Artha – Journal of Social Sciences
2025, Vol. 24, No. 1, *1-30*
ISSN 0975-329X | https://doi.org/10.12724/ajss.72.1

Pattern of Occupational Diversification among Rural Agricultural Households: A Field View

Dinesh Rajak*

Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the nature and expansion of non-farming activities in rural areas and investigate patterns of occupational diversification among households of various socio-economic strata in rural Bundelkhand. It also investigates how different social groups and local populations move to non-farming occupations in rural Bundelkhand, Madhya Pradesh (MP). MP remains an agrarian state, with around 70% of the people living in rural areas. This field study was undertaken in the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh, India. Bundelkhand, located in one of India's rain-scarce regions, has grappled with prolonged drought conditions over an extended period. Madhya Pradesh is ranked as the fifth most populous state in India. It has a rural population of 72.6 million residing in rural areas and 27.63 per cent living in urban areas. For this study, two villages were selected to conduct the empirical research, and the approach resorted to was a mixed-method approach; further, a household survey and semi-structured interview were carried out in selected villages of 415 households. The study suggests that rural transformation reveals diverse impacts on different social communities, shaping household experiences according to their disparate socio-cultural and economic statuses. The interplay between land and caste is a significant determinant of social and occupational mobility, influencing the livelihood dynamics within the rural agrarian setting of Bundelkhand.

* Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India; dineshrajak02016@gmail.com

Keywords: Agriculture, Caste, Land, Livelihood, Diversification, Rural Bundelkhand and India

Introduction

In the Indian rural economy, agriculture has been the primary source of employment and income. It is considered the backbone of the Indian economy from colonial to postcolonial times (Desai, 1961). However, since the late 1980s, after the Green Revolution and the introduction of liberalisation in India, rural areas and the agrarian sector have undergone a comprehensive transformation (Mohanty, 2016). The accounts of this transformation range from stories about rural distress to a "rural resurrection," declining gross domestic product (GDP) growth and the dependence of the rural population on agriculture, downturns in agricultural production, and farmer suicides (Viswanathan et al., 2012).

However, agriculture as a sector currently no longer contributes the majority of income and employment for rural households in India. Its contribution has declined over the years, particularly following liberalisation. As a result, there is a shift in employment in rural areas from agriculture to other rural fields, especially the rural non-farm sector, which has emerged around the world as an important source of income for rural communities and has been promoted by world organisations as part of their initiatives for rural development. Among various categories of rural population, occupational diversification emerged as a livelihood strategy, and most of the rural population is now employed in multiple occupations linked to both push and pull factors depending upon the socio-economic conditions of households.

In the existing studies, there are essentially two established theories of livelihood diversification. One is how rural households diversify into non-farm occupations in response to distress, danger, and uncertainty about the future, now recognised as a necessity-driven activity. This mostly happens among poor and landless households, mainly in the form of migration. Second is that rural households can diversify and capitalise on new opportunities and generate more income from the various occupations with the help of their wealth and surplus, motivated to make a profit from it. This is known as a choice-driven type of diversification of livelihoods. This

type of diversification gives them socioeconomic mobility in rural households.

Apart from these two views, it has been acknowledged that the shift from agriculture to non-farm occupations is also influenced by non-economic aspirations in certain instances (Vijaybhasker et al., 2018). Historically, agricultural labour has been associated with low status in the caste-based division of labour, often linked with scheduled castes and tribes. As Tilche (2016) highlighted in her study, upward social mobility correlates with transitioning away from manual agrarian work. Consequently, farming may not be an appealing occupation, leading rural poor preferences to shift towards alternative "non-farm" activities.

Nevertheless, rural non-farm occupational diversification may not always fit into these binary arguments due to the diversity of the Indian agricultural system, the diverse nature of rural societies, and its rural economies within states. Occupational diversification is not easy; it is complex and dynamic, depending on various situations. Apart from this, several other significant elements include household location, social background, class position, region-specific features and richness/assets, other cultural challenges, gender, and ecology. Thus, that is a challenging and multi-dynamic process. Without a doubt, extra variables influence diversification processes, such as the economic and political processes of state machines at various levels. In this context, this paper makes an effort to explore rural livelihood diversification in rural Bundelkhand.

This study seeks to examine the nature and expansion of non-farming activities in rural areas and investigate occupational diversification patterns among various socio-economic strata in rural Bundelkhand, Madhya Pradesh. It also investigates how various social groups and local populations move to non-farming occupations in rural Bundelkhand, Madhya Pradesh. Madhya Pradesh remains an agrarian state, with around 70% of the people living in rural areas. It has six more sections, including an introduction. The second section discusses a review of literature related to the research topic of agriculture in Bundelkhand, Madhya Pradesh; the third section talks deals with field sites and methods, and the fourth section broadly talks about the observation, insights

and discussion from the field sites and last section is about the conclusion and findings.

Review of Literature: *Agriculture, Livelihood, Non-farm, Madhya Pradesh in Neoliberal Indian Context*

The scholarly discourse in rural and agrarian studies underscores that the rural youth is increasingly diverging from traditional agrarian pursuits. This indicates a growing disenchantment towards farming within this population section. The rise of agrarian distress has resulted in instances of severe poverty, heightened inequality, and suicides in rural India. Moreover, there are indications of an overall decline in the agrarian population (Posani, 2009; Singh, Bhangoo, & Sharma, 2016; Radhakrishna, 2015). For example, agriculture as an occupation has a lot of significance, meanings, and social status (Mohanty & Lekha, 2019). It is conceived as lower-status employment in this age of neoliberal and digital.

