

The Role of Caste and Labour Relations in the Lives of Landless Agricultural Labourer Women in Western Uttar Pradesh: A Sociological Study

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Abstract:

The study focuses on the caste and labour relationship issues pertaining to the lives of women agricultural labourers who are landless in western Uttar Pradesh. This study is confined to the selected districts of Western Uttar Pradesh namely Muzaffarnagar, Meerut, Bijnor, Mainpuri, Aligarh and Badaun which are mainly the divisions of Western Uttar Pradesh. The relationship between agriculture and land ownership, caste hierarchy, gender division of labour and rural power relations is strong in this region. Women in agricultural labour for hire without access to land are in a vulnerable situation as they rely on the availability of seasonal jobs in agriculture, informal employment and low wages, as well as unequal relationships with groups that own the land. They are still involved in the tasks of sowing, weeding, harvesting, collecting fodder, providing care to livestock and post-harvest activities, but they are socially invisible and economically undervalued in rural agriculture. The study takes a sociological approach that integrates the lens of Marxism, Ambedkarism, feminism and intersectionality in examining the combined impact of caste, class, gender and landlessness on women's labour opportunities, wages, dignity, mobility, bargaining power and experiences of everyday discrimination. The study is based on the secondary data and the sources of data used are Census reports, NSS data, Periodic Labour Force Survey reports, district statistical handbooks, government publications, books and research articles. It believes that the situation of landless agricultural labourer women should be discussed with the backdrop of poverty or employment, but it is essential to look into the combined structure of the caste hierarchy, gender subordination, landlessness and dependency on agrarian labour.

Keywords: Caste, Labour Relations, Landless agricultural labourer Women, Western Uttar Pradesh, Rural Sociology, Gender Inequality, Agrarian Structure, Social Exclusion.

Introduction:

Agriculture is still one of the most significant bases of rural India—economically and socially, through the livelihood, caste system, gender roles and village power structure. Rural households' access to land can shape the household decision-making status, income security,

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bargaining power, and social dignity of rural households. But there is a very high level of land inequality and the landless households need to rely on agricultural wage labour, seasonal employment and patron-client relations to survive. National Statistical Office (NSO) NSS 77th Round data indicates that land and livestock ownership are closely linked to the economic status, productive assets, indebtedness, and access to agricultural opportunities of rural households.

Landlessness is one of the major forms of socio-economic vulnerability as the agricultural labourers with no land are deprived of productive assets, they are deprived of the conditions of labour. They are dependent on the availability of farm labour, the rates of wages determined by the landowners as well as caste-based social networks and local demand for farm labour. This is even more pronounced in the case of women. Women agricultural labourers who have no land are engaged in a number of tasks sowing, weeding, harvest, collection of fodder, livestock-related activities, and household chores. Their contribution is less valued and is deemed as secondary, temporary, low skilled, or supplementary. Research on women in agrifood systems demonstrates that women contribute significantly to agriculture, but are also less likely than men to be given access to land, wages, technology, credit, training and decision-making power (Food and Agriculture Organization-2023).

Caste is strongly related to land ownership and occupational hierarchy and rural labour relations in western Uttar Pradesh. The agricultural resources are usually dominated by the caste and land-owning groups while many of the lower caste and marginalised groups are relying on wage labour for their livelihood. This establishes a connection between the caste status and job, wages, dignity, mobility, social interaction and access to common resources. The findings of rural power studies suggest that caste, landownership and patron-client relationship are still part of rural power dynamics in India despite the change in the nature of traditional landlordism in many parts of rural India.

Thus, it is not possible to examine the life of landless agricultural labourer women without using the concept of income or employment. They are a product of the cross-over of caste, class, gender and landlessness. Their economic dependence is as workers, caste-based subordination and gender-based subordination is in their homes and workplaces. The socio-scientific research is needed on the landless women agricultural labourers in Western Uttar Pradesh as it enables one to examine how the caste and labour relations affect the wages, working conditions, social status, bargaining power, access to resources and everyday experience of exclusion of the target groups. This study can be a part of the understanding of rural inequality and nature of agricultural labour in the present India.

