

A mode of production flux: the transformation and reproduction of rural class relations in lowland Nepal and North Bihar

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Abstract The Eastern Gangetic Plains of South Asia represents a peripheral region far from the centers of global capitalist production, and this is all the more apparent in *Mithilanchal*, a cultural domain spanning the Nepal/Bihar border. The agrarian structure can be considered ‘semi-feudal’ in character, dominated by landlordism and usury, and backed up by political and ideological processes. Paradoxically, *Mithilanchal* is also deeply integrated into the global capitalist market and represents a surplus labor pool for the urban centers of Western India as well as the Persian Gulf in a classic articulation between pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production. A review of the changes in the agrarian structure over recent decades in the context of globalisation, out-migration and climate stress, shows that while landlordism remains entrenched, the relationship between the marginal and tenant farmer majority and the landed classes has changed, with the breakdown of ideological ties and reduced dependence on single landlords. The paper thus ends on a positive note, as the contemporary juncture represents an opportune moment for new avenues of political mobilization among the peasantry.

Keywords Semi-feudalism · Neoliberalism · Landlords · Livelihoods · Nepal · Tarai-Madhesh · Bihar

Introduction

The Eastern Gangetic Plains, which include the Nepal Tarai and India’s Bihar state, is one of the most densely populated and peripheral belts in South Asia. The agrarian formation of the region has long been characterized as ‘semi-feudal’—

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although a growing body of scholarship has suggested that the concept is no longer relevant in the context of economic liberalization and market expansion. The paper, however, seeks to re-approach this contested topic by critically analyzing the very real changes which are underway in the region, focusing on *Mithilanchal*, a cultural region which spans the Nepal–India border. Based on an analysis of long-term and contemporary trends in 5 districts on both sides of the border, the paper observes new patterns of labor movement and migration, shifting relations between landlords and tenants, and new pressures and stresses on agriculture.

These changes, however, must not be viewed as signifying the end of semi-feudalism, as some scholarship suggests (Harriss 2013; Basu and Das 2013)—instead this paper argues that they should be viewed as a process through which an older economic formation adapts in the context of an expanding capitalism, while keeping its relations of production intact. The paper also shows how neoliberalism can have diverse and complex outcomes on modes of production on the ground, which are themselves mediated by other changes such as climate stress and class struggle. The paper ends on a positive note, recognizing that the changes underway have created spaces for new avenues of political mobilization by the marginal farmer, tenant, and laboring majority.

Semi-feudalism and the market

Understanding feudalism

Before reviewing the origins of feudalism in Mithilanchal, it is useful for a brief review of the concept. A detailed definition of the component parts of the feudal mode of production has remained elusive over the years. The characteristics of feudalism as alluded to by Marx (1932)¹ when discussing the European context, include firstly, control over the means of production by a small land-owning aristocracy with political, ideological, and economic power over a peasant majority. A second attribute includes the appropriation of surplus (usually in kind), often through extra-economic means, backed up by the political–ideological power of landlords. Another element which is often overlooked is the use of surplus for *consumption* rather than productive reinvestment. Marx asserts that the feudal lord consumes the product of the land rather than investing it as capital to maximize productivity. Even if the surplus is sold, generating ‘value,’ it is used for “luxury consumption,” as Marx notes in *Grundrisse* (1973, 469).

The conceptualization of feudalism was taken further in the Dobb-Sweezy debate of the 1950s on the transition from feudalism to capitalism (see summary by Hilton 1976). For Dobb, the emphasis was on the presence of a particular form of exploitation, ‘serfdom,’ whereby an individual provides labor services to an overlord through extra-economic coercion. Sweezy placed more emphasis on the sphere of circulation, and the production of commodities for use, rather than

¹ The conceptualization is dealt with most systematically in the discussion on ‘Rent of Land’ from the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.

exchange (as is present under capitalism). In intervention by Takahashi and Mins (1952), however, they rightly emphasized that any definition of feudalism should be based on the mode of exploitation, the property relationship, and the form of labor power. Under feudalism, the laborer remains attached to the means of production (i.e., feudal landed property) and the appropriation of surplus takes place directly using coercion rather than the laws of commodity exchange. Their definition is more flexible, noting that surplus appropriation may occur through different forms including serfdom (extraction of labor tax) or ground rent.

Sharma's (1985) definition of medieval Indian feudalism generally echoes the approach of Marx, yet applies it to the Indian context. He refers to an agrarian system where the peasantry is subjugated to overlords who use extra-economic power to maintain control over land and appropriate surplus. These extra-economic methods include social, political and religious methods and even 'ideological power' alone, whereby peasants believe they are duty bound to pay. He emphasized like Takahashi and Mins that feudal social relations vary considerably in different historical and geographical contexts. The character of the land-owning class in Medieval India was highly variable, as were the political-ideological mechanisms being mobilized to coerce the peasantry. Surplus was also appropriated in diverse ways (including rent and forced labor), and different hierarchies of exploitation were present, including sub-feudation and simultaneous exploitation by centralized feudal states as well as local functionaries (Sharma 1985). This paper will draw broadly on Marx's definition of feudalism—namely the concentration of landed property, surplus appropriation through rent and labor tax via extra-economic coercion, and use of surplus for consumption rather than productive reinvestment. It will, however, like Sharma, be flexible in identifying the component parts of feudalism which vary according to particular temporal and spatial junctures.

Some of the above characteristics of feudalism have been applied through the 'mode of production debate' in the 1970s and 1980s which revolved around the question of whether Indian agriculture was feudal or capitalist. Analysis of semi-feudalism in the post-independence period was carried out by Bhaduri (1973) and Chandra (1974) with reference to surveys from West Bengal and Prasad (1973) with reference to Bihar. At its foundation was the continued presence of landlords controlling large estates farmed by sharecropping peasants. The coercive appropriation of surplus remained important, although rather than occurring through political-ideological means, the emphasis was on economic processes such as the inter-linkage of land, credit, and produce markets. Debt, in particular, was shown to bond tenants to money-lending landlords and even to merchants through 'distress' commercialization. Landlords were noted to have few incentives to improve productivity, as improved yields may undermine poor farmers' need for consumption loans (Bhaduri 1973, 1977; Prasad 1973). The inclusion of market forces is one reason why such post-colonial modes of production are referred to as 'semi-feudal' rather than simply 'feudal.'² In these contexts, however, the unproductive 'drain' of

² As Bhaduri (1981, 44) notes: "Translated into the language of daily politics in India, our schematisation of the class structure in Indian agriculture corresponds to the coexistence of "feudal remnants" (or semi-feudalism) sustained by a nexus of forced commercial relations and "capitalist tendencies"."

surplus by landowners and merchants to meet the needs of simple reproduction only and debt bondage to landlords blocks the development of the productive forces which is necessary for capitalist development to emerge (Bhaduri 1973, 1981; Prasad 1973).

The semi-feudal thesis did of course have its detractors. Rudra (1974), for example, also drawing on data from West Bengal, noted that there were clear signs of capital formation in agriculture. He noted that ‘landlords’ were increasingly making investments in irrigation infrastructure, high-yielding varieties of seeds, and other improved inputs, while providing tenants with their irrigation costs, part of the fertilizer cost, and interest-free loans.

