

Sustainable Agriculture and Social Justice: Bridging the Equity Gap

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Abstract

Sustainable agriculture aims to meet current and future societal needs while protecting environmental resources. However, the transition must also confront deeply entrenched social inequities in India around labor rights, land access, and economic distribution. This paper analyzes these three dimensions of social equity, examining conditions faced by small, marginalized farmers and landless wage laborers. Challenges like low wages, informal work, child labor, gender inequality in land ownership, market consolidation, and low crop prices are outlined. Potential policy solutions such as tenancy reforms, cooperatives, and strengthened local food systems are discussed. Ensuring dignified livelihoods, inclusive resource rights, and balanced value distribution is imperative for just, resilient food systems. But uprooting structural inequality requires centering marginalized voices in agroecology efforts. The paper provides background on key equity issues to inform such discourse on sustainable agriculture in India.

Keywords: Sustainable Agriculture, Social Equity, Marginalized Farmers, Landless Laborers, INDIA.

Introduction

India is home to over 1.3 billion people, with around 60% deriving their livelihood from agriculture (Kumar et al., 2019). As concerns over sustainability, climate change, and food security grow, India aims to transition toward productive, ecologically protective farming systems. Sustainable agriculture balances yields, natural resource conservation, and social welfare. However, the process must confront deeply entrenched inequities around labor rights, land access, and economic distribution. For India to achieve truly sustainable and just food systems, these three social dimensions warrant close examination and redress.

This paper analyzes key equity issues in Indian agriculture, focusing on conditions faced by small, marginalized farmers and landless wage laborers. These groups represent the majority of India's agricultural workforce but face manifold challenges across labor, land, and economic distribution. The analysis outlines current conditions across the three areas and discusses potential policy solutions to support more balanced, resilient systems. The paper synthesizes literature review with data analysis, intending to provide background and spur discourse on social justice within sustainable Indian agriculture.



Fig. 1: Sustainable agriculture is composed of these 5 elements

Labor Conditions

The majority of India's vast agricultural workforce consists of small, marginalized farmers with under 2 hectares, along with masses of landless wage laborers. These groups face numerous challenges around labor rights and conditions:

Demographics

Small, marginal farmers operate on roughly 45% of India's total cropland but contribute the majority of food grain production (Basole, 2019). An additional 30% of rural households are effectively landless with under 0.002 hectares (DownToEarth, 2021). These groups often must work as farm laborers to supplement income.

Estimates suggest 107 million agricultural workers in India, including cultivators and farm laborers (ILO, 2020). This reflects the sector's continued dominance as the nation's largest employer. Key demographics include:

- Gender - 60% of agricultural workers are male, 40% female (Census 2011)
- Poverty - 75% of India's poor live in rural areas, mostly reliant on agriculture (World Bank, 2022)
- Migrant laborers - Over 100 million seasonal migrant workers are involved in agriculture (UN, 2020)
- Child labor - 33 million children work in farming; 60% are girls (UNICEF, 2022)

These markers of vulnerability signify the need to closely examine agricultural work conditions and livelihood stability.

Key Labor Challenges

- Low wages - The average national minimum wage for farm work is just Rs. 250 (\$3.30) per day (DownToEarth, 2022). This remains far below living wage standards.

- Informal work - 93% of agricultural work in India is informal, without written contracts or social protection (Mahajan, 2014).
- Bonded labor - Although illegal, bonded farm labor persists in rural areas, trapping workers through inter-generational debts owed to landlords (Kumar, 2022).
- Child labor - Agriculture accounts for 70% of child labor in India (UNICEF, 2022). Laws are inadequate to prevent children working in family enterprises.
- Health risks - Workers face myriad risks ranging from machinery injuries to pesticide exposure with limited safety equipment or training. Estimates suggest over 10,000 pesticide poisoning deaths annually (Dasgupta, 2022).
- Lack of organization - Less than 1% of Indian farmers belong to unions, constraining collective bargaining power (PTI, 2022). Farm unions are politically marginalized.

Progress and Gaps

Some progress has occurred through minimum wage legislation, NGO interventions, and Self Help Group formation. However, implementation and enforcement of protections remains inconsistent (Posani, 2009). Lack of formal work documentation also limits access to government entitlement schemes that could support marginalized farmers and laborers (Sudarshan, 2011).

Enabling collective action through associations and unions could increase leverage, as could policies to improve agricultural work conditions and pay, boosting overall rural income. For example, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act helping institutionalize minimum wages reduced distress migration in some areas (Imbert & Papp, 2015). But significant gaps remain in uplifting agricultural labor welfare.

