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# Social Reproduction and the Agrarian Question of Women's Labour in India

Agrarian South: Journal of  
Political Economy  
5(1) 50–76  
© 2016 Centre for Agrarian Research  
and Education for South (CARES)  
SAGE Publications  
sagepub.in/home.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/2277976016658737  
<http://ags.sagepub.com>



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## Abstract

Using a social reproduction framework, this article explores how reproduction of rural working class households is rearticulated to capitalist production in India. Our analysis of the conditions in India reveals that the interaction of three institutions—market, state and household—has imposed the burden of reproduction on women. In turn, women's work is dependent on private and common lands. This link, between the role of women's unpaid labour in reproducing rural households and the fact that this work remains largely dependent on land, constitutes a failure of the Indian economy to provide decent livelihoods. It also reasserts gender equity as a contemporary and unresolved question in the midst of India's agrarian transition and underscores the importance of instituting agrarian reforms and state intervention at levels sufficient for social reproduction.

## Keywords

Social reproduction, gender, land and labour, domestic economies, India

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## Introduction

Land reforms have been viewed as crucial to economic development by some and have long constituted an integral aspect of radical political demands.<sup>1</sup> According to this rationale, land reforms would stimulate agricultural production, which, in turn, would facilitate accumulation required for industrialization without undercutting investments in agriculture or the standard of living of the working classes. However, the failure of land reforms in India, as well as a stagnating agrarian economy, does not appear to have an impact on economic growth or capital accumulation in the country, nor has the latter benefited all sections of society. To illustrate, in the period between 1990–1991 and 2004–2005, the Annual Survey of Industries reports that the total value of output in India increased by 518 per cent and profits by 110 per cent (Jha, 2009). Yet, in this same period of phenomenal growth and profits, the total wage bill, including social security, only increased by 240 per cent (Jha, 2009), while in 1997–2008 the number of farmer suicides recorded in India was 199,132 (Sainath, 2010). These developments pose questions regarding the continued relevance of land for the rural economy.

While agriculture only contributes 18 per cent of value added in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it continues to support about 47 per cent of total employment (WDI, 2014). It is of significant concern that the non-agricultural economy has created insufficient employment to absorb the relative surplus population. The attrition of private and common lands by land grabs, competition from international markets and the globalized regime of flexible and precarious immobile labour but mobile capital have, together, deepened the impact of the parallel process of withdrawal of the Indian state from agricultural investment and protection of the working classes. The state has intervened in some social welfare programmes, but these appear to be half-hearted attempts to assuage the increasingly immiserated population and retain its legitimacy as a democratic entity that exists in the interests of all classes.

Our objective in this article is not to provide a discussion of economic growth, nor of the effect of land on capital. Rather, we are interested in the conditions under which the rural poor reproduce themselves. Social reproduction would broadly include biological reproduction, everyday survival, accumulation of education and skills to participate in the capitalist economy (for workers' participation in the formal and informal labour market), acquisition of skills to ensure the survival of the households (i.e., skills to engage in household production and care work) and inculcating the necessary value system to ensure the reproduction of the

patriarchal and capitalist economy. We adopt a more basic definition of daily reproduction of working class households through the acquisition and provision of such basic needs as food, shelter, clothing and health-care (Katz, 2001).

Social reproduction in contemporary capitalist economies hinges on the interplay between three major institutions: households, markets and the state (Antonopolous & Hirway, 2010; Dickinson & Russell, 1985). The roles that these institutions play in ensuring social reproduction may both contradict and complement each other. In addition, we also adopt Rosa Luxemburg's (1951) insights that non-capitalist forms of production are essential for capitalism even if the latter is waged in a continuous struggle to undermine the former. Non-capitalist social formations of household and family labour, specifically articulated to peasant modes of production, include unpaid labour that directly benefits the market, as well as unpaid and invisible domestic productive and reproductive labour. The latter supports the reproduction of the working classes and the reserve army of labour (RAL), thus assuming the costs of supporting a labour pool. The incursion of capital and consumer goods in rural areas and the dispossession that accompanies commodification forces rural populations to purchase from the market what they used to produce for themselves. The accompanying shrinking of the non-capitalist strata means that some rural households cannot keep up with the socially determined level of consumption, thus lowering the living standards of all workers. However, capitalism does not benefit from the complete destruction of non-capitalist economies, as it would lead to a 'standstill of accumulation' (Luxemburg, 1951).

Economic changes since the 1980s have simultaneously differentiated and homogenized the conditions of capitalist exploitation and, hence, the conditions under which rural households reproduce in India. Rural households are engaged in various instances of work, including urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and self-employment, and significantly for this study, self-exploitative non-capitalist production. We do not relate these activities only with petty-commodity production, but rather with the reliance of rural dwellers on different livelihood strategies and wage work that do not free them from their peasant roots. We use an assemblage of data from various sources to present our central argument, that due to the insufficiency of this cornucopia of livelihood strategies, the satisfaction of the minimum consumption levels of rural households and their very reproduction is critically dependent on women's labour, which is, in turn, articulated to the agrarian question of land. While state intervention in India provides

some succour, subsistence production, care work and other forms of non-capitalist production support the reproduction of the working classes, thereby subsidizing capitalist production. In turn, these work activities, which are often, but not exclusively, carried out by women, are dependent on private and common land. Land, therefore, does not assume significance only due to the semi-proletarian condition, but also because the capitalist market economy does not support the reproduction of the working classes (Moyo & Yeros, 2005). Under changed global economic conditions, land ownership is unlikely to lift working classes out of poverty. Nevertheless, reproduction of rural working class households depends on land and women's labour, which, in turn, portends continued immiseration and deepens the contradictions of achieving gender equity under conditions of capitalism. Political demands for land and agrarian reform, therefore, should address the gender inequities underlying women's invisible work.

