



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Peasants and Proletarians in Harevli and Mahatwar¹

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Abstract: This note analyses socio-economic changes among peasants and rural workers in Harevli and Mahatwar based on surveys conducted in 2006 and 2023. It examines shifts in family and hired labour use, sources of income, and patterns of proletarianisation. Findings show a marked decline in family labour and growing dependence on non-agricultural income. Despite this, peasant households continue to contribute over 70 per cent of village agricultural output, underscoring their enduring significance. The study also notes increasing landlessness and diversification of livelihoods through migration and leasing, highlighting persistent inequality and the evolving character of rural class relations.

Keywords: peasant households, agrarian change, family labour, hired labour, proletarianisation, non-agricultural income, income diversification, landlessness, tenancy, class differentiation, rural India, Uttar Pradesh.

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This note describes certain important features of the socio-economic characteristics of peasants and rural workers in the two Uttar Pradesh villages of Harevli and Mahatwar which were surveyed by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies in 2006 and 2023.²

PEASANT HOUSEHOLDS

Peasant households are households whose members participate in some or all of the major operations – manual or mechanised – of cultivation on the land that they operate. The peasantry has shown great resilience as a social category, and the socio-economic characteristics of peasant households have changed across historical

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² Other aspects of the agrarian economy of these two villages have been discussed in the accompanying articles of this issue (*RAS*, 15, 2).

epochs. The main feature of the modern peasantry is its subjugation to capital and the market, and by the capitalist-landlord state. The main changes that we discuss are with respect to the declining number of days of family labour expended on family farms, the hired labour that peasant households employ on their farms, the extent to which members of peasant households work as wage workers, the share of crop and other agricultural incomes in total peasant household incomes, and the contribution of peasant households to total village agricultural output.

The Deployment of Labour by Peasant Households

There has been a sharp decline in family labour on farms (Table 1).

The precipitous decline in family labour among rich peasant households in Mahatwar was because they no longer cultivated sugarcane in 2023. There was a decline in family labour in Harevli as well, particularly marked among middle peasants and rich peasants.

In Harevli, where sugarcane cultivation requires large numbers of wage workers, the ratio of family to hired labour on farms has declined sharply, even among poor peasants. In 2006, the ratio of family female labour to female hired labour on poor peasant farms was almost 12 (Table 2). The corresponding figure for male family labour and male hired labour on poor peasant farms was about 20. In 2023, these ratios had fallen to less than a quarter of their corresponding values in 2006.

By contrast, in Mahatwar, the ratio of family to hired labour rose across peasant classes. This was because of a fall in the demand for hired labour on peasant farms. In 2023, only 14 workers living in Mahatwar reported doing agricultural wage work. In 2006, that number was 85. Among poor peasants in 2023, the ratios of family labour to hired labour were about 30 (females, poor peasants), 20 (males, poor peasants), 56 (females, middle peasants), and 26 (males, middle peasants). Rich peasants in both villages continued to depend mainly on hired labour.

When the average number of days of family labour on farms is disaggregated by sex, distinct patterns emerge.

Table 1 *Average days of family labour on farms by peasant households, Harevli and Mahatwar, 2006 and 2023*

Sl. no.	Socio-economic class	Harevli				Mahatwar			
		Female		Male		Female		Male	
		2006	2023	2006	2023	2006	2023	2006	2023
1	Poor peasants	49	44	134	117	49	32	98	57
2	Middle peasants	15	16	162	53	41	19	123	35
3	Rich peasants	0	0	120	75	10	1	98	13

Table 2 *Ratio of total family labour on farms to total hired labour on farms by peasant households, Harevli and Mahatwar, 2006 and 2023*

Sl. no.	Socio-economic class	Harevli				Mahatwar			
		Female		Male		Female		Male	
		2006	2023	2006	2023	2006	2023	2006	2023
1	Poor peasants	11.8	2.8	20.8	5.0	7.8	30.1	35.8	20.0
2	Middle peasants	0.6	0.2	12.9	0.9	1.6	56.7	6.3	26.5
3	Rich peasants	0.0	0.0	2.6	0.8	0.5	3.7	0.6	1.8

The average number of days of female family labour on farms is a fraction of the number of days of male family labour on farms. This feature of family labour on farms was true in both 2006 and in 2023.

The average number of days of family labour undertaken on farms has fallen sharply for men and women over the period between the two surveys. The decline in family labour has been especially steep for men.

In Harevli, family labour among women members of peasant households has been low among poor and middle peasant households over this period. Women from rich peasant households did not undertake family labour at all over the two survey periods.