There are multiple and overlapping instances of marginalisation for landless agricultural labourer women in Western Uttar Pradesh, which are related to caste, gender and landlessness. They face irregular jobs in agriculture, low wages, caste discrimination, gender discrimination, lack of bargaining power, and unequal access to education, health and social protection. Women's work is fundamental to production in the rural areas but is not visible socially or economically in the village. Studies in the past have concentrated either on caste hierarchy or on rural labour or on women's work, but there is little sociological research that has considered

both of these aspects in Western Uttar Pradesh. This study therefore explores the impact of caste and labour relations on women's work opportunities, earnings, dignity, discrimination, and on their day to day survival and coping strategies.

Background of the Study

Western Uttar Pradesh is a significant agrarian area of North India, occupying a vast expanse of land comprising Meerut Division, Saharanpur Division, Moradabad Division, Bareilly Division, Aligarh Division and Agra Division. Together, these divisions form a varied agricultural countryside, with fertile plains, canal and tube-well irrigation, high-intensity cropping regimes, growing of sugarcane, wheat farming, livestock keeping and a robust network of social interaction in the village. Most of the rural population in this area still rely on agriculture for their livelihood. The agrarian economy of Western UP, however, is as much a product of land, crops and markets as of caste, gender relations, land ownership and the reliance of rural labour upon the land.

The rural agrarian organization of Western Uttar Pradesh is a manifestation of land and social power imbalance. In many villages, dominant caste groups may own larger and more secure plots of land, whereas marginalised caste groups may be landless or own tiny plots of land. This inequality of land access perpetuates a dependency on agriculture, agricultural wage labour, seasonal work, animal husbandry, informal credit and social networks to sustain the livelihoods of landless households. Landholding also has a close relationship with rural income and productive assets and livelihood security in India, as reflected in the report of the National Statistical Office on agricultural households and land and livestock holdings (National Statistical Office(NSO), 2021). This connection grows more complicated in the case of Western Uttar Pradesh as caste status can dictate access to land, work opportunities, bargaining power, wages and social status.

Amongst this agrarian system, the women agricultural labourers who have no land are in a very vulnerable position. Women from the landless and marginalised castes play an important role in agricultural production by sowing, weeding, harvesting, collecting fodder, looking after animals, threshing, cleaning, storing and post harvesting. Their labour is vital to the operations of agriculture in the rural areas particularly during the periods of peak agricultural activity. But in many places women's farm work is considered secondary, unskilled and an extra work to men's work. work is still not recognised socially and it is still under-valued economically. While women are playing a key role in all agrifood systems, they are still underrepresented in decision-making, credit access, training, technology, and wages, as noted by FAO (2023).

Labour relations of landless agricultural women is mostly unorganized in western Uttar Pradesh. Employment is normally obtained following verbal contract, caste contacts, kinship or direct negotiation with landowners. Lack of written contracts, fixed working hours, lack of job security, lack of social protection and formal complaint mechanisms. This informality leaves women exposed because their participation in the labor force relies on the demand for seasonal labour as well as the local caste dynamics and the attitudes of landowners towards their employers. Women can also be hired for a short term for sowing/weeding/harvesting in

the growing season but they are often underemployed and have irregular income during the lean agricultural season.

Wage differentials and labour segregation by gender is another significant aspect of agricultural work in the region. Men are more likely to be involved in labour-intensive jobs like ploughing, irrigation, machine operating, pesticide application, transport, market-related activities, etc., while women are more likely to be involved in labour-intensive and less remunerative activities like weeding, harvesting, fodder collection, livestock care and post harvesting activities. Such a division of labour is influenced by patriarchy, and caste-based occupational norms. This means that although women's labour is normally valued as a means of sustaining household livelihoods and supporting agricultural production, it is still perceived as less valuable.

There are also some social constraints for women that belong to landless and marginalised caste households in their daily lives in the rural areas. Caste and gender norms can restrict their mobility, involvement in village institutions, access to education, control over income and use of public spaces and negotiating of wages. They may also be dependent on the dominant caste landholders for their employment, but also their credit, fodder, access to common resources and social protection during crisis situations. Landless agricultural labourer women in Western Uttar Pradesh thus can't be analysed only on the basis of employment or income. It needs to be understood on the prism of caste, gender and relation of landlessness and labour relations.

