

Understanding the contemporary livelihood engagements of ‘Dalits’ in the rural Punjab

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Abstract

The first quarter of the 21st century has witnessed a significant rise in non-farm employment within rural India. Punjab, once known as the ‘bread basket of India’, has also witnessed a shift from farm to non-farm employment in its hinterlands. This paper is about the contemporary work engagements of Dalits in rural Punjab. An attempt is made to understand and theorise the work profiles of the Dalit households in the rising non-farm employment in the rural-Punjab. The paper is based on an empirical study carried out by the author in one of the village of Punjab. The research reveals a notable trend: Dalit households are predominantly engaged in the non-agricultural sector for their livelihood needs. However, a crucial aspect of this shift is the heterogeneity, fluidity, and often temporary nature of these non-farm employment opportunities. This research contributes to a growing body of literature on rural livelihoods in India, specifically focusing on the experiences of marginalised groups like Dalits. By shedding light on the changing nature of work and the challenges Dalit households face in rural transformation, this study provides valuable insights for policymakers and development practitioners.

Key words: Punjab; Rural; Dalits; Non-farm; employment

Introduction

In India, words like ‘rural’ and ‘agrarian’ have been used interchangeably till the last few decades of 20th century. It was mainly because when rural was all about agriculture whereas most of the rural working population was dependent on agriculture in one or the other way. But in the past three decades or so this equation has been changed drastically. It has been found that a larger

proportion of rural workers today earn their livelihoods not only from non-agricultural activities but also through multiple economic engagements. India Rural Development Report (2012-13) suggests that during the financial year 2004-05 share of non-farm income has been recorded as 61 percent of the total rural income (IDFC Rural Development Network, 2013: 19). Jodhka (2014) has envisaged this rise of diverse and multiple occupational profiles, particularly in non-farm sector, of rural workers as the emergence of “New Rural India”. This paper intends to assess the implications of this shift from farm to non-farm for the rural caste groups that have historically belonged to agricultural labourers.

The study is located in the region of Punjab that has been projected as the harbinger of the green revolution project in India. Historically, across the production relations in agriculture, the caste groups in Punjab can also be classified into following three groups – landowner castes (the dominant caste like *Jats*), agricultural labour castes (mainly the Dalits) and artisan castes (like ‘*Tarkhans*’ of Punjab).

Here the word Dalit¹ is specifically used for the Scheduled Castes (SCs from here onwards) of Punjab who consists of about its’ one-third population i.e. 31.94 (Census 2011). It is important to mention that Punjab is a state with highest concentration of SCs as compared to the other states of India. Further, the 71.38 percent of the SCs of Punjab live in rural areas (Ibid.). It can be argued that about three-fourth of the SCs of Punjab are rural residents. Another important point is that SCs in Punjab are largely being landless (particularly for cultivable land). As only 6% of the total operational landholdings belong to SCs and that comprises just 3% of the total

¹“Dalit,” a word derived from Sanskrit that means “broken, ground down,” was used in the 1930s in Marathi translations of “depressed classes,” a government term for untouchable castes. The term gained currency in the 1970s when a group of young untouchables in Bombay formed the “Dalit Panthers,” modeled somewhat after the American radical Black Panthers... (Peter N. Steams, 2008, “The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World” Published by Oxford University Press – Online version, 2008, accessed at <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195176322.001.0001/acref-9780195176322-e-402#:~:text=Source%3A%20The%20Oxford%20Encyclopedia%20of%20government%20term%20for%20untouchable%20castes> on January 19, 2025)

area under operational holdings in the state (Government of India, 2015). It indicates that degree of landlessness among Dalits, who constitute about one-third of the state population, is quite high.

With an objective to explore the work profiles of Dalit households in rural Punjab, the paper addresses the following two questions:

1. What kinds of activities do Dalits engage in to earn their livelihoods in the “newly emerging rural” of Punjab?
2. How could these rural Dalit households of Punjab be conceptualized in the broader ‘political-economy’ framework?

