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Regional Variations in India's Agricultural Landscape: Insights from Himachal Pradesh, with a Focus on Scheduled Castes

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Abstract: This research investigates India's agricultural landscape, focusing on the interplay between social disparities, landownership patterns, and household distribution. With 70% of the population residing in agriculture-dependent rural areas, the study employs a quantitative approach, utilizing data from the National Statistical Office's 2019 NSS 77th Round on Agricultural Households. Findings reveal enduring disparities across diverse social groups, with Scheduled Tribes dominating agriculture and Scheduled Castes playing a pivotal role in non-agricultural activities. The nuanced exploration of land distribution highlights prevalent landlessness and small holdings, emphasizing the intricate relationship between social groups and landownership dynamics. Regional variations are evident, notably in Himachal Pradesh, where the 'Others' group assumes dominance. Advocating for targeted policy interventions, the research emphasizes the need for nuanced understanding of regional dynamics to address inequalities, promote equitable land distribution, and facilitate inclusive growth in the agricultural sector amid global transformations.

Keywords: Agricultural Landscape, Social Disparities, Landownership Patterns, Household Distribution, Inclusive Growth

JEL Codes: Q15, Q13, R23, I32 and D63

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INTRODUCTION

Around 70% of India's population resides in rural areas, heavily dependent on agriculture. However, small landholdings, comprising 86.2% of total holdings, raise concerns. The average size has declined from 1.15 hectares in 2010–11 to 1.08 hectares in 2015–16, impacting smallholder farmers practicing subsistence agriculture and facing a low-income trap (Chand, Saxena, and Rana, 2015). Approximately half of India's farm households would endure poverty without non-farm income prospects, highlighting the crucial role of alternative livelihoods. Birthal *et al.* (2015b) disclosed that over 40% of marginal and small-scale farmers aspired to exit agriculture due to limited alternative opportunities. Various studies have noted an inverse correlation between agricultural productivity and farm size, primarily due to enhanced labor on smaller farms. Nevertheless, this relationship has diminished with time, attributed to the adoption of scale-neutral biochemical technologies and mechanization. The introduction of high-yielding seeds, chemical fertilizers, and mechanization has contributed to this weakening trend (Sen 1962; Gaurav and Mishra 2011; Foster and Rosenzweig 2017; Deininger *et al.* 2015).

India's agrarian productivity is significantly influenced by the social aspect of land distribution and resource access. The rural society is fragmented along caste, ethnicity, and religious lines, with caste being a prominent factor. Historically, two caste categorization systems, varna and jati, have shaped social structure.

Varna divides society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras, while jatis offer a more nuanced hierarchy. With 3,743 castes in India, the government classifies them into Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Castes (OBCs), and Upper Castes (UCs). SCs, STs, and OBCs face social marginalization, with SCs at the bottom of the hierarchical structure (Deshpande 2001; Azam 2012; Mosse 2018).

In India's agricultural communities, social stratification is closely linked to the inequitable distribution of land and access to productive resources, as documented by various scholars (Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994; Agrawal 2004; Desai and Dubey 2012). Studies by Deshpande (2001), Thorat (2002), and Gaiha *et al.* (2007) reveal that lower-caste households (SC, ST, and OBC) often possess smaller landholdings compared to their upper-caste counterparts (UC), exacerbating rural inequality. This unequal land distribution not only perpetuates discrimination but also hampers access to technology, extension systems, financial institutions, and government welfare schemes for marginalized groups (Batte and Michael 2003; Ali 2012; Birthal *et al.* 2015a; Khan *et al.* 2016; Birthal *et al.* 2017; Karthick and Madheswaran 2018; Joshi, Khan, and Kishore 2019; Krishna, Aravalath, and Vikraman 2019). The literature demonstrates that early adopters of innovations predominantly belong to the upper social strata, while lower-caste households face challenges in accessing information and institutional credit. Caste-

based discrimination permeates various aspects of rural livelihoods, influencing wage payments in labor markets and affecting returns from farming (Banerjee and Knight 1985; Munshi and Rosenzweig 2006; Madheswaran and Attewell 2007). Although existing studies highlight caste-based differences, extensive research on how the caste system impacts agricultural productivity is lacking. They reveal disparities in land distribution, access to resources, technology adoption, and discrimination in labor markets, underscoring the need for addressing social inequities in the agricultural sector (Khan *et al.*2020). The study explores challenges for Indian agricultural laborers amid global integration, emphasizing globalization's impact on feudal structures and progressive movements advocating social-economic transformation. This article assesses the regional variations in India's agricultural landscape, providing insights from Himachal Pradesh with a specific focus on Scheduled Castes.

