

Livelihoods in a village and a slum on Delhi's periphery: 1988–2014

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Abstract *This long-term study highlights the changing profile of livelihoods in a village and a slum, in Delhi's periphery, since 1988, and lists 70 categories of workers and 'non-workers', including those like the village bourgeoisie and 'multi-taskers', which generally seem neglected in employment reports. The paper shows that while sub-marginal farming and casual work have grown rapidly in the studied field, during the past two and a half decades, diversification is also occurring in an expanding non-farm economy, which now includes a growing petty bourgeoisie of shopkeepers, petty professionals, and salaried employees, many of whom commute daily between villages and cities. Unit level census data on the studied village, however, seems to not only overlook budding and complex work categories like home-based women workers and multi-taskers but also undercounts, in 2011, the village's population and workforce.*

Keywords Work · Non-work · Agriculturists · Non-farm employment · Petty bourgeoisie · Bharat

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1 INTRODUCTION

The presence of a vast informal sector, a large proportion of multi-tasking ‘home makers’, and a shadow economy of considerable illegal and quasi-legal work generally complicate the count of workers in developing economies. In India, the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), the Registrar General, and various research organisations have generated reliable data for the long-term analysis of employment trends.¹ Difficulties have persisted, however, in classifying workers with shifting or multiple occupations, women engaged in home-based work and officially banned professions like child work and production in unauthorised factories, among others.² In this scenario, there is need for a more detailed view of ‘work’, especially in slums and villages, by applying tools from economics as well as ethnography, and integrating standard occupational classifications with work categories used by the masses themselves.³

As a small contribution, this paper attempts a close analysis of the varieties of work and ‘non-work’ in Dhantala, a village of about 2600 persons in Meerut district of western Uttar Pradesh (UP), and Aradhaknagar, a slum of about 1700 residents on the Delhi–UP border along the Grand Trunk Road.⁴ Dhantala and Aradhaknagar are both multi-caste communities with a preponderance of Dalits in the latter and of middle castes/Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the former. These communities had been studied by the author initially, in 1988–89, and again, in 2013–14, to afford a long-term view of changes in their living conditions including work profiles.

2 METHODOLOGY

Terms like ‘work’, ‘occupations’, ‘livelihoods’, and ‘employment’, standing for gainful activity, a person’s profession, earning strategies, and sectoral location in the economy, respectively, are distinct and yet used interchangeably in scholarly writings, as also, in this paper. A departure made in this study is with respect to the tracking of the vast varieties of workers as well as ‘non-workers’ in the studied field. The former include single profession individuals as well as ‘multi-taskers’, while the latter include those engaged in illegal professions, home-based production for self-consumption and unpaid social workers, whose output is officially excluded from the count of the country’s GDP but seems large enough to merit attention in any ethnography of work. In order to do justice to official and native categories, this

¹ For a summary of recent data on occupations in India, see National Sample Survey Organisation (2010), and Institute for Human Development (2014).

² For critiques of recent NSS and census counts of workers in India, see Bhalla (2014) and Hirway (2013).

³ For an early appeal for conversations between economists and anthropologists, see Bardhan (1989), and for ironies in official work counts, see Sen (1973).

⁴ The full name of the village noted in official records is Rasoolpur -Dhantala, after an eighteenth-century *fakir* named Rasool Baksh, who is credited with having started the village settlement, according to folklore.

study has used a multi-method approach involving door-to-door surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs).⁵ The results of the work surveys in Dhantala and Aradhaknagar, in 1988–89 and 2014, have been listed in various tables in this study. Occasional variations in the respondents' descriptions of their work withhold us from claiming complete precision in our data. We also admit that some categories of workers like daily commuters and petty professionals, which were inadvertently omitted in our house-to-house surveys in 1988 or in 2014, had to be subsequently configured through group discussions. Yet, by following a multi-method approach and constantly discussing the findings with the educated respondents in both the communities (collectively as well as individually), it is felt that a fairly reliable picture of occupational shifts in the field has emerged and can serve as a base for further research in future.