This study aims to explore the effect of caste and labour relations on the lives of landless agricultural labourer women in the wider belt of the region of Meerut, Saharanpur, Meerut, Moradabad, Bareilly, Aligarh and Agra divisions in Western Uttar Pradesh. The study of this region is sociologically significant as it exposes the process of agrarian inequality that manifests in terms of land ownership, caste system, gendered labour, wage dependency and lived experiences of dignity, exclusion and survival.

Theoretical Framework:

The study adopts a combination of theoretical approach due to the fact that the life of the women agricultural labourers cannot be analysed using one approach. Marxist perspective on economics of exploitation and class dependency, Ambedkarite perspective on economics of exclusion and denial of dignity to the oppressed caste and certain sections, feminist perspective on economics of unpaid labour and gender inequality, and intersectionality which brings together the above economic perspectives. Hence, the study will focus on the analysis of women labourers in agriculture, who are affected by caste hierarchy, gender subordination, class exploitation and landlessness at the same time.

Table:01- Theoretical Framework for Analysing Caste, Gender and Labour Relations among Landless Agricultural Labourer Women

Sociological Perspective	Key Focus	Relevance to the Present Study	Analytical Use in the Study
Marxist Perspective	Class relations, ownership of	This perspective helps explain how landlessness	It will be used to analyse unequal labour

	means of production, exploitation, labour dependency and economic inequality	creates economic dependence among agricultural labourer women. Since landowners control land and employment opportunities, landless women remain dependent on wage labour for survival.	relations between landowners and landless women labourers, wage insecurity, seasonal employment, exploitation and lack of control over productive resources.
Ambedkarite Perspective	Caste hierarchy, graded inequality, social exclusion, occupational division and denial of dignity	This perspective is useful because caste continues to influence landownership, labour opportunities, social status and dignity in rural India. Landless women from marginalised castes often face both economic and caste-based exclusion.	It will be used to examine how caste shapes access to work, wage bargaining, social treatment, discrimination, humiliation, mobility and everyday relations between landowning and landless caste groups.
Feminist Perspective	Patriarchy, gender inequality, unpaid work, wage discrimination, household power and women's marginalisation	This perspective helps understand how women's agricultural work remains undervalued despite their major contribution to farm production. It also highlights the double burden of paid labour and unpaid domestic responsibilities.	It will be used to analyse gendered division of labour, lower wages for women, unpaid household work, restricted mobility, household decision-making and patriarchal control over women's labour and income.
Intersectionality	Combined effect of caste, class, gender and landlessness	Intersectionality explains that landless agricultural labourer women do not experience exploitation through one factor alone. Their marginalisation is produced by the combined effect of being poor, landless, female and	It will be used as the central analytical lens to study how caste, gender and class jointly shape labour opportunities, wages, dignity, discrimination, social mobility and coping

		often from marginalised caste groups.	strategies in Western Uttar Pradesh.
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Source: Author's own compilation based on Marxist theory, Ambedkarite perspective, feminist theory and intersectionality framework.

Review of Literature:

Historically, the caste system and land ownership and power dynamics have significantly influenced the agrarian structure of rural India. Land is not only an economic resource in a village society, but it has also an authority, political influence and symbolic status. Srinivas's notion of the 'dominant caste' accounts for how numerically powerful and land-owning caste communities are able to dominate the institutions, labour relations and social practices within the rural communities (Srinivas, 1959). In many agrarian areas, caste location influences access to land, jobs, credit, water, social networks and public resources. Thus, caste cannot be defined just as a ritual system, and it can also be understood as a material structure that organizes the dependency of the rural and social inequality.

Landlessness is an important factor that leads to rural households' economic insecurity. Casual wage labour, seasonal agricultural work, informal borrowing, migration and patron-client relationships are major sources of livelihood of the landless agricultural labourers. In India, dependence, debt, caste status and imbalance in bargaining power over work sometimes determine rural labour relations more than free labour-market conditions, as observed by Breman (1974). Under these circumstances, landowners have more power regarding job opportunities, wage payment, and access to local resources, and landless labourers are more vulnerable to underemployment, delayed wages and social pressure. When caste-based exclusion is added to landlessness this dependency can get more serious.