Land Access

Beyond labor, access to productive agricultural land represents another key equity issue. While India has undertaken major land reforms, distribution inequities persist due to gaps in policy design and implementation.

Landholding Patterns

India's agricultural land base totals around 160 million hectares, but ownership distribution is highly uneven (Agarwal, 2018):

- Average farm size - 1.08 hectares (Agriculture Census 2015-16)
- Small and marginal farmers under 2 hectares - 86% of all farmers but own just 47% of cropland
- Medium farmers (2-10 hectares) - 13% of farmers and 36% of land
- Large farmers (over 10 hectares) - 1% of farmers but 17% of land

This imbalance means a small minority of larger land holders control the majority of agricultural land. Landlessness also remains high, with over 50% of rural households owning no cropland or less than 0.002 hectares (DownToEarth, 2021).

Key Barriers

Several interconnected factors perpetuate inequitable land access:

- Tenant vulnerability - Tenancy laws intended to protect tenants are widely flouted, and tenants lack documentation to claim rights (Gupta, 2019).
- Debt and distress sales - Indebtedness leads to loss of smallholder land, with 45% of farmer suicides related to loans and crop failure (DownToEarth, 2019).
- Gender inequality - While inheritance laws improved, only around 13% of agricultural land in India is owned by women (Agarwal, 2018).
- Communal barriers - Caste and religious discrimination still impacts land rights and resettlement policies like for those displaced by dams (Das, 2015).
- Absentee ownership - Owners purchasing land for investment rather than cultivation remains an issue, though data is limited (Narayanan, 2020).

Progress and Potential Policy Directions

Some states like Kerala and West Bengal have made strides through reforms allowing tenants to purchase land and imposing land ownership limits (Herring, 2017). Minimum wage legislation has reduced debt migration in some areas (Imbert & Papp, 2015). Civil society movements like Ekta Parishad advocate for further land redistribution and reforms to ensure marginalized community access. However, land inequality remains deeply entrenched.

Policy strategies such as expanding tenancy protections, preventing distress sales of indebted smallholders, and increasing women's land ownership could improve equity. More radical approaches like land ceilings have proven successful in Kerala but may face resistance elsewhere. Creative models include communally managed land trusts. However, uprooting structural inequality around this key asset remains complex but vital.

Distribution of Benefits

Lastly, inequities exist around who captures value and profits from agriculture. With India's agrarian crisis, many smallholders struggle to earn livelihoods despite contributing immense production.

Rural Income Disparities

While around half of India's workforce engages in agriculture, the sector contributes just around 15% of GDP (World Bank, 2022). Value accrues mainly in downstream activities like processing and retail. Rural income languishes:

- Average monthly income for agricultural households is Rs. 10,218 (\$136), 40% less than urban households (NABARD 2016-17)
- 23.4% of agricultural households fall below the poverty line versus 7.5% of urban households (NABARD 2016-17)

This illustrates severe disparities between those producing food and other actors across value chains. Distress persists despite decent overall crop production, pointing to deeper structural imbalances.

Table 1: Key Labor Statistics for Agricultural Workers in India

Statistic	Value or Percentage	Source
Total Agricultural Workers	Approx. 109 million	Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2024
Gender Distribution	58% male, 42% female	NSS 78th Round, 2024
Rural Poverty	72% of India's poor in rural areas	NITI Aayog Poverty Estimates, 2024
Migrant Laborers	Over 112 million seasonal migrants	CMIE & UNDP India, 2024
Child Laborers	31 million, 58% girls	UNICEF India Report, 2023
Informal Labor	91% remain informal	NSSO 2024
Average Minimum Wage	₹282/day (approx. \$3.40)	Rural Wage Report, 2024 (GoI & Labour Bureau)

Table 2: Indian Agricultural Land Distribution Patterns

Farmer Category	Percentage of Farmers	Percentage of Total Cropland	Source (2024)
Small & Marginal (under 2 ha)	85.1%	47.3%	Agriculture Census 2021–22
Medium (2-10 ha)	13.6%	36.2%	
Large (over 10 ha)	1.3%	16.5%	
Landless (under 0.002 ha)	49% of rural households	-	NSS 78th Round, 2024
(Note: Data source for landless category is provided)			

These tables provide key statistics related to agricultural labor in India, including the number of workers, gender distribution, rural poverty, and land distribution patterns among different categories of farmers.