Our approach to this analysis is feminist political economy, through which we conceptualize the various forms of women's labour as being dialectically linked to changes in the agrarian structure of society. Social change in rural India not only differs from the path predicted by the classical agrarian question, but it has also been fraught with significant diversity across the country (Shah & Harris-White, 2011). In their bid to theorize and understand the changes, researchers have relied on a variety of methodological approaches. Some have relied on case studies involving longitudinal research or in new areas, whereas others focus on general formulations (*ibid.*). This study falls in the latter category, not as an attempt to homogenize, but to develop a structural position on the basis of national-level data. We view the existence and continuation of women's reproductive unpaid labour as a continuation of capitalism's tendency to produce and exploit non-capitalist forms of production. In this article, we show the agrarian question of labour as being not only deeply gendered, but also highly differentiated by the social relations present in various spheres of the production of labour under neoliberalism. This differentiation would explain, too, the wide variations of labouring conditions by region in India—but such analysis is beyond the scope of this article.

## **Market Economy, Land and Reproduction**

The wage economy facilitates reproduction of workers and their families, as wages are transformed into means of subsistence. Yet even though

**Table 1.** Distribution of Rural Households by Land-size Categories, 2011–2012

Land, in hectares	< 0.004	0.005–0.4	0.41–1.00	1.01–2	2.01–4.00	> 4.01
<b>Distribution of Households (%)</b>						
by land cultivated	48	19.8	14.2	10.3	5.4	2.4
by land owned	15.5	48	16.7	10.9	6.3	2.7

**Source:** NSSO (2014a).

reproduction of labour power is a precondition for the reproduction of capital, it is not integral to the sphere of surplus value production. The delinking of the cycles of social reproduction and capital accumulation, especially under neoliberal capitalism, leads to social fragmentation and births new (or deepens existing) contractions (Mingione, 1985). In this section, we explore the conditions of reproduction in rural India that are fostered by the capitalist market economy.

Structural transformation in the Indian economy, despite being stunted, has been accompanied by increasing landlessness. The share of agriculture in value-added GDP dropped from 28 to 18.7 per cent in 1994–2012, whereas the share of employment decreased from 61 to 47 per cent in the same period (WDI, 2014). Nearly 64 per cent of all rural households own less than 0.41 hectares (that is, less than one acre) of land, this being the group that Basole and Basu (2011) characterize as ‘effectively landless’. Table 1 indicates that even though only 16 per cent of rural households owned less than 0.005 hectares in 2011–2012, 48 per cent of all rural households cultivated less than 0.005 hectares.

Table 2 compares the proportion of income derived from various sources, total income and consumption expenditure for rural households in 2003 and 2012–2013. It indicates that the ‘effectively landless’ households derived between 41 and less than 1 per cent of their total household income from agriculture in 2012–13. This suggests that agriculture alone may not be a viable strategy for a large proportion of rural households and that dependence on agricultural income varies even among the land-poor households. However, while agriculture is not the sole source of income, neither is wage income. ‘Effectively landless’ households derived 38–64 per cent of total household income from wages in 2012–2013, thus hinting at a high degree of semi-proletarianization. Table 2 suggests that ‘effectively landless’ households are engaged in diverse livelihoods, including casual (agricultural and non-agricultural) labour

**Table 2.** Proportion of Income from Various Sources, Consumption Expenditure and Net Investment Per Household and Household Deficit (2003 and 2012–2013)

Size Class of Land Possessed, in Hectares	Proportion of Income from				Total Income (₹)	Total Consumption Expenditure (₹)	Net Income = Total Income Less Expenditure (₹)
	Wages	Net Receipt from Cultivation	Animal Farming	Non-farm Business			
	2012–2013						
< 0.001	63.63	0.66	25.89	9.80	4561	5108	-547
0.001–0.004	57.47	16.55	14.96	11.05	4152	5401	-1249
0.005–0.4	38.33	40.88	11.99	8.81	5247	6020	-773
0.41–1	23.52	57.28	11.13	8.07	7348	6457	891
1.01–2	15.44	68.58	10.82	5.16	10730	7786	2944
2.01–4	10.34	77.62	7.64	4.38	19637	10104	9533
> =4.01	3.17	86.22	6.34	4.28	41388	14447	26941
All	32.23	47.95	11.87	7.97	6426	6223	203

(Table 2 continued)

(Table 2 continued)

Size Class of Land Possessed, in Hectares	Proportion of Income from						Total Income (₹)	Total Consumption Expenditure (₹)	Net Income = Total Income Less Expenditure (₹)
	Wages	Net Receipt from Cultivation	Animal Farming	Non-farm Business	Total Income	Total Consumption Expenditure (₹)			
	2003								
< 0.001	77.90	0.80	4.64	16.67	1380	2297	-917		
0.001-0.004	59.58	18.13	5.76	16.53	1633	2390	-757		
0.005-0.4	39.80	43.34	6.19	10.67	1809	2672	-863		
0.41-1	25.47	63.30	4.09	7.14	2493	3148	-655		
1.01-2	17.75	74.81	1.59	5.85	3589	3685	-96		
2.01-4	8.55	82.31	0.21	8.92	5681	4626	1055		
>= 4.01	5.76	86.08	1.17	6.99	9667	6418	3249		
All	38.72	45.82	4.30	11.16	2115	2770	-655		

**Sources:** NSSO (2005, 2014b) and authors' calculations.

and agricultural and non-agricultural self-employment (see also NSSO [The National Sample Survey Organization], 2014a). These data imply that although de-peasantization is presently a key feature of the rural Indian economy, it is neither a stable nor linear process, as peasant modes of production remain necessary for the survival of rural households.