Review of Literature

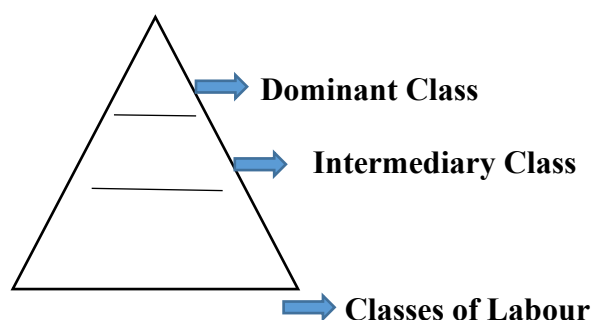
In India, since the time of independence, “rural society” and “agrarian society” has been used interchangeably both by the scholars from India and, also from outside. The scholarship on ‘Indian agrarian economy’ can be labeled as ‘Sociology of agrarian change’ because its prime focus has been to understand the transition occurring in the agrarian economy specifically and in rural social structure generally. Two kinds of questions have been discussed about the transition in Indian agrarian economy. First, the question of capital that deals with the production and accumulation in the agrarian economy which is supposed to precede industrial development. Second, the question of labour that deals with the political transformation in society through the conscious action of working class. On the basis of these two questions of agrarian transition, i.e. question of capital and question of labour, entire scholarship on rural-India can be divided into two phases. In the first phase (pre-1990s) ‘mode of production’ debate dominated, with scholars divided between those who saw Indian agriculture as capitalist (e.g., Thorner, Patnaik) and those who viewed it as semi-feudal (e.g., Bhaduri, Chandra). Key changes included the shift from tenant farming to hired labour, increased capital investment, and evolving rural labour relations.

Despite these changes, debates on labour freedom highlighted continued constraints, with contrasting views from scholars like Brass and Jodhka on whether labourers experienced real freedom or remained bound by economic pressures. In the second phase (post-1990s), it was argued that the agrarian question of capital has diminished in relevance with globalization. Scholars like Bernstein argue that industrial growth now relies on external sources rather than an agrarian foundation. However, the labour question persists, focusing on the political and economic struggles of rural workers. One can say that India has transitioned from feudalism but not towards classical industrial capitalism, instead moving towards an informal-capitalist economy shaped by global influences.

Here, it is essential to trace the 'question of labour' in the "New Rural India" - dominated by non-farm employment. In his classic text titled as "Class Dynamics in Rural India", Bernstein (2010) found dilution of rigid boundaries like peasant/non-peasant, rural/urban, agricultural/non-agricultural and formal/non-formal forms of labour etc. Bernstein conceptualised the present mass of labourers at countryside as 'classes of labour' (Ibid.). He argued that contrary to an ideal 'class' of industrial workers, the contemporary 'classes of labour' have found more segregated. The concept 'classes of labour' represents a double edge phenomenon. On the one hand it shows the segregation of labourers through their diverse work profiles and on the other hand it shows their commonality as being the members of exploited classes. Nowadays, because of the heterogeneity of the work-profiles of labourers, the question of labour has become too complex to deal with. In contrary to an 'ideal class' of industrial workers, the contemporary 'classes of labour' have found more segregated.

Pattenden (2017), on the basis of his 12 years long field-work in 39 villages of the state of Karnataka, has drawn a following class structure for contemporary rural India:

Figure 1.1: Class Structure in Contemporary Rural India



(Source: Labour, State and Society in Rural India; 2017: 24)

Pattenden classified the above classes across the line of being net-buyers and net-sellers of labour-power. 'Dominant class' consists of capitalists and petty-capitalists who are net-buyers of labour-power and also surplus producers; it includes those (i) whose land is cultivated by hired labour; (ii) who primarily use hired labour but also use family labour and; (iii) who primarily work their own land but also hire-in labour. Dominant class has found more likely to diversify its' accumulation strategies out of agriculture too as for example they may also be involved in petty forms of self-employment. Intermediary is the class whom Pattenden identified as 'pure' petty commodity producers (who have found very less in numbers) and it includes those who produce with family labour only. 'Classes of labour' consists of net-sellers of labour-power that includes those (i) who primarily work on their own land but also sell their labour-power; (ii) marginal farmers who sell their labour-power more than they work on their own land, and; (iii) landless who only sell their labour-power. Classes of labour, as may also be involved in petty forms of self-employment, have found likely to sell their labour-power in multiple sectors and locations (see also Bernstein, 2010).

