



# Sikh Research Journal

**Vol. 7 No. 1**

This article is from \*Sikh Research Journal\*, the online peer-reviewed journal of Sikh and Punjabi Studies

Sikh Research Journal \*Vol. 7 No. 1 Published: Spring 2022.

<http://sikhresearchjournal.org>

<http://sikhfoundation.org>

**Who are farmers in India after all?**  
**A conceptual exercise and a policy question**

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**Abstract**

Definitional exercises are by nature political and nowhere does this come across more clearly than in attempts to define farmers in India. Any such effort is bound to be contentious but nonetheless necessary for understanding the nature of Indian state and its policies. This article is one attempt at understanding ‘farmers’ as informed by current debates on the topic and our combined field experiences. We identify three groups of farmers, each of whom control and contribute three different factors of production. This heterogeneity among farmers is crucial to understand the farm laws and which of these groups is best served by such a policy direction and more importantly, which group is not.

**Introduction: The conceptual issue**

Over the decades, the literature<sup>1</sup> on how farmers in India have been defined and should be defined has been growing. Such variety in the definition of farmers have in fact come from economists,<sup>2</sup> sociologists, political scientists, journalists or even

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<sup>1</sup> Bernstein (2010) used the term farmer and defines it as those who own land and other means to farm. Eric Wolf (1969) and James Scott (1985) refers to the term peasants. T. J. Byres (1981) used the term capitalist farmers. In the context of India, Utsa Patnaik (1976) used peasants and categorises them through a complex relation between capital and labour. Daniel Thorner uses the term kisan which literally may mean farmer, but it included those cultivators who 'live primarily by their own toil on their own land'. Harriss-White (2008) raises a definitional question about the term “farmer” and employs the term agro-commercial capital.

<sup>2</sup> The definition of a 'agricultural household' defined by the National Sample Survey (NSS) Situation Assessment Survey of agricultural Households (SAAH) in 2013 and 2019 is the following "Agricultural households are defined as an ‘agricultural production unit’ which produced field crops, horticultural crops, livestock and the products of any of the other specified agricultural activities, with or without possessing and operating any land and receiving value of agricultural

Bollywood for that matter.<sup>3</sup> Regardless, all such exercises in attempting to define the farmer have and will always continue to be contested. Since the farmers' protests that began in 2020 and ended in 2021, this question of defining farmers has come into sharp focus. An article written by Harish Damodaran and Samridhi Agarwal (2021) featured in the *Indian Express* is part of that larger spotlight on the topic. A month later, another article was published in the same newspaper as a reaction to this one. It was authored by Ishan Anand, Arindam Banerjee and Anirban Dasgupta (2021). The former argued that agricultural policy should focus on those who earn at least half of their income from agriculture and call them the 'serious farmers'. For the remaining 70 percent of rural households, the authors proposed a different set of policies. The latter disagreed with the point, drawing attention to the heterogeneity of Indian agriculture, and argued that both caste and class should be considered in defining a farmer.

All whose income are considered agricultural income and thus exempted from taxation by the Indian government can be technically considered a farmer<sup>4</sup>. This definition is put forth in government categorizations. As social scientists, we define the social category 'farmer' based on both theoretical engagement and empirical observation. In this essay, we build on the debate spotlighted in the two articles aforementioned. Next, we juxtapose this with findings from our own fieldwork on this topic.<sup>5</sup> All combined, we reflect on the question of who is a farmer? Broadly, analysis of all the data leads us to identify three groups of farmers. Each one of these three groups control and contribute three different factors of production. One controls land, another contributes labor and yet another controls capital. Who is the farmer? It is an important question in this backdrop of identification as farmers that is emergent from the ground. Thus, how one defines farmers is a significant question that is conceptually relevant for the scholarship generated on the topic. This question of definition is additionally crucial for the purpose of designing policies that are impactful for "farmers." It is to that aim of academic pursuit as

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produce from agricultural activities more than Rs 3,000 and Rs. 4,000 in 2013 and 2019 respectively". It is widely used by economists, agricultural scientists, policy makers, development professionals.