With agriculture in Mahatwar being less labour-intensive than in Harevli, overall levels of the absorption of male family labour was lower in Mahatwar than in Harevli. The average number of days of family labour undertaken by women in Mahatwar was lower, around the same levels as in Harevli. In Mahatwar, however, women in rich peasant families did not, as women from Tyagi rich peasant families in Harevli, exclude themselves from family labour altogether. Further, in Mahatwar, where absolute levels of male family labour were low, there was a further steep decline in the number of days of male family labour.

Incomes of Peasant Households

The share of crop income in the total income of peasant households was generally less than 50 per cent, and, in general, with one significant exception, declined between 2006 and 2023 (Table 3). The significant exception was among poor peasants in Harevli. Owing to a rise in tenancy, and increased sugarcane and cereal production by poor peasants, the share of crop income in poor peasant incomes actually increased in Harevli.

The magnitudes in this respect in Mahatwar are astonishing, and show real change in the character of peasant households with respect to their dependence on wage work. In Harevli, however, there has been a sharp increase in sugarcane productivity. In

Table 3 *Share of crop income in the total income of peasant households, in per cent, Harevli and Mahatwar, 2006 and 2023*

Sl. no.	Socio-economic class	Harevli		Mahatwar	
		2006	2023	2006	2023
1	Poor peasants	8	36	3	2
2	Middle peasants	61	52	25	14
3	Rich peasants	61	36	25	8

addition, the agro-ecological conditions are more favourable to crop production than in Mahatwar. As a result, crop incomes continue to constitute more than 30 per cent – and crop income and income from animal resources constitute more than 50 per cent – of total household incomes among peasant families (Table 4). The sources (other than crop income) that contribute to total peasant household incomes vary between the two villages. In Harevli, non-agricultural incomes of peasant households are more mixed, led by pensions/scholarships/insurance (14 per cent), private salaried jobs (13 per cent), rents from agricultural land (10.6 per cent), and business/trade (10.3 per cent). In Mahatwar, non-agricultural incomes of peasant households are dominated by salaried and external flows: government salaried jobs (27.4 per cent) and business/trade (22.9 per cent) together with remittances (15.5 per cent) account for most of the total, with pensions (9.1 per cent) and private salaried jobs (7.4 per cent) further behind; agricultural labour is negligible.

Sources of income other than agricultural production also vary according to the class of the peasantry, reflecting differentiation in education, skilling, and the ability to pay for access to meet the transaction costs of entering more modern sections of the labour market. Among rich peasants, incomes skew towards salaried work, business, and asset-based returns, while among poor peasants, they lean more on animal resources, wage labour, remittances, and village-specific activities; these patterns differ sharply between Harevli and Mahatwar.

In Harevli in 2023, the main sources of income other than crop production for rich peasant households were rental income from agricultural land (19.3 per cent),

Table 4 *Share of income from all agricultural activities in the total income of peasant households, in per cent, Harevli and Mahatwar, 2006 and 2023*

Sl. no.	Socio-economic class	Harevli		Mahatwar	
		2006	2023	2006	2023
1	Poor peasants	86	65	23	9
2	Middle peasants	82	67	48	25
3	Rich peasants	81	55	37	13

Note: All agricultural activities include crop production, animal husbandry, renting out crop land and agricultural machinery, and labouring out in agriculture.

Table 5 *Share of gross value of agricultural output by peasant households, Harevli and Mahatwar, 2006 and 2023*

Village	Year	Share (in per cent)
Harevli	2006	73
	2023	78
Mahatwar	2006	61
	2023	71

pensions/scholarships (15.4 per cent), private salaried jobs (14.8 per cent), business and trade (13.4 per cent), and animal resources (10.5 per cent). The main sources of income other than crop production among rich peasant households were government salaried jobs (51.9 per cent), business and trade (24.0 per cent), private salaried jobs (10.3 per cent), and remittances (5.4 per cent) in Mahatwar.

In Harevli in 2023, the main sources of income other than crop production for poor peasant households were animal resources (19.9 per cent), private salaried jobs (13.9 per cent), agricultural labour (11.7 per cent), non-agricultural casual labour (11.6 per cent), remittances (11.0 per cent), and rental income from machinery (10.2 per cent).³ The main sources of income other than crop production among poor peasant households were business and trade (25.7 per cent), remittances (24.4 per cent), government salaried jobs (14.0 per cent), and village-specific activity (12.1 per cent) in Mahatwar.⁴

Peasant Households and Crop Production

At the same time, in both villages, in 2023, peasant households contributed more than 70 per cent of the gross value of agricultural output (Table 5). Landlords and big capitalist farmers accounted for the bulk of the remaining 30 per cent.

