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**Crisis in the Countryside:
Farmer Suicides and The Political Econ**

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Abstract

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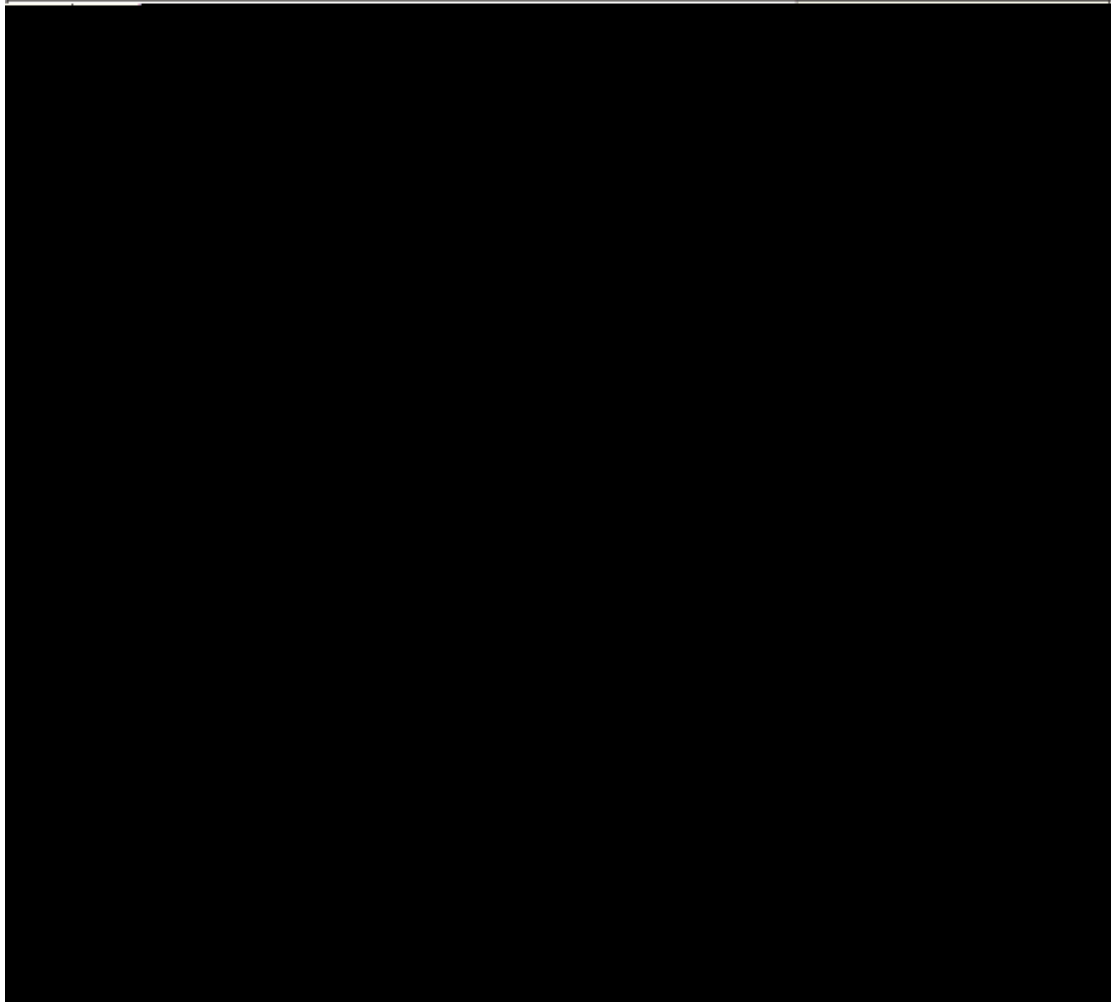
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Maps

1. India Political:

2. State of Andhra Pradesh



Abbreviations

AC.....Advanced Country

AP.....Andhra Pradesh

APC.....Agricultural Prices Commission

APSADC.....Andhra Pradesh State Agriculture Development Corporation

APSSDC.....Andhra Pradesh State Seeds Development Corporation

BC.....Backward Caste

1. Introduction: Crisis in the countryside

“Something is terribly wrong in the countryside.”