METHODOLOGY

This research exclusively relies on secondary data, adopting an exploratory approach. The secondary data is sourced from diverse outlets, including research papers and online resources. The chosen research methodology is quantitative, utilizing data from the National Statistical Office's 2019 NSS 77th Round on Agricultural Households. The study's main objectives revolve around a demographic overview and land distribution patterns. The former entails scrutinizing millions of households categorized by social groups, examining percentage distributions in agricultural, non-agricultural, and rural contexts from July 2018 to June 2019. The latter involves a meticulous analysis of Table 2, revealing landownership disparities across size categories and social groups among rural households during this period. Additionally, the study comprehensively analyzes Table 3 to unveil percentage distributions of households and land area, providing valuable insights into disparities in agricultural, non-agricultural, and rural contexts.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- Analyze demographic trends in agricultural and non-agricultural households among Scheduled Castes and other groups, providing insights into rural dynamics.
- Examine land distribution patterns in rural households by size categories and social groups, revealing disparities and variations in landownership dynamics.

Demographic Overview: Percentage Distribution of Agricultural and Non-agricultural Households by Scheduled Castes and others Social Groups, July 2018 - June 2019.

The table illustrates the percentage distribution of agricultural and non-agricultural households, along with rural households, categorized by social groups for the agricultural year spanning July 2018 to June 2019. The data is presented in millions and percentages. Examining the social groups, it is apparent that Scheduled Tribes (ST) account for 14.2% of agricultural households, 10% of non-agricultural households, and 12.3% of rural households. Similarly, Scheduled Castes (SC) show a distribution of 15.9%, 28.4%, and 21.6% across the respective categories. Notably, the Other Backward Classes (OBC) contribute significantly, constituting 45.8% in agricultural households, 42.8% in non-agricultural households, and 44.4% in rural households. The 'Others' category displays a distribution of 24.1%, 18.8%, and 21.7%. In terms of the overall distribution, when combining all social groups, agricultural households total 93.094 million, non-agricultural households amount to 79.35 million, and rural households sum up to 172.443 million. Remarkably, the percentage distribution for each category aggregates to 100%, emphasizing the comprehensive coverage of the data. This analysis provides valuable insights into the demographic composition of agricultural and non-agricultural households across different social groups, offering a nuanced perspective on rural dynamics during the specified agricultural year.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Agricultural and Non-agricultural Households by Social Group for the Agricultural Year July 2018 - June 2019, Estimated in Millions and Percentage

Social group	Agricultural households	Non-agricultural households	Rural households
ST	13.217	7.921	21.138
%	14.2	10	12.3
SC	14.788	22.519	37.306
%	15.9	28.4	21.6
OBC	42.622	33.98	76.601
%	45.8	42.8	44.4
Others	22.467	14.931	37.398
%	24.1	18.8	21.7
all	93.094	79.35	172.443
%	100	100	100

Source: Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, National Statistical Office. (2021, September). *Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and holding of Households in rural India, 2019 NSS 77th Round, January-December 2019*.

Land Distribution Patterns among Rural Households by Scheduled Castes and Other Social Groups in Different Size Categories, July 2018 - June 2019.

Table 2 provides a detailed analysis of the percentage distribution of rural households and the corresponding percentage distribution of land area owned based on size categories for each household social group during the agricultural year from July 2018 to June 2019. The size categories, ranging from landless to large holdings, offer insights into the landownership patterns across different social groups. In agricultural households, the landless category (≤ 0.002 hectares) is prevalent across all social groups, with percentages ranging from 1.9% to 3.8%. Marginal holdings (0.002 – 1.000 hectares) constitute a substantial proportion, particularly for Scheduled Castes (81.7%) and Other Backward Classes (70.3%). The distribution pattern remains diverse across size categories, reflecting varying degrees of land ownership within each social group. Non-