Youth are not interested in working in the farm field but in making their life in the city and outside agriculture. It is believed that the cultivation of land is the work of uneducated people. So, in many ways, the connotation of cultivating land and pursuing agriculture as an occupation has changed over time. However, farming land is still as highly valuable as ever. As Agarawal et al. (2017) observed, a substantial portion of the rural population engages in agriculture not as a 'matter of choice' but due to an 'absence of alternative livelihood' options. Consequently, the rural population is gradually reducing its dependence on agricultural activities. This shift can be ascribed to the proliferation of non-farming opportunities in rural and urban settings, drawing individuals into the informal urban economy.

In the post-liberalization era, many small cultivator households have shifted to non-farm activities by incorporating farming into agri-business (Philip, 2023). This shift was instigated by neoliberal policies[1] implemented in the 1990s when agriculture underwent a

[1] Neoliberal economic policies, such as the reduction of state subsidies to agriculture, the increasing costs of farming inputs, stagnant farm production, and ecological precariousness, have led to a substantial shift

transformative phase to enhance profitability. However, these changes inadvertently rendered agriculture economically unrewarding due to rising cultivation costs, heightened risk and uncertainty in both production and marketing domains. The withdrawal of government support, particularly subsidies, has played a pivotal role in agrarian transformation.

In response to evolving socio-economic dynamics, individuals from higher and cultivating castes have transitioned towards alternative lucrative occupations such as trade, business, politics, and urban employment (Lenka, 2020). This diversification of the 'forms and spaces of employment' has become an integral facet of livelihood strategies, wherein households and individuals actively seek work across fragmented and diverse realms of material reproduction (Breman, 2000). Consequently, caste plays a pivotal role in shaping the new rural non-farm economy, engendering disparate outcomes that disproportionately favour the historically privileged upper and middle castes possessing landownership and social capital (Kumar, 2016; Jodhka, 2017).

It is vital to acknowledge that diversifying rural occupations towards the non-farm sector has enhanced social mobility and increased income for specific caste groups. However, it is noteworthy that this diversification has not yielded uniform benefits across all households (Alha, 2020). The extent of benefit is contingent upon a myriad of socio-economic and locational factors intrinsic to rural households. Consequently, the shift towards non-farm occupations is shaped by both volitional choices and imperative circumstances, contingent upon the socio-economic standing of the rural household. This transition can potentially instigate social mobility within farming households, manifesting as aspirational or occupational mobility. A comprehensive empirical investigation is imperative to understand the nuanced dynamics of non-farm occupations in the field site of Madhya Pradesh.

There has been a substantial shift in employment patterns from agriculture to non-agricultural employment in India. The role of

---

in the rural economy towards non-farm economic activities, as articulated by Kumar (2021).

agriculture in the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and its provision of livelihoods to rural populations has diminished. In 1950-51, the composition of agriculture and allied activities, industry, and the service sector was 51.81%, 14.16%, and 33.25%, respectively. By 2013-14, the share of agriculture and allied sectors had reduced to 18.20%, while the industry and services sectors had increased to 57.03% and 24.77%, respectively. According to a recent report by the International Labour Organization (World Bank, 2019a), employment in the agricultural sector decreased from 250 million jobs in 2004 to 215 million in 2016. Particularly notable is the substantial decline in male participation in agriculture, dropping to 40 per cent by 2019 (World Bank, 2019b, cited in Choithani, 2021).

Despite these shifts, the rural population is no longer predominantly dependent on agricultural activities. Instead, there has been a visible trend towards engagement in the rural non-farm economy, driven by occupational diversification and out-migration, as evidenced by recent trends (World Bank, 2019b).

The rural non-farm economy has emerged as a significant component of rural development and modernisation strategies in the global context. This initiative asserts that the advancement of rural economies is closely tied to non-farming activities. The prevalence of rural households relying on rural non-farm employment (RNFE) as their primary income source has increased, rising from approximately 32 per cent in 1993–94 to over 42 per cent in 2009–10, as reported by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) in 2011. The ubiquity of non-farm employment highlights its integral role in rural economies, with an increasing trend toward diversification of rural livelihoods into non-farm activities (Neog et al., 2020). Rural non-farm activities are highly diverse and multifaceted, depending on whether they are distress-induced or are an outcome of a vibrant primary sector (Basu et al., 1999).

Madhya Pradesh is a significant out-migration state, with its workforce seeking employment opportunities in other states. The Economic Survey of 2013 highlighted prominent migration routes from Madhya Pradesh to Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, positioning these routes among India's top state routes for migration. The Bundelkhand region, characterised by historical underdevelopment, stands out within Madhya Pradesh. Comprising

six districts, this region has historically witnessed substantial single-male migration and family migrations driven by employment-seeking motives. Many of these migrants engage in seasonal and circular migration, contributing to remittances sent back to their places of origin (Anuja, 2023).

Study Area

Bundelkhand is located in one of India's rain-scarce regions.[2], has grappled with prolonged drought conditions over an extended period (Suthar, 2018). This environmental context further complicates the socio-economic dynamics of migration from this region. Once, the region has been historically recognised for its agricultural prosperity, a characteristic that has endured both in the past and the recent past. Despite occasional droughts, the region's agricultural productivity faces escalating challenges attributed to environmental factors, human activities, and insufficient institutional initiatives to mitigate the decline in agricultural prosperity (HDR, 2012, p. 02). The consequences of this decline include crop failure, diminished food production leading to heightened food insecurity, and a surge in debt, culminating in farmer suicides. Malnutrition and hunger have become prevalent due to inadequate nutritional resources (Shiva, 1993). Sudhir (2022) highlights that, in addition to natural adversities like droughts and floods, Bundelkhand grapples with institutional challenges and policy frameworks, contributing to its underdevelopment. Consequently, the region contends poverty, malnutrition, rural social inequalities, and other related challenges. The human development index of the region also reflects shortcomings in education, access to drinking water, and health and sanitation infrastructure.