M.S.Swaminathan, Former Chairman, National Commission of Farmers, 2006

output prices. 'Rural power' grew so strong that no political party could afford to ignore their demands. The basic economic postulate

and subsumed under, rising ethnic and communal politics since the 90s. Seen in this way, then, it would seem that ‘rural India’ is neither infinite in its power, nor undifferentiated in its interests. The apparent *paradox* in the rise and fall of *rural* power may, after all, have been too sharply emphasised.

All of which is not to deny that there has been a definite marginalization of the agrarian interest in national policy since the 90s. In my analysis of the state of agriculture in India today, I will establish that the reforms of the 90s and the shift in economic priorities of the Indian government led directly to stagnation in agriculture and hardships for farmers. This shift is related to the changing global political economy of development which is increasingly curtailing the policy space available for national governments to pursue policies in the interest of their own citizens. However, to the extent that the policy priorities *are* a choice for the government, I will identify some of the changes in the political landscape of the country which made this shift politically feasible when precisely such a shift seemed ‘impossible’ to contemplate only a decade before. Post *Mandal* and *Mandir*, there has been an increasing use of ethnicity and religion as the currency of electoral mobilization in India. In making available ‘new’ socio-political categories of vote-banks this may have released the political parties from the electoral obligation of appealing to ‘the farmer’ and ‘the village’. In addition to this, the relative quiescence in the Farmers’ Movements today, I will argue, has to be seen in the context of the flux in contemporary rural society’s social and economic structures whereby the identities of the ‘villager’ and the ‘farmer’ and how they relate to ‘the village’ and ‘farming’ are themselves changing rapidly (Gupta 2005).

A note on data: My analysis concerns the political economy of agricultural policy at national level. There has historically been a gap in how this policy translates into implementation at state levels.

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state's economic development policies. The choice is due in addition to a personal interest which comes from growing up in the state and being constantly aware of this contradiction. However, this does not compromise the applicability of the analysis to other states as available studies from all other affected states confirm similar aspects to the agrarian crisis throughout.

The dissertation is organized as follows. In the form of an analytical narrative, Chapter 2 traces the rise and consolidation of the power of the rural lobby and the political economy of India's pro-rural policy by the end of the 80s. Chapter 3 provides macro and micro analyses of the state of agriculture in India, and in particular how the stagnation in agriculture is translating into a constellation of risks and problems for the farmers and leading to their suicides. The crisis brings forth the paradox of 'rural power'. Chapter 4 offers a resolution of this apparent paradox, by identifying the limitations of rural power and the changes occurring in the political landscape of the country in general and rural society in particular which influence the fortunes of the

2: The Impossibility of the Crisis?

The Political Economy of India's Pro-Rural Policy

1947 – 1990

2.1 The Agrarian Question:

The political economy of 'town-country' struggles

It is an established fact in development economics that the process of development involves a structural transformation of the economy

consolidation of farmers' political power, the 'ruralization' of Indian politics. This chapter traces this rise of 'rural power' and the political economy of what came to be a clearly pro-rural policy by the end of the 80s.

2.2 The Nehru-Mahalanobis Years (1947 – 1964):

India's agricultural situation at Independence was bleak. During the four decades preceding 1947, food grain output grew by a mere 12%, while the population grew by over 40%, resulting in a decline in per capita food availability. Irrigation was dire, covering only 15% of the cultivated land, the rest being at the mercy of the monsoons. The 1942 Bengal famine in which a million people died was still fresh in the memory. The task of transforming agriculture was daunting and urgent (Varshney 1995).

That production had to go up was clear, but the way in which to incentivize the peasant² to do this was intensely debated. On the one hand was the technocratic approach: increasing the output (food) prices, investing in new agricultural technologies and encouraging the peasant to adopt them by giving subsidies on inputs. But, the Planning model with its industry-bias was committed to keeping food prices low because they impacted the wage and inflation levels in the economy, and these had to be kept low in order to facilitate industrialization. The existing microeconomic theories on peasant behaviour (Mellor 1966) supported the choice of keeping food prices low: the peasant was viewed as price-unresponsive, with a backward-bending supply curve – in response to higher prices, being tradition-bound and not profit-maximizing; he would cut production instead of increasing it, going only for a level of income that satisfied consumption. Therefore, a 'cheaper' institutional approach was taken to increase productivity. This approach had three constitutive elements: *land reforms* to provide incentives to the actual tiller to produce more; *farm and service co-operatives* to bring in economies of scale and better access to inputs; *local self-government* with principles of universal suffrage and majority voting to enable the poor to ensure that the reforms and co-operatives were not captured by the landed oligarchy in complicity with local bureaucracy (Varshney 1995).