agricultural households exhibit distinctive patterns, with the landless category ranging from 13% to 18.9%. Marginal holdings dominate across all social groups, with percentages exceeding 60%, emphasizing the prevalence of small landholdings in this category. The distribution by size categories underscores the distinct landownership dynamics between agricultural and non-agricultural households. Rural households mirror similar trends, with the landless category accounting for 6.4% to 9%. Marginal holdings continue to be prominent, particularly for Scheduled Castes (84.8%) and Other Backward Classes (75.7%). The size-wise distribution underscores the nuances in landownership across diverse social groups within rural settings. Overall, the table unveils the intricate relationships between social groups, landownership, and size categories, shedding light on the disparities and variations in land distribution among agricultural, non-agricultural, and rural households.

Table 2: Percentage distribution of rural households and percentage distribution of area owned by size category of ownership holdings for each household social group

Size category of ownership holdings (in ha.)	Household Social Group									
	Percentage distribution households					Percentage distribution of area owned				
	ST	SC	OBC	Others	all	ST	SC	OBC	Others	all
Agricultural households										
Landless (≤ 0.002)	3	3.8	2.3	1.9	2.6	0	0	0	0	0
Marginal (0.002 – 1.000)	68.6	81.7	70.3	64.2	70.4	37	47.8	30.7	24.9	31.5
Small (1.000 – 2.000)	19.6	10.1	16.3	18.8	16.4	30.4	27	24.6	24.7	25.7
Semi-medium (2.000 – 4.000)	7	3.7	7.9	11.2	7.9	19.8	17.2	22.1	27.3	22.8
Medium (4.000-10.000)	1.7	0.7	2.8	3.6	2.4	9.7	8	17.1	18.9	15.7
Large (>10.000)	0.2	0	0.3	0.3	0.2	3.1	0	5.5	4.2	4.3
all sizes	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Non-agricultural households										
Landless (≤ 0.002)	18.9	12.4	16.3	13	14.8	0	0	0	0	0
Marginal (0.002 – 1.000)	77.4	86.9	82.5	84.9	83.6	60.4	77.8	71.1	66.7	69.7
Small (1.000 – 2.000)	3.4	0.3	0.9	1.5	1.1	33.2	5.1	16	16	16.4
Semi-medium (2.000 – 4.000)	0.4	0.4	0.3	0.5	0.4	6.3	17	11.5	11.6	11.8
Medium (4.000-10.000)	0	0	0	0.1	0	0.1	0	1.5	5.8	2.1
Large (>10.000)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
all sizes	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Rural households										
Landless (≤ 0.002)	9	9	8.5	6.4	8.2	0	0	0	0	0
Marginal (0.002 – 1.000)	71.8	84.8	75.7	72.4	76.5	38.9	52.2	33.4	27.8	34.5

Small (1.000 – 2.000)	13.5	4.2	9.5	11.8	9.3	30.6	23.8	24	24.1	24.9
Semi-medium (2.000 – 4.000)	4.6	1.7	4.5	7	4.4	18.7	17.2	21.4	26.2	22
Medium (4.000-10.000)	1	0.3	1.6	2.2	1.4	9	6.9	16.1	18	14.7
Large (>10.000)	0.1	0	0.2	0.2	0.1	2.9	0	5.1	3.9	3.9
All sizes	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: Figures may not add up to 100 due to rounding **Source:** Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, National Statistical Office. (2021, September). *Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and holding of Households in rural India, 2019 NSS 77th Round, January-December 2019*

Landownership Disparities: A Detailed Examination of Household Distribution and Land Area Ownership across Scheduled Castes and Social Groups in Agricultural, Non-agricultural, and Rural Contexts (July 2018 - June 2019).