The historical dominance of elites and feudal structures has resulted in the concentration and control of natural resources,

[2] The geographical landscape of Bundelkhand is distinctive, as outlined in a Mint article that underscores the region's challenges, including continuous drought from 2003 to 2010, floods in 2011, late monsoons, deficit rainfall in 2012 and 2013, and a subsequent period of drought in 2014 (Mint, 2015).

including land and water, by upper castes in the region. As observed by Suthar (2022), traditionally dominant groups such as particularly Bundela Rajputs and backward castes such as Kushwahas and Patels, wield control over land, services, and mining, conferring upon them a natural advantage in accessing various government welfare programs. Moreover, their dominance in land ownership positions them as influential actors in agrarian politics within the region (2022).

This field study was undertaken in the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh, India. Madhya Pradesh ranked as India's fifth most populous state, with a rural population of 72.6 million residing in rural areas and 27.63 per cent living in urban areas. Notably, 21.1 per cent of the state's population belongs to tribal communities, a percentage significantly higher than the national figure of 8.6 per cent categorised as Scheduled Tribes. Similarly, Scheduled Castes constitute approximately 15.6 per cent of Madhya Pradesh's population, aligning closely with the national average of 16.6 per cent. Madhya Pradesh has a historical legacy of socio-economic backwardness within the Indian context (Narayan, 2020).

The prevalence of rural poverty is pronounced, with a rate of 35.74 per cent in Madhya Pradesh, surpassing the corresponding rate of 25.7 per cent observed in rural India during 2011-12 (Bhanumurthy et al., 2016). This rural poverty burden is disproportionately higher among historically marginalised communities, with Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes reporting rates of 55 and 41 per cent, respectively. Despite being a predominantly agrarian state, with agriculture contributing up to 34 per cent to the state's Gross Domestic Product in the fiscal year 2013-14 and engaging over 70 per cent of the population (Narayan, 2020), Madhya Pradesh's agrarian landscape reflects a stark contrast to the national trend where the agricultural sector contributes less to the overall GDP.

According to the 2015-16 Agricultural Census, the state has 10 million operating holdings covering 15.67 million hectares. The average size of the operational property is 1.567 hectares. The Agricultural Census 2015 found that 71.46 per cent of operating holdings are small or marginal. The Lodhi and Kurmi communities have assumed prominence in the Bundelkhand region, significantly shaping the socio-political landscape. Disparities in land ownership

are evident, with Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) possessing a considerably smaller share of land relative to their population size. Most individuals are engaged in small-scale and marginal farming, with a notable proportion of agricultural labourers belonging to SC and ST communities. This region predominantly comprises landless workers, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes, as highlighted in prior research (Gupta et al., 2014).

Field Villages and Methods

It is a field study that involves a field survey of two villages, Bilani and Muda, situated in the Damoh district within the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh. These villages are approximately 40-45 kilometres from the urban centres (district) and exhibit diverse social compositions, including significant Muslim and tribal populations. The selection of these villages was carried out purposively, taking into account their similar caste compositions and economic activities. Despite sharing these commonalities, the villages vary in their specific geographical features. Bilani is a relatively modern settlement, while Muda maintains a more traditional character. Muda is positioned in a more isolated location, lacking adequate road and internet connectivity. Furthermore, the two villages differ regarding education, healthcare, and other fundamental amenities.

A mixed-methods approach has been employed for this research study. Combined with secondary sources, quantitative and qualitative methodologies were utilised for comprehensive data collection. The empirical study involved two distinct phases of fieldwork. Initially, primary data was gathered through a 'census household survey' conducted in both villages. This survey encompassed various aspects of household information, family structure, population, land, and household assets. The primary aim was to classify households based on socio-economic class, enhancing comprehension of the surveyed villages. The field survey encompassed 415 households across both villages, with 278 in Bilani and 137 in Muda.

During the following phase, interviews were undertaken with a diverse range of rural households as part of the second fieldwork stage. Employing a semi-structured interview, these interviews were strategically designed to complement the data acquired through the

survey, offering a more nuanced comprehension of the field with a few households. The distribution of households resulting from the field survey encompassed 278 in Bilani and 137 in Muda. The fieldwork was conducted in a couple of visits from November 2022 to November 2023.

The household serves as the primary unit of analysis for this study. To conduct a comprehensive census household survey, households were categorised based on their social and economic backgrounds, incorporating factors such as caste, class, land size (adopted from the Agricultural Census 2016), household size, and overall wealth. Stratified random sampling was employed to select households for the semi-interviews, stratifying based on size, class, and wealth. Typically situated within a single concession (walled compound), a household may consist of multiple houses and eating groups. Interviews were predominantly conducted with the head of the household, whether male or female.

Discussions from the Fields Data

Demographic characteristics of various social groups across Muda and Bilani villages.