Despite a hiatus of research on the topic, the structure of South Asian agriculture has come under renewed interest, particularly in the context of the stresses brought about by neoliberal restructuring. However, scholarship has generally pointed to a decline in many of the social relations often termed ‘semi-feudal,’ particularly in the context of expanding neoliberal markets and the migration economy (see edited volume, Lerche et al. 2013). Changes include the decline in landlordism due to fragmentation of estates, reduction in the leased area, and the declining importance of land for political control. Also cited is the changing power structure with the emergence of new elites from outside the traditionally dominant castes, and the new sources of off-farm income, most notably through migration (Harriss 2013; Basu and Das 2013; Rodgers and Rodgers 2001). As noted in Basu and Das (2013, 379), ‘The landlord-dominated semi-feudal economy of the 1940s and 1950s has given way to an agrarian economic structure marked by a preponderance of small-scale farms, non-farm petty production and a ceaseless circulation of footloose labor.’ While not all scholarship goes on to characterize agriculture in South Asia as capitalist, there is a strong implication in contemporary scholarship that the concept of ‘semi-feudalism’ is of reduced relevance. In fact, certain relations such as bonded labor in agriculture are increasingly reinterpreted as ‘capitalist’ in character (Guérin 2013).

Articulation of modes of production

It is the intention of this paper not to *deny* the presence of capitalism in rural Mithilanchal and the larger social formation of South Asia. Instead this paper seeks to assert that capitalism *coexists* alongside feudal modes of production. Before exploring the case study, it is important to provide insights into a theoretical departure of this paper from past debates on the feudalism versus capitalism question.

A theoretical entry point is Althusser and Balibar (1968, 215) who emphasize the articulation of modes of production. They assert that the mode of production is constituted by three ‘elements’: the means of production, the laborer, and the appropriator of surplus labor. These are in turn structured by two ‘connections’: the relation between the laborer and the means of production (the *forces of production*), and the property relation which defines the how surplus is appropriated and put to use (the *relations of production*) (Althusser and Balibar 1968, 212–216). The transformation and reproduction of a particular mode of production is mediated firstly by political and ideological processes and secondly through its interaction with *other* modes of production. Modes of production therefore never exist in

isolation, but coexist with others at specific historical junctures. This occurs within a broader entity, the *social formation*—a ‘totality’ under which several coexisting modes of production are *articulated* in a functional unity. It is asserted that within a social formation one mode of production is normally ‘dominant,’ although this can be either capitalist or pre-capitalist (Althusser and Balibar 1968, 212–215).

This is of important theoretical relevance as even if a social formation is dominated by capitalism, this does not mean that the modes of production on the ground are all ‘capitalist’—an argument often used to deny the presence of pre-capitalist formations. Most notably, Andre Gunder Frank had argued that India was capitalist since the colonial era due to its integration within (and supply of surplus to) the global capitalist economy through mercantile capitalism. However, this conceptualization has been criticized for over-emphasizing the relations of exchange and the role of merchant capital rather than the relations of production. Such an approach is ahistorical and marks a departure from the approach of Marx himself, who acknowledged the importance of pre-capitalist modes of production in mediating capitalist infiltration into peripheral economies such as colonial India (Gupta 1977; Lin 1980).

The Althusserian conceptualization of articulation of modes of production has been applied most eloquently in the Marxist anthropological analyses of sub-Saharan Africa in the 1970s and 1980s (Dupré and Rey 1979, Meillassoux 1973, 1980; van der Klei 1985). The concern was of pre-capitalist ‘lineage’ modes of production, which had the capacity to initially resist subordination into capitalism. While the coercive economic forces of colonialism were able to subordinate these modes to supply surplus to capitalism, they retained their own laws of motion and internal social relations. This paradoxically facilitated the generation of substantial profits for capital when individuals from the pre-capitalist mode enter the capitalist labor force. The internal pre-capitalist economy meets the costs of labor reproduction, a process described in detail by Meillassoux (1981) with reference to West Africa. A similar conceptualization has been applied by (Singh 2007) with reference to adivasi social formations in central India.

The presence of pre-capitalist forms of exploitation alongside capitalism is of course not new. Scholarship has shown how family farms or ‘petty commodity producers’ can be functionally articulated to supply surplus to capitalism without losing land (Banaji 1977; Bernstein 2003; de Janvry 1981), a process epitomized by contract farming (White 1997). Similarly, peasant producers may maintain enough land to subsidize capitalist labor (Bernstein 2001). This tendency was outlined by both Lenin (1960) and Kautsky (1988), referred to most notably in the Latin-American context as ‘functional dualism’ (de Janvry 1981). It should be noted though that most of such analyses do not emphasize the role of ‘pre-capitalist’ economic formations per se, but are associated with a different interpretation of capitalism which can function without the full proletarianization of labor (Hall 2012). This paper, by contrast, will seek to build upon earlier work in the region (Sugden 2013) to understand semi-feudalism not as relic forms of exploitation which are part of capitalism, but as a mode of production in its own right with distinctive combinations of relations and forces of production and class interests.

‘Semi-feudal’ and ‘semi-colonial’

It is worth noting that analysis of the articulation of modes of production also requires an understanding of the unique forms of capitalism which are present in peripheral regions such as South Asia. Charles Bettelheim, who drew upon the Althusserian position, noted that the global capitalist mode of production is subject to a ‘twofold tendency’ (Bettelheim 1972, 293). Firstly, it reproduces the relations and forces of production at the scale of each national social formation, including specific forms of domination between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production. Secondly, it reproduces the unequal relations between these social formations at a global scale (Bettelheim 1972). These include regional economic specializations, relations of production, and ideological and political processes in peripheral regions which ‘block’ the development of the forces of production rendering them dependent on low-value exports (Bettelheim 1972, 293–294). The blocked development of industry itself contributes to the perpetuation of pre-capitalist modes of production within national social formations.

This has strong parallels with past descriptions of the Indian and Nepalese economies as ‘semi-colonial.’ They are characterized by dependence on foreign capital, low development of the productive forces, and a significant surplus labor pool (Ghosh 1983a; Blaikie et al. 2001). This has blocked the organic development of capitalist industry (Alavi 1990; Ghosh 1983b). These are matched by a unique set of class relations, dominated by a ‘comprador bourgeoisie’ who profit from economic activities that serve the interests of imperialism (Alavi 1990; Ghosh 1983b; Blaikie et al. 2001).

An explicit link between the ‘semi-feudal’ and ‘semi-colonial,’ alongside the potential for two modes of production to coexist, was acknowledged during the mode of production debate, particularly through an emphasis on how rural underemployment gives semi-feudalism some stability. A capitalist sector which has been distorted by imperialism does not have the capacity to end the rural poor’s dependence on landlords (Chandra 1974; Sau 1975). In a later intervention, Gupta (1977) notes that India remains part of the global capitalist system, although he asserts the presence of more than one mode of production. The overall social formation is termed ‘semi-colonial’ as imperialism has stunted full capitalist development, supporting the persistence of feudalism in rural areas. Lin (1980) also attests to the presence of both capitalism and feudalism, noting the accommodation of historically divergent interests of the pre-capitalist and capitalist ruling classes.

The concept of a ‘semi-colonial’ social formation remains relevant in the post-liberalization context, even if the term is not always used. In spite of the growth of capitalism in India’s (and Nepal’s) urban centers and rising rural–urban migration, labor is mostly casual, low paid, and unskilled, being dominated by work in low-value industries such as agro-processing where wages and conditions of employment are poor (Bhaduri 2009; Blaikie et al. 2001, Breman 2009; Harriss-White and Goopu 2009). Industry, which remains largely subordinate to foreign capital, thrives off a vast surplus labor force which it can never absorb.