By referring to John Harriss (2012), Pattenden (2017; 25) argued that in the analysis of Indian society caste-class relationships cannot be ignored because caste gives social legitimation

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to the material differences of class and power. If one goes with Pattenden's class structure of rural India then 'the bottom of the bottom' (i.e. the landless net sellers of labour-power among the classes of labour) have historically been constituted mainly by the today's Scheduled Castes. Hence, it is necessary to empirically validate the contemporary forms of labour of these historically remained net-sellers of labour-power, particularly, now when we are talking about the 'emergence of new rural India'.

Methodology

This paper is based on an empirical study that was conducted by the author in December 2017 and January 2018, in the village 'Raiké Kalan' located in Bathinda district of Punjab. From eight Dalit caste groups, a total of 129 households were included in this study. About one-third of the study-population is included in the sample. The following table provides details about the study sample.

Table 1.1: Sample of the study

Sr. No.	Name of the Dalit Caste Group	No. of Households in the Village	No. of Households included in the study
1	Mazhabi Sikh	268	64
2	Bazighar	53	20
3	Meghwal	38	16
4	Ramdasia Sikh	18	12
5	Thori (Kori)	8	7
6	Balmiki	7	4

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7	Marassi (Doom)	3	3
8	Bhath	3	3
Total		398 (100%)	129 (32%)

(Source: Field Data)

Here, for the purpose of this study, the term ‘Dalit’ has been used to represent all the six – Mazhabi Sikh, Balmiki/Bhangi, Ramdasia Sikh, Meghwal/Meg, Bazigar, and Thori/Kori – officially notified Scheduled Castes as well as two caste groups notified as Other Backward Classes from the study-village. Two OBCs, namely Mirasi/Dum and Bhat/Bhath, have been included as Dalits in this study because in everyday practice these both caste groups are perceived as SCs or even lower in the social hierarchy within the study-village. Although, the sample was selected through stratified-random sampling method but for four caste groups, whose total numbers of households in the village were less than 10, we tried to include all their households in the study.

Both primary as well as secondary sources of data were incorporated in this study. The primary sources of data includes: structured schedules for each household, situational-conversations, interviews, observations and case studies. Secondary sources of data includes: Census data and reports of agricultural census of India, and reports of department of agriculture of Punjab etc.

Analysis

a) **Landlessness among the Dalits** Out of 129 households selected for this study, less than 10 percent have land ownership while all others are landless.

The following table provides data about the share of these 11 SC landowning households:

Table 1.2: Land Ownership Status among Dalit Households

Sr. No.	Caste	No. of Land Owing Households	Total Land Owned by the All Households (In Acres)	Average Land Ownership Per Each Household (In Acres)
I	Mazhabi Sikh	8	3.62	0.45
II	Bazigar	1	1	1
III	Ramdasia Sikh	2	5	2.5
Total		11	9.62	0.87

(Source: Field Data)

The above table indicates that the average landowning size for a household is just 0.87 Acres which seems meagre in front of the average landowning size of a household in the state i.e. 3.77 Acres (<http://agcensus.dacnet.nic.in/SL/StateT1table4.aspx> accessed on 06.04.2018)². Also the all Dalit landowning households (11) belong to only three caste groups, i.e. Mazhabi Sikh, Bazigar and Ramdasia Sikh. Among the other five Dalit caste groups not a single case of landownership has been reported. This table sheds light on the fact that these eight Dalit caste groups have historically been landless and it implies that they have been agricultural labourers within the rural economy.

b) Work-profiles of Dalits

Here, we will discuss two thesis emerged out from this study. First thesis that has come up is about the shift among landless Dalit households from farm to non-farm labour. It can be inferred

² Agricultural Census 2010-11 for All the Social Groups.

from both the household level data as well as individual level data as provided in the table given below.