Muda Village		
Categories	Frequency	Per cent
UC	11	8.02
OBCs	62	45.26
SC	23	16.79
ST	1	0.73
Others (Muslim)	40	29.2
Total	137	100

Sources: field survey conducted by author

Bilani Village		
Categories	**Frequency**	**Per cent**
UC	33	11.87
Dominant Caste (OBCs)	98	35.25
OBCs	70	25.18
SC	43	15.47
ST	9	3.24
Others (Muslim)	25	8.99
Total	278	100

Sources: field survey conducted by author

The caste system operates as a multifaceted framework encompassing resources, capital, and a structured network of advantages and disadvantages. Caste embedded in the village society is significant in understanding the nature of the agrarian and land relationship, which also remains a significant source of social reproduction (Vasavi, 2009). Hierarchically, structured caste relation was the basis for landownership and agricultural activities. In contemporary rural India, Jodhka (2022) claims that caste exists as a positive and negative resource, a type of social capital that reproduces inequalities in various sectors of life. It serves as a mechanism for both positive and negative discrimination and accumulation, interplaying with variables such as gender, education, and closed social connections facilitated through the practice of 'endogamy' (Harriss-White, 2003, p. 239; Jodhka, 2022). Building upon Tilly's (1998) conceptualisation of 'durable inequality,' the caste system is argued to embody processes of 'categorical exclusion' and 'opportunity hoarding.' The data collected from the field throws light on some of the aspects of these villages.

The two villages constitute a mix of population of Hindus and Muslims. Looking closely, we find different caste groups within rural society, including upper castes, the Scheduled Caste, and the other backward classes. OBCs comprise almost 66% of the households in both field sites. Out of these 66%, there is a significant

presence of the Dominant Caste Kurmi (Patels), who constitute around 24 per cent of the households in both villages. They are the majority in both villages, followed by the upper castes. Meanwhile, households are from lower castes, and there is 2.41 per cent of the Scheduled Tribes as well.

Comparatively, Bilani village (Table 2) has more OBCs (approximately 60%) than the Muda village (45%), constituting 25 % of the dominant caste, which is Kurmi in the region. They are an agrarian caste, owning a substantial amount of land resources. They got the land reforms and emerged as one of the significant dominating agrarian castes in both social and political villages of villages. These agrarian caste groups are not limited to agriculture. However, they are expanding their sources of income in various non-agrarian sectors and keeping an interest in making more benefits rather than distress, as a few landholding farmers said in conversation.

It is also noted in some empirical studies, as also argued by Jodhka: "The experience of mobility of those located at the lower end of the traditional caste hierarchy, i.e. their moving out of the village and agrarian economy, is also not an easy process. Those who move out of the rural/agrarian economy into urban entrepreneurship find it hard to make headway beyond the margins of the emerging urban economy. Caste matters in urban markets in many ways for the Dalits trying to establish themselves in business. Even when it becomes virtually impossible to do so, kinship networks play a very critical role in the urban business economy. Besides working as gatekeepers, kinship networks also matter in mobilising capital through banks, the most critical requirement for businesses worldwide. Those from the historically deprived communities also do not own collateral, such as agricultural lands or urban properties (Jodhka, 2015; P, 8)".

Education Status across villages

Education Levels Muda		
	Frequency	Per cent
Illiterate	59	43.07
Primary	39	28.47
Secondary	26	18.98
Higher Secondary	10	7.3
Graduate	2	1.46
PG	1	0.73
Technical Education	0	0
Total	137	100

Sources: field survey conducted by author

Education Levels Bilani		
	Frequency	Per cent
Illiterate	65	23.38
Primary	67	24.1
Secondary	86	30.94
Higher Secondary	47	16.91
Graduate	9	3.24
PG	3	1.08
Technical Education	1	0.36
Total	278	100

Sources: field survey conducted by author

Few significant aspects of socioeconomic status can be derived from the data collected. If we look at the levels of education, the data shows that around 30% of the population is illiterate; these household heads did not get a basic education. Muda households have not received education, while less than 20% have education up to secondary levels. In Bilani Village, literacy levels are much higher, with more than 30% of people attaining education up to secondary levels. Also, few HH heads attained higher education up to PG and technical education (1 instance). Education has a significant role in getting jobs in the non-farm economy. To get employment in the non-farm sector requires skills and education, which a significant number of households do not have, and a few do not up the basic level. As a result, most of them lack the skill set and education. They end up in the non-capital-generating employment of the non-farm sector. As it is argued by Djurfeldt et al. (2008) argue, based on evidence from Tamil Nadu, that with education and industrial employment opportunities, landless and significant landowning families exit farming at a faster rate, which results in a less skewed distribution of land and rural incomes. Leasing in or buying land becomes possible for small and marginal landowning families, thus consolidating family farming. Similar is the case of small farming households in the rural Bundelkhand. Illiterate creates most of the issues for getting employment in the non-farm sector. In the Neoliberal age, education is quite critical to get decent livelihoods.

Owning Farm Machinery livestock and Livestock among households

No	355	85.54
Yes	60	14.46
Total	**415**	**100**

Sources: Field survey

Livestock	Frequency	Per cent
No	385	92.8
Yes	30	7.2

Sources: Field survey

Of these 415 households, 60 have their own tractors and other necessary farm machines such as irrigation machines, harvesting machines, and banks, and these 60 are farming households that only engage in farming activities. So, access to assets such as tractors is limited to only large farmers who own large landholdings and belong to prominent castes in the villages. Though agriculture is almost mechanised, only certain land owned by agricultural households has farm machinery. Other small cultivators hire it for their agricultural work, which becomes a significant input cost for poor farmers. Eventually, they do other livelihood activities due to a lack of agrarian machines and capital, as most of the small farmers mentioned while interviewing them.

It has been observed that 92.8% of the households in both villages do not own livestock, which used to provide some income support, especially in times of crisis. Only 7.2% of households have cattle, as only certain community/ caste groups keep the cattle. A Yadav community in the area usually keeps buffaloes for livelihood support. This has finished their coping mechanism at the difficult times. Now, one of the household members has to work in another field to get multiple sources of income and buy milk and other products from the market, and for that, they need cash. It is observed in most small households that they have to work extra to buy this item. Apart from this, the lack of Livestock has led to a whole migration of households to different places.