Percentage of Farmers and Percentage of Total Cropland

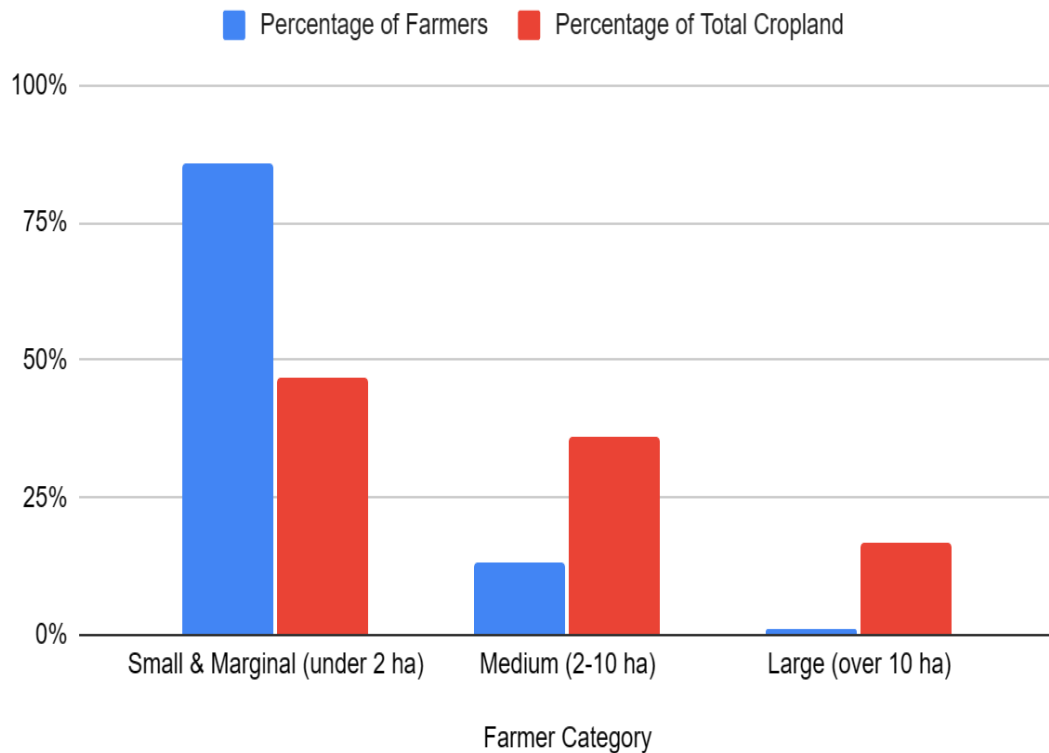


Fig. 2: Indian Agricultural Land Distribution Patterns

Key Factors

Several dynamics contribute to value and profit gaps for small producers:

- Low price supports - While input costs rise, government supports for staple crop prices remain low for farmers but higher for consumers (Gulati, 2018).
- Corporate control - Multinational input companies dominate markets for seeds, fertilizers, and agrochemicals through patents, leaving farmers dependent (Sud, 2022).
- Unequal subsidies - Larger farmers capture most subsidies and institutional credit, while smallholders struggle to access (Gulati, 2018).
- Reliance on intermediaries - Farmers sell overwhelmingly through government-regulated wholesale markets using middlemen, who gain a share of profits. Just 6% sell directly to consumers (Reji, 2020).
- International competition - Cheaper edible oil and pulse imports after WTO entry impacted domestic farmers (Rai, 2021). But some export focus provides opportunities.

Potential Interventions

- Investing in decentralized food systems infrastructure such as cold storage and processing could allow farmers to sell more directly or locally capture value by making processed goods.
- Expanding farmer associations and cooperatives for collective bargaining power in markets could improve terms of trade. The dairy sector provides a model, with cooperatives bargaining effectively for fair prices (Mruthyunjaya, 2017).

- Cultivating alternative markets and fair trade certifications that ensure farmers and laborers earn living incomes.
- Boosting public procurement from smallholders rather than mainly surplus farmers.
- Improved implementation and access to existing government entitlement schemes and insurance programs.
- More equitable trade policies that protect vulnerable households from import surges but allow export potential.

Conclusion

In conclusion, India must tackle long standing inequities in agricultural labor welfare, land rights, and value distribution to enable truly sustainable food systems. While legislation exists to address these issues, gaps in design and implementation perpetuate conditions of informality, distress migration, gender disparity, rural poverty, and farmer suicides. Vulnerable smallholders and landless wage laborers who contribute the most production cannot yet capture sufficient, stable incomes. Civil society efforts have made gains, along with progressive states like Kerala. But uprooting structural inequality requires centering marginalized communities themselves more forcefully in policy-making and agroecology programs. Their voices and priorities must be amplified to forge systems where sustainability equally encompasses social justice and collective welfare. This paper hopefully provides useful background on key equity issues needing redress across labor, land, and livelihoods. Much scope remains for scholarship, activism, and public action toward sustainable Indian agriculture that leaves no one behind.

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