² I use the terms "peasants", "farmers" and "rural sector" interchangeably in this dissertation.

The deeply entrenched structural problems in Indian agriculture did justify this approach. Penetratingly summarised by Daniel Thorner as a built-in 'depressor', the agrarian structure at the time of independence with its profound inequalities in landownership and exploitative production relations that made it possible for the landlords to extract huge rents, usurious interest and speculative trading profits from the mass of peasantry and limited the possibilities of investment to raise productivity.

complemented at the time by advances in agricultural technology and the discovery of High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds, the ‘miracle seeds’ of Norman Borlaug (Varshney 1995.).

All of these changes translated into a very different form of state intervention in agriculture. Price incentives had to be complemented with price stability, and producer incentives were to be reconciled with consumer welfare (food prices having far-reaching economic and political implications). This necessitated the establishment of two new institutions: the Agricultural Prices Commission (APC), which made price recommendations which were reasonable to producers, and the Food Corporation of India (FCI), which bought and sold grains at that recommended price. Technology policy led to strengthening of agricultural research institutes, foreign collaboration, and introduction of specialist agricultural extension officers (*ibid.*).

The most important change, however, was the hugely increased fiscal demands brought about by this policy shift. The HYV package necessitated more expensive seeds, greater amounts of controlled water (irrigation) and chemical fertilizers. In order to incentivize farmers to adopt the new technology the government *had* to invest in irrigation, provide huge subsidies on inputs, and spend scarce foreign exchange in importing chemical fertilizers which were imperative to the success of the new strategy. All of this in the absence of sufficient revenues to support the new fiscal demands (taxing agriculture was politically infeasible) meant deficit financing, and threats of inflation. Predictably, this led to severe inter-bureaucratic struggles between the Finance Ministry (and Planning Commission) and Food and Agriculture Ministry, in which the latter prevailed (*ibid.*).

The success of the ‘New Agricultural Strategy’ was soon evident. From 74.2 million tons in 1966-67, food grain production shot up to 108.4 million tons by 1970-71. The area under HYV seeds went up from 1.9 million hectares in 1966-67 to 15.4 million hectares by 1970-71. The new technology had caught the fancy of farmers in the irrigated belt. A ‘Green Revolution’ was underway (*ibid.*).

2.4 Political legacy of Green Revolution:

The rise of the rich peasant

By the mid-60s, the rich peasantry had grown further in political power at state levels, having captured most of the benefits of the institutional strategy. Furthermore, the new strategy, with its explicit 'betting on the strong' approach, steered the newer agricultural technologies towards those parts of the country in which the rich peasants were powerful (Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh), and towards them in particular. This started a process of locking them into a positive spiral of further increasing wealth (Corbridge & Harriss 2000).

resource allocation. The mobilizing ideology was populist, captured by the compelling imagery of a *Bharat* – India divide relentlessly propagated by its leaders, notably Sharad Joshi (who coined the slogan) of *Shetkari Sanghatana* in Maharashtra, and Mahinder Singh Tikait of *Bharatiya Kisan Union* (BKU) in Punjab and Western Uttar Pradesh. With this *sectoral* appeal, they could transcend the class and other cleavages that would otherwise work against such large-scale collective action, including among its supporters small and marginal farmers whose gains from the demands were questionable (*ibid.*).

Although the organizations leading these mobilizations were on the whole non-party and refrained from contesting elections, these mobilizations were so powerful that they rocked the politics of many states in the 80s like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. All political parties felt compelled to reformulate their programmes in support of these de

has led to a sharp decline in the average size of the holding, leading to increasing number of small and marginal farmers³.