We also wish to point out here that it was difficult to obtain a precise count of the number of work-hours of each adult, on a daily or weekly basis, as we were working with just two assistants. Hence, the principal and subsidiary workers were counted only on the basis of 'usual' or year-long status.⁶ On the other hand, in order to accommodate the native perspectives on work, which accord considerable importance to security and steady returns, formal and informal sector location as also legal and illegal divides were considered along with the standard divisions based on economic sectors, activity status and skill levels. Since the figures for all the residing castes and their occupational break-ups would have overloaded our tables, the break-ups for Dalit workers in Dhantala (where they constitute 23 per cent of the population in a middle caste-dominated village), and for the upper castes in Aradhaknagar (who comprise 10 per cent of the Dalit majority slum) alone have been listed presently. The proportion of women workers has, however, been cited, in brackets, with the corresponding totals of workers in the concerned categories in the following tables.

The village women are generally overburdened with work due to the unavailability of piped water, cooking stoves, and contraceptives, among other necessities. Dhantala also has a large number of women who tend to manage the livestock daily along with the performance of their other domestic chores. Ironically, they are not expected to be counted as workers as much of their output is home-based and used only for self-consumption. However, the women who help with livestock daily in households and also sell milk have been counted as subsidiary workers (see Table 1, row 14) while those who work on family farms occasionally or in dairying for domestic consumption only have not been counted as workers.

The exact referents of broader employment categories—tracked in Tables 1 and 2—also need to be explained here. Thus, the term 'self-employed' includes most artisans, petty professionals and shopkeepers as well as small and marginal farmers,

⁵ For detailed personal profiles from these work segments, see Vijay (2016).

⁶ The principal occupation of workers with more than one profession was identified on the basis of the time spent on a particular work in a year and not on the basis of income or identification with a job. The time criterion used here is the same as specified in the NSS rounds, namely, a minimum of 183 days of earning activity for principal workers during a year, and ranging between a month and 183 days for subsidiary workers.

Table 1 Workers in Dhantala: 1989–2014

No.	Occupations/Year	1989	2014	SCs in 2014
1	All Workers	843 (176)	1013 (215)	226 (70)
2	Total Population	2080 (980)	2604 (1209)	599 (259)
3	Workers' Ratio	41 % (20 %)	39 % (18 %)	38 % (27 %)
4	Employers	30 4 %	24 2 %	02 01 %
5	Self-employed	745 88 %	705 69 %	143 51 %
6	Casual Labourers	35 04 %	177 18 %	66 31 %
7	Regular Wage Earners	33 04 %	107 11 %	17 17 %
8	Paid Women Workers	22	41	19
9	Manual Workers	813 96 %	888 89 %	211 93 %
10	Low Skilled Workers	727 86 %	791 79 %	179 79 %
11	Non-agriculturists +	165 20 %	349 35 %	77 41 %
12	Agriculturists	678 80 %	664 (169) 65 %	149 59 %
13	Rear Livestock Alone	03	16	04
14	Women Rearing Livestock	132	158	31
15	Cultivators	529	430 (2)#	79
16	Petty Cultivators	12	51	13
17	Sub-marginal Cultivators	02	67 (1)	18
18	Marginal Cultivators	94	128	12
19	Small Cultivators	302	127 (1)	32
20	Small Leasers	02	05	01
21	Semi-middle Cultivators	92	42	03
22	Middle Cultivators	17	04	00
23	Big/Capitalist Cultivators	06	03	00
24	Tenant Cultivators			
25	Small Tenants	02	07	01
26	Substantial Tenants	00	01	00
27	All Cultivators	529 (8) 63 %	435 (2) 31 %	80 (1) 29 %
28	Farm Labour[^]	14 (10) 02 %	55 (9) 4 %	34 (6) 7 %
29	Casual Labour	08	47 (4)	14
30	Landless Casual Labour	04	8 (5)	14 (6)
31	Traditional Bonded Labour	02	00	00
32	Non-farm Labour (NFL)	27 (6) 6 %	71 (10) 11 %	19
33	NFL within the village	23	49 (9)	18 (3)
34	Casual Labour	17	47 (9)	18
35	Hard/Construction labour	N.A	37(7)	12 (6)
36	Other/Light Labour@	N.A	10(2)	06
37	Wage Labour	06	02	01
38	NFL Outside the Village	04	22 (1)	01
39	All Labour	41 (16) 05 %	126 (19) 15 %	53 (12) 22 %
40	Artisans and Servers	92 (14) 11 %	121 (15) 10 %	33 (1) 5 %
41	Traditional Artisans	37 (2)	11 (1)	02
42	New Artisans/Mechanics	05	40 (8)	09
43	Semi-skilled Servers	26 (6)	25	10