Table 1.3: Household and Individual level classification of Dalits in Three Categories of

Sr. No.	Category of Labour	No. of Households	No. of Labourers
I	Only Agricultural	3 (2%)	85 (24 %)
II	Only Non-agricultural	19 (15%)	131 (37%)
III	Hybrid Category of Labour (Combination of Non-agricultural and agricultural labour)	107 (83%)	141 (39%)
Total		129 (100%)	357 (100%)

Labour

(Source: Field data)

Above table indicates that only 2% of the Dalit households depended upon agricultural labour as a sole means of livelihood. Meanwhile, 15% of Dalit households solely depended on non-farm work. While rest of the 83% of Dalit households, whom we classified as ‘hybrid-households’, mingled non-farm and farm work to earn their livelihoods/incomes. In other words, one can say that 98% of the landless Dalit households engaged in one or the other non-farm activity. A larger proportions of these ‘hybrid labour households’ have strategically combined some non-farm activities with seasonal agricultural work. However, a few households of casual/seasonal and attached agricultural labourers supplemented their earnings from non-farm activities particularly like MGNREGA and/or construction work.

At individual level, data in the above tables suggests that only about one-fourth of the total Dalit labourers are dependent on agriculture as a sole means of livelihood/economic earnings. Whereas rest of the three-fourth (3/4th) of Dalit labourers are engaged in non-

agricultural activities either as sole means of livelihood or with the exception that a few are also engaged in seasonal agricultural labour.

The data, on both household as well as individual level, in the above table indicates a shift from farm to non-farm activities for the Dalit labourers in study-village. But this does not imply that Dalit households have abandoned agricultural work. Rather, the study data indicated that the mechanization of agriculture and seasonal cheap in-migrant labour has resulted in decline of employment in agriculture for the native labourers. These two factors seem to have pushed Dalit households in search of new economic avenues in non-farm sector. In this changing employment scenario, one could interpret that a pool of 'hybrid-labour Dalit households' (i.e.83 percent of all Dalit households) have emerged.

In order to understand the deeper notions about this shift from agricultural to non-agricultural, it is important to analyze critically the forms of their engagements in, both, non-agricultural as well as agricultural activities. In the following table forms of labour are classified as per the engagements of labourers in three categories of labour: Category I - Only agricultural labourers; Category II - Only Non-agricultural Labourers; and Category III - Hybrid Category of Labourers (i.e. combination of Non-agricultural and Agricultural Labour).

Table 1.4: Forms of Labour of Dalit workers

Sr. No.	Forms of Labour	No. of Labourers	Percentage
I	Manual Labourers (From Category I, II & III)	221	61.90
II	Skill Based Self Employed Labourers (From Category II)	53	14.85
III	Petty Traders/Vendors and Manual Agricultural Labourers (From category III)	15	4.21

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IV	Government Employee (From Category II)	12	3.36
V	Private Job Holders (From category II)	11	3.08
VI	Cultivators (From category I)	11	3.08
VII	Petty Traders/Vendors (From category II)	10	2.80
VIII	Skill Based Self Employed Labourers and Manual Agricultural Labourers (From category III)	10	2.80
IX	Skilled Agricultural Labourers and Manual Non-agricultural Labourers (From category III)	4	1.12
X	Cultivator and Manual Non-agricultural Labourers (From category III)	3	0.84
XI	ASHA/Anganwadi Workers (From category II)	2	0.56
XII	Shepherds at Own Goats/Sheep (From category II)	2	0.56
XIII	Petty Traders/Vendors and Cultivators (From category III)	2	0.56
XIV	ASHA/Anganwadi Worker and Manual agricultural Labourers (From category III)	1	0.28
Total		357	100.00