Within agriculture itself, neoliberalism has created new patterns of stress. In this context, scholars such as Utsa Patnaik have moved away entirely from the

traditional ‘agrarian question’ (see synthesis by Lerche 2013). They argue that state support rollbacks and the drive toward commercial farming have left farmers vulnerable to falling prices, exploitation by global agribusiness through contract farming, and outright dispossession due to corporate-friendly land legislations (Patnaik 2006). This has actually impeded the development of capitalism in agriculture. The primary antagonism in this context is between farmers across the land ownership spectrum and the corporate food regime. Agriculture and industry, meanwhile, are increasingly disarticulated, so the development of capitalist agriculture is no longer necessary to support an emerging industrial base (Patnaik 2006).

Many of Patnaik’s assertions relating to agrarian stress under liberalization are correct in parts of South Asia and are in line with the concept of a larger semi-colonial social formation subordinate to imperialism. However, they also imply that there is a nascent capitalism in agriculture which has been blocked by imperialism and downplay the persistence of semi-feudalism in many regions. This paper points to a slightly different trajectory of change in Mithilanchal. It acknowledges the presence of some of the stresses on agriculture under economic liberalization identified by Patnaik (particularly the increasingly weak terms of trade), but suggests that they do not only block capitalist development within agriculture. Together with the skewed development of capitalism in urban centers, they serve to bolster semi-feudal modes of production, which persist in rural areas.

This paper also highlights that semi-feudalism is a dynamic system, like capitalism itself, which is subject to flux and transformation, particularly as modes of production interact. The paper follows Bois (1978) in asserting that the underlying dynamics of agrarian transition can be uncovered only through the historical analysis of empirical data for geographical and historically specific conjunctures.³ This is in tune with the most important epistemological break of the Althusserian tradition—the need to identify historical individualities of given social formations (including complex combinations of modes of production) rather than attempting to fit what is observed into a pre-ordained evolutionary framework.

Methods

This paper is an amalgamation of multiple sources, following a decades’ work in the plains of Nepal and Bihar. The primary data source is two large random surveys on agriculture and livelihoods, the locations of which are mapped in Fig. 1. The first survey of 427 households was carried out in 2013 in Rakuwari and Bhupatti of Bihar’s Madhubani District, Thadi Jijha and Ekrahi of Nepal’s Dhanusha District, and Bhaudaha, Jhorahat and Thalaha of Morang District (Sugden et al. 2014). The second survey of 809 households was completed in Ragunathpur and Giddha of Dhanusha, Korahiya and Nanour of Madhubani, Dogachinagar and Damdaha of Bihar’s Purnea District, and Simariya and Mahendranagar of Nepal’s Sunsari

³ Bois (1978) criticized the debate on the decline in feudalism in Europe initiated by Brenner (‘the Brenner debate’) as being overly theory laden and detached from complex spatiotemporal realities.



Fig. 1 Map of core study sites

District (Sugden et al. 2015b). This was combined with data from 10 focus groups as part of the 2013 study, and 15 as part of the 2015 study. Data were also drawn from 26 qualitative interviews carried out in Dhanusha and Morang in a 2012 study on groundwater irrigation access (Sugden 2014), and data from a 2007–2008 study of landlordism in Morang (Sugden 2013). Full details on the methodology of these studies can be found in the above-cited research outputs.

Historical origins of semi-feudalism in the Eastern Gangetic Plains

While concentration of land in South Asia has been a phenomenon since the years of the Indus civilization (Habib 2002), the origins of the contemporary agrarian structure in the Eastern Gangetic Plains can be traced to Mughal rule, and the agrarian taxation bureaucracy. Madhubani, on the Indian side of the border, was under the rule of the Mughals between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries and later was part of the Hindu Darbhanga Raj, a tributary state of the Mughal and then the British colonial authorities (Chaudhury 1964). The state tax collection apparatus under the pre-colonial and colonial zamindari system, combined with a rigid caste system, saw the development of a hierarchical agrarian formation.

On the Nepal side of the border, a Mughal-style tax generation apparatus was set up by the Sen Kingdom of central Nepal, which encompassed Morang and Dhanusha. This was followed by the Gorkhali dynasty, the founders of the present-day Nepal in the late eighteenth century (Gaige 1976). Under Nepal's Rana kings in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Tarai was a vital source of revenue, and an administration similar to the colonial zamindari system was introduced, propping up local elites and fostering the emergence of a powerful landlord class

(Regmi 1978). Even indigenous communities in the jungle belt to the east such as Morang and Sunsari were gradually subordinated to feudalism. This occurred through the distribution of land grants to hill elites, encouraging the contraction of the forest frontier. This undermined shifting cultivation, turning indigenous farmers into tenants and laborers on the newly cleared estates. Meanwhile, the state created of a functionary class of landlords within the Adivasi population, undermining indigenous forms of economic and political organization (Sugden 2013).

Land tax had declined at the end of the colonial era in both Nepal (Regmi 1976) and India (Habib 2002) as the market provided new sources of revenue for the state. The primary surplus appropriators were now the landlord intermediaries, who continued to exploit the peasantry through rent. Control over land had long been associated with political power in both lowland Nepal and Bihar, and landed interests were well represented in the bureaucracy. It is therefore unsurprising that even in the post-colonial era, state-implemented land reforms failed to overcome the landed interests which pervaded the bureaucracy and even political parties. In the 1950s and 1960s, both Bihar and Nepal saw state-implemented land reforms which regulated ceilings and rents and the abolished the traditional agrarian tax collection hierarchy.

There is widespread agreement that the reforms failed to create any real transformations in the agrarian structure. Ceilings were weakly enforced, while loopholes in the laws worked in the favor of landlords, who used political influence to retain ownership of their holdings (Adhikari 2006; Kishore 2004; Sugden and Gurung 2012; Regmi 1976). In the case of the Nepali plains, many of the large landlords were themselves bureaucrats from the hill upper castes, who had acquired estates through the political power of their ancestors under the Rana regime. At the end of the Rana era in the 1950s, many retained key positions in Nepal's Panchayat state, and even the emerging political party apparatus. Many of those who lost land in the reforms were the remnants of the Adivasi *Tharu* functionary class whose historical power was grounded in the now defunct agrarian tax collection hierarchy (Sugden 2013). The remnants of the Tharu nobility lost even more land in later years due to fragmentation. Unlike the absentee counterparts who were also enriched through state power, most of the Tharu nobilities' wealth was derived from the land itself, and without access to alternative sources of income for family members, population growth saw estates divided among sons. Many also succumbed to debt.

Agrarian relations in the Nepal Tarai and Bihar were arguably semi-feudal in character by the 1970s, as has been shown in numerous studies (Blaikie et al. 2001; Timberg 1982; Rodgers and Rodgers 2001). In Bihar, a survey carried out in Gopalganj, Purnea, and Madhubani in 1982 found that 65.5 % of households were landless or owned less than 1 acre (0.4 ha), and they owned only 16 % of the land. Thirteen percentage of farmers had 10 acres (4 ha) or more, the majority of which were from the Brahmin or Bhuhimar castes. 36.23 % of households (and 52.99 % of farming households) were leasing in land (Karan 2009). Similarly, a Purnea study from the 1970s reviewed in Rodgers and Rodgers (2001) suggested that 40 % of households were landless, and bonded labor was common.

Across Nepal's Central and Eastern Tarai, out of the land which was owner-cultivated, 85 % of the owned holdings were less than 0.5 ha, far below what is

required for a family to subsist. The 7 % of land owners with more than 1 ha of land owned 68 % of the cultivated area (Central Bureau of Statistics 1982). The National Sample Census for Agriculture for the Central and Eastern Tarai indicated that as of 1971, 25.6 % of farming households were part-tenants and 8.5 % were pure tenants. Tenancy data in Nepal, however, have long been prone to underestimation so it is likely to have been considerably higher.