Furthermore, striking differences between income sources in 2003 and 2012–2013 illustrate, in Table 2, the critical importance of land for sustaining households. Higher landholdings are positively associated with the proportion of household income derived from agriculture and higher total incomes, but negatively associated with the proportion of household income derived from wage income. For households with landholdings above 0.41 hectares, agriculture contributed between 57 and 86 per cent of total household income in 2012–2013.

For land-rich households (with landholdings above 4.01 hectares), the proportion of income received from cultivation remains almost constant at 86 per cent between 2003 and 2012–2013. While total household consumption expenditure for this section of rural society nearly doubled between 2003 and 2012–2013 (from ₹6,418 to ₹14,447), net income increased nearly eightfold in the same period, from ₹3,249 to ₹26,941. Similar to land-rich households, total household consumption expenditure for households with the lowest landholdings (less than 0.001 hectare) nearly doubled between 2003 and 2012–2013, from ₹2,997 to ₹5,108. However, unlike the land-rich, total household income of land-poor households only tripled in the same period, from ₹1,380 to ₹4,561.

In 2003, households cultivating less than 2 hectares of land suffered an income deficit, which could be explained by the agrarian crisis in the early part of the twenty-first century. However, 10 years later, in 2012–2013, after the worst of the crisis, effectively landless households (with less than 0.41 hectare) continued to face a deficit, ranging from 10 to 30 per cent of total income. A simple ratio of consumption expenditure in the highest and lowest land categories increased marginally in 2003–2013, from 2.79 to 2.82. However, the ratio of income for the highest and lowest land cultivating categories increased from 7.01 to 9.07, in the same period. Thus, relative inequalities in consumption expenditures have not varied much over this 10-year period, possibly because consumption patterns tend to be relatively smooth (Vakulabharanam, 2010), but relative inequality in income has increased.

We make three related observations based on these data. First, while some may view the diversity of livelihoods as an accumulative strategy, the income deficit faced by land-poor households suggests the necessity of these livelihoods for the reproduction of rural working class



households (see also Shah & Harris-White, 2011). Second, land continues to be important in that it is associated with higher net incomes. For those with lower landholdings, land may not constitute an accumulative strategy or even a path out of poverty. Nevertheless, it potentially contributes to reproduction (see also Moyo, Jha & Yeros, 2013). Third, it appears that income from market engagement, which includes self-employment in agriculture and non-farm business and wage labour, is insufficient for maintaining consumption and, hence, reproduction. As a result, we hypothesize that land-poor households are able to sustain income deficits either due to state intervention, non-capitalist production in the form of subsistence production or remittances, though we do not explore the issue of remittances in this article.

### **State Intervention in Reproduction**

As a precondition to capitalist production, reproduction of the working classes constitutes the *faux frais* of capitalist production (Marx, 1986, p. 603). Wages constitute the ‘first form of proletarian subsistence’, but its adequacy in the processes of ‘self-managed reproduction’ depends on workers’ access to employment and decent wages (Dickinson & Russell, 1985). To manage the contradictions associated with a reproduction crisis, the state may intervene to prevent or mitigate cost-shifting by capitalists through appropriate legislations, or may seek to underwrite some or most of reproductive costs. The actual articulation and effective implementation of these interventions, however, are historical and dependent on the social structure and the growth process (*ibid.*).

The Indian welfare regime<sup>2</sup> since the 1980s has increasingly intervened only to the extent of correcting market failures or failures of family provisioning, by providing meagre support to ‘deserving’ households (Palriwala & Neetha, 2009). The intervention has been haphazard and piecemeal (Gough, 2004), and has complemented the systematic gutting of the welfare regime (Ahmed & Chatterjee, 2013) to create a neoliberal state even more sensitive to the needs of the capitalist economy. We focus our analysis in this section on two specific welfare programmes, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and the Public Distribution System (PDS), to illustrate the (inadequate) role of the Indian state in reproducing the household, and at the same time, the tensions that exist in the provision and the coverage of these programmes.

The PDS system, which was initially restricted to urban households during World War II, was extended to the entire country in post-colonial

India as the joint responsibility of the federal and state governments. The system provisions basic needs items at government-mandated fixed prices through 'fair price' shops to ration cardholders. At the end of the last decade, there were about 478,000 such shops in the country (Palriwala & Neetha, 2009). By some reports, the PDS has the highest recognition and participation of different government programmes (Dev, 2008, cited in Palriwala & Neetha, 2009). However, after liberalization, the emphasis shifted from universal coverage to one of targeting households living below the poverty line for differential pricing. Targeting has been necessitated by the declining share of food subsidy in government expenditure and GDP. This has led to the exclusion of many households that should benefit from lower prices and has fostered an environment of patronage and corruption (Palriwala & Neetha, 2009).