Table 3.2
Certain Key Characteristics of Operational Holdings

	1960-61	1970-71	1981-82	1991-92	2003
[The table body is severely corrupted and contains illegible data]					

Accordingly, the proportion of marginal landholders has increased from 39.1% in

Declining growth rates: Growth rates of agriculture have been on the decline, most visibly in the post-reform period. The growth rate by gross product (GDP from agriculture) fell from 3.08% during 1980-81 to 1990-91, to 2.57% during 1992-93 to 2005-06 (Table 3.4). This included a dip to 1.3% in 1999-2000 and even a negative growth of -2% in 2000-2001 (Majumdar 2002)

Table 3.4
Growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Sectoral GDP and Per Capita Income

(1999-2000 prices)

Year	Agriculture	Industry	Services	GDP at	Per capita
1980-81	3.08				
1981-82					
1982-83					
1983-84					
1984-85					
1985-86					
1986-87					
1987-88					
1988-89					
1989-90					
1990-91					
1991-92					
1992-93	2.57				
1993-94					
1994-95					
1995-96					
1996-97					
1997-98					
1998-99					
1999-2000	1.3				
2000-2001	-2				
2001-02					
2002-03					
2003-04					
2004-05					
2005-06	2.57				

The growth rate by yield of all crops taken together fell from 3.19% during 1980-81 to 1990-91, to 1.58% during 1990-91 to 2003-04 (Table 3.5)

Table 3.5
Growth of Area, Production and Yield of Major Crops in India, 1980-81 to 2003-04

State-wise disaggregation of the data shows that this deceleration has occurred in

income ToT became favourable to agriculture from 1984-85 until 1996-97, but thereafter they more or less stagnated (Figure 3.1).

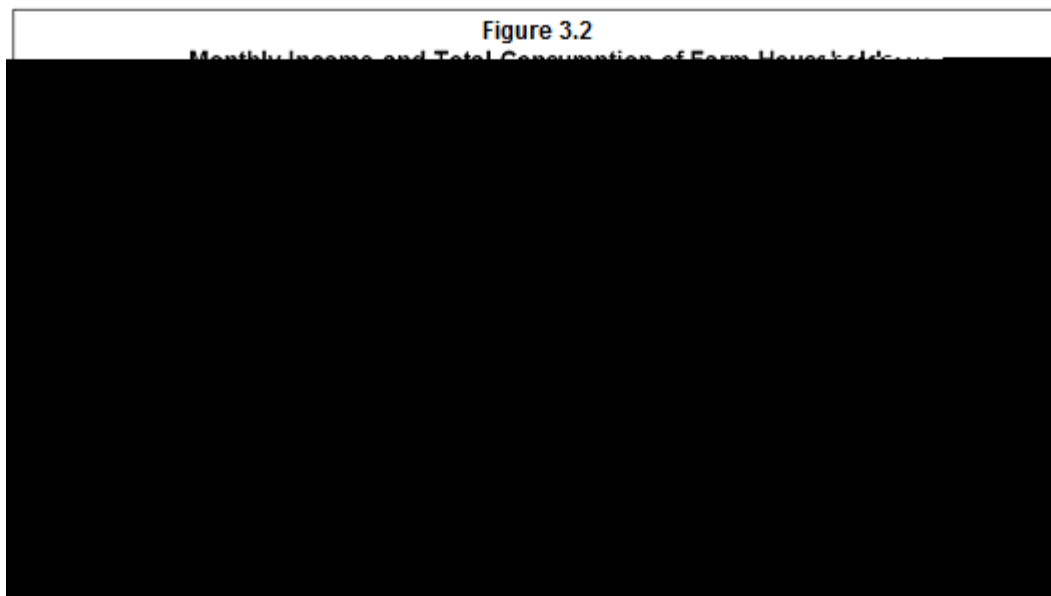


Likewise, the Input-Output Price Parity (computed by comparing the index of prices paid for agricultural inputs with the index of prices received for the outputs), which was unfavourable to agriculture during the 80s and then turned favourable in the early 90s, has since 1994-95 remained lower than one hundred, indicating declining profitability of agriculture (GoI 2008).

