

**SOCIAL CHANGE AND AGRICULTURE IN RURAL AREAS OF UTTAR
PRADESH**

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Abstract

The combined influence of government programmes and policies on rural institutions has been observed in U.P., during a study conducted from June to August, 2011. The government programme MGNREGA and PDS has strengthened the wage rate and nature of work. The political scenario of UP is also instrumented in affecting in the institutional setup in rural areas.

Introduction

Recently the institutional arrangements in rural areas have undergone change. These changes have occurred as a result of governmental programmes initiated to improve the living condition of marginalized population. MGNREGA is an interesting example of the changes it brought in the institutional setup in rural areas. It has been observed that introduction of MGNREGA has led to the labour shortage in rural areas. Recently the Union Agriculture Minister *Shri Sharad Pawar* (2011) also acknowledged that farming sector is facing labour shortage during sowing/transplanting and harvesting after the implementation of MGNREGA.

In addition, other schemes such as Public Distribution System (PDS) and specific state government programmes have induced changes in the institutional setup in rural areas. The political scenario of the states has also contributed to institutional changes.

In this note we describe the influence of programme and politics on the institutional changes in rural areas of Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh (UP). A survey that was conducted during May to August, 2011, in which 360 farmers were interviewed (large,

medium, small and marginal) from two districts, Banda and Hamirpur. Three villages were selected from each district that are situated at different distances from the major cities, keeping in mind the different experiences of villages to labour shortage.

Social Change due to Development Programmes and Schemes

Farmers in this region explained that their agricultural outputs were declining due to shortage of labour when labour was acutely needed. The farmers categorically mentioned that this situation is prevailing ever since MGNREGA was introduced in rural areas. Effect of agricultural labour shortage directly affects field practices, and insect, pest and disease incidence due to delayed field operation (*Savary et al., 2005*). Delayed harvesting also causes loss of grain due to shattering, especially in pulse and oilseed crops.

A main reason for labour shortage for agricultural work is the wages paid under MGNREGA. Farmers cannot afford wage equivalent to MGNREGA's wage of Rs. 120 per day. Most of the farmers complained that if they have to pay a wage equal to or higher than MGNREGA wages, their total cost increases substantially. For example, labour now demands Rs. 150 per day. The wage rate in these villages was Rs. 60-70 per day before MGNREGA was introduced. Also the work carried out under of MGNREGA is not restrictive. For example, for bunding of the field in MGNREGA a labourer has to dig an area of land (pit 10 x 6 x 1 feet, locally known as khanti) for Rs. 120. Because, there is no limit for the time taken for the pit, a couple can dig 2 to 3 pits in a short period of time of 5 to 6 hours and earn Rs. 240- 360 per day. Another important change that has been observed due to development programmes is change in the nature of remuneration for work. A common practice among land owner who employ agricultural labour was to provide for wage in terms of grains and food. However, this practice of providing wages in kind is now nonexistent in the villages. Agricultural labour now demands cash on the spot for the work they perform. For a farmer it is difficult to pay high wage in cash as he himself does not have enough liquidity. The labourers when they are not working for MGNREGA prefer to migrate to nearby cities. When they do not migrate they prefer to attend to work in their homes. This work involves either repairing their home or helping their relatives in repairing and constructing of houses.

They also work on their own farm. They use the time when they are not doing MGNREGA work for their leisure activities such as playing cards or watching movies.

As a result of MGNREGA not only did the labour enjoy higher wages but also their holding of job cards has given them a sense of job security. Because of this perceived assurance of future availability of jobs and high wages the labour now-a-days engages in their own activities. Most of the beneficiaries of MGNREGA belong to SC and upper caste farmers mentioned that agricultural labourers do not need wage money. A farmer with a larger land holding said that:

“The government provides basic needs free of cost such as free home construction, money for daughter’s marriage, cheap ration, and free education of their children. So, they don’t need to work for money. Before, 2005-06 they were requesting for any type of work”.

Another government scheme i.e., Public distribution system (PDS) has also affected the institutional setup changes. *Rodgers and Rodgers* (2011) also supported that public distribution is a problematic in the rural areas. Public distribution system affected relationship between poor and non-poor. A group of high caste people in Bundelkhand region revealed that

“We do not want to support and help poor (SC) people, because they are getting monthly cheap ration from PDS in large quantity. That quantity may be higher than their household consumption. The surplus ration that is obtained from PDS, they sell in the market at higher rate. Now poor are enjoying more than us.

The UP government has launched Mukhyamantri Mahamaya Garib Arthik Madad Yojana, Savithri Bhai Phule Balika Siksh Madad Yojana, and other Yojanas for the benefit of low caste. These schemes have given an opportunity for labour class to be independent of others. Central government’s development programmes for marginalized population such as Indira Awas Yojana also generated changes in rural areas.