Table 1 continued

No.	Occupations/Year	1989	2014	SCs in 2014
44	Skilled Servers	16 (4)	41 (4)	10 (1)
45	Petty Vendors	08 (2)	04	02
46	All Formal Employees	28 (06) 3 %	106 (17) 10 %	16 17 %
47	Private Sector	07	53 (3)	04
48	Grade IV	05	30 (1)	03
49	Grade III	02	23 (2)	01
50	Public Sector	21	53 (15)	12 (2)
51	Grade IV (R)	11	05 (1)	3
52	Contract Workers (T)	N.A	12 (10)	4 (1)
53	Grade III	09	29 (4)	3 (1)
54	Grade II	01	07	2
55	Rural Bourgeoisie	12 1 %	50 (4) 5 %	09 4 %
56	Professionals	00	02	01
57	Petty Professionals	04	15 (2)	02
58	Village Shopkeepers	03	16 (2)	05 (2)
59	Manufacturers (in Dhan)	00	02	00
60	Business Persons	03	13	01
61	Multi-taskers	02	02	00
62	All Workers	843 (176)	1013 (215)	226 (8)
63	Earning Women	41 including 10 welfare workers 6 tailors in 2014		
64	Child Work Outside Home	25 working on others' fields in 2014		
65	No. of Households	302	430	90

Notes: Workers considered as per Usual Principal + Subsidiary Status

Noted percentages are of all workers in the concerned year*

The figures in italics are sub-totals and those in bold are grand totals. The percentages are of respective grand totals of all the workers in the concerned columns. The number of women workers is shown in brackets along with the totals. SCs stands for Scheduled castes; UCs for upper castes; R for regular government employees, and T for temporary ones; NFL refers to non-farm labour. NA refers to data that is not available

Index: * Very few workers, in our field, could afford to not work for more than six months. However, women engaged in dairying at home, generally work for less than three hours daily and may be counted as subsidiary workers (Row no. 14)

+ About 100 'agriculturists' in Dhantala, spend more time and earn more from their non-farm occupations such as construction labour, at one end, and small businesses, on the other. Their employment status is mixed though here they have been counted with the agriculturists

Independent women cultivators shown in brackets are mostly widows or those living in all-women households

^ Farm labour denotes those who are mainly dependent on labouring in others' fields for living and includes most of the sub-marginal and petty cultivators whose number is not added here to the count of full-time labourers

@ Other labour includes transport workers, load carriers and shop assistants

//Private sector refers to incorporated enterprises with a minimum of 20 workers

Source: House to house surveys conducted in both communities in 1988-89 and again in 2013-14

owning 2.5–5 acres, and 1–2.5 acres of agricultural land, respectively, who generally neither hire-in nor hire-out labour. The ‘employers’ include middle and large landowners, owning 10–15 acres, and more than 15 acres of irrigated land, respectively, and also ‘multi-taskers’ and some businessmen. ‘Casual wage earners’ include the landless as well as sub-marginal cultivators, owning between half and one acre, and petty cultivators, owning less than half acre of land, as well as farm and non-farm labour without regular employment.