In the Adivasi frontier of the Nepal Tarai in Sunsari and Morang districts, the distribution of holdings was particularly unequal. In Morang District as of 1971, 27.8 % of farmers were tenants and 19.8 % were part-tenants. However, rather than being dominated by locally based upper caste landlords as is predominant in Mithilanchal, large tracts of land were in the hands of urban dwellers who descended from the Rana era land grant recipients. Between the 1970s and 1980s, there was also an increase in speculative investment in land by wealthy hill people from Kathmandu and Biratnagar (Sugden and Gurung 2012; Sugden 2013), and they emerged into a new landlord class. A large number of Adivasi cultivators were deceived into selling their land at a low price, or lost land due to indebtedness, to these newcomers.

With reference to the 1970s and 1980s, oral histories recalled a striking level of dependence on landlords. In Ekrahi VDC of Dhanusha, elder respondents recalled how several upper caste *Brahmin*, *Buhimar*, and *Kyastha* households held private holdings of up to 60 bighas. A *jajamani* (ritualized exchange between castes) system was still in place, whereby tenants or laborers would work for free for these landlords, only to receive grains as payment during festivals. Poverty was extreme, and it was recalled how many households did not even have a fire to cook or utensils. If one wanted to go to Janakpur for some official work, they had to borrow formal clothes from landlords. Similar stories were recalled in Rakuwari of Madhubani, where elders recalled how the poor farmers were in perpetual debt to zamindars. People were unaware of their rights and of opportunities outside, and migration was rarely even considered an option to escape debt bondage.

Dependence on landlords was worsened by the inter-linkage of credit–debt relations with land tenure. It was recalled in all the sites that landlords in the past were also the primary source of credit. Repayments of loans were sometimes the basis on which landlords could extract an unpaid labor rent. Elders in two different villages of of Madhubani, also referring to the 1980s, recalled how the poor farmers were in perpetual debt to zamindars, often taking loans of grain. For each 1 maund taken as a loan, recipients would have to repay 1.5 maund at harvest time plus provide 10-day unpaid labor contribution. In addition, a number of bonded labor contracts were in place such as the *halwaha* system where a plowman remains attached to a landowner, as was noted in Karan (2003) and Rodgers and Rodgers (2001). Farmers across the region noted how poverty was extreme prior to the 1990s, with subsistence needs pushed down to the physiological minimum, and very limited circulation of cash. Many farmers even had to borrow clothes from the landlord if they wanted to go into the town for some official work. Given the semi-colonial nature of the larger social formation, industrial activity and off-farm employment opportunities were very limited on both sides of the Nepal–India border, reinforcing the power of landlords (Sugden 2016b). The exception was a

few industries in Morang-Sunsari in Nepal, which were themselves insufficient to absorb the vast surplus labor pool Sugden (2013).

The mode of production during this period is not dissimilar to the classic models of Indian semi-feudalism in Bengal and Bihar described above, characterized by sharecropping, perpetual indebtedness, and concentration of usury and land ownership among the same class, and reinforced by industrial stagnation (Chandra 1974; Gupta 1977; Bhaduri 1973).

Neoliberal restructuring and climate change

Economic liberalization and climate change

Between the 1980s and 2000s, considerable changes have taken place. Following economic liberalization in the late 1980s, farmer testimonies pointed to a terms of trade increasingly stacked against agriculture (Sugden et al. 2014). This echoes literature on India's 'agrarian crisis' cited above, which has focused on the drive for commercialization following liberalization, and the impoverishment of marginal farmers. The removal of minimum support prices in India has left farmers vulnerable to the fluctuations of the global market and has put them directly in competition with global agribusiness⁴ (Lerche 2013; Patnaik 2006; Walker 2008).

With regard to Mithilanchal, commercial production had always been limited with some exceptions in the wetter eastern frontier where the region merges into Bengal. This includes jute cultivation in Purnea and Morang-Sunsari. Regardless, the prospects for wealth accumulation from commercial production are notably bleak. Across India, demand for agricultural products from industry—Lenin's creation of a 'home market'—is limited given that most growth is in sectors catering to the urban elite such as construction or the service sector, leading to a disarticulated pattern of development (Lerche 2013; Walker 2008).⁵ This is all the more pertinent in regions such as Madhubani and Dhanusha where industrial development is negligible. Even in the belt of agro-processing industries in Morang-Sunsari of Nepal, production has been dropping in recent years, due to power shortages and the failure to compete with goods imported from India and China—leading to a decline in jute cultivation.⁶

What was, however, of greatest concern to farmers was the spiraling price of inputs over the last two decades (Sugden et al. 2014). The removal of state subsidies for fertilizer and pesticides in the 1990s following India and Nepal's liberalization

⁴ Farm gate prices for primary products such as cotton, food grains, jute and sugar dropped by between 40 and 60 % between 1996 and 2001 alone.

⁵ This leads to rising income among the upper tiers who purchase not local products but imported luxuries.

⁶ The removal of government subsidies for electricity for industries and Nepal's power crisis had made it impossible for local industries to compete with Indian and Bangladeshi products, and five out of 11 jute mills in Nepal had closed, with cultivation dropping considerably. See report in Kathmandu post, Sep 22, 2014. *Demand drop leaves jute industry in doldrums* and Gorakhpatra article, Aug 24, 2014, *Jute industries in eastern region in crisis*.

led to considerable price increases as the private sector took control (Kishore 2004; Walker 2008; Sugden 2009b). More recently, spiraling oil prices up until 2014 added to the stress on agriculture. In Nepal, for example, the price for diesel increased by 352 % between 1995/1996 and 2009/2010, both impacting the price of fertilizer and other inputs (Pant 2011). This comes at a time when dependence on purchased agricultural inputs had been increasing as farmers seek to offset population growth and land fragmentation. Retail prices for food have also soared in this context, due to the higher processing costs (Pant 2011). The withdrawal of public goods once available prior to liberalization such as healthcare have also increased living costs (Reed 2011).

Farmer testimonies also pointed to more complex reasons for rising living costs, which are associated with the ideology of neoliberalism. Along with the expansion of markets and mass media is an emergent culture of consumerism, with rising demand for manufactured goods. Farmers reported how they increasingly prefer to purchase plastic utensils and factory-made goods rather than depending on what is produced in traditional cottage industries. This is of course facilitated by expanding capitalist markets. In Nepal, for example, as is emblematic of semi-colonial social formations, imported goods have rapidly undermined cottage industries, resulting in a rising cost of living and greater rural underemployment (Blaikie et al. 2001). The most devastating change, however, has been the spiraling costs associated with 'cultural' institutions. This includes dowry in the caste heartland of Madhubani and Dhanusha, where farmers increasingly seek to outbid each other, and it is not unusual for brides' families to pay out \$3000 or above (see also Sugden et al. 2014).

Similarly, among the Tharu community of Morang-Sunsari, the gift exchanges during weddings of males or females have become increasingly lavish, with high-value goods such as motorbikes often expected (Sugden 2009a). In the past, such gift exchanges were associated with the Tharu nobility. As noted above, this groups' economic and political power has declined considerably, and hill upper caste absentee landlords have become the new landed class. Nevertheless, these households are still expected to invest considerable sums of money in both village religious ceremonies and lavish weddings, in spite of the fact that many are now small peasants. Even households who did not hail from aristocratic backgrounds reportedly feel compelled to copy the spending habits of the descendants of the former nobility if they were to maintain their cultural status in the community.