Erosion of real incomes of farmers:

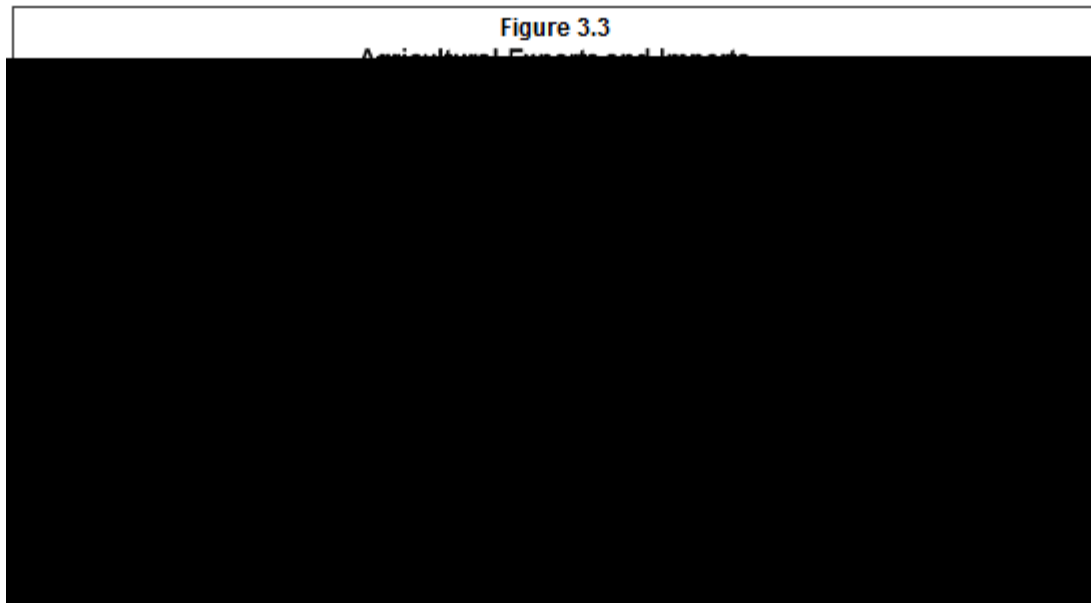
When the prices received by the farmers for their crops are compared with the prices they pay for consumer goods (i.e., Consumer Price Index for Agricultural Labour –

Table 3.7		
Monthly Per Capita Income and Consumption by Size-Class of Holdings, 2003		
Size-class (hectares)	Income (Rs)	Consumption (Rs)
[Redacted content]		



Slowdown of exports:

As expected, post-liberalization, exports in tradeable agricultural commodities did register an increase up to 1996-97, but they flattened out after 1997 following the East Asian Crisis and the consequent large deceleration in growth of international trade in agriculture (Figure 3.3). Simultaneously, international prices started falling for most commodities, making Indian exports uncompetitive. Cheap imports, as I will elaborate below, have been on the rise with the removal of quantitative restrictions on agriculture by 2000.



Declining Gross Capital Formation and Rural Development Expenditure:

Capital formation is important for the growth of any sector. In agriculture this takes the form of irrigation, rural infrastructure etc. The share of agricultural Gross Capital Formation (GCF) in total GCF fell from *16.1%* in 1980-81 to *7.6%* in 2004-2005. This was due to a decline in the share of public sector GCF from *43.2%* in 1980-81 to *19.2%* where private investment failed to compensate (Table 3.8). Simultaneously, there was a big fall in the rural share of total development expenditure from *11.7%* of GDP in 1991-92 to *5.9%* in 2000-01. This translates into less state support and hence increased expenditure by rural families on things like health and education.

Declining irrigation: Ironically, with a shift in cropping patterns towards more water intensive cash crops, the aggregate net irrigated area remained stagnant (GoI 2007) In AP it actually declined from 43.5 lakh hectares in 1990-91 to 37.1 lakh hectares in 2004-05 (GoAP 207). Successive state governments have grossly neglected investment in surface irrigation infrastructure. Consequently there has been an increase in private investment in exploiting ground-water sources (mainly bore wells), which have been growing relative to canal and tank irrigation. This has led to overexploitation of ground-water and a falling water table, forcing farmers to deepen their wells every few years. In addition to the hig

HYV seeds through aggressive marketing techniques, and opportunistically advised to use more fertilizers and pesticides promising unrealistically high yields. This non-judicious fertilizer use is causing serious long term soil damage (Christian Aid 2005).