Landholding Status among the Social Groups

Distribution of land-holding households among the various caste categories

Castes\ Land Category	Landless	Marginal	Small	Semi Medium	Medium	Large	Total
Upper Caste	5	1	17	16	3	2	44
	11.36	2.27	38.64	36.36	6.82	4.55	100
	5.32	1.04	16.04	17.78	18.75	15.38	10.6
Dominant Caste	6	8	26	37	12	9	98
	6.12	8.16	26.53	37.76	12.24	9.18	100
	6.38	8.33	24.53	41.11	75	69.23	23.61
OBC	37	40	32	20	1	2	132
	28.03	30.3	24.24	15.15	0.76	1.52	100
	39.36	41.67	30.19	22.22	6.25	15.38	31.81
SC	31	20	14	1	0	0	66
	46.97	30.3	21.2	1.52	0	0	100
	32.98	20.83	13.2	1.11	0	0	15.9
ST	6	3	0	1	0	0	10
	60	30	0	10	0	0	100

Castes\ Land Category	Landless	Marginal	Small	Semi Medium	Medium	Large	Total
	6.38	3.13	0	1.1	0	0	2.41
Others	9	24	17	15	0	0	65
	13.85	36.92	26.15	23.08	0	0	100
	9.57	25	16.04	16.67	0	0	15.66
Total	94	96	106	90	16	13	415
	22.65	23.13	25.54	21.69	3.86	3.13	100
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Sources: Field survey conducted by Author

Agriculture has been the one significant source of income in Indian society for ages, and rural livelihood and life have been central to land and agriculture. However, over the past couple of decades, the rural-agrarian landscape in India has undergone significant transformations, materially and ideologically. Historically, agriculture has served as the cornerstone of the Indian economy, particularly within rural communities, where land and farming activities not only constituted primary sources of income and employment but also contributed to one's social status and honour (Mohanty, 2000; Panda, 1986).

In rural society, land has traditionally been viewed as a valuable possession. It offered sources of income, employment, social prestige, and a sense of security in rural society. Moreover, land is also important and associated with creating a new identity (Suthar, 2018). The ownership of land acts as the primary source of power. In the past, land was the direct expression of power structures and the actual field of their unfolding through labour and service relations

(Sbriccoli, 2016, p.14). The land is unequally distributed in India among various caste groups (Beteille, 1973). Caste groups with more land become dominant caste groups and control the rural economy (Mayer, 1958). Land reform was brought to give the 'land to tillers', but it did not work out, and most of the lower caste groups remained landless after the reforms (Pai, 2016; Jha, 2003). So, village society and its economy revolve around agricultural land, making it a vital resource within the rural setting. Analysing the access and use rights to the land within different social groups in rural communities.

As per the data on caste-wise land ownership across both the villages, we get a snapshot of a typical Indian village where upper castes and dominant castes own most of the agricultural land as compared to the lower castes and tribes who either own tiny land plots or work as a landless labourer. The data collected from the field shows that around 94 households in these two villages are landless households who do not own any agricultural land, which accounts for 22.65%. As per the data on a landless category across villages, 46% of SC households do not own land, while 30% have marginal land holdings. The number of large landholdings is only 13, and all of these households belong to dominant agrarian and upper-caste groups. Meanwhile, the percentage of small and marginal households is roughly 48.76%. So, the size of marginal and small farming households is relatively more significant than any other group. With time, the size of landholding is getting smaller and smaller. With this small amount of landholding, the small farming households find it quite challenging to survive. As a result, many households are now involved in multiple sources of income generation occupations, including farming practices.

Landownership in rural areas has been characterised by significant inequality stemming from the feudalistic structure of society and the historical influence of princely states. The control of land was predominantly in the hands of kings and Rajas, who belonged to upper caste groups, while other caste groups served as cultivating and labouring communities. Members of these lower caste groups, particularly Dalit, often lacked ownership of agricultural land, relying instead on employment as agricultural labourers or daily wage workers in various fields. Despite post-independence land reforms, the intended benefits did not reach the

landless lower sections of society due to ineffective implementation and the enduring influence of upper-caste families in bureaucratic processes in Bundelkhand regions. Therefore, most of the land is in the hands of a few households.

Due to the feudalistic nature of the region, the benefits of the project of modernisation and development did not reach the powerless communities, and they remained on the margin as well. Shal et al. (2018) contend that the reforms have exacerbated existing social inequalities rooted in the traditional caste system of villages. This is attributed to the historical association between caste relations, land ownership, and agricultural pursuits. Landowners and cultivators in the hierarchical caste framework were predominantly privileged higher castes. At the same time, those belonging to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), situated at the lower stages of the social hierarchy, were primarily engaged as agricultural labourers (Mohanty, 2015). Consequently, it has been observed that affluent upper-caste households with substantial landholdings in villages enjoy preferential positions in the emergent non-farm sectors of the regional economy. The prevalence of clientelism in these relationships is a typical characteristic rooted in caste dynamics (Jeffrey, 2002).