The contribution of the peasantry to the gross value of agricultural production, and the fact that *the share of total production grown by peasant households is increasing* is an indication of the continuing weight and importance of the peasantry in agricultural production.

This is a particularly robust finding – applicable, we believe, to a wide range of village situations in India. Despite the changes that have occurred, the peasantry has not “disappeared;” it continues to have a significant presence and play a critical role in agricultural production and agrarian relations.

³ Here “rental income from machinery” refers to the net earnings after deducting the wages paid to workers.
⁴ Unfortunately, the data do not permit us to accurately differentiate between amounts remitted by persons earning salaries and persons earning daily wages. We note, however, that the source of remittances for poor peasants is almost always wage work and the source of remittances for rich peasants most often comes from salaried work.

Table 6 *Select indicators for peasant households, by socio-economic class, Harevli and Mahatwar, 2006 and 2023*

Indicator	Socio-economic class	Harevli		Mahatwar	
		2006	2023	2006	2023
Average value of means of production owned (in rupees)	Poor peasants	16940	166050	3011	868
	Middle peasants	148424	232934	28337	42439
	Rich peasants	396016	352730	76126	129210
Average days of family labour in operated land	Poor peasants	204	183	154	96
	Middle peasants	188	78	175	58
	Rich peasants	122	78	112	16
Average days of hired labour employed in operated land	Poor peasants	20	46	9	4
	Middle peasants	146	193	46	2
	Rich peasants	428	282	189	10
Average income from crop production (in rupees)	Poor peasants	4918	81671	1543	5198
	Middle peasants	120215	224777	17499	34755
	Rich peasants	383796	316383	56873	46487
Average household income	Poor peasants	59395	229333	50501	213532
	Middle peasants	198575	433202	68967	247155
	Rich peasants	624121	886227	229460	566212

Note: Rupee values are in constant 2022–23 prices, adjusted using CPI-AL.

The peasantry as a whole continues to be differentiated into distinct rich, middle, and poor peasant classes. There are distinct differences between the classes in respect of the ownership of the means of production, of the way family labour is used, in the extent of labour power employed by households, and in levels of household income (Table 6).

WAGE WORKERS AND PROLETARIANS

There has been an increase, over historical time, in the number and proportion of households that are free from ownership of land. This has occurred in both villages, though the factors that impelled the new landlessness was different in each village.

As has been noted in the literature, it is difficult today to separate a class of wage workers who engage only in agriculture. Rural wage workers work at multiple tasks, agricultural and non-agricultural (Table 7).⁵ The class of wage workers (manual workers) comprises all households that derive most of their income from and spend most of their work time in wage work.

In both villages (and in other villages surveyed by FAS), the number of days of agricultural wage work and the share of agricultural wage work in all wage work has declined.

⁵ See Communist Party of India (Marxist) (2016) and Ramachandran (2011).

Table 7 Average number of days of employment in wage work per household, by socio-economic class, Harevli and Mahatwar, 2006 and 2023

Village	Socio-economic class	Agricultural tasks		MGNREGS		Other non-agricultural tasks		Total	
		2006	2023	2006	2023	2006	2023	2006	2023
Harevli	Middle peasants	7	6	-	9	0	7	7	22
Harevli	Poor peasants	329	57	-	39	24	50	353	146
Harevli	Manual workers	236	121	-	26	44	120	279	267
Mahatwar	Middle peasants	4	0	-	1	106	220	110	221
Mahatwar	Poor peasants	29	0	-	5	151	283	180	288
Mahatwar	Manual workers	46	1	-	6	227	342	273	349

Notes: a) Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) was not implemented in these villages in 2006. b) Other non-agricultural tasks include migrant work.

To summarise the information on daily wage rates in agriculture, there has been a steady rise in the daily wage rate at constant prices for men and women in all agricultural operations. For example, in Harevli, among males, the sugarcane harvesting wage rose at an annual rate of growth of 6 per cent. The daily wage paid to women for transplanting rose 5 per cent per year. In Mahatwar, the daily wage rate for rice operations increased by 7 per cent per year for men and by 6 per cent per year for women.