Vicissitudes of output: The output side is not without risks either. To the conventional *yield shocks* associated with deluge or dearth of water, have been added

percentage of the cotton produced is publicly procured. In addition, the minimum support price (MSP) for many commodities is less than the market price (Table 3.10 for AP). Since market prices revolve around the MSP

of the farmers. Even mandates of special lending to SCs, STs and very small farmers were revoked to pursue commercial viability and aggressive loan recovery. Tenant cultivators with insufficient titles are altogether denied access to formal credit (Christian Aid 2005).

With this drying up of formal credit, the farmers are left with no choice than to depend on 'informal' sources for credit. An NSSO survey in 2004 revealed that 68.6% of the total loans taken by farmers in AP are from the informal credit market. This credit typically comes at usurious interest rates (anything between 36% and 100% compound), and worse, from the same entrepreneur who is selling the farmer the seeds and fertilizers. This stranglehold of the trader-moneylender has become the root of much exploitation and misery. Credit from these agents is almost never in cash form. It is inputs (his own brand of seeds, fertilizers) issued against the future output whose price, invariably low and exploitative, is fixed by the agent himself. (*ibid.*; Suri

marginalization of the rural sector in the national policy agenda which prioritises rapid economic growth is leaving rural producers with a feeling of socio-economic estrangement from the community, and that the suicides were an effect of individualization of this estrangement (Mohanty 2005: 243).

Taking stock:

4. Explaining the Crisis:

The Changing Political Economy (1990s and after)

In the last chapter I argued that the present crisis in agriculture and the relative marginalization of agrarian interests in the national policy agenda can be mapped on to the economic reforms in India since the 90s. But

4.1 Deconstructing the rise of *rural power*:

4.1.1 Limitations of rural power:

Economic constraints and social cleavages

election based purely on a 'sectional' strategy like the 'urban-rural' divide, or 'farm

Taking stock:

move their finance in and out of countries in search of the highest profit. Accordingly, there has been a systematic push for opening up of capital accounts, and for deflationary economic policies around the world. Deflationary policies mean higher interest rates and cuts in public expenditure and subsidies. As I discussed earlier, apart from these cuts directly increasing the *cost* of cultivation, deflation with its multiplier effects leads to a slowing down of aggregate demand, which puts a downward pressure on the world food prices, and with the surge in cheap imports following increasing opening up of agriculture there is a decline in *returns* from cultivation as well.

However, policies like tightening of public expenditure, opening up of agriculture and

Not only was this true, but, ironically, there is evidence that the Farmers' Movements may themselves have assisted in the subsumption of the political force of their cause under growing ethnic and communal discourse of politics. Zoya Hasan (1995) in her study of BKU in western UP finds that although the movement was dominated by economic interests of surplus-producing farmers, the principal mobilizing ideology was along caste and religious lines. It was dominated by 'upper' caste *Jats* who used Hindu communal ideology to draw the 'backward' caste farmers' support. However, the caste tensions were brought out sharply when it backed the anti-*Mandal* agitations in UP because the *Jats* stood to lose from it, and this alienated the 'backward' caste farmers. In addition, BKU's active promotion of communal tensions in UP in the 90s were directly responsible for its decline under the sway of *Hindutva* politics in western UP.

4.2.3 From unchanging idylls to 'vanishing villages':

Explaining the further weakening of farmers' movements today

In addition to these larger social and political forces, the relative quiescence in farmers' movements today and their lack of fervour in protesting against their marginalization has to be understood in the context of gradual but distinct changes which have been taking place within the agrarian communities themselves.

The Green Revolution and its technologies not only led to a surge in productivity, but the commercialization of agriculture that went with it had an i5(e)3.74(,)-0.147593()(m)-2.45995(m)

within the village, as Lindberg (2005: 11) points out from his studies in Punjab, many agricultural households are becoming increasingly 'pluri-active' i.e., economically diversified. Agriculture is no more an 'all-encompassing way of life and identity'. The data on employment patterns in Punjab reflects this trend clearly. The proportion of cultivators in the total number of workers declined from 46.5% in 1971 to 22.6% by 2001 (Jodhka 2006 citing GoP 2004).

Similar observations are made by Dipankar Gupta (2005). Citing the 57th round of NSS (2000-2002), notwithstanding the lack of *enough*

changes in the contemporary rural society where the identities of 'villagers' and 'farmers' and how they relate to 'the village' and 'farming' are themselves changing.

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