On an ecological level, there was widespread agreement among farmers that the climate was becoming increasingly erratic—with an increased frequency of late monsoons, unseasonal pre-monsoon rains (which damages wheat and other dry season crops), not to mention chilling and extreme heat episodes, processes which have all been acknowledged in the scientific literature of the region (Practical Action 2009; Sharma 2009; Bartlett et al. 2010). Invariably, these stresses hit the marginal and tenant farmers the hardest, as they cannot afford tubewells and pump sets to offset the effects of late monsoons, while having limited cash reserves. Outcomes of a climatic extreme can be devastating and can reinforce patterns of exploitation. For example, in a *Chamar* (Dalit caste) settlement of Madhubani, a

drought in 2012 forced the women⁷ from many land-poor tenant households into the agricultural labor market so they could earn cash for food. Respondents recalled how the landlords were able to take advantage of this crisis by offering them labor at just Rs 20 (\$ 0.45) per day, far below the market rate. Similarly, a tenant on a fixed-rent contract in Morang had to give his entire harvest to the landlord due to a drought, leaving him with a huge unpaid loan which had been taken to buy inputs.

Migration

The changes outlined above show that the mode of production in the countryside is by no means isolated from changes taking place in the global capitalist economy through neoliberal restructuring. While these point to active links between the rural economy and capitalism via the market, the most significant articulation today is through migrant labor.

Due to the rising cost of living and climate stress, marginal farmers and landless households, once partially dependent on agricultural labor, are no longer able to subsist on previous wage rates (Sugden et al. 2014). Against this backdrop, there was a considerable rise in out-migration throughout the 1990s and 2000s. For Bihar, these changes are reflected well in a time-wise comparative survey from Madhubani, Purnea, and Gopalganj districts by Karan (2003). It notes that as of 1982/1983, 27.69 % of households had migrated. As of 1999/2000, this increased to 48.63 %. In Madhubani and Purnea today, seasonal and long-term migration to more developed western states of India is now a key component of household livelihoods. Although most are working in factories in the 'capitalist' sector, as noted above, labor is usually casual and unskilled, being dominated by work in low-value industries such as agro-processing where wages and conditions of employment are poor. Others work on an even more casual basis in ancillary sectors such as construction or the service industry (e.g., as cleaners, cooks or drivers), and to a lesser extent in farms and plantations in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh.

Over the border in the Tarai-Madhesh, migration is even more pronounced, although the geographical flows of migrants and type of work are different. As of the 1981 census, there were 402,977 Nepalese household members classed as 'absentee.' This had increased more than fourfold to 1,921,494 by the 2011 census. In 1980, 93.1 % of migration was to India (Khatiwada 2014), although from the 1990s onwards, migration toward overseas destinations such as the Persian Gulf and Malaysia was more common. By 2011, 90.1 % of migration was to overseas destinations and just below 10 % was to India (Khatiwada 2014), although the latter is likely to be much higher if one includes seasonal migration which is often not captured in official surveys. As of the 2011 census, 26.3 % of households in the Eastern Tarai have an 'absentee' member either in India or overseas (Central Bureau of Statistics 2011).

⁷ Many of the men were engaged in migrant labour.

Agrarian structure today

Laborers, tenants and marginal farmers

While it is clear that there is a growing articulation between the agrarian economy and capitalism, based upon the survey data, how does one characterize the mode of production in Mithilanchal? From the outset, it is clear that the agrarian structure remains deeply unequal. Figure 2 and Table 3 shows that at the base is a large class of landless households, who are dependent upon others for their subsistence.⁸ Across all the sites in both surveys, they constitute around 37 % of the sample.

The first of this group are the landless laborers, who make up 22.67 % of the sample, and who have no engagement in agriculture other than working on others' farms or pastoralism. Table 1 shows that around a third of landless laborers engage in labor for large farmers and landlords, and their contributions represent 21.46 % of the aggregate labor days (on others' farms) recorded by households in the 2015 sample. Most also engage in subsistence activities such as fishing or livestock rearing, with some even herding cows for large farmers in return for a share of the milk. Wages for farm labor are highly variable according to the local socio-economic context (see Table 2). As of the 2013 sample in Bhupatti and Rakuwari of Madhubani, 53 % and 66 % of farm laborers still receive wages in kind, and in Thadi Jijha and Ekrahi of Dhanusha, it is 64 % and 86 %, respectively. These farmers receive 4–6 kg of paddy per day. In Morang-Sunsari and Purnea, cash wages or a mixed cash/kind wage predominate.⁹ Meeting one's subsistence needs

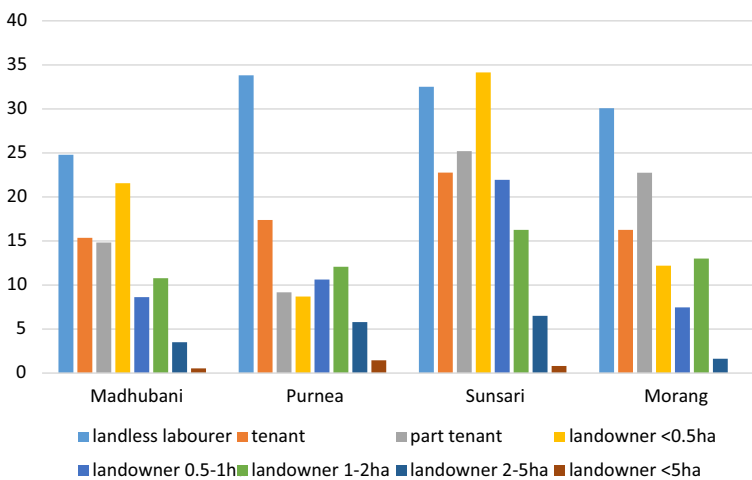


Fig. 2 Land ownership categories in sample survey. (Source: 2013 and 2015 survey)

⁸ These are classified as households with holdings below 0.05 ha.

⁹ Despite a recent increase in cash wages in Nepal due to migration-induced labour shortages, this is reportedly offset by spiraling retail prices for food and the rising cost of living.

Table 1 Engagement in farm labor over last year. (Source: 2013 and 2015 survey)

Land ownership category	% engaged in farm labor	% of aggregate farm labor days of sample performed by group (2015 sample only)	Average annual person days in farm labor	Person days in off-farm labor	% engaged in off-farm labor	Engaged in migration
Landless laborer	31.90	21.46	120.50	180.00	32.62	55.93
Tenant	33.90	13.05	135.00	145.00	29.38	48.35
Part-tenant	24.73	14.76	112.50	160.00	20.88	61.50
<0.5 ha	20.35	18.59	150.00	126.00	17.26	51.32
0.5–1 ha	9.21	13.01	204.00	168.00	14.47	55.94
1–2 ha	6.99	12.55	178.00	300.00	11.19	37.68
2–5 ha	11.66	6.06	0.00	266.00	10.14	55.56
<2 ha	0	0	0	0	0	25 %

entirely from farm labor alone is difficult, and as a result, both surveys show that a third of landless laborers are engaged in off-farm labor and over half are involved in some kind of migration. Only some households, often from the Dalit *Musahar* community, depend entirely on farm labor, with consumption often pushed down to the physiological minimum.