The most noteworthy feature of wages, however, is not the growth in wage rates, but the very low absolute level of daily wages. In 2023, the daily rate paid to men for sugarcane harvesting was only 320 rupees. The daily wage rate for women for rice transplanting was only 250 rupees. In Mahatwar, the daily wage rate at rice operations was 250 rupees for men and 220 rupees for women. By contrast, according to official data, daily wages in rice cultivation in 2022–23 in Tamil Nadu were 511 rupees for men and 325 rupees for women. In Kerala, the corresponding rates were 862 rupees for men and 600 rupees for women.⁶

Rural wage workers no longer work mainly in the village or local labour markets, but they seek work in distant labour markets, often travelling to remote parts of urban and rural India in search of wage work. The extent to which wage workers migrate varies widely across villages – and in the two survey villages (Table 8).

Skill levels among rural proletarians vary widely, and with these skills, the wage-paid tasks that they undertake, and patterns of migration vary as well.⁷

Table 8 *Distribution of workers by category of place of work, Harevli and Mahatwar, 2006 and 2023*

Village	Category of place of work	Year	
		2006	2023
Harevli	Village and surroundings	162	227
Harevli	Within district	5	16
Harevli	Outside district but within State	2	0
Harevli	Outside State	20	47
Mahatwar	Village and surroundings	126	145
Mahatwar	Within district	28	73
Mahatwar	Outside district but within State	42	25
Mahatwar	Outside State	15	65

⁶ It is well known that the actual wages in Kerala are actually higher than the wages recorded in Wage Rates in Rural India (WRII).

⁷ Distinct patterns of migration among workers in a village where tertiary (including vocational) education levels are relatively high are part of the subject matter of the Foundation for Agrarian Studies' research in villages in the Lower Cauvery Delta (Swaminathan, Surjit, and Ramachandran 2023).

There has been great change in the work that rural wage workers do, with wide variations in job descriptions, levels of remuneration, and forms of payment among workers.

The sweep of the market for wage work now extends across a much broader section of rural households than before.⁸ In Harevli and Mahatwar, the number of days of wage labour at which members of the class of wage workers worked as a proportion of the total number of days of wage work done by all workers in the village were 42 per cent (2006) and 55 per cent (2023), and 49 per cent (2006) and 67 per cent (2023). Conversely, workers in other households contributed 45 per cent (2023) and 33 per cent (2023) of the total number of days of wage work in the two villages. This broadening of the labour market has important implications for class struggle and proletarianisation in the villages. In Harevli, wage workers and poor and middle peasants together constituted 75 per cent (2006) and 72 per cent (2023) of all households. In Mahatwar, wage workers and poor and middle peasants constituted 63 per cent (2006) and 73 per cent (2023) of all households in the village. The proportion of workers that did *some* manual wage work to all workers was 93 per cent in Harevli and 89 per cent in Mahatwar, and the workers involved belonged to all classes other than landlords and rich peasants.

While the major trend among the rural poor is increased landlessness, and while proletarianisation is further characterised by the spread of the market for hired labour among wider sections of rural households, another important development has been an increase in the share of crop land operational holdings with income-poor and land-poor households. By way of example, in Harevli, crop land operated by Dalit households increased from 7.4 per cent of all operated crop land in 2006 to 15.4 per cent of the same in 2023. In Mahatwar, the share of crop land operated by Dalit households increased from 24 per cent of all operated crop land to 38 per cent from 2006 to 2023.

The means by which the poor have acquired these small operational holdings of land vary across the two villages (and across different parts of the country). The transfers have taken place through purchase, mortgage, lease, government policy in response to the demands of and protests by the working people, and by combinations of these means.

In Harevli and Mahatwar, the main means by which the poor, especially Dalits, acquired operational holdings of land between 2006 and 2023 was by leasing land in from landlords. In Harevli, the tenants cultivate sugarcane and food grain. These leases are linked to the new incomes that have become available from sugarcane cultivation after 2015 (Munjal 2024, and elsewhere in this volume), and the diversion of landlords' investments into non-agricultural economic activity.

⁸ See also Ramachandran (2011; 2019).

This phenomenon of the acquisition of land by the rural poor is not a reversal of proletarianisation, nor has it reversed the overall trend towards greater inequality in the village. In an important new study of the rural poor in West Champaran district, Bihar, Mrityunjay Pandey examines three ways in which the rural poor – specifically wage workers and poor peasants – seek to earn their livelihoods (Pandey 2024). These are, first, by seeking wage work in and around the villages in which the workers live; secondly, by acquiring operational holdings of land through lease, mortgage, or other means of transfer; and, thirdly, by means of migrating for wage work, generally in the informal sector. None of these strategies, however, have taken the households – as a class – out of poverty and economic insecurity (*ibid.*). This is an observation that is valid for Harevli and Mahatwar as well.

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