<sup>3</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization uses the terminology family farms rather than farmer, Lowder et al, 2021

<sup>4</sup> Under Section 10(1) of the Income Tax Act, 1961, any income generated from any agricultural activities are exempted from being taxed by the Government.

<sup>5</sup> Fieldwork has been conducted in four regions, National Capital Region, Karnataka, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh in 2018 and 2019. We will be resuming fieldwork in 2022.

well as policy goals we reflect on the meaning attributed to “farmers: and use our research to address some of the key concerns involving the agrarian question.

### **Defining the farmer**

Ownership of land by households is an important way in which farmers have been defined, as recently seen with the policy of PM-Kisan<sup>6</sup>. According to Damodaran and Agarwal, ownership of land is not sufficient qualification to be a farmer. Rather, it is only those with a landholding of at least 1 hectare where more than half of the total income is derived from farming (crop production and animal husbandry) qualify as “serious” or “regular” farmers. Using data from Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households (SAAH) report for the year 2018-19 to which this definition of “serious” or “regular” farmers was applied, Damodaran and Agarwal arrived at an approximate figure of 40 million “regular” farmers in India. Based on this definition, they argued how certain agricultural policies may not cater to those farming households who own less than 1 hectare. Firstly, they proposed that farm policy should focus on the serious farmer group rather than the numerically bigger group of farmers who are “non-serious” or part-time farmers. Presumably, this will make public policy more logical and efficient. Secondly, since the part-time farm households constitute seventy percent of rural dwellers and would not benefit from policies addressing farm income, a viable solution for them lies in thinking of employment opportunities beyond the farm but related to agriculture. Consequently, policies that aim to increase income in allied activities like packaging, processing, transporting, warehousing and so on would be more effective in benefiting all. For the part-time farmers that essentially involves value adding tasks related to farming that can potentially provide more employment and better income. However, the point to note here is that 70 percent of households own land and are actual cultivators, even if the income from self-cultivation does not account for 50 percent of their annual income. They play the critical functions of tilling, weeding and harvesting their land and other’s land either as a tenant or as a wage labor. Whereas the 30 percent of farmers who are defined as serious farmers do not necessarily cultivate their land. Still as per Damodaran and

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<sup>6</sup> Any policy that defines kisan as anyone who owns land, ends up excluding tenant cultivators, agricultural labourers, women cultivators or other marginal groups who are the main cultivators but, in several cases, do not have title deeds, or may not own land. The landless in India are numerically as big a group. According to the Census (2011) out of the total 263 million persons (26.3 crore) households are involved in farming activities, 119 million persons are land-owning farmers. The rest, 144 million are landless workers and peasants (Dogra 2020).

Agarwal's conceptualization, the latter group is regarded as "serious" farmers. Whereas those farmers who cultivate their land despite the rising cost of cultivation, poor access to credit and subsidized inputs and poor returns on crops are not recognized as serious farmers. We disagree with this understanding of farmers, that centers the debate around land ownership and disregards cultivation as a central characteristic.

Yet another category of people who have been regarded as farmers are those who contribute labor to agriculture, despite owning and cultivating their small or marginal land holdings<sup>7</sup>. Bernstein's concept of classes of labor refer to those unable to reproduce themselves as capital and who struggle to secure their reproduction on a day-to-day basis. Hence, these classes variously combine insecure and exploitative forms of labor commodification, self-employment activities with small-scale farming to ensure daily survival, according to Bernstein (2010). A disproportionate number of Dalits, tribals and women fall in this category (Mehrotra 2022). To understand the majority of India's farm households, let us engage with Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta who demonstrate that land is not the only critical factor in defining a farmer. In fact, it is by bringing in aspects of labor and non-class variables, like caste and gender, can we understand the diverse reality around Indian farmers. Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta strongly disagree with Damodaran and Agarwal's perspective.

First, Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta develop this point by using evidence from Jharkhand where farmers pursue livelihood diversification that does not undermine the importance of landholding and farming in their lives. Rather, livelihood diversification includes a combination of self-cultivation with working in brick kilns, others' farms, or even migration to towns for seasonal work. Income from such pursuits are used to mitigate low income from agriculture. At the same time, food and nutrition security of these cultivating households is dependent on their marginal and small landholdings because buying food from markets is highly costly and are often inaccessible. Hence, we argue that policies must treat such people as farmers as well. Otherwise, it will adversely impact food security of the nation at large. Secondly, and most crucially, the marginal farmers contribute between 19 percent to 30 percent of the total surplus marketed food grains (Banerjee, Dasgupta and Anand) which is the backbone of food security and food sovereignty of India<sup>8</sup>. Thirdly, Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta note that Damodaran and Agarwal's

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<sup>7</sup> Utsa Patnaik (1976) categorized them as poor peasant.

<sup>8</sup> A similar finding has been made at a global scale, where the small farms (less than 2 hectares) are reported to produce 35 percent of food for the world (Lowder et al. 2021).

conclusions are derived from one specific year's report. Therefore, at best they present a snapshot which does not consider the wider regional variations regarding the history of development and diversification of livelihoods (for more details see Lerche 2014). They refer to the state of Kerala where small-scale spice cultivators and rubber growers draw a viable income from agriculture and should be considered "serious" farmers despite their holding size. Once again, land holding emerges not as the defining feature in defining the farmer.

Fourthly, we find Damodaran and Agarwal's piece problematic because it constructs farmers as a homogenous category based on landholding size, with no acknowledgement of class differentiation. The ground reality is that farmers are differentiated along the axis of caste, class and even gender. It is a point supported with empirical data from Mehrotra's (2021) work on Uttar Pradesh and Das Gupta's (2019) empirical analysis of the agrarian structures and policy in Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, and Karnataka. Such a way to define farmers would lead to further disadvantaging historically discriminated castes if public policy were to exclude them from subsidies and price support in the name of focusing only on "serious" farmers. In fact, this might just be another way to further pushing them out of agriculture which would lead to their rapid proletarianisation. Such proletarianisation is indeed underway in India. Between the census of 2001 and 2011, India has seen a huge increase in landless farm workers, adding a 37 million more to the rural worker pool (Dogra 2020, Census 2011). This is another illustration of how development policies in India have failed to provide rural workers with employment opportunities outside of agriculture. Hence, we are skeptical of an understanding of the farmer that ties it to land size exclusively and thereby proposing a policy regime that envisions the classes of labor that depend on agro-industries for productive jobs. Instead, we emphasize that the classes of labor provide something invaluable to agriculture and, in turn, agriculture provides a social safety net for a sizable population – a fact borne out by the phenomenon of reverse migration during the Covid pandemic (Sengupta and Jha 2020). We agree with Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta to conclude that surely policies need to be rethought to meet the demands and requirements of farmers. But excluding the majority of farmers from farm policies by a conceptual exercise of redefinition just because they primarily contribute labor is certainly not the way forward.

### **Understanding Farmers**

In the context of the afore discussed discourse on agriculture and farmers, we try to grapple with the following question - how do we understand farmers? Over the years, our individual and joint research findings on defining farmers have become more aligned with the perspective put forth by Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta. For example, Mehrotra's extensive research focusing on one end of the spectrum indicates the diversity that is found amongst small farmers in India who can be categorized as petty capitalists, petty producers or classes of labor. At the other end of the spectrum, Dasgupta's research showcases the dominant proprietary classes, the petty bourgeoisie, rural proprietary classes and its factions—capitalist farmers, big farmers, landlords and an emerging class of agrarian capital (Das Gupta 2019). More recent research undertaken by Mehrotra and Das Gupta discusses a completely different category of farmers. They are the “nouveau riche rural capitalists” who claim to be farmers based on the capital they invest in agriculture. This class accumulates but does not necessarily own land. This finding shows that it is no longer necessary to own land to be considered a farmer, neither is it necessary to cultivate it. In fact, there might be a reverse flow of capital – from industry/ services to agriculture. We noted presence of women among the owners of farmhouses and nurseries. In many cases, even the livelihood of these farmers does not depend on agriculture. In several other cases, the farmer is entirely absent from the site of production. To reiterate then, the category of farmer is in actuality extremely heterogenous. Therefore, any attempt to identify agrarian classes must consider regional specificities, development history and how class identities interact with identities, such as caste and gender.