The Food Security Act (2013) further erodes this programme by allowing individual states the discretionary provision to move from a targeted PDS to a cash transfer (CT) system. But CT is unlikely to alleviate food insecurity and poverty, as the programme does not address the problem of inflation indexing, the effects of volatile food prices, lack of access to cash due to poor banking networks and the collapse of minimum support prices to farmers, who might be compelled to move away from food production or agriculture due to global competition (Ahmed & Chatterjee, 2013, p. 91). Further, in the absence of decent affordable public health and education systems, CTs in India may not tackle the problem of a food budget squeeze that has potentially caused a decline in calorie consumption in India (see Basole & Basu, 2012; Ghosh, 2011; Patnaik, 2003), and will significantly affect the effectively landless and unemployed households.

The other significant programme legislated in the last decade is the NREGS.<sup>3</sup> An important aspect of NREGS is that, unlike past public works programmes, it implicitly accepts that the problem of underconsumption is endemic and is not restricted only to times of natural disasters (Palriwala & Neetha, 2009). Also, unlike targeted PDS, it is open to all rural households. Beginning with the poorest 200 districts, NREGS became a nationwide programme in April 2008 (Jha & Gaiha, 2012), and remains the largest social welfare programme in India, with a budget of about USD 7 billion per year (Chopra, 2014).

With a significant proportion of households facing an income deficit (Table 2), income derived from NREGS could form an important basis of survival for the land-poor. Case studies, however, suggest varied impacts and implementation of NREGS across states. In states where it has been implemented well, the impact has been significant. It has

reportedly improved food security in some parts of Central India and erstwhile Andhra Pradesh (Khera & Nayak, 2009; Ravi & Engler, 2013). Further, studies have reported that a high proportion of NREGS income is spent on food, medical expenses and education (Dreze & Khera, 2009; Joshi, Singh & Joshi, 2008; Pankaj, 2008; Ravi & Engler, 2013). The greatest employment beneficiaries were those from lower castes, landless households, casual agricultural workers and households in the lowest consumption quintile; women benefited significantly from this scheme, although there is considerable inter-state variation (Dreze & Khera, 2009; Dutta, Murgai, Ravallion & van de Walle, 2012; Pankaj, 2008; Pankaj & Tankha, 2009). Thus, NREGS work has been important in reproducing working class households, and has the potential to benefit the significant proportion of land-poor working class households facing income deficits, as indicated in Table 2.

Yet, despite its tremendous potential, the programme has been unable to fulfil unmet demand for work. The average number of person-days worked among households in the poorest consumption quintile participating in NREGS was 33.7 days in 2009–2010, compared to the 100 days provision (Dutta et al., 2012). The mean percentage of households that completed 100 days of work in 2009–2010 was a dismal 3 per cent (Jha & Gaiha, 2012). Furthermore, as with other welfare policies, there have been numerous calls by the economic elite to reduce state support for NREGS. It is telling that the combined expenditure on labour and employment by the federal and state governments fell from 0.51 per cent of total development and non-development expenditures in 1990–1991 to less than 0.4 per cent since 2000–2001, even after the implementation of NREGS (RBI, 2005, 2015).

The effect of India's contradictory economic policies is visible in its undertaking to strengthen welfare through NREGS and targeted PDS and CTs, despite an overarching neoliberal mode of socio-economic regulation. The policies suggest that the state recognizes the need for cushioning against the current accumulation regime. However, rather than inducing social transformation and reducing inequality, the state has limited itself to meagre attempts to reduce poverty, and focused on narrow objectives of economic growth and higher labour flexibilization (Palriwala & Neetha, 2009). State intervention within a capitalist logic or structure—even when seemingly pro-poor—inevitably functions to maintain the dynamism of capitalist accumulation (Ahmed & Chatterjee, 2013, p. 87), especially when capital's accumulation of political power is greater than that of the labouring classes. The Indian state in this context has not adequately fulfilled its social provisioning role. State intervention is deemed necessary only when families are incapable of adequately

fulfilling this role, and increasingly even this intervention is geared towards 'individualization of social costs' (Braedley, 2006, p. 216).

## Households, Women's Work and Reproduction

The family-household constitutes another major institution of reproduction. It undertakes the conversion of wages (and social grants) into necessities of life for individual consumption, and engages in consumption of simple-use values (Dickinson & Russell, 1985). The persistence of economic insecurity in the absence of adequate wages and state intervention also forces working class households to engage in subsistence production or 'domestic economies' (Meillassoux, 1977 cited in Cockcroft, 1983) to ensure survival. Labour expended in these activities constitutes reproductive work that is often, but not exclusively, the bastion of women's invisible work. The existence and persistence of 'domestic economies', particularly, allows capitalists to expect the reproduction of labour in the absence of a living wage and inadequate social welfare programmes. Consequently, non-capitalist social formations of household and family labour shoulder a large proportion of the burden of meeting minimum consumption levels essential for daily and generational reproduction and, as Luxemburg (1951) suggests, continue to subsidize capital accumulation.

Table 3 below provides data on the participation of female rural workers in India in various activities, from 1983 to 2011–2012. It indicates an increase in women's participation in 'all domestic' activities, from 27.3 to 42.2 per cent between 1987–1988 and 2011–2012. Correspondingly, the women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) has declined from 42.5 to 18 per cent in the same period. Some have attributed this trend to an 'income effect', in which higher household incomes afford women the choice and luxury to withdraw from the labour market and produce goods that would enhance the social 'status' of the household (Abraham, 2013). This argument is, however, unconvincing.