3 CHANGES IN WORK PROFILES

Tables 1 and 2 clearly show that the typology as well as proportions of different sets of workers, in Dhantala and Aradhaknagar, have changed notably since the partial liberalisation of the economy from the late 1980s onwards. While the proportion of workers in the populations has remained roughly 40 per cent, the proportion of wage earners in Aradhaknagar (including domestic helps and sweepers, among others) rose while that of the self-employed in Dhantala came down sharply. A substantial chunk of the self-employed in the village, are agriculturists who combine cultivation with dairying. Their share in the workforce declined from 80 per cent in 1989 to 1965 per cent in 2014. However, cultivators themselves comprise less than 40 per cent of all workers in Dhantala now as about 100 agriculturists are engaged more intensively in non-farm work and 158 women agriculturists rear livestock within households to sell milk.

Another major shift in the agrarian sector in Dhantala can be seen in its landownership pattern. Just after Independence, land titles had devolved on all *sikmi* (regular) tenants with the abolition of *zamindari* in the 1950s. Further, Dhantala witnessed a historic land distribution trend among the landless (from the village commons of about 400 acres) after a valiant struggle of the landless guided by the CPM party cadres from Meerut in 1984. As a result, the number of landless farm workers came down to near zero, though today they again stand at eight besides 51 others who are petty holders. In 2014, out of a total of 430 families (having independent kitchens), 340 had some agricultural land. While the incidence of absentee landlordism has disappeared, the numbers of big and middle farmers have also dwindled sharply (though three families still have holdings that are larger than 30 acres). On the other hand, small, marginal and sub-marginal farmers have shown exponential growth as family holdings have got sub-divided over time. The total number of farm and non-farm labourers still remains low at 15 per cent of the village workforce in contrast to the surrounding villages where no land was redistributed and wherein up to 50 per cent of all workers are engaged in casual or regular labour. Meanwhile, the proportion of artisans and service providers in Dhantala remained constant at about 10 per cent even as the proportion of traditional artisans like potters and carpenters fell and that of new ones like mechanics and drivers increased.

In Aradhaknagar, the most notable change since 1988 has been that the proportion of semi-skilled workers rose from 36 per cent to 43 per cent as the number of construction labourers and domestic maids grew rapidly in the last

Table 2 Workers in Aradhaknagar: 1988–2014

No.	Occupations/Years	1988	2014	UCs in 2014
1	All Workers	159 (52)	701 (243)	34 (05)
2	Total Population	441 (208)	1694	110 (50)
3	Ratio of Workers	36 % (15 %)	41 % (30 %)	30 % (10 %)
4	Employers	02 < 1 %	08 1 %	02 4 %
5	Self-employed	33 21 %	112 15 %	13 38 %
6	Regular Wage Earners	92 58 %	440 63 %	14 40 %
7	Casual Wage Earners	32 20 %	139 20 %	06 18 %
8	Manual Workers	154 97 %	625 89 %	23 67 %
9	Informal Sector Workers	105 66 %	478 70 %	24 70 %
10	Primary Sector Worker	07 04 %	07 (1) < 1 %	00 %
11	<i>Livestock Rearers*</i>	03	5 (3)	00 0 %
12	<i>Grass Collection</i>	04	2	00
13	Semi-skilled Manual Workers			
14	All Semi-skilled	58 (37) 36 %	308 (175) 43 %	08 (1) 31 %
15	Self-employed	12 (2)	22(6)	04 (1)
16	<i>Home-based Labour</i>	04 (2)	2 (2)	00
17	<i>Vendors</i>	04	12 (4)	00
18	<i>Others</i>	04	08	04
19	Wage Earners	36 (29)	182 (122)	01
20	<i>Maids @</i>	26 (26)	122 (20G)	01
21	<i>Others</i>	10 (3)	60	00
22	Casual Labourers	11 (6)	95 (17)	03
23	Skilled Artisans and Servers			
24	All Skilled	35 (08) 22 %	111 (11) 16 %	06 (1) 28 %
25	Self-employed Artisan	03	12 (2)	00
26	Self-employed Server	07 (3)	36 (06)	01
27	Regular Wage Earners	04	19 (3)	03
28	Casual Workers, etc.	21	44 (10)	02
29	Formal Sector Worker	54 (12) 34 %	239 (52) 34 %	10 28 %
30	Private Sector Employees//	10 (4) 6 %	101(32) 16 %	09 23 %
31	Grade IV Sweepers	04 (1)	62 (22)	00
32	Grade IV Labour)	04 (1)	35(10)	06
33	Grade III Clerks, etc.	02 (2)	04	03 (1)
34	Public Sector Employees	44 (8) 28 %	138 (30) 18 %	01 2 %
35	Sweepers (R)@	28 (3)	69 (06)	00
36	Sweepers (T)	12 (5)	31 (6)	00
37	Others in Grade IV (R)	02	04 (2)	01
38	Others in Grade IV (T)	02	12 (4)	00
39	Grade III Clerks, etc. +	00	12 (8)	00
40	Petty Bourgeoisie	05 03 %	40 (3) 6 %	10 28 %
41	Business Persons	03	22 (1)	06
42	Manufacturers	00	01	01