The second landless group is the pure tenant farmers, who represent 14.33 % of the sample (see Table 3). They also engage extensively in off-farm labor, while farming land on rent. A further 14.74 % of the sample is part-tenants, who rent land while also owning small plots. The average size of the owned portion is small, at 0.34 ha, while the rented area is on average 0.78 ha.¹⁰ In the total sample, half the land is under tenancy (see Table 4); yet, in districts such as Morang where the subjugation of adivasi groups to landlordism has been severe, it is a staggering 83.57 %, while in neighboring Sunsari, which has a similar ethnic and socio-economic composition, it is 56.59 %.

Exploitative sharecropping arrangements, known as *bhaataiya*, remain the most prominent form of surplus appropriation for tenants and part-tenants, who surrender half of the crop to the landlord. The net surplus appropriated is even higher when one considers that tenants also cover most of the input costs. Sharecropping is present on 91 % of the rented land in Madhubani, and 71 % in Dhanusha and just over half in Morang and Sunsari, with fixed in-kind payments predominant on the remaining plots. This latter system is known as *mankap* in Bihar and *tekka* in Nepal and involves a fixed payment of paddy or wheat, once a year. Only in Purnea is cash rent more common (54 % of the land), but this is as a result of a small number of commercial tenants in this district (not counted as tenants in the sample) who have leased out land for cash crops such as sugarcane and bananas. Seventy-seven percentage of normal tenants and part-tenants in Purnea are sharecroppers. There is

¹⁰ Only farmers with less than 1 ha of their own land while also renting were considered as part-tenants, and the remainder were considered owner cultivators.

Table 2 Agricultural wage rates. (Source: 2013 and 2015 survey)

Village	Women's cash wage (\$)	Men's cash wage (\$)
Rakuwari	0.76	1.06
Nanour	0.86	1.91
Korahiya	1.21	1.54
Dogachhinagara	1.40	2.75
Damdaha	1.28	3.15
Thadi Jijha	1.43	1.67
Ekrahi	1.43	1.71
Giddha	1.47	1.57
Ragunathpur	1.75	1.67
Simariya	2.05	3.98
Mahendranagar	2.53	3.76
Jhorahat	1.90	3.16
Bhaudaha	1.52	1.57
Thalaha	1.12	2.97

sometimes some inter-linkage between tenancy and farm labor contracts, with tenants also laboring directly for their landlords, particularly in Madhubani.

Also at the base of the agrarian structure is a sizeable class of marginal owner cultivators who are not engaged in tenancy yet own small plots. 18.3 % of the sample are small owner cultivators with less than 0.5 ha, and a further 12.3 % have between 0.5 and 1 ha (see Table 3). Few households can subsist though, even with this amount of owned land, and 1 ha was estimated by some farmers in Morang to be the 'upper limit' to support a typical family of 6. The majority therefore are also engaged in wage labor and migration. Thirty-one percent of the aggregate farm labor days recorded by households in the sample were from these two groups of owner cultivators (see Table 1).

There is some flexibility within these three groups at the base of the agrarian structure, and in some respects, they can be considered a single class. Many landless laborers move in and out of tenancy and thus can move from the 'landless laborer' to 'tenant' group. Similarly, marginal owner cultivators may take additional land on tenancy from time to time and thus may become a part-tenant. These changes are due often to the availability of land to lease as well as household food security requirements in a given agricultural year.

The weak economic position of landless laborers, tenants, and marginal owner cultivators also makes them particularly vulnerable to other exploitative relations such as usury. There are three primary reasons that farmers take loans—the first is to pay for fertilizer or seeds before planting, the second is to meet short-term consumption needs, and the third is to meet one-off expenses such as marriages or payments to a middleman to facilitate the migration of a family member. The 2013 sample, which included data on debt, revealed that indebtedness to money lenders is widespread, particularly among landless laborers, tenants, and marginal owner cultivators (see Fig. 3), particularly in Dhanusha and Madhubani. Money lenders,

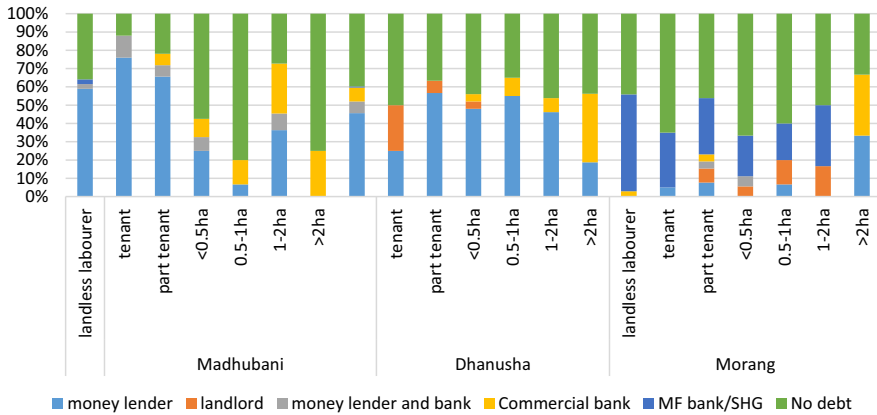


Fig. 3 Source of loan (Source: 2013 survey)

who are normally also large farmers or landlords, charge extortionate interest rates varying from 36 to 50 % per year. The greatest indebtedness was in Dhanusha where migration-related loans are common. Landless laborers owe on average \$1322 to private lenders, tenants and part-tenants owe \$1216, and marginal owner cultivators (owning <1 ha) owe \$730. Indebtedness is present among richer farmers, yet it is less prevalent (only \$167 for those with more than 2 ha), and they are more likely to take loans from commercial banks with lower interest rates. In Morang and Sunsari where landlords are mostly absentee, the role of money lenders is less significant, although a form of indebtedness not captured in the survey is the tendency of Morang and Sunsari farmers to take loans from grain merchants or *katawalas*, who are repaid at harvest time in paddy or wheat. As documented in earlier studies (Sugden 2009a), merchants extract both interest on the loans and a ‘disguised interest’ (see Harriss-White 1996) by lowering the buying price.

Medium or large farmers and landlords

There is a small class of medium farmers with between 1 and 2 ha, yet this group is small, at just 11.58 % of the sample (see Table 3). Large farmers with more than 2–5 ha represent an even smaller proportion, at just 4.94 %. Those with more than 5 ha, who could be considered ‘landlords,’ represent just 0.6 %. Together the medium farmers, large farmers and landlords constitute just over 17 % of respondents yet own a substantial two-thirds of the land in the sample. Large and medium farmers (but not landlords) are also engaged in some farm labor, but this is often part of a de facto ‘exchange’ of labor between farms for busy times of year. All are net buyers of labor and often rent out excess holdings to their poorer counterparts. 74.22 % of the land reported as ‘rented out’ belongs to medium farmers, large farmers, and landlords. Data on money lending was too sensitive to be captured in the survey, although it is reported that households who fit into the large farmer and landlord group are engaged in money lending to poorer farmers,

Table 3 Concentration of land within the sample. (Source: 2013 and 2015 survey)