First, the country is suffering from a lack of adequate employment creation for women workers. A closer look at the components that make up the LFPR (Table 3) reveals that its decline stems from a secular decrease in the proportion of women engaged in self-employed and unpaid work in family enterprises, as well as casual wage work, from 1987–1988 to 2011–2012.<sup>4</sup> To contextualize this decline, it is important to note that from 2004–2005 to 2011–2012, when economic growth was fairly high, approximately 30.3 million agricultural workers withdrew

**Table 3. Female Usual Activity Status Distribution (for all ages), 1983–2012**

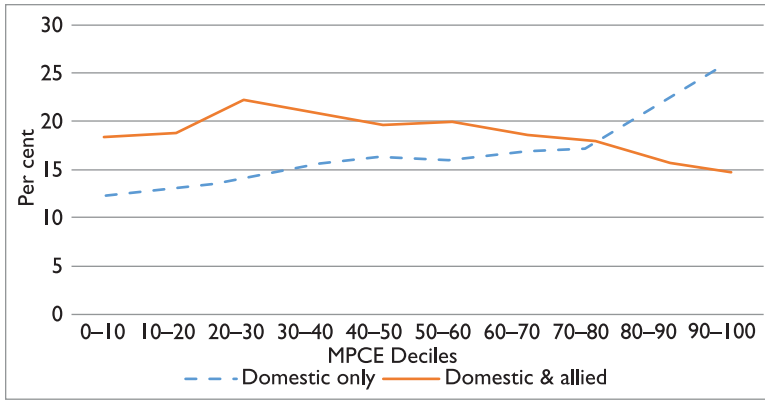
Activity Status (PS)	Rural									
	1983	1987–1988	1993–1994	1999–2000	2004–2005	2009–2010	2011–2012			
Self-employed and unpaid family worker (1)	21	22	18.5	11.4	13.6	10.2	9.4			
Regular wage work (2)	1.6	2.1	1.3	0.9	1.2	1.1	1.3			
Casual wage work (3)	18	17	17	11	9	9	6.8			
All domestic (4)	29.8	27.3	34.4	36.3	35.5	39.9	42.2			
Domestic duties only (4a)	15.9	15.1	15.7	20.3	17.5	22	18.5			
Domestic duties and allied activities (4b)	13.9	12.2	18.7	16	18	17.9	23.7			
Unemployed (5)	0.6	1.4	0.5	0	0.8	0.5	0.5			
Education (6)	7.6	7.2	11.7	18.4	21.3	23.8	25.1			
Others (7)	21.4	23.1	16.2	22.4	18.4	15.6	14.7			
WPR (1 + 2 + 3)	40.6	41.1	36.8	23.3	23.8	20.3	17.5			
LFPR (1 + 2 + 3 + 5)	41.2	42.5	37.3	23.3	24.6	20.8	18			

Source: Abraham (2013).

their labour in rural India, of which 24.6 million (81.2 per cent) were women (Thomas, 2014). In the same period, 25.7 million jobs were created in the non-agricultural sector in rural India, but only 4.6 million of these (17.9 per cent) were for women; the total female labour force consequently shrank by 20.5 million (Thomas, 2014). Further, Kannan and Raveendran (2012) note that, of the total 28.16 million women missing from the Indian labour force in 2010, 61 per cent were from the poorest households, thus challenging the 'income effect' explanation. Other studies, instead, attribute the decline in women's LFPR to agrarian change (Mukherjee, 2011), lack of sufficient well-paid jobs (Das, 2006) or the composition of growth rather than growth itself (Lahoti & Swaminathan, 2013).

Second, conflating participation in domestic activities with status production obscures the realities of rural working class and marginalized households in India. The National Sample Survey Organization classifies 'domestic activities' into 'domestic activities only' and 'domestic and allied activities'. The latter constitutes unaccounted agricultural and allied activities, such as free collection of goods, preparation of cow dung cakes, domestic production and processing and fetching water. 'Domestic activities only' is assumed to consist of other invisible work that includes care work, cooking and cleaning (Mukherjee, 2011). Women's participation in 'domestic activities only' increased from 15.1 to 18.5 per cent between 1987–1988 and 2011–2012, but their participation in 'domestic and allied activities' increased from 12.2 to 23.7 per cent in the same period (Table 3). While Figure 1 suggests a positive association between women's participation in 'domestic activities only' and household consumption expenditure, participation in 'domestic and allied activities' is negatively correlated with household consumption. Thus, we argue that characterizing all domestic activities as social 'status' production is unwarranted.

Furthermore, Table 4 provides a breakdown of various activities undertaken by women participating in domestic and allied activities. The highest participation is in unaccounted agricultural production, free collection of goods, preparing cow dung and fetching water, activities which have suitable market substitutes although they may be unaffordable to the working classes. According to the only National Time Use Survey conducted in 1998, ultra-poor women (who fall below the midpoint of the poverty line) spent 23.6 per cent of their time on low-productivity subsistence work that is classified by NSSO as 'domestic and allied activities', whereas non-poor women (above the poverty line, but below the midpoint of average consumption expenditure of those



**Figure 1.** Distribution of Rural Women's Participation in Domestic Duties by MPCE Deciles, 2011–2012

**Source:** (NSSO 2014a).

**Notes:** MPCE, monthly per capital consumption expenditure of households; data on activity status include principal and subsidiary status.