As a consequence of the above mentioned institutional changes, there has been alteration in the agricultural practices. For example, now leasing land (in or out), changing cropping pattern, no use of compost to soil, reduced number of domestic animals is more common in the rural areas. Because of high wage and unavailability of timely labour for agricultural work, most of the farmers have stopped growing vegetable crops, and cultivation

of paddy is affected. Farmers in surveyed villages are also concerned with “Anna Pratha”. This is a practice among the villagers to allow their animals, especially cows, to graze freely in the village including agricultural land. When animals are released by villagers especially by landless households, the animals damage the crops during the grazing. Farmers who owned land are helpless in controlling animals due to Anna Pratha and not motivated to adopt multiple cropping due to this practice.

Another the significant change that has been observed in Bundelkhand region is increased involvement of family members in agriculture due to labour shortage. Generally, women who belong to high caste do not work outside their homes. High caste women work when unfortunate circumstances befall on them. An elderly high caste person stated that

“We cannot afford labourers during peak periods because of the higher wage rate demanded by the labour (Rs. 150 per day) and if we hire the labour on this wage rate then the cost of cultivation is higher than return from the field. Our son, daughter and daughter in-laws are working in the field, who never went outside of the home. This is very painful for us”.

High caste women, who are now working outside their homes, now have to manage household work and work in the fields. Sometimes, they have to share their limited food with other family members. Because of long working hours for these women who are not used to work in the field, their health is affected considerably.

As it is common in other parts of the country because of unavailability of labour in the village, the labour is sought from outside the village. In addition to paying their wages the farmer now has to manage living arrangements, provide health facilities, and transportation charges. This increases cost to the farmer. However, whenever the farmers are able to get labour from outside the village they seem to prefer such labour because they work longer duration in the field. Selling of land and stopping of education of daughter is also a consequence of labour shortage. Because of low return from the field, farmers cannot afford to pay for their daughter’s education. Some of the farmers explained that

“Daughter’s marriage requires dowry, whether she has a high or low education. Even highly educated girls need more money for marriage, because they have to search for an educated and employed boy. Educated and employed boys demand more dowry. We can save the money that we spend on girl’s education in the bank and that saving can be used for

marriage. And another reason for not having interest in girls' higher education is, we don't like women's earning, and their visits outside the village. It is against our culture".

Social Change due to Political Scenario in the State

There have been perceptible changes in agricultural labourers that work in the villages. Labourers seek wage according to nature of work (hard work/or light work) and place of work (indoor work or under the sunshine). They also do not wish to work for more than eight hours in a day and demand timely payment from owners. An important change that has occurred is that labourers now expect to work under conditions which they consider as 'respectful'. According to a high caste farmer who owned a large amount of land

"Labourers now work according to the movement of the clock. They do not bother whether work is finished or not. In case we do not pay for the incomplete work they threaten to go to the police and file case against us. The labourers are not depends upon our work, as they have MGNREGA. Labourers who were working as bonded labour in our household in the past, even they are not interested in working for us.

Political influence of SC, ST, and OBC leaders also creates labour shortage in the rural areas in U.P. Large farmers who usually belong to high caste feel that labour shortage in the village has been created by the political scenario of the state. Higher caste farmers of Banda and Hamirpur district complained that whenever there is BSP government in the UP (since 1992-93), the SC people are not working for them or they leave their work unfinished. Having faced exploitation and oppression, low caste agriculture workers prefer to migrate to urban areas. These workers are also emboldened due to the political environment and demand higher wages and/or better working conditions. They are now demand high wages, payment on the spot and other perks (tea, pan masala, bidi/cigarette). Those agriculture labourers who are in the agriculture field said

"We are working for that (particular) farmer, because he provides breakfast, tea, pan masala, bidi/cigarette. He is also flexible about work and gives wage on time. He respects, never forces us to work, and has caring and helpful nature. He lends money without interest whenever we need. He never threatens or cheats".

Conclusions

The institutional setup in rural areas has undergone change due to various reasons. The government's development programmes (MGNREGA) and schemes (PDS) and participation of SC, ST, and OBCs in politics are the major reasons for such a change. The relationships that were prevailing between high caste and low caste people also have changed. There is conflict and a competitive environment can be observed in terms of development and political support.

The above mentioned developments increased the cost of labour to a farmer and thereby pushed the cost of cultivation. To maintain the costs, farmers were engaged in an agreement to bring labour from outside the villages. However, the external labour was bargaining for travel costs and other perks which included proper living arrangements, money for purchase of bidis and cigarettes and coverage of health needs. As a result of the non availability of labour either from internal or external sources, farmers resorted to increase the labour supply by employing their relatives and women folk, who never worked on the farm. A major change in the institution of labour is occurring in the villages of Uttar Pradesh.

Politicians and government functionaries should be aware of the changes in institutional setup. So that, they can work and support for harmony in the villages, such that agricultural operations are not affected.

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