Table 2 continued

No.	Occupations/Years	1988	2014	UCs in 2014
43	Within Aradhaknagar	00	01	01
44	Outside Aradhaknagar	00	00	00
45	Professionals	01	07 (2)	2 (1)
46	Multi-taskers	01	08	01
47	All Workers	159	731 (243)	34
48	Female Earners	52 33 %	243 (20 G) 36 %	05 13 %
49	Child Workers	NA	40 (20)	00
50	Total Families	91	292	12

Notes: Workers considered as per Usual Principal + Subsidiary Status

Supplementary Index for Table 2 (for common terms also refer to Index for Table 1)

* Livestock rearers in Aradhaknagar include two cattle rearers and three part-time pig and poultry keepers

@ G stands for girl workers

+ Grade III public sector employees include many low-paid contract workers including para-medics and aid workers in semi-government status

25 years, even as the number of public sector employees (that is, mainly Grade IV workers) fell from 28 per cent to 18 per cent. However, the number of workers like sweepers, peons, and guards working in major private sector units like malls and offices rose from 6 per cent to 16 per cent. Thus, the proportion of Grade IV formal sector employees remained the same in the slum. On the other hand, the minute but dynamic segment of the petty bourgeoisie (including semi-qualified doctors and teachers, petty shopkeepers, educated Grade III and Grade II salaried employees as well as a few ‘multi-taskers’ (engaged in several high-return jobs) jumped from just 1 per cent to about 5 per cent of the total in both communities.

Gender and caste profiles of occupations also show some change in the field between 1988 and 2014 though *varna* ceilings (as against sub-caste barriers) remain significant at the top and the bottom of the work pyramids. This is evident from the fact that 75 per cent of the Dalits remain poor agriculturists or labourers, in Dhantala, and most in Aradhaknagar also, are sweepers, vendors or artisans while the upper caste slum-dwellers and the village’s dominant castes find employment in the private organised sector more easily.⁷ At a more general level, it may be noted that work has become more mechanised and commercialised over time and still, up to 90 per cent of the workers in both the communities remain engaged in manual work while about two-thirds of the workers in Aradhaknagar and 90 per cent in Dhantala continue to struggle in the insecure informal sector.

A number of workers studied by us try to combine more than one job out of necessity or choice. Apart from petty and sub-marginal farmers who are forced to flit between farming, vending and casual labour due to poverty, this category also includes the well-off government employees, large landowners and shopkeepers, who

⁷ For more on the gender profile of occupations in our field, see Vijay (2016).

engage in money-lending, building contracts or liaison work because of local influence. Overall, in Dhantala, there were 150 individuals and 237 families which were earning from more than one occupation in 2014. In Aradhaknagar, 25 families had workers in three or four different occupations and 10 individuals engaged in more than one profession. However, the number of employers was just eight in the slum and 24 in the village (including middle and large landowners). The count of workers in the manufacturing sector also remains low in both the communities and the number of employer–manufacturers was just two in Dhantala and one in Aradhaknagar.

Among other notable work categories in Dhantala, in 2014, were Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) card-holders (25), and beneficiaries of caste-based reservations in employment (11). In Aradhaknagar, there were only two beneficiaries of job quotas for Dalits even though the number of government employees (mostly in Grade IV) was 138. In Dhantala, there were 17 physically challenged persons during the same year; of these six were working, while in Aradhaknagar, their numbers were 13 and 5, respectively. Both the communities also had about 30 child workers employed outside the home.