**Table 4.** Participation of Women (15–59 years) Usually Engaged in Domestic and Allied Activities (including subsidiary status) in 2011–2012

Specified Activities	Rural (%)
Maintenance of kitchen garden (1)	24.1
Work in household poultry etc. (2)	38
<i>Unaccounted agricultural and allied activities (1 or 2)</i>	47.3
Free collection of fish etc. (3)	22.4
Free collection of firewood, cattle fodder etc. (4)	57.8
<i>Free collection of goods (3 or 4)</i>	59.8
Food processing (own produce) (5)	11.1
Food processing (acquired) (6)	6
Preparing cow-dung cakes (7)	56.3
Sewing, tailoring etc. (8)	29.3
Free tutoring of own and other's children (9)	5.4
Fetching water from outside house (10)	40.4
Fetching water from outside village (11)	1
<i>Women in this age and status category engaged in at least one of the above activities</i>	89.5

**Source:** NSSO (2014c).

above the poverty line) spent only 12.16 per cent of their time on ‘domestic and allied activities’ (Hirway, 2010). While there are no recent national time use studies to compare the current situation, it is clear that domestic and allied activities are associated with low income and social status. In addition, the increase in income inequality between land-rich and land-poor households between 2003 and 2013 (Table 2), at the same time that which women’s participation in domestic and allied activities increased from 18 per cent in 2004–2005 to 23.7 per cent in 2011–2012 (Table 3), also suggests that working class households may be compensating for household income deficit<sup>5</sup> and income differences across class by increasing time spent in non-capitalist subsistence production. The withdrawal of women from the labour force and their increased participation in ‘domestic and allied activities’ may be an indicator of a reproductive crisis, rather than signifying social status or higher incomes.

Although subsistence production (domestic and allied activities) is not always carried out by women, it is overwhelmingly dominated by women because of structural constraints. About 60 per cent of women above the age of 15 years responding to the NSS 68th Round surveys noted that their primary occupation was domestic work because no one else would do the work, whereas only 15.8 per cent cited religious and social constraints (NSSO, 2014c). This indicates (though does not confirm) the relevance of economic constraints and sexual division of labour in determining women’s participation in domestic work instead of wage labour and other System of National Accounts (SNA) activities.

Palriwala and Neetha (2009) attribute the crisis of consumption to inadequate labour commodification and ‘familialism’, which relies on family and community networks and reiterates the role of women’s work in reproducing the household. The declining female LFPR in India may be a result of inadequate creation of high-quality jobs, which has particularly impacted women workers (Das, 2006; Patnaik, 2003). While it has long been accepted that women constitute a significant proportion of the RAL, Table 4 provides evidence that this labour constitutes the latent or floating components of the RAL, and not the stagnant component engaged in status production and leisure activities, as suggested by some. It could be argued that state provisioning and wages are low because of ‘familialism’. The direction of causality is, however, unclear. It is also possible that domestic economies (non-capitalist production) provide the only recourse to survival, given the lack of adequate jobs, wages and social welfare measures. Rather than indicating a ‘choice’, or being a

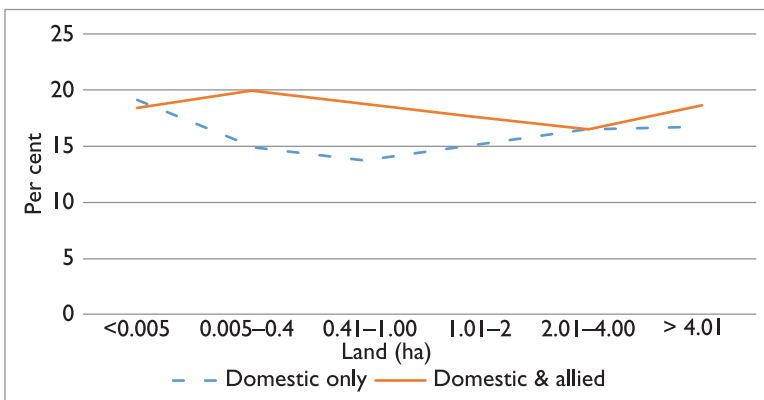


remnant of traditional societies, ‘familialism’ may reflect a constraint imposed by a neoliberal capitalism in which neither the market economy nor the state are willing to commit to reproducing working class households (see also Braedley, 2006). Increased participation in domestic and allied activities may, thus, reflect a coping mechanism to deal with the crisis of reproduction, which also provides a gendered subsidy to capital.

## Land, Women’s Work and Reproduction

Figure 2 indicates that 15–20 per cent of women from households across different levels of land cultivation participated in ‘domestic and allied activities’ in 2011–2012. The non-linear relationship between the two variables suggests that women from ‘effectively landless’ households have a higher participation in ‘domestic and allied’ activities (see also Sen & Sen, 1985). Land and ‘domestic activities only’ also display a non-linear relationship, in that participation in the latter is negatively associated with land as long as land cultivated is one hectare or less.