Women's involvement in agriculture is widespread but often hidden and undervalued. Rural women participate in sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvests, collection of fodder, care of animals and post-harvest activities but their efforts are still treated as non-primary. Agarwal (1994) has pointed out that women's unequal access to land and property diminishes their bargaining power in home and agrarian society. Women are also under a double burden of work in agriculture because of their gendered division of labour, in addition to domestic responsibilities. The gender gap in household labour is continuing as seen in the amount of time spent on unpaid domestic work by women compared to men in the Time Use Survey 2019. This imbalance of workload and responsibility limits women's access to mobility, education, acquiring skills, or accessing paid jobs.

To describe the situation of landless agricultural labourer women, caste, class and gender interaction is crucial. Intersectionality is a theory developed by Crenshaw (1989) that views different types of inequality as interconnected, with each form of inequality producing specific forms of marginalisation. A woman from a marginalised caste household who is landless is faced with double marginalisation as a poor worker and as a woman from a marginalised caste group in the Indian rural context. Caste and patriarchy are very intertwined in India as women's labour, sexuality and mobility is controlled which helps in maintaining caste hierarchy,

Chakravarti (2003) asserts. Hence, together caste-based exclusion and gender-based subordination impact wages, dignity, mobility, choice of jobs and social participation.

The research from western Uttar Pradesh indicates a unique agrarian identity in terms of fertile soil, irrigation, cultivation of sugarcane, production of wheat, rural markets, and the political mobilisation along caste lines. The older land-labour relations, rural mobility and caste dominance have been transformed in Western Uttar Pradesh by the agrarian transformation but the land ownership and caste location remains a determinant of the village power structure. Kumar's article in Economic and Political Weekly points to a transformation in agriculture, a disintegration of the declining peasantry and the emergence of marginalised caste groups in a shifting rural economy in Western Uttar Pradesh. The under-representation of women from agricultural labour households in the absence of land ownership is, however, less visible in regional studies. It highlights the need of a localised sociological study on the lived experiences, wages, dignity and coping strategies, and the level of discrimination and disadvantage that agricultural labourer women in the landless condition of agriculture face while managing caste, gender and labour relations in Western Uttar Pradesh.

Research Methodology:

The study will employ descriptive and analytical research design with secondary data approach. Secondary data will be gathered from the Census reports, government records, books and journals. Census reports, data from Periodic Labour Force Survey reports, district statistical handbook, government publications, books, journal articles, research papers and reports on caste, landlessness, rural labour, women's agricultural work and agrarian relations will be used in the study. The sources will be used for analysis and interpretation of the study.

Source: Author’s own compilation based on Marxist theory, Ambedkarite perspective, feminist theory and intersectionality framework.

Division	Districts Included in the Division	Selected District for Study	Reason for Selection
Saharanpur Division	Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar, Shamli	Muzaffarnagar	Strong agrarian base, sugarcane economy, caste-based rural structure and significant agricultural labour population
Meerut Division	Meerut, Baghpat, Ghaziabad, Gautam Buddha Nagar, Hapur, Bulandshahr	Meerut	Important agricultural and urban-rural transitional district with diverse caste and labour relations
Moradabad Division	Moradabad, Bijnor, Amroha, Sambhal, Rampur	Bijnor	Sugarcane-dominated agriculture, rural labour dependency and mixed caste composition

Agra Division	Agra, Mathura, Firozabad, Mainpuri	Mainpuri	Predominantly agrarian district with landholding inequality and dependence on rural wage labour
Aligarh Division	Aligarh, Etah, Hathras, Kasganj	Aligarh	Agrarian and semi-urban district with visible caste hierarchy and agricultural labour relations
Bareilly Division	Bareilly, Badaun, Pilibhit, Shahjahanpur	Badaun	Rural agrarian character, landlessness, caste-based social structure and dependence on agricultural labour

Source: Author’s own selection based on agrarian character, caste composition, agricultural labour dependency and regional representation across six divisions of Western Uttar Pradesh.

