



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Introduction to the Studies of Harevli and Mahatwar Villages

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This issue of the *Review of Agrarian Studies* is dedicated to two village studies from Uttar Pradesh: Harevli village in Bijnor district in north-west Uttar Pradesh, and Mahatwar village in Ballia, the easternmost district of the State. These are the latest of the village studies undertaken by the Project on Agrarian Relations in India (PARI), which has now surveyed altogether 27 villages across India during the last twenty years.

The Uttar Pradesh studies are both longitudinal, with the villages having been surveyed in 2006 and in 2023. Importantly, the teams behind these studies have taken the opportunity to analyse them from a comparative perspective, something that enables a better understanding of the general and the specific aspects of their trajectories. The following paragraphs will briefly introduce the articles and some of the themes and findings of the issue.

The comparison of the agrarian and rural development trajectories between east and west Uttar Pradesh has a long history. It stretches back to pre-Independence years and also figured prominently in “semi-feudal stagnation versus capitalist development” debates and analyses from the 1970s onwards. This volume focuses on a village in the highly profitable sugarcane-growing region of north-west Uttar Pradesh and a village in the wheat- and paddy-growing far east of the State. In line with other village studies of the last 30 years, this study suggests convincingly that the differences between their trajectories are best understood as different capitalist development trajectories.

Each article provides a thorough, in-depth analysis of one of the villages. In “Cereal Production in the Sugarcane Belt: Commercialisation and Smallholders in a Western Uttar Pradesh Village,” Kunal Munjal concentrates on the Bijnor village, while

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Deepak Johnson and Tapas Singh Modak's article "Economics of Farming in Mahatwar, Uttar Pradesh," focuses on the eastern Uttar Pradesh village of Mahatwar. These two articles provide the core analysis of the agrarian and wider political economy of both villages. The other five contributions are comparative. Of these, two also provide further general context. The article "Agrarian Change in Uttar Pradesh: A Review of Village Studies" by Kunal Munjal and Madhura Swaminathan places the studies in a historical and academic studies perspective through a thorough review of Uttar Pradesh village studies, as well as a brief overview of relevant all-Uttar Pradesh data. The article "Socioeconomic Classes in Two Villages in Uttar Pradesh" by Niladri Dhar sets out the location of the villages, both in a geographical sense and within PARI's conceptualisation of all their village studies, and on the back of this, it moves on to a comparative class analysis. The article "Household Incomes in Two Villages in Uttar Pradesh: A Longitudinal Study" by Niladri Dhar and Kulvinder Singh presents the income levels for different social classes and different economic activities over time.

A number of central themes and analytical points arise from these studies, of which I will highlight the following.

Both villages are highly inequitable regarding landownership and income. In both villages, there is also close correlation between caste and socioeconomic class, with caste Hindu and some Other Backward Class households at the top of the hierarchy and Dalit households at the bottom.

At the same time, as summarised by Munjal and Swaminathan, and shown in more detail by the other articles, the political economy of the two villages is also very different. Harevli is dominated by a highly profitable agrarian economy, centred on large-scale sugarcane production with capitalist farmers in charge of – by far – most of the land and investing both in agricultural technology and some non-agricultural ventures. The wheat-and-rice-based agriculture in Mahatwar is significantly less capital-intensive and less profitable, and non-agricultural incomes and investments are overwhelmingly dominant.

The situation for the poor peasants and landless labourers differs between the two villages. In Harevli, sugarcane growing is central to this concern, as it requires a large, low-paid, and dependable labour force. The upper-caste capitalist farmers have ensured this through leasing out small plots of land to their labourers, on the condition that they take part in the sugarcane harvest. Both Dalit and Other Backward Class (OBC) labourers and marginal farmers are drawn in, as labour requirements for sugarcane cultivation are high. Even though non-agricultural employment matters economically here, it does so less than in Mahatwar.

In Mahatwar, low agricultural labour requirements mean that for poor peasants and landless labour households, non-agrarian incomes are overwhelmingly dominant.