As Table 4 indicates, 59.8 per cent of women engaged in domestic and allied activities engaged in free collection of firewood and cattle fodder and 22.4 per cent participated in free collection of fish and other



**Figure 2.** Distribution of Rural Women’s Participation in Domestic Duties by Land Cultivated, 2011–2012

**Source:** NSSO (2014a).

**Note:** Data on activity status include principal and subsidiary status.

food items, both of which require access to private or common lands. The blurring of perceived dichotomies between agrarian and environmental change has led to research that argues in favour of historical complementarity between agrarian livelihoods and private and common lands (Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan, 2000; MRD, 2009). Past literature suggests a non-linear relationship between land and free collection of goods (Narain, Gupta & Van't Veld, 2008). However, the rural land-poor are more dependent than the land-rich on free collection of goods from private and commons lands (Adhikari, 2005; Narain et al., 2008). Some studies have estimated that consumption of goods from common lands account for between 9 and 26 per cent of total rural household income,<sup>6</sup> 91–100 per cent of total fuel requirements and 69–89 per cent of live-stock feed requirements (Beck & Ghosh, 2000; Jodha, 1986). We do not propose to extrapolate these results to all aspects of domestic and allied activities, but this literature compels us to recognize the relationship between land and women's work.

## Land and Its Contemporary Relevance

Land reform has long been considered significant to rural development and poverty alleviation, but appears less relevant in the changed circumstances of the Indian and global economies. Yet, its significance in relation to the crisis of reproduction—the expression of which is highly gendered by the fact that the bulk of the burden of reproduction is being shouldered by household labour performed mainly by women—cannot be gainsaid. The economic and social character of the subsidy afforded to capitalist accumulation by domestic economies asserts gender (the gendered characteristic of household reproduction) as a core and as yet unresolved variable of the contemporary agrarian question (Moyo, Jha & Yeros, 2013). While domestic economies may have historically provided a wage subsidy, the attrition of such economies to land grabs, competition from international markets and enclosure of forests and other natural resources makes such a subsidy less likely with the level of effort required prior to liberalization. It is in this context that we can understand the need for higher participation in domestic and allied activities. In the period from 1987–1988 to 2011–2012, participation in domestic and allied activities jumped more than 10 percentage points. For women in 'effectively landless' households (less than 0.41 hectares), the category of domestic and allied work, which is labour intensive and invisible, keeps the highest proportion of women occupied. This suggests

a positive complementarity between women's work, land (both common and private) and reproduction.

In 2004, 57 years after independence, the Common Minimum Programme of the then ruling party restated its feeble commitment to land reforms by declaring that 'landless families will be endowed with land through implementation of land ceiling and redistribution legislation. No reversal of ceiling will be permitted' (cited in MRD, 2009). Unsurprisingly, however, nothing was actually done to fulfil land reforms. Instead, the Indian state has been either a silent spectator or an active facilitator in the dispossession of private and common lands from the marginalized. Combined with an inadequate wage economy, the dispossession from private and common lands has imposed an inordinately high burden of reproduction on households, especially women in these households.

Land also assumes significance in capitalist economic growth and this is evident in the massive transfers of land for mining, industrial, residential and commercial real estate and infrastructural projects. However, the resulting economic growth has not created an adequate number of jobs and well-paying jobs that would improve standards of living to justify the loss of traditional livelihoods. This has particularly affected women's labour force participation (Das, 2006; Ghosh, 2011). Depeasantization thus does not guarantee proletarianization due to insufficient creation of secure well-paid jobs. Furthermore, the participation of the most vulnerable sections of rural India in the labour market may be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the reproduction of the rural labouring household, owing to labour flexibilization and deteriorating work conditions. Lacking their own means of production and combined with the poor state provisioning, rural Indian households are locked into an impoverishing cycle of poor-quality jobs and low wages. The effects of this can only be borne by resorting to domestic economies, which is attracting high participation in the period after liberalization. Domestic economies, in turn, continue to be dependent on land. Of the domestic and allied activities for which NSSO collects data, the highest participation of women is in activities that directly or indirectly depend on either private or common lands.

The Ministry of Rural Development asserts that 'land reforms, including redistributive measures and security of tenure and ownership, prevention of usurious alienation from vulnerable segments of people and ownership of house sites' is essential to rid the country of rural poverty (MRD, 2009, p. 6). It is, therefore, not surprising that despite the agricultural sector's declining share of GDP and employment, popular land

struggles continue to dominate the Indian political landscape. In 2015, hundreds of farmers protested *en masse*, with tragic consequences, against the Indian state's proposed amendments to the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act of 2013. While the working class and the lower middle class bear the burden of supporting the stagnant form of RAL (Marx, 1986, p. 603), it is the yet non-commodified sphere of household subsistence production that shoulders the weight of reproducing the labour pool and the floating and latent forms of the RAL.

Feminist researchers have advocated for gender-sensitive land reforms so that women's right to own and control land would combat patriarchy, feminization of poverty and improve the bargaining and social position of women within and outside the household (Agarwal, 1994, 1997; Kelkar, 2013). It is only recently that there has been some improvement in furthering the rights of women to land in India. The 2005 amendment to the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 enlarges the rights (and liabilities) of married and unmarried daughters in the Hindu family, consonant with those of the male progeny of a coparcener. Notwithstanding contestations by male family members unwilling to part with their claims to the family inheritance, and women themselves willingly giving up their claims to avoid conflict and maintain cordial relations with their natal family, this legal amendment is fraught with larger problems, two of which are relevant to our discussion.