Analysis:

The districts selected are representative of the Western Uttar Pradesh as one district from every division of the state is selected. The situation is quite complex in Western Uttar Pradesh as it is a big and heterogeneous area covering all 26 districts, which would be too cumbersome to cover in the scope of fieldwork. Hence, the sample of 6 districts, namely Muzaffarnagar, Meerut, Bijnor, Mainpuri, Aligarh and Badaun, is practically and representatively used as a sampling frame for the analysis of caste-labour relations of landless agricultural labourer women.

The reason for the selection of Muzaffarnagar from Saharanpur Division is its strong agrarian base and rural economy which is dominated by sugarcane. The district is heavily reliant on agriculture-based labour force and has a clear caste-based rural structure. The following conditions make it appropriate to study how land ownership, caste status and wage labour relation affects the life of the landless women workers.

The selected area Meerut has been selected due to its both agricultural and urban rural transition characteristics from Meerut Division. The district is becoming increasingly urbanized, though agriculture is still significant in more rural areas. This renders Meerut as a significant study area to understand the transformation of traditional labour relation in the context of urbanisation, market access and non-farm employment opportunities.

The main reasons for Bijnor's selection from Moradabad Division are sugarcane cultivation, rural labour force dependence and the presence of mixed caste population. The district is an important area in which to explore seasonal labour demand, wage bargaining and landless women's reliance on agriculture. Furthermore, it is the caste diversity that aids in understanding the differences in access to labour, labour dignity and social discrimination.

The town of Mainpuri has been identified as a representative town from Agra Division because of the fact that it is mostly agrarian and the inequalities in land ownership are observed. In these areas, wage labour becomes the way to living for landless households. Hence, Mainpuri is a proper area for the study of dependency of class, caste and the power bargaining of women agricultural labourers is limited.

Aligarh has been identified as Aligarh division as it has been a blend of agrarian and semi-urban characteristics. Caste based social relations still persist in rural areas of the district and livelihood pattern is undergoing some modifications in semi-urban areas. This makes Aligarh very informative for the studies of continuity and change in the role of women in agriculture, caste-specific labour market access and intra-household power dynamics.

The rural agrarian nature, landlessness and caste-based social structure of Badaun have led to its selection from Bareilly Division. The districts offers a relevant field environment for the exploration of the vulnerabilities of agricultural labourer women, in the context of their everyday experience of low pay, unstable work, social exclusion and economic dependence.

Discussion

The choice of one district in each division of the Western area of Uttar Pradesh is balanced and regionally representative sufficient to serve the purpose of the study. Western UP is a region of varied agrarian, social and economic situations and the selected districts of Muzaffarnagar, Meerut, Bijnor, Mainpuri, Aligarh and Badaun enable the study to address the study of the caste and labour relations in various rural situations. The study is concerned with landless agricultural labourer women who are affected both by gender and poverty, as well as by the regional agricultural pattern, landholding structure and caste relations. This sampling design is appropriate due to the fact that the study is concerned with the landless agricultural labourer women.

The significance of Muzaffarnagar and Bijnor districts is that sugarcane is the major crop in both the districts. In these regions agricultural employment is related closely to cropping cycles, seasonal employment and cash cultivation. But in agricultural productive areas, women who are working as labourers but without any land ownership may not necessarily be economically secure. Their employment tends to be part time and irregular; wages might not be equal; and bargaining power may be restricted due to the landowners' control of the availability of work. The importance of agricultural prosperity and labour dependence in these districts is thus understood.

In Meerut and Aligarh, the rural agricultural life is surrounded by the influence of the growing towns. The significance of these districts is that they may be examined from the perspectives of changing attitudes towards traditional caste-based labour relations, market access, education and non-farm employment opportunities as a result of urbanisation. But urbanisation does not necessarily erode caste and gender inequalities in the countryside. When women agricultural labourers are losing land and their economic activities are being formalized, they are still likely to be paid low wages, to have limited mobility and to work in informal conditions, and may even experience caste discrimination.