Primary occupations in both villages

Primary Occupations						
Muda			**Bilani**			
Occupations	**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Total**	%
Farming	23	16.79	91	32.73	114	27.46
Farming and Labour	24	17.52	35	12.59	59	14.21
Farming and Non-farm	19	13.87	62	22.3	81	19.5
Agricultural Landless Labour	44	32.12	43	15.47	87	20.96

Primary Occupations						
Muda			**Bilani**			
Occupations	**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Total**	**%**
Non-Farm Activities	24	17.52	29	10.44	53	12.77
Regular Service	3	2.18	18	6.47	21	5.06
Total	**137**	**100**	**278**	**100**	**415**	**100**

Source: Field Survey conducted by author

Nature of Non-farm employment in the villages

Essential Goods	Grocery Shops	12
	Manhari/Cosmetic	6
	Clothes Shops	1
	Steel Vessels Shops	2
	Tent House	3
	Vegetable Sellers	10
Services	Tailor Shops	4
	Online Computer Shops	4
	Online Banking Kiosks	1
	Private Schools	2
	Coaching Centres	2
	Repairing Shops (Hardware)	4
	Mistry (Mechanics)	12
	Bike/Cycle Repairing Shops	2
	Aata Chakki	4
	Tractors Drivers	3

	Politics full time	5
	Services (Private + Govt)	16 + 17
Food and Beverage	Chai + Samosa Stalls	2
	Samosa Shops	1
	Alcohol Shops	1
Specialised Shops	Band Baja Party	3
	Chicken Shops	3
	Fish Shops	1
	Bidi Makers	14
	Bidi Contractors (Thekedars)	1
	Brick Makers	7
	Bamboo Utensils Shops	7
Health and Wellness	Medical Shops	1
	Doctors	4
Other	Balance/Mobile SIM Shops	1
	Salon Shops	1
	Electronic Repairing Shops	1
	Electronic Workshops (Motor Wiring)	2
	Petrol Stations	2

Source: Field Survey conducted by author

The primary occupation is the main economic activity through which an individual sustains a livelihood in rural areas. It can be categorised into many types based on the nature of work and the economic sector. The data collected from the field shows that the number of households solely engaging in farming activities is 114

out of a total of 415, roughly 27 per cent. These households depend entirely on farming as their primary source of income. Moreover, these are the more significant and medium farming households in the upper and dominant agrarian caste. On the other hand, around 72.35% of households, which is 321 households out of 415, own some agricultural land, engage in cultivation and other non-farm activities, and do not depend only upon farming.

The non-farm activities within these two villages are on the rise. There are many patterns of it among the different households. Examples of these non-farm activities are computer, electronic, stationery, grocery, clothes, fruit and vegetable sellers, private schools and coaching, and make-shift shops on motorbikes. A majority of the small and marginal households are now seen to gain employment through this non-farm economy, as some of the members of the households engaging in other kinds of non-farm activities are multi-occupational households. However, only households with 8-10 acres of land belonging to socially better caste and class groups are in a better position to invest in the non-farm sector, which gives them profits and some business exposure. Households with less land, education and capital only manage to survive and cannot benefit from it. They are substantial engagement to non-farm employment. However, even the development of these non-farm employment has a caste pattern, and it is not open to all caste groups to start any employment activities. There are hidden caste structure that governs the non-farm sector, such as the making of bricking is dominated by Muslim households mostly. Upper and middle-caste groups control the food and processing sector, from tea samosa to big hotels. Lower caste groups are not there to open these kinds of shops locally.

This transition from traditional agricultural pursuits to diverse non-farm activities represents a substantial shift in occupational patterns and serves as a different avenue for employment generation. This phenomenon can be conceptualised as the diversification of occupations, a strategic response to mitigate income deficiencies experienced by agricultural households. The scope of diversification extends beyond non-farm activities, encompassing 'pluri-activities' at the household level and income generation through migration. Consequently, a growing number of rural households are

transforming into pure-active households, characterised by multiple sources of income and occupations.

It is essential to recognise that diversification dynamics vary based on households' social, political, and economic contexts. Specifically, small and marginal landholding households are compelled to diversify due to risk, inadequate income, vulnerability, environmental conditions, and local/regional circumstances, thereby characterising their diversification as a 'distress-driven livelihood strategy.' In contrast, households with extensive landholdings perceive diversification as a matter of choice, strategically capitalising on the benefits derived from diversifying their income sources. Local politics also has a massive role in establishing local businesses that would get the government's tender to develop the rural infrastructure. Caste networks to regional politics have an impactful role in this as well, in which mainly the regionally dominant caste groups monopolise these kinds of opportunities.

A significant factor contributing to this diversification process is that these two villages have no public irrigation system. Most of these marginal and small farmers mentioned in the conversation that villages lack a public irrigation system, leading local farmers to rely heavily on personal bore wells or arrange independent water sources. As a result, they are forced to purchase water externally, and when such arrangements fail, farmers resort to leasing or sharecropping. The situation is exacerbated by rising cultivation costs, where those without agricultural equipment must rent machinery, increasing expenses. Even for those with equipment, returns are meagre, prompting some to abandon farming or lease out their land. Small and marginal households, particularly, explore alternative sources of income like migration or engaging in urban occupations, such as security guards, operating tea stalls, or running shops.

While this is primarily about those with small and marginal households, landless households, predominantly from the Scheduled Castes (SCs), are compelled to migrate for engagement in the informal urban economy, particularly in construction work. Among the landless, the SCs are mostly without land, with a percentage of 46.97 per cent. These landless (SCs) households are

migrating and working as wage labourers in the urban areas. These SCs find it challenging to look for another source of employment generation within the rural agrarian economy because of the existing caste hierarchy within these villages. Thus, their location in the local caste structure restricts their access to other livelihood opportunities in the non-farm rural economy within the village and the region. Due to their marginal economic, social and cultural location, it is challenging even to open shops such as grocery, e. Villagers, especially the upper caste, do not buy things from the lower caste status. They are only limited to a labourer's work, which is hardly available there. They are, hence, forced to migrate to sustain themselves.