District	Farmer land ownership category	% of sample	% total cultivated land belonging to each group	% total land owned by sample belonging to each group
Madhubani	Landless laborer	24.80	0.58	0.68
	Tenant	15.36	0.16	0.18
	Part-tenant	14.82	7.66	8.93
	<0.5 ha	21.56	10.03	11.69
	0.5–1 ha	8.63	11.08	12.91
	1–2 ha	10.78	27.79	32.39
	>2 ha	4.04	28.50	33.21
	Total	100.00	85.79	100.00
Purnea	Landless laborer	33.82	0.01	0.01
	Tenant	17.39	0.00	0.00
	Part-tenant	9.18	4.27	6.71
	<0.5 ha	8.70	2.35	3.69
	0.5–1 ha	10.63	7.49	11.76
	1–2 ha	12.08	18.31	28.75
	>2 ha	7.25	31.25	49.08
	Total	100.00	63.68	100.00
Dhanusha	Landless laborer	12.91	0.28	0.33
	Tenant	10.81	0.11	0.13
	Part-tenant	15.32	7.15	8.40
	<0.5 ha	20.42	7.01	8.24
	0.5–1 ha	16.82	15.77	18.53
	1–2 ha	15.62	25.20	29.62
	>2 ha	7.81	29.56	34.75
	Total	100.00	85.07	100.00
Sunsari	Landless laborer	19.90	0.38	0.59
	Tenant	13.93	0.06	0.09
	Part-tenant	15.42	8.22	12.87
	<0.5 ha	20.90	7.78	12.18
	0.5–1 ha	13.43	12.28	19.24
	1–2 ha	9.95	16.83	26.37
	>2 ha	4.48	18.30	28.67
	Total	100.00	63.84	100.00
Morang	Landless laborer	16.91	0.27	0.85
	Tenant	16.26	0.27	0.85
	Part-tenant	21.14	6.84	21.42
	<0.5 ha	14.63	3.23	10.13
	0.5–1 ha	12.20	7.83	24.53
	1–2 ha	4.88	6.29	19.72
	>2 ha	1.99	7.18	22.51
	Total	100.00	31.91	100.00

Table 3 continued

District	Farmer land ownership category	% of sample	% total cultivated land belonging to each group	% total land owned by sample belonging to each group
Total	Landless laborer	22.67	0.30	0.43
	Tenant	14.33	0.11	0.16
	Part-tenant	14.74	6.76	9.73
	<0.5 ha	18.30	6.23	8.96
	0.5–1 ha	12.31	11.25	16.19
	1–2 ha	11.58	20.20	29.06
	>2 ha	5.51	24.66	35.46

Table 4 Total cultivated area under tenancy. (Source: 2013 and 2015 survey)

District	Land rented in	Land rented out	Total land rented	Total land cultivated	% area rented in	% area rented out	% area under tenancy
Madhubani	53.00	24.27	77.27	202.21	26.21	12.00	38.21
Purnea	82.62	9.52	92.14	199.77	41.36	4.77	46.12
Dhanusha	64.05	26.65	90.70	244.23	26.23	10.91	37.14
Sunsari	70.59	12.56	83.15	146.08	48.32	8.60	56.92
Morang	102.93	10.10	113.03	135.26	76.10	7.47	83.57
Total	373.19	83.10	456.29	927.55	40.23	8.96	49.19

with interest as an additional source of income. Occasionally, absentee landlords also give out loans.

While the medium and large farmers and landlords retain economic dominance over the marginal and tenant majority, it is the latter group with more than 5 ha who are by far the most powerful. Some landlords own up to 25 ha, and they hold considerable political as well as economic influence. They are, however, underrepresented in the sample. The number of local landlords is generally too small to be captured in a random sample. Similarly, the sample does not capture the absentee landlords, who do not reside locally. Table 4 shows a big difference between the total land rented in and the total land rented out, suggesting that a representative proportion of land owners were not counted in the sample. This represents a limitation of the data. Qualitative information on the landlords suggests that the majority have family members linked to the historical tax collection bureaucracy, although some medium and large farmers were descendants of this elite whose holdings were fragmented among sons, or lost land due to debt or land reform. For many landlords, family members have professional salaried employment, particularly in the bureaucracy—which in both Nepal and Bihar has long been dominated by landed groups, while for some others, agriculture remains the dominant profession.

In sum it is clear that marginal farmers, laborers and tenants are subject to multiple axes of exploitation through ground rent, usury, and wage labor. The monopoly of land among a small class of medium and large farmers and landlords, who appropriate surplus through rent and usury, and the importance of in-kind mechanisms of payment suggest that the mode of production remains semi-feudal in character.

A mode of production in flux

Political change

It is important, however, to note that despite the persistence of feudal relations, the mode of production remains dynamic and in flux as articulations with capitalism evolve. Firstly, the relationship between land owners and tenants is changing. There have been significant political changes in Bihar and the Nepal Tarai since the 1990s which have undermined some of the ideological mechanisms of feudal reproduction. There was evidence of active class struggle in Dhanusha of Nepal. The restoration of democracy in the 1990s sensitized many villagers, and in one village, a revolt against the landlord saw tenants trying to seize the land. Such instances were amplified during Nepal's Maoist People's War in Nepal. In another Dhanusha village, the tenants agitated against a landlord who they believe had falsely claimed public land in his name. Both incidents eventually culminated in the landlord selling off much of his estate. The Maoist war saw similar movements in Morang-Sunsari, including seizure of land by rebels, but after the war, the status quo was restored with the resurgent influence of mainstream parties in rural areas, many of whose leaders were powerful landlords in the region.

In Bihar to the south, the populist caste politics from the 1990s onwards had also challenged entrenched caste hierarchies between landlords and tenants in Madhubani and culminated in the increased political and economic power of the middle castes, known as other backward castes (OBCs). It appears from testimonies that these changes are primarily ideological, although Karan (2009) suggested that the rising political assertiveness of marginalized groups have in some cases contributed to improved wages and conditions for landless laborers. While not all these movements led to direct changes in material relations, they have reportedly increased the assertiveness of peasants.

Declining landlord estates yet persisting land poverty

Landlord estates have also been declining in size in some districts for reasons not associated with class struggle. This is due in part to the ongoing breakdown of estates with population growth and division of holdings among sons. Furthermore, it was reported that as landlords diversify their income sources, with the younger generation taking up professional employment in the bureaucracy or service

Table 5 % of total land area bought and sold by different farm size categories

Farmer category	% of total sample	% of total land sold	% of total land bought	Area of land sold in the last 10 years (ha)	Area of land bought in last 10 years (ha)
Tenant	14.33	6.27	1.00	4.49	.81
Part-tenant	14.74	13.71	20.89	9.82	16.88
<0.5 ha	18.30	17.79	18.19	12.74	14.70
0.5–1 ha	12.31	17.49	14.50	12.53	11.72
1–2 ha	11.58	21.16	18.43	15.16	14.89
>2 ha	5.51	21.34	24.65	15.29	19.92
Landless laborer	22.67	1.47	1.21	1.05	0.98
Total				71.64	80.80

sector,¹¹ they no longer see the value of retaining large estates in the countryside. This is particularly notable in more remote regions such as Dhanusha, where the potential future value and productivity of the land are considered lower.

These changes have led to some redistribution of land within the farming population. For example, Table 5 from our own sample shows that over the last 10 years, the total area sold by farmers in the sample is 71.64 %, while the area bought is 80.80 %. The fact that purchases *exceed* sales suggests that there is some redistribution underway and reflects the buying up of land from landlords. However, when one looks at *who* is buying and selling land, there are signs that the situation is more complex.

Although 55.80 % of land purchased over the last 10 years was by households with less than 1 ha of land, 56.72 % of land sales was also from this group. Sales were invariably reported to be due to indebtedness and economic insecurity driven by climate shocks and rising costs of living. This suggests that while there has not been a striking *increase* in inequality, purchases of land by poor farmers are canceled out by sales. Furthermore, the data on land sales do not include the loss of land due to fragmentation among sons.

Oral testimonies suggested that while many medium and large farmers have also lost land due to debt, the rising cost of living, and fragmentation, they have also benefitted more from the breakup of larger estates. The medium and large farmers with more than 1 ha account for 42.5 % of sales, and 43.08 % of the total land purchases, despite the fact they represent only 17.09 % of the sample. The fact that purchases slightly exceed sales for this group, while the opposite is true for poorer farmers, backs up these testimonies.