### **Three Empirical Observations**

We make three key observations about agrarian transformation based on fieldwork since 2018:

Firstly, in terms of development, India was divided between Bharat and India, former rural and lagging in development, the latter urban and developed. This divide resulted from policies which favored the urban, put resources towards industrialization, and treated agriculture as a bargain sector, following the Western model of development. But recent agrarian transformations, with new entrants into the agrarian scene have closed the gap between the rural and urban, creating a space for the “rurban,” a category coined by Dipankar Gupta (2015). Farmhouses, organic crops and high value crops characterize this “rurban” life.

Secondly, capitalist farmers, unlike the *nouveau riche* rural capitalists, who emerged from the Green Revolution were primarily rural, whose starting point was land ownership from which surplus was generated and subsequently, invested in technologically advancing production. The investment made agriculture much more profitable for them. Interestingly, and quite contrary to classical political economic analysis, the *nouveau riche* class have generally transferred surplus from non-agrarian to agrarian sectors. They are mainly high value crops and organic crops (for more details, see Das Gupta and Mehrotra 2021). It is a rather intriguing social phenomenon.

Thirdly, neoliberalism has created multiple opportunities of which investment in farms has proved to be a particularly lucrative one. Converting premium land located near major highways, metropolitan areas and ports of the country through methods such as lease and 'operations contract'. They are in high demand, such as land along the Surat-Mumbai highway that has been converted into farms, orchards, nurseries, with or without a residential farmhouse. This attractive opportunity is being optimized by capital investments from India as well as abroad. Amongst them, women are at the forefront as observed in Chhattisgarh, National Capital Region and, in fewer instances, in Gujarat.

It is important to pay close attention to these observations from our fieldwork in defining the farmer because definitional exercises and policy designs are intricately linked. This link, we believe, is obvious. The recent policy debate around the farm laws and the subsequent farmer protests of 2020 demands our attention to reflect on the question of which of these three kinds of farmers do the laws propose to serve? Why did such a large section of farmers in India's most agriculturally developed region rise up in a long-drawn protest against these laws? We will reflect on these questions from the perspective of the heterogeneous understanding of farmer and highlight the importance of such an understanding by demonstrating how the current policy regime is excluding most and catering to the interest of a few, who contribute capital in agrarian production.

### **The audience for agricultural policy – who are they?**

We agree with several scholars, including Anand, Banerjee and Dasgupta, that farmers are not a homogeneous category. Farmers are differentiated based on their access to the means of production. Non-economic variables, such as gender and caste, also impact class positions of farmers. There are wide differences between farmers with regards to land size, tenures, labor contracts, wages of workers hired,



inputs used, capital invested, mechanization of agricultural operations and access to the market. Farming systems in the diverse agro-ecology of India are varied too. Given the diversity of farmers and farming, it is reasonable to assert that “one-size” agricultural policies will not meet the needs of all types of farmers and farming systems.

However, in recent years, Indian agricultural policymaking seems to be disconnected from the diverse reality of rural India. In pursuit of a modern market-led agricultural sector populated by dynamic capitalist farmers and corporates, policymakers hurriedly introduced the 2020 three farm laws amid the pandemic. The legislation sought to liberalize agricultural markets and to further encourage trade of agricultural commodities outside the control of Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees (APMC). It would allow farmers to directly sell their produce to private and corporate sector without the intervention and regulation of APMCs. It is worth noting that contract farming rules and regulations legislated by the various state governments in India till date are framed within the APMC Acts of the respective states. It, thus, makes the marketing committees also overseers of contracts between individual farmers and the procuring companies. The legislation also sought to remove some important agricultural food grains, oilseeds and potato from the list of essential commodities. The liberalization of agricultural markets, according to the Indian government, would benefit farmers by giving them higher prices as well as encourage crop diversification with simultaneous expansion of markets.