In both villages, out of 415 rural households, 124 migrate to different places for work, around 30 % of total households. This out-migration is relatively high among SC households compared to other rural households. There is a total of 66 households in both villages. Among them, 45 migrated to other places for work and livelihood. Primarily, they are landless households in the majority, and they do not have other kinds of assets and work to survive in the rural economy. Therefore, they shift to a non-farm economy through labour migration in the form of diversification. Moreover, these SC households have been working in the agricultural field as labourers; however, due to the decline of labour in farming with the coming of farm machinery, these households have no other choice but to migrate in search of livelihood. As they do not have other kinds of capital and resources, it is pretty challenging to start any business. The transformation of the rural and village economy has yielded a complex and multifaceted outcome. The substantial diversification of the village economy has been remarkable, leading to shifts in occupational patterns across various caste groups (Kumar, 2016). Deshpande (2017) observes that the expansion of the rural economy beyond agriculture in the post-reform era, marked by neoliberal policies, has not disrupted the enduring connections within traditional caste structures. Notably, affluent upper caste groups persist in occupying prestigious and well-remunerated positions, while individuals from Dalit communities often find themselves employed in labour-intensive industries.

However, it is not primarily landless and marginal rural households that are more prone to migration. At the same time, SC rural households with some land and interest in the politics of the village prefer to stay in the village and not migrate, take an active part in the politics, and be part of it. Needless to say, they are slightly positioned better economically and politically quite vibrant.

Conclusion

It is imperative to note that the diversification of livelihoods in Bundelkhand distinguishes itself from other regions due to unique social, economic, and geographical conditions that significantly contribute to the region's underdevelopment. The variation in income and occupational diversification among rural households is intricately tied to each household's specific social and economic circumstances, determining the extent of privileges and capital they possess.

Bundelkhand's social structure is hierarchical, wherein de-privileged or lower-caste groups face more severe conditions than similar groups in other locations. Consequently, the opportunities and potential for diversification differ significantly from other regions. As caste still prevents as a resource, capital and discriminatory practices. The livelihood diversification among different social classes and groups is happening at different levels, benefiting and offering opportunities differently. There are not many opportunities for the rural youth population in this region. Opening their business in a different section of society has many different challenges.

Out-migration is a prevalent strategy among Dalits and the lower sections of society in Bundelkhand. It is a principal avenue for non-farm diversification, distinguishing it from other areas. Observations in the field highlight the formidable challenges Dalit households face, lacking agricultural land and economic assets, making survival in the rural economy challenging due to a lack of alternative employment opportunities. These households encounter difficulties diversifying into emerging sectors within neoliberal times, primarily attributable to capital, resources, and skills scarcity.

Migration emerges as their last resort, predominantly in the urban informal sector, particularly in the construction labour industry.

Conversely, farmers from dominating agrarian castes consider continuing agricultural practices based on access to superior livelihood opportunities. The continuation of agricultural practices as a prospective occupation is influenced by various factors, including landholding size, caste location, and individual characteristics of farmers, particularly among the rural youth. In both villages, affluent Kurmi Patel farmers exhibit a sustained interest in farming, leveraging their social, cultural, and economic capitals. The widening access of this farming community to political power, spanning local to regional politics, further contributes to their commitment to agriculture. Nonetheless, they are diversifying their source of income by investing in land, farm technology, and rural-based businesses.

So, the rural transformation reveals diverse impacts on different social communities, shaping household experiences according to their disparate socio-cultural and economic statuses. The interplay between land and caste is a significant determinant of social and occupational mobility, influencing the livelihood dynamics within the rural agrarian setting. Though the shifting to rural non-farm is not entirely new to rural India, earlier, there were substantial numbers of traditional non-farm sources of livelihood such as craftmanship, artisan works, caste service, trade, and commerce. However, the number of non-farm occupation opportunities has increased substantially in the post-liberalization of the Indian economy. Owing to it, many new occupations have come into existence with the introduction of globalisation and digitalisation.

References

Agarwal, B., & Agrawal, A. (2017). Do farmers really like farming? Indian farmers in transition. *Oxford Development Studies, 45*(4), 460–478.

Alha, A. (2020). Non-farm Diversification and Agrarian Change: The Story of a Semi-arid Village in Rajasthan. *Social Change, 50*(2), 254–271.

Breman, J., & Das, A. N. (2000). Down and out: Labouring under global capitalism. *Amsterdam University Press*.

Choithani, C., van Duijne, R. J., & Nijman, J. (2021). Changing livelihoods at India's rural-urban transition. World Development, 146, 105617.

Ellis, F. (1998). Household strategies and rural livelihood diversification. The Journal of Development Studies, 35 (1), 1–38.

Ellis, F. (2000). The determinants of rural livelihood diversification in developing countries. *Journal of Agricultural Economics, 51*(2), 289–302.

Harriss-White, B. (2003). Inequality at work in the informal economy: Key issues and illustrations. *Int'l Lab. Rev., 142*, 459.

Harriss-White, B. (2018). Awkward classes and India's development. *Review of Political Economy, 30*(3), 355–376.

Himanshu, P. L., Murgai, R., & Stern, N. (2013). Non-farm diversification, poverty, economic mobility and income inequality: A case study in village India: The World Bank.

Himanshu, H., Lanjouw, P., Mukhopadhyay, A., & Murgai, R. (2011). Non-farm diversification and rural poverty decline: A perspective from Indian sample survey and village study data.

Himanshu, H., Jha, P., & Rodgers, G. (2016). The changing village in India: Insights from longitudinal research. *Oxford University Press*.

Jeffrey, C. (2010). Timepass: Youth, class, and the politics of waiting in India. *Stanford University Press*.

Jha, P. K. (2002). Land reforms in India. Volume 7: Issues of equity in rural Madhya Pradesh. Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd

Jodhka, S. S. (2006). Caste and democracy: Assertion and identity among the Dalits of rural Punjab. *Sociological Bulletin, 55*(1), 4-23.