(Source: Field Data)

As above table indicates about 62% of Dalit workers are only working as manual labourers either in agriculture or non-agriculture or in both. Around 15% are skilled self-employed workers like masons, electricians, tailors, and mechanics, with 3% also engaging in seasonal agriculture. Government and private sector employment each account for 3%. Only 3% work as cultivators, mainly through leasing or sharecropping. Petty trade and vending employ about 7 who often supplemented by seasonal farm work. The remaining 4% are in diverse roles,

including hybrid jobs like Anganwadi/ASHA workers, sheep/goat owners, and combinations of manual, agricultural, and trade work.

Hence the second thesis of the study is about the heterogeneity and segregation of Dalit labourers as per their work engagements. The prevailing forms of labour in agriculture are very few such as casual and seasonal agricultural work, attached agricultural labour, tenancy and share-cropping. But, there are wide ranges of activities in which labourers are engaged in non-agricultural sector. The prevailing non-agricultural forms of labour in the 129 Dalit households are grouped under following six broader categories:

- 1) Manual-labour** – The workers are engaged in: cattle-sheds and/or house-sweeper, construction labour, waiter at a small hotel, working as a helper at a grocery shop/ a cloth show-room/ or any other shop, labour at brick-kiln, labour at a flour-mill, shepherds at other persons' sheep/goats, labour at local food grain market, maid in a private school/with a '*zamindar*' family and, MGNREGA work;
- 2) Skill-based self-employed labour** – mason (construction work), carpenter, plumber, glass worker, aluminium factory worker, tube-well installer, repairer and installer of home water pumps, electrician, factory worker at a fiber plant, tractor-mechanic, gas-welder, motor-cycle mechanic, cycle/small puncture repair workshop, tailor, caterer, driving of mini-van/tractor/truck, laboratory-technician, lumberjack, and salon/beautician;
- 3) Petty traders/vendors** – scrap dealers and/or seller of kitchen utensils or cattle feed or purchaser of the wastage of food-grains, vegetable seller/onion seller as street vendor, mobile fast-food seller, milk-man, cattle traders, and owners of a grocery shop/chemist shop etc.;
- 4) Private job-holders** – school teacher, assistant to a revenue officer, contract based job in the department of agriculture, contract based job in army-cant (Bathinda), brick-kiln

account-managers, bus-conductor, security-guard, call-center representative and textile-mill worker;

5) Government employees – army-man, employee in the state transport company, science lab attendant in a government school, a clerk in a government school and employees in the water supply and sanitation department of the state;

6) Others: Anganwadi worker, ASHA worker and owners of sheep/goat.

There are total 52 different non-farm forms of labour being reported. Out of which at least one or more than one forms of labour were being means of livelihoods/income for each Dalit household.

If one looks at household as a unit and its source of incomes/livelihoods it is difficult to classify all households in some-fixed categories because of the diverse range of work-profiles of household-individuals. But, for the purpose of analysis, in the following table, classification of all the households has been done by identifying one ‘major-source’ of income for a household. Here, a major-source’ of income for a household can be any one avenue, in which at least one or more member(s) of the household is/are engaged and that generates regular income for the household in the form of cash.

Table 1.5: Classification of Households with one ‘major-Sources’ of Incomes/Livelihoods

Sr. No.	‘Major-source’ of income/livelihood	No. of Households Dependent upon
1	Only Manual Work	45 (35%)
2	Self-employment	72 (56%)
3	Government Employment	12(9%)
Total		129 (100%)

(Source: Field Data)

As above table indicates, more than one-third of Dalit households are still dependent upon only manual-work. It includes the households of cattle-shed sweepers, agricultural attached labourers, casual construction labourers, and casual and seasonal agricultural labourers. The largest proportion (56 percent) of Dalit households are able to supplement their earnings with some kind of self-employment that may be a skilled self-employment or petty trade/vending work or a private job or being a tenant farmer and/or a share-cropper or any other. Third category consists of households from among the members who have entered into public sector employment and they constitute nine percent of the all Dalit households.