For us this discussion raises the following essential question: who are “farmers” in the eyes of the government and for whose benefit are these laws enacted? We think that it is the nouveau riche capitalists, capitalist farmers and private and corporate agribusinesses who are the primary beneficiaries of the policies that incentivize privatization, marketization and commercialization. These policies would have disproportionately advantaged the classes that control capital and land, while pushing those who contribute labor to the margins. Crop diversification is linked to marketization. Moving from food crops to commercial crops and then to high-value crops is crucial to accrue more profit from agricultural production. Such a shift permits capture of metropolitan markets within India and foreign markets where demand for high-value crops is concentrated. Of course, crop diversification has been on the policy table for the past two decades, but it only existed at the level of specific states ruled by the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) (Das Gupta 2019). These classes of farmers have also benefitted from subsidies for warehouses, solar energy, greenhouses, private irrigation, access to credit and so on. The proposed crop

diversification in 2020 laws is taking the same to a national level. On the other hand, seventy percent of farming households who own less than one hectare and are in fact serious contributors to agricultural production do not figure in the new vision of Indian agriculture painted by the policymakers. The survival of these small and marginal farmers hinges upon intermittent and seasonal employment outside of self-cultivation, to cope with high costs of cultivation, low prices of crops, interlocking of factors and credit markets. Interlocking of factors ties them to traders and moneylenders in pre-harvest contracts to sell crops at low rates. Thus, they are precluded from taking advantage of high crop prices offered by an open market. In the absence of interlocking, they are still unable to attract high prices for their produce either due to the small marketable surplus or their inability to bear the high transportation and storage costs. As a result, they end up selling their crops to commission agents within the village immediately following harvest. They face several challenges – lack of land and capital, access to and adaptation of technology – which is in no way resource neutral (Byres 1981). Most modern technology are intensive in capital and energy, and hence expensive which makes it hard for the small farmers to adopt them. On the margins, women, tribals and Dalits struggle to make ends meet. Even with periodic cash transfers from the government through schemes, such as PMKISAN, can small farmers survive in a market-led system on the proceeds from land alone? The answer is a resounding “no.” Their capacities are diverse and so are the challenges they face as well as their needs. Presumably for this reason, the government and perhaps even a section of academia is of the view that small and marginal farmers are only a hindrance to the efficiency and growth of Indian agriculture. They expect them to exit agriculture sooner or later.

Hence, the question we pose is two-fold – firstly, what will become of Indian agriculture and diverse food grains and crops without small farmers? They produce thirty percent of all the food. Additionally, they are the most skilled when it comes to tilling the soil. Yet, they have no rightful claim to be a farmer, nor are their needs and interests considered central for agricultural policy making. Secondly, if indeed the state wants the small “inefficient” farms to disappear, what is the exit option for small farmers that policymakers have in mind? We have seen that the slow pace of structural transformation in India has indeed shown the failure of the state and the market to create adequate skill-appropriate employment opportunities within the non-agricultural sector for the rural poor (Bakshi and Modak 2017, Bakshi forthcoming). It is, therefore, crucial for policymakers to develop a clear path for economic prosperity for this group.

Finally, it seems as though Indian leadership is in a rush to transform agriculture as per the rules of neo-liberal market forces; in that vision, those who contribute land and labor have been sidelined from the policy domain. In contrast, it is capital that evidently is placed favorably vis-à-vis the state. Now, one can understand the massive “farmers” protest launched by rural landowners and labor. Their solidarity was to make themselves visible and heard by the neoliberal Indian state.

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