Jodhka, S. S. (2017). Non-farm economy in Madhubani, Bihar: Social dynamics and exclusionary rural transformations. *Economic and Political Weekly, 14-24*.

Jodhka, S. S. (2022). Agrarian Studies and the Caste Conundrum. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy, 11*(1), 14-36.

Jodhka, S. S., & Kumar, A. (2017). Non-farm economy in Madhubani, Bihar: Social dynamics and exclusionary rural transformations. *Economic and Political Weekly, 14-24*.

Jodhka, S. S., & Newman, K. (2007). In the name of globalisation: Meritocracy, productivity and the hidden language of caste. *Economic and Political Weekly, 4125–4132*.

Kashyap, S. P., & Mehta, N. (2007). Non-farm sector in India: Temporal and Spatial aspects. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics, 50*(4), 611-632.

Krishnamurthy, M., & Witsoe, J. (2012). Understanding mandis: Market towns and the dynamics of India's urban and rural transformations. International Growth Centre, London School of Economics, London.

Kumar, R. (2016). Rethinking revolutions: Soyabean, choupals, and the changing countryside in Central India.

Kumar, S. (2016). Agrarian transformation and the new rurality in Western Uttar Pradesh. *Economic and Political Weekly, 61–71*.

Kumar, S. (2018). Agrarian Transformation and New Sociality in Western Uttar Pradesh. *Economic and Political Weekly, 53*(26).

Kumar, S. (2021). Class, caste and agrarian change: The making of farmers' protests. *The Journal of Peasant Studies, 48*(7), 1371–1379.

Kundu, A., & Das, S. (2022). Occupational diversification as a livelihood strategy among the agricultural labour households of West Bengal, India. *Management and Labour Studies, 47*(1), 40-58.

Mohanty, B. B. (Ed.). (2016). Critical perspectives on agrarian transition: India in the global debate. *Routledge*.

Mohanty, B. B. (2001). Suicides of farmers in Maharashtra: A socio-economic analysis. *Review of Development and Change, 6*(2), 146–189.

Mohanty, B. B. (2005). 'We are like the living dead': farmer suicides in Maharashtra, western India. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, *32*(2), 243–276.

Mohanty, B. B. & Papesh, K. Lena, (2023). 'For them, farming may be the last resort, but for us, it is a new hope': Ageing, youth and farming in India—Journal *of Agrarian Change*, 23,(4).

Mosse, D. (2018). Caste and development: Contemporary perspectives on a structure of discrimination and advantage. World Development, 110, 422–436.

Munshi, K., & Rosenzweig, M. (2016). Networks and misallocation: Insurance, migration, and the rural-urban wage gap. *American Economic Review, 106*(01), 46-98

Narayanan, S. (2020). Becoming a young farmer in Madhya Pradesh, India (No. 2020-040). *Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, India*.

Narayanan, S., & Srinivasan, S. (2020). No country for young women farmers: A situation analysis for India. *Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai Working Papers, 41*.

Neog, B. J., & Sahoo, B. K. (2020). Rural non-farm diversification, agricultural feminisation and women's autonomy in the farm: evidence from India. *Australian Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics, 64*(3), 940-959.

Pai, S. (2013). Developmental state and the Dalit question in Madhya Pradesh: Congress response. Routledge.

Philip, J. K. (2023). Who Are We Without Land? Repeasantization and Caste in a Village of South India. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy, 12*(4), 488-513.

Philip, J. K. (2023). Land for dignity and struggle for identity: Landlordism and caste in a village of South India. *Journal of Agrarian Change, 23*(2), 327-345.

Rani, U., & Shylendra, H. S. (2002). Occupational diversification and rural-urban migration in India: a review of evidence and some issues for research. *Journal of Social and Economic Development, 4*(1), 27-41.

Sbriccoli, T. (2016). Land, Labour and Power: A Malwa Village, 1954-2012. Economic and Political Weekly, 8-16.

Shah, A., & Lerche, J. (2018). Conjugated oppression under contemporary capitalism: class relations, social oppression and agrarian change in India. *Journal of Peasant Studies, 45*(5-6), 927-949.

Sinha, S. (2021). Revisiting agrarian questions of capital: Examining diversification by capitalist farmers in Punjab, India. Third World Quarterly, 42 (4), 699–716.

Suthar, S. K. (2018). Contemporary Farmers' Protests and the 'New Rural–Agrarian' in India: *Economic and Political Weekly, vol lIII nos 26 & 27*.

Thapa, R., & Mishra, D. K. (2022). Agrarian Distress and Seasonal Out-migration: Insights from a Field Survey in North Bengal. *Sociological Bulletin, 71*(3), 396–420.

Tilche, A. (2016). Migration, bachelorhood and discontent among the Patidars. *Economic and Political Weekly, 17–24*.

Tilly, C. (2017). Durable inequality. In Collective Violence, Contentious Politics, and Social Change (pp. 225–248). *Routledge*.

Vasavi, A. R. (2009). Suicides and the making of India's agrarian distress. *South African Review of Sociology, 40*(1), 94-108.

Vijayabaskar, M., & Menon, A. (2018). Dispossession by neglect: Agricultural land sales in Southern India. *Journal of Agrarian Change, 18*(3), 571-587.

Vatta, K., & Sidhu, R. S. (2007). Income diversification among rural households in Punjab: dynamics, impacts and policy implications. *Indian Journal of Labour Economics, 50*(4), 723-736.

World Bank. (2018). World Development Report 2019: The Changing Nature of Work. *The World Bank*.

Yadav, S. (2022). Caste, diversification, and the contemporary agrarian question in India: A field perspective. Journal of Agrarian Change, 22 (4), 651–672.