The men from these households have moved out of agriculture and undertake labour migration or do other non-agricultural jobs. The Dalit women in particular are now doing the agricultural work in the village; women cannot easily work away from the village. A significant number of these households have also leased in or even bought small plots of land, which are also tilled by the women, as subsistence agriculture. As is well known within the global agrarian political economy literature, this is only economically viable because women's labour on own fields is treated as more or less "free"; but it does provide the poor, mainly Dalit, households with a degree of food security.

So, leasing out land mainly to the oppressed Dalit and OBC workers has re-emerged in both villages but, intriguingly, for very different reasons, related to different strategies of accumulation of the landowning classes.

Similarities and differences between the villages are also reflected in income levels. The article *Land and Income Mobility in Two North Indian Villages: A Note*, by Rithika Reddy and Madhura Swaminathan, provides a detailed analysis of income and asset mobility in the two villages over time.

As already intimated, the levels of inequality are very high in both villages. There has been no significant change to this over time. The rich have stayed rich, which may not seem surprising, but as the authors point out, this is different from what has been reported from the Uttar Pradesh village of Palanpur, which has been studied intensively over time. It is, however, similar to my own findings from a village in Muzaffarnagar district in north-west Uttar Pradesh and a village in Jaunpur district of east Uttar Pradesh (Lerche, forthcoming).

Moving on to the differences between the villages, Harevli is better off than Mahatwar, especially so for the landowning groups. That said, as acknowledged by the study, off-farm incomes of the rich – which constitute the main income of the rich in Mahatwar – might be underestimated as it is difficult to measure many of these kinds of sources, and income from financial assets, which has increased in importance for the top classes in the village, fell outside the scope of the field survey. The study also shows that among the poor, the non-agrarian income of landless and Dalit households in Mahatwar did lead to some income mobility. It is this that has enabled some of them to purchase mini-plots of land, or to lease in small plots. At the same time, these households, particularly the Dalit households, remained discriminated against. The poor in Harevli did not experience any economic mobility as they were more involved in the low-wage work within agriculture than in other tasks. This is another finding that resonates more widely, e. g., with a PARI study from Andhra Pradesh (Ramachandran, Rawal, and Swaminathan 2010), where the exploitative relations in highly productive agriculture were also more disadvantageous to the workers than those from a non-agrarian village.

The special issue is completed by the article *Peasants and Proletarians in Harevli and Mahatwar* by V. K. Ramachandran and C. A. Sethu. It analyses the findings from the village studies in relation to processes of class differentiation. As is the case for all the papers, it should be read in full, and this brief introduction restricts itself to highlighting a number of issues it raises. The article notes that if, taking the peasantry as a whole – the poor, middle, and rich peasantry – it is clear that its importance for agricultural production is not falling but actually increasing. But looking at class differentiation and proletarianisation, it is also the case that wage work is increasingly done not only by landless or near-landless workers but also by poor and middle peasants; and that the large majority of the villagers belong to the group of wage workers and the poor and middle peasantry, a group that is still growing. That said, it is perhaps worth pointing out that this large category is also shot through with caste-based oppression and discrimination. The article also points to the ongoing move out of agriculture and the fall in agricultural wage work, especially but not only in Mahatwar. This is happening while village wages in agriculture are kept low: they are around half or less of wages for comparable tasks in South India.

Overall, this special issue significantly furthers our understanding of the agrarian and post-agrarian production and class relations and the related economic and caste-based inequalities in Uttar Pradesh and in all of India. It should be clear that such relations today go well beyond agriculture, and that there is no reason to think that intensive and profitable agrarian production *a priori* will benefit all social groups in the countryside. The two village studies also show that rural capitalist development trajectories may differ quite substantially, but, as also shown by many other village studies from PARI and others, it is rare that this breaks with established class and caste relations and relations of economic inequality. What this all means for the transformation of class relations in the countryside and how this and caste discrimination play out still remains to be seen, but the issue does provide important pointers regarding the growth of wage work involving new groups and moving away from agriculture.

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