Mainpuri and Badaun are the two towns of the rural areas which are predominantly agricultural and socially stratified. These districts are vital for studying landholding inequality, the caste hierarchy and landless households' reliance on agricultural wage labour. Women from landless families may be socially compelled to work in these areas, which is tied to the local power dynamics. While their work can be critical for the survival of the household, they are often not fully valued in the labour market and socially excluded in society.

The districts so selected also allow inter comparison between various types of caste and labour relations in Western Uttar Pradesh. Caste can directly affect access to work and bargaining over wages in some districts and indirectly through social networks, household dependency, and village level status and regular interaction in other districts. Likewise, women's labour can vary by crop pattern, size of land holdings, irrigation facility, rural markets and availability of non-farm employment. This comparative approach enables the study to transcend the mere description of women's labour in the rural areas and to gain a better understanding of the regional variations.

Conclusion

The selection of sample districts Muzaffarnagar, Meerut, Bijnor, Mainpuri, Aligarh and Badaun is an appropriate and balanced frame work to study the issue of landless agricultural labourer women in Western Uttar Pradesh. The study is conducted at a regional level, with each district being a major division, with the aim of achieving regional diversity but maintaining manageable fieldwork. These districts portray various agrarian scenarios, such as sugarcane agriculture, semi-urban transitory, inequality in land holdings, caste based rural structure and reliance on agricultural wage labour.

The chosen districts are significant as caste, gender and landlessness still have different impacts on the lives of rural women workers. Women's involvement in agriculture is significant but unfortunately in some advanced districts like Muzaffarnagar and Bijnor women's labour is not valued. The shift towards new life opportunities in semi-urban places like Meerut and Aligarh, is paralleled by traditional disparities in caste and gender. Landless women are very dependent on agriculture labour and local power dynamics in agrarian areas like Mainpuri and Badaun.

This sampling design allows for a comparative socio-labor analysis of job opportunities, working conditions, bargaining power, social dignity, discrimination and coping strategies of landless women agricultural workers. The districts selected serve as a good empirical basis to understand the effect of caste and labour relations on the everyday life of the landless women workers in the Western Uttar Pradesh region.

Suggestions

After selecting one district from each division of Western Uttar Pradesh, careful selection of the blocks, villages and respondents is required to ensure that the study is balanced and representative. Each selected district can have at least 2 blocks selected, one agriculturally advanced block and the other is relatively backward/marginal block. This will enable comparison of difference in agricultural development, caste composition, landholding pattern and labour dependency.

The study should cover villages where the presence of landless agricultural labourer households (particularly women from marginalised caste groups) is discernible. The selection of villages can be based on the caste composition, agricultural dependency, existence of wage labour and landowning caste groups. This will render fieldwork more meaningful to the problem being studied.

Respondents can be selected using a stratified sampling method. The respondents can be categorized on the basis of caste category, age group, marital status, agricultural activities and income and employment pattern of the household. This will facilitate analysis of the effect of caste, gender, age and economic status on labour opportunities, wages and social dignity.

Questions on wages, working hours, nature of agriculture, seasonal employment, wage discrimination, interaction with landlords, caste treatment, household decision making, access to welfare schemes and coping strategies should be included in the questionnaire. Interviews and case studies are also useful tools to collect women's lived experiences, in addition to structured questionnaires.

Ethical issues should be addressed in the study. This topic covers issues of caste discrimination, gender inequality and labour exploitation, so the interviewees should be treated confidentially and sensitively. They should not be identified or identified by their name without their permission.

The study can be used to compare the districts which grow sugarcane with the traditional agrarian districts like Muzaffarnagar and Bijnor with Mainpuri and Badaun respectively for stronger analysis. In the same way, semi-urban towns like Meerut and Aligarh can be analysed to determine the impact of urbanisation on the elimination or perpetuation of caste and gender inequalities.

This study is not just to be descriptive but also action oriented with respect to the problems of landless agricultural labourer women and various practical measures which could be taken to improve their condition like better wage protection, access to government schemes, women's self-help groups, skill development, social security coverage, awareness and protection of land rights and many more aspects related to caste-based discrimination.

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