First, a large proportion of rural households in India are effectively landless (Basole & Basu, 2011), and, hence, this legislation does not address their plight. This problem could be mitigated if women form agricultural cooperatives and purchase land and materials as a collective (Agarwal, 2010). However, this still raises the question of how initial capital would be raised, and does not offer a way out of neoliberal, market-led agrarian reforms.

Second, the immiserating conditions suffered by the working classes, and particularly women from these classes, are not driven solely by a contextual patriarchy. Suggesting land reforms and women's right to land as a panacea to poverty reduction and empowerment ignores the realities of social relations of rural production and its articulation with the capitalist sector. Studies of the agrarian economy in India have suggested that class and ethnicity often supersede gender identities, that is, often women from upper class and castes are complicit in the economic exploitation of lower class, landless women (Nithya Rao, 2005; Smriti Rao, 2011). Thus, the amendment to the Hindu Succession Act does not serve to destabilize the agrarian class structure. The high incidence of subsistence production among land-poor households confronts us with

the question of whether imperial capitalism is destroying traditional peasantries (Bernstein, 2004), or whether what we are witnessing is ‘not the disappearance of the peasantry, but rather, its redefinition’ (Johnson, 2004, p. 54). Given capitalism’s tendencies towards ‘involution’ via its spatial concentration and centralization, matched by an expanding sphere of social exclusion, Johnson (2004, p. 63) adds

The peasant form of production as operating according to a driving logic of subsistence and retaining at least some form of control over the means of production is not disappearing. Rather, it persists as rural populations are increasingly marginalized and impoverished by the currents of global capital. The persistence of the peasantry is not a positive process. It stands as a testament of the failures of the development project.

Extending this argument to women’s work, women’s dependence on land for low-productivity and labour-intensive subsistence production to sustain domestic economies, while important to reproduction, is also cause for concern. It indicates the failure of the Indian economy to provide decent livelihoods. Women’s increased participation in domestic economies is a result of contextually and historically determined patriarchy that works in tandem with neoliberal capitalism. Hence, land reforms that rely on individualist ontologies and which are concerned only with tenure security or land distribution may be insufficient for social transformation (Razavi, 2003).

Furthermore, as we have argued in this article, gender inequity—which we address through an interrogation of reproductive labour—remains a contradiction to the peasant path to agrarian transformation. In other words, the prism of subsistence economies and the gendered labour regimes therein, which are highly predicated upon the free, exploitative and self-exploitative labour performed by rural women on a daily basis, present the peasantry as a contradictory social force in the course of India’s agrarian transformation. For even when gender is accounted for (normatively through guarantees of women’s rights to land), this incorporation cannot proceed in isolation from the conditions of the global economy. That is, women might have land which they do not actually cultivate due to, for instance, insufficient support for agriculture and the failures or insufficiency of state provisioning. It may not be possible for women to escape the trap of poverty and immiseration simply because they have access to land. The failure to address the question of reproductive labour (the agrarian question of gendered labour) thus renders land

reforms as incomplete. Ultimately, there is need to address the question of social reproduction.

In this regard, we view the failure of land and agrarian reforms in India as critical to understanding not only capitalism's exploitative tendencies in relation to women's reproductive labour, as argued in this article, but also ironically, as a commentary on the continued relevance of land in the process of household reproduction.

## Conclusion

We have argued that the changing global conditions make it unlikely for land to lift the working classes out of poverty. Yet, land still affords the primary means of reproduction of rural households, a function which is still largely dependent on women's labour. This link—between the role of women's unpaid labour in reproducing rural households and the fact that this work remains largely dependent on land—reasserts gender equity as a contemporary and unresolved question in the midst of India's agrarian transition. The complexities and contradictions staged by neoliberal reforms means that neoliberal capitalist expansion ignores and undermines the reproductive aspects of land and women's labour, even as capitalist accumulation depends on them. The fact that reproduction relies on women's work further implies that household consumption is a function of a gender subsidy to capital. This subsidy traps women in their role in the reproductive household economy.

Ultimately our analysis makes visible two sets of issues that ought to be the focus of political demands: first, that land reform should address the gender inequities underlying women's invisible work, which entails making demands for structural changes that recognize the household sphere of reproduction through which gender becomes articulated to capitalist production; and second, that state intervention in both wages and households should be instituted at levels sufficient for reproduction, which otherwise continues to constitute a significant sphere of exploitation of women under capitalism.

## Notes

1. We thank participants of the 2016 African Institute for Agrarian Studies (AIAS)/Agrarian South Summer School and two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. The usual disclaimer applies.
2. We follow Gough's (2004) analytical distinction regarding state welfare provision between 'welfare regimes' and 'welfare state' regimes, to differentiate

- between the role and scale of state welfare provision in countries of the Global North and South.
3. The NREGS is a public works programme that guarantees 100 days of employment a year as a right to at least one member of any rural household who is willing to perform unskilled labour at the statutory minimum wage for the programme. Provisions in the Act mandate that at least one-third of the workers should be women.
  4. It should be noted, however, that remuneration is less than desirable in these kinds of work and women tend to extend themselves physically and mentally, especially when self-employed or working in family enterprises. In the rural areas, both categories of work are primarily agricultural.
  5. See also Nathan and Kelkar (1999) for an analysis of the role of domestic economies after the Asian crisis.
  6. These figures are most likely lower bound estimates due to the limitations of assigning market-based exchange value to the use value of goods and services that do not pass through the market.

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