Table 3 presents a comprehensive analysis of the percentage distribution of households and corresponding land area owned, categorized by social groups for agricultural, non-agricultural, and rural households during the period of July 2018 to June 2019. In agricultural households, the percentage distribution varies across social groups, with Scheduled Tribes (ST) constituting 14.2%, Scheduled Castes (SC) at 16%, Other Backward Classes (OBC) at 45.9%, and Others at 23.9%. The distribution of the land area owned follows a similar pattern, with OBC dominating at 47.8%, followed by Others at 28.7%. On average, OBC households also possess the largest land area per household (0.912 hectares), while ST households have

the smallest (0.862 hectares). For non-agricultural households, the percentage distribution of households shows dominance by Other Backward Classes (42.8%), while land area distribution indicates a lead by OBC (39.8%). The average land area owned per household is highest for Others (0.118 hectares) and lowest for Scheduled Castes (0.059 hectares). Rural households exhibit a distribution pattern similar to agricultural households, with OBC having the highest percentage distribution of households (44.5%) and land area owned (47.2%). The average land area per household is again highest for OBC (0.543 hectares) and lowest for Scheduled Castes (0.242 hectares). Overall, the table underscores the disparities in landownership among different social groups, providing a nuanced perspective on the distribution of households, land area, and average landholding size across agricultural, non-agricultural, and rural settings.

Table 3: Percentage of households and area of land owned by social group

Indicators	Household social group				
	ST	SC	OBC	Others	all
Agricultural households					
Percentage distribution of households	14.2	16	45.9	23.9	100
Percentage distribution of area of land owned	14	9.5	47.8	28.7	100
Average area (ha.) owned per household	0.862	0.52	0.912	1.054	0.876
Non-agricultural households					
Percentage distribution of households	10	28.4	42.8	18.8	100
Percentage distribution of area of land owned	14.8	19.5	39.8	25.9	100
Average area (ha.) owned per household	0.127	0.059	0.08	0.118	0.086
Rural households					
Percentage distribution of households	12.3	21.7	44.5	21.6	100
Percentage distribution of area of land owned	14.1	10.2	47.2	28.5	100
Average area (ha.) owned per household	0.586	0.242	0.543	0.677	0.512

Note: Figures may not add up to 100 due to rounding **Source:** Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, National Statistical Office. (2021, September). *Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and holding of Households in rural India, 2019 NSS 77th Round, January-December 2019*

Table 4: Percentage Distribution of Agricultural/Non-Agricultural and Rural Households by Scheduled Castes and others Social Groups in Himachal Pradesh for the Agricultural Year July 2018 - June 2019

Social Groups	percentage distribution of agricultural households by social group	percentage distribution of non-agricultural households by social group	percentage distribution of rural households by social group
ST	6.8	3.2	5.7
SC	17.9	22.4	19.3
OBC	12.5	7.6	11
Others	62.8	66.8	64.1
All	100	100	100

Note: Figures may not add up to 100 due to rounding **Source:** Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, National Statistical Office. (2021, September). *Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and holding of Households in rural India, 2019 NSS 77th Round, January-December 2019*

Table 4 provides a detailed overview of the percentage distribution of agricultural, non-agricultural, and rural households in Himachal Pradesh during the agricultural year from July 2018 to June 2019, focusing on Scheduled Castes (SC) and Other Social Groups. In terms of agricultural households, the percentage distribution reveals that Others dominate with 62.8%, followed by SC at 17.9%, OBC at 12.5%, and ST at 6.8%. In non-agricultural households, the pattern shifts, and the majority lies with Others again, accounting for 66.8%, followed by SC at 22.4%, OBC at 7.6%, and ST at 3.2%. The distribution of rural households follows a similar trend, with Others leading at 64.1%, SC at 19.3%, OBC at 11%, and ST at 5.7%. The overall distribution emphasizes the significant presence of the Others social group in all categories, highlighting their dominance in both agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, as well as in rural settings. This insight into the demographic composition provides valuable information for understanding the social dynamics of household distribution in the specified region during the given agricultural period.

MAIN FINDING SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study conducted a thorough examination of household distribution, landownership patterns, and social disparities in agricultural and rural contexts during the July 2018 to June 2019 period. Findings revealed significant demographic variations, with Scheduled Tribes dominating agricultural households and Scheduled Castes prominent in non-agricultural sectors. The nuanced analysis of land distribution highlighted prevalent landlessness and small holdings, emphasizing the complex relationships between social groups and landownership dynamics. Disparities persisted across different regions, exemplified by the dominance of the 'Others' group in Himachal Pradesh. The study emphasizes the need for targeted policies to address these inequalities, promote equitable land distribution, and tailor interventions based on regional dynamics for inclusive growth in the agricultural sector.

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