It is also notable here that the working age 'non-workers', who are not employed or engaged in illegal or non-economic activities, also have immense variety that calls for more attention today. Thus, in 2014, Aradhaknagar had 180 home-makers (including unpaid women engaged in considerable home-based work like food processing that would normally be bought and sold in developed economies), 12 adults engaged in higher studies (including 6 women), 20 unemployed adults (half of whom are not seeking work), 6 men and women engaged in quasi-legal professions like begging, and 12 in illegal activities like pickpocketing, 35 rentiers (having spare rooms to let out to tenants), 50 Below the Poverty Line (BPL) pensioners, 13 retired pensioners, 5 full-time political activists, and 4 religious/social workers. Similarly, Dhantala, during the same year, had 250 home-makers, 21 adults in higher education, 22 unemployed men, and 4 others who were not seeking work, another 4 earning from quasi-legal and 2 from illegal professions, 5 political activists and 2 full-time 'social workers' besides 15 rentiers (including 4 shop leasers and 8 land leasers) besides 14 BPL pensioners and 16 retired pensioners in 2014.

4 OFFICIAL COUNTS

It is obvious that the variety of workers as well as non-workers captured through long-term field-work in communities far exceeds that cited in macro data sets as well as short-term field reports.⁸ It may also be highlighted here that comparisons between our surveys and the Census record of workers in Dhantala (available at the Block Development Office in Kharkauda town and also on compact discs at the Jawaharlal Nehru University [JNU]) shows that the latter is not only thin but also riddled with some glaring errors. Thus, conversations with local high school-

⁸ For examples, see Harris (2012), Himanshu et al. (2013), Datta, et al. (2014), and Rodgers (2012).

teachers who undertook the Census survey of 2011 revealed that the enumerators had never counted women working with livestock even in homes where milk was sold. The surveyors also stated that they were asked to keep workers aged below 18 years out of their count and categorise all family heads owning farm land as cultivators, irrespective of the time spent by them in other occupations. They also seem to have under-counted two or more cultivators in such families.

As a result, the 2011 Census figures for Dhantala recorded 698 principal and marginal workers while our door-to-door survey in 2014, found as many as 1013 in all. This was mainly because the census under-counted not only women workers but also many non-farm workers in the village and noted only 334 farmers and 33 farm labourers in 2011, with no entries for categories like formal sector workers, shopkeepers, petty professionals, traditional and new artisans and service providers, among others. More intriguingly, the population of Dhantala was shown as 2123 in 2011, by the decadal Census, implying a decline of 407, from a figure of 2560 counted officially in 2001.⁹ Our own count showed 2694 residents in Dhantala, in 2007, and 2604 in 2013.

5 CONCLUSION

The survey of occupations in Dhantala and Aradhaknagar thus highlights a number of categories that seem neglected in macro as well as micro reports on work and employment, in India, even as their proportion has been growing in local communities and making them more diverse than before.¹⁰ Despite these shifts, the overall transition in work in the studied field, seems marginal as is evident from the incidence of continuing under-employment and disguised unemployment (especially of marginal and sub-marginal farmers and home-based workers) as well as extreme informality and insecurity among the mass of young workers who yearn for any formal sector job, even in Grade IV now.

A stronger safety net (including protection against illness, accident, and old age) for workers in the informal sector, along with rapid job creation in both the public as well as the organised private sectors seems imperative in this light. The expansion of health, education and other services in lakhs of villages and slums can generate millions of productive jobs within *Bharat* that lives with minimal infrastructure till today but also yearns for secure work and earnings too.

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⁹ Village level Census data for 2011 has been checked at the Data Archive, Convention Centre, JNU, New Delhi. The author is thankful to Professor P.M. Kulkarni of the Centre for Regional Development Studies for facilitating access, and to Lokniti, Centre for Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, for sharing occupational survey data on Delhi for 2013.

¹⁰ It is hoped that the digital record of family data being brought out by the Social Economic and Caste Census now would help in the monitoring and sharing of such figures in future.

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