

Project title:

The end of agriculture (as we know it)? District-specific trends in the decline of cultivators and increase in agricultural laborers in neoliberal India

The problem:

India's 2011 census data revealed, for the first time in the history of the country, a decline in the absolute number of cultivators in the country. Concomitantly, the data also showed that the numbers of agricultural laborers and their proportion to the total workers of the country had increased over the same period. The simultaneous decline of cultivators and increase in the proportion of agricultural laborers to the total workers of the country proves that the decline in the number of cultivators was not due to the much-vaunted urbanization process. Official explanations ranged from pinning the blame onto the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act for allegedly disincentivizing cultivation to the declining productivity of agriculture. Officials of the Indian government and scholars of Indian agriculture admitted that more specific analysis of trends was needed before conclusive reasons could be offered. This project intends to prepare a State and district-specific analysis of the trends in agricultural employment based on the available data available from the decennial censuses of 2001 and 2011.

Justification:

The specific motivation for this project is the non-availability of district-specific data on trends in agricultural employment, especially cultivators and agricultural laborers. This data is necessary in order for India's State Governments, who are responsible under the country's Constitution for agriculture and allied activities, to understand the district-specific variations within their jurisdictions. The lack of such data is not because the data is not considered important, but because there is very limited interest in official circles to gather such data. Scholars of agrarian transition in India (personal communication with Jens Lerche and with Barbaba Harriss-White) agree, however, that such data is potentially useful.

Methodology:

I will assemble, with research assistance, data from 600 Indian districts gathered for the census operations of 2001 and 2011. I will focus on data on the population of cultivators and agricultural laborers, and disaggregate them into the following categories:

1. 'Main workers' and 'marginal workers'
2. 'Male' and 'female'; and

3. SC, ST and other

Based on this synthesis of data, I will prepare, with research assistance, district-specific maps to reveal the trends in agricultural employment between 2001 and 2011. I anticipate preparing up to twenty (20) distinct maps revealing very specific trends in agricultural employment.

Rationale for methodology:

The rationale for the district focus is straightforward. Indian States are enormously heterogeneous climatically, culturally, politically and economically. A focus on the districts will facilitate an understanding of contradictory trends within States, and provide the opportunity to select localities for scholars who might be interested in more in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Project contribution:

The project's assembling and synthesis of primary data will be an innovative way of organizing and analyzing data on Indian agriculture. The project will enable scholars of Indian agriculture to access valuable data presented in an easy-to-understand way. I will make the maps available to the India Center for dissemination among interested scholars. Because the India Center will host the maps, its profile will be further enhanced among scholars of Indian agriculture and political economy. Its location at the intersection of disciplines of geography, political economy and sociology will make it invaluable to scholars from these disciplines. I intend to develop my own future research on questions of the fate of the agrarian economy in the light of impending WTO regulations and the impact of these interlocked developments on citizenship in India. This seed funding will help me develop a nuanced perspective on this issue.

The data generated thus would be valuable to researchers and policy-makers who seek to understand State-specific rural transformations. In particular, it will shed valuable light on intra-State (rather than inter-State) disparities. A simultaneous decline in the proportion of cultivators and increase in the proportion of agricultural laborers is symptomatic of deeper rural distress. Agricultural laborers are lowly-remunerated and often underemployed.

At the very least the data will help State governments to initiate further inquiries into districts that show such trends since 2001, and possibly 1991, in conjunction with trends in holding size. The data will provide district-disaggregated overview of India's rural

transformations to researchers and civil society and provide a starting point for them to initiate their investigations.

The data illustrating a decline in proportion of cultivators and an increase in proportion of agricultural laborers will help policy-makers calibrate rural livelihood interventions accordingly in at least three ways. There are at least three reasons why this is so:

1. At a time when the Indian government is contemplating restructuring the NREGA and targeting it to the 'poorest' districts, maps such as the ones this project will generate are crucial to help them identify the priority districts.
2. The Indian government has initiated skill building programs for rural populations. a knowledge of districts with greater proportion of agricultural labourers will help it to target its skill building interventions more effectively.
3. The Indian government proposes to initiate a 'Make in India' program through which it intends to promote manufacturing within the country. Basing the new manufacturing activities in districts with increasing proportion of agricultural laborers and decline in cultivators will absorb surplus labor into rural manufacturing, thereby ameliorating rural poverty in a way that contributes directly to economic growth.

Budget requirement:

I will need resources for research assistance and purchase of district-level maps. Research assistant(s) will glean data for 600 districts from the 2001 and 2011 census on total workers, main workers, marginal workers, agricultural laborers, cultivators in the disaggregated way indicated above. I anticipate research assistance of upto 60 hours. Maps are expected to cost no more than GBP 500.

Research assistance: 60 hours * GBP 20= GBP 1200

Map purchase: GBP 500

TOTAL BUDGET: GBP 1700