This descriptive analysis of work-profiles has led us to following conclusions. First, agriculture being the sole means of livelihoods/incomes has shrunk only to 24 percent for the Dalit workers at individual level while it is 2 percent and Dalit households continue with agriculture only. It can be said that 98 percent of Dalit households have entered in one or the other activity in non-farm. However, it indicates a clear shift, of Dalit households, towards non-farm but it does not imply that the Dalits have abandoned agricultural work. Second, the categories of 'hybrid-labourers' and, particularly, 'hybrid-households' (which consists 83 percent of the all Dalit households) suggest that agricultural work, more or less, for the Dalits have become secondary source of employment. Third, there is a high degree heterogeneity which is among the Dalit workers engaged in non-farm activities. Whereas the prevailing forms of labour in agriculture are very few such as casual and seasonal agricultural work, attached agricultural labour, tenancy and share-cropping. Whereas in the non-farm labour there is huge diversity (52 different forms of labour) have reported that ranges from a cattle-shed sweeper (from the category of manual labourers) to an army-man (from the category of government employees). It can be argued that every third household, engaged in non-farm labour, differs from the first two in terms

of the form of labour. It suggests not only the rising heterogeneity among the work-profiles of Dalit labourers but their segregation too. Fourth, as per the individual level analysis of work-profiles, manual workers, self-employed³ workers, and government employees constitute 62 percent, 35 percent, and 3 percent respectively.

In this shift from farm to non-farm work, inter-caste and gender-based differences have been found among the Dalits. For example, Balmikis remain in manual labor, while Mazhabi Sikhs and Meghwals have broader work profiles and also male Dalit workers are largely found to be working in non-farm, while women largely stay in manual labour, with few shifting to skilled work or experiencing "housewifization." As not of being the scope of this particular paper, the inter-caste and gender-based differences among Dalits, in terms of the shift from farm to non-farm work, will not be elaborated further.

Discussion

Regarding the first question posed in this paper (i.e. from what kinds of activities are Dalits earning their livelihoods), individual-level and household-level analyses of 'work profiles' of the Dalit households have offered two significant considerations. One, non-agriculture sector, compared to the agriculture sector, constitutes a major avenue of livelihood earnings for the Dalit households. Two, a majority of the Dalit households are constituted of heterogeneous, fluid and temporary categories of work.

About the second question posed in this paper (How could these rural Dalit households of Punjab be conceptualized in the broader 'political-economy' framework?), if one goes with Pattenden's class structure of rural India, then the Dalits are constituted of 'the bottom of the

³ Here, self-employed/self-employment includes: skilled self-employment, petty trade/vending work and private jobs, cultivators (tenant farmers, share croppers & owner farmers) and others.

bottom' (i.e., the landless net sellers of labour-power among the classes of labour). This group comprises the landless net sellers of labour-power among the broader "classes of labour," reflecting their exclusion from landownership and productive capital, which are key markers of economic stability and social mobility. Here majority of the Dalit labourers either are working as manual labourers or engaged in one or the other kinds of self-employment. Further the category of self-employed requires a critical investigation. As Praveen Jha (2016) argued, in the post neo-liberal regime of India, the rising pool of 'self-employed' workers is not viewed as an empowering phenomenon but rather it has been seen as 'disguised wage-labour' under contemporary capitalism. He further argued that even a substantial segment of workers, those are unable to find even casual employment, often remain 'self-employed', which, to a large extent, is the same as being 'underemployed' or 'disguisedly unemployed' (Ibid.). In this context, conceptualizing rural Dalit households within the broader political economy reveals their role as a labour reserve in capitalist production, underscoring the persistent challenges of economic marginalization and structural inequality in post-reform India.

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