The changes become clearer when looking at data over a longer timescale, given that landlords have been selling up land for over two decades. The NSS data from Bihar in Table 6 show that the percentage land area belonging to farmers with less

¹¹ The small industrial class in Morang and Sunsari was mostly from the Marwari community and reportedly had little interest in land or agriculture, with government jobs being the most common reported occupation of landlords.

Table 6 Distribution of area owned by farmer category in Bihar. (Source: NSSO 2006)

Year	% area owned by households with <1 ha	% area owned by households with 1–2 ha	% area owned by households with 2–4 ha	% area owned by households with >4 ha	% landless households
2003	42.07	25.29	18.53	14.19	7.6
1992	28.58	23.84	24.45	23.12	8.6
1982	23.96	22.91	27.02	26.12	4.1
1971–1972	18.2	23.43	28.07	30.3	4.3

Table 7 % distribution of households by farmer category in Bihar. (Source: NSSO 2006)

Year	% households with <1 ha	% households with 1–2 ha	% households with 2–4 ha	% households with >4 ha
2003	89.4	7.1	2.7	0.8
1992	80.56	11.1	6	2.34
1982	76.55	12.42	7.79	3.13
1971–1972	71.71	15.11	9.15	4.03

than 1 ha increased between 1971–1972 and 2003 from 18.2 to 42.07 %, while the percentage of land belonging to households with more than 2 ha has declined. This points to a breakup of larger estates due to fragmentation and sales, with some land passing into the hands of poorer farmers. However, Table 7 also shows that the actual percentage of farmers with less than 1 ha has increased from 71.71 to 89.4 % in the same period, most likely due to distress sales and fragmentation. Further analysis of the 2003 data shows that the percentage of households who own only uncultivated homestead land and no fields is a significant 31.01 % (Rawal 2008). The average holdings for those who do own farm land was just 0.4 ha (NSSO 2006). Karan's (2009) longitudinal study also echoes these trend, while also identifying an increase in the area of land under tenancy between 1982/1983 and 1999/2000 from 24.59 to 25.47 %. Therefore, although a greater share of land may lie with marginal farmers, the size of this group is growing, with fewer fields to go around, and fragmentation and distress sales ensure land poverty remains widespread.

The Bihar data from Tables 6 and 7 also point to the emergence of a more powerful 'middle farmer' class. The proportion of the total land area owned by middle farmers with 1–2 hectares has increased from 23.43 % in 1971 to 25.29 % in 2003, despite a drop in the proportion of these farmers from 15 to 7 %. This suggests that with distress sales, around half the middle farmers have entered the small farmer category, while the remainder have consolidated their position, buying plots from landlords who are selling off, and poor farmers who are in distress. Similarly, despite a fourfold decline in the percentage of the largest farmers with 2–4 ha and <4 ha, the proportion of land owned by this group has only halved. This divergence between the population decline and the area of land owned by this group suggests that some large farmers and landlords are retaining their holdings.

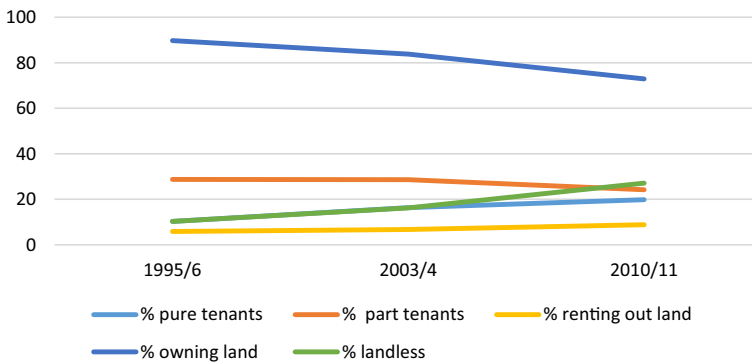


Fig. 4 Change in % of tenancy and land ownership in East and Central Tarai of Nepal. (Source: Central Bureau of Statistics 1996, 2011)

Table 8 Percentage households fitting different land ownership categories in Nepal Tarai 1995/1996–2010/2011

Year	<0.5 ha	0.5–2 ha	>2 ha	Landless	Tenants
2010/2011	50.4	42.8	6.8	30	36.3
1995/1996	33.18	47.07	19.75	24.41	36.2

In the case of the Nepal Tarai, the trend appears similar. The Nepal Living Standards Survey data from the East and Central Tarai (see Fig. 4) show that between 1995/1996 and 2010/2011, the proportion of farmers who are landless or pure tenants has increased. Table 8 which include data from across the Tarai¹² also attest to an increase in the proportion of land owned by marginal farmers (with less than 0.5 ha) matched by a significant increase in the size of this category (see Table 9). There has also been a significant increase in the proportion of land belonging to farmers in the middle (with between 0.5 and 2 ha) from 38.81 to 54.7 %, despite the fact this group has declined in number.

The above trends reflect the data from the sample in Table 3 which point to the presence of a large and medium farmer class who share economic dominance with the traditional landed elite. This also corroborates data from North Bihar which point to the rise in a class of middle farmers from the intermediate (OBC) castes such as the *Yadav* and *Kushuwaha (Koeri)*, who are buying land of the landlords who are selling off their estates (Karan 2009). This ‘rural neolite’ as Karan (2009) terms them have increased their rural authority against a backdrop of the rising political power of the OBCs.

These changes do not, however, mean that landlord power has dissipated. As noted above, there are still powerful local landlords in the region, even if their estates are smaller than before, particularly in Purnea and Madhubani, where two local land owners in the sample had holdings of between 10 and 20 ha. In a village

¹² Data on farm sizes from just the central and eastern Tarai were not available.

Table 9 Percentage land owned by different land ownership categories in Nepal Tarai 1995/1996–2010/2011

Year	<0.5 ha	0.5–2 ha	>2 ha
2010/2011	14.6	54.7	30.7
1995/1996	5.8	38.81	55.39

in Madhubani from another study 5 km from Rakuwari, 51 % of the land belongs to just seven households (3.7 %), each of whom owns large estates (Sugden et al. 2016a). Furthermore, absentee landlords who own 53 % of the rented land in Morang/Sunsari, 49 % in Madhubani, and 75 % in Purnea retain a strong grip on their holdings, particularly in Nepal where they have considerable political power. In the Sunsari and Dhanusha 2015 sample, only 12.84 % of land purchases in the last 10 years were from absentee landlords, with the rest being from local farmers. In Madhubani and Purnea, purchases from absentee landlords were only 2.3 %.

What does, however, seem apparent is that the monopoly of land among a single landlord class has declined, and it appears increasingly common for land-poor farmers to rent land from multiple landlords, including local large and middle farmers. Contracts with landlords have also become more impersonal, particularly as landlords become absentee and manage their estates through an agent, known in Nepal as a *kamtiya*. Patron–client relations between tenants and landlords such as the *jajamani* system have declined, although they persist in other forms. Two different landlords in Madhubani, for example, noted how when his own tenants work for him they provide extra services, such as laboring on his land for lower wages than outside workers, or providing a few hours labor for free.

Reduced bondage to landlords and increase in indebtedness

Perhaps the most significant change is that there has been a decline in the inter-linkage between landlordism and usury. Karan's (2009) data set from Bihar points to a decline in debt-associated bonded labor between 1982/1983 and 1999/2000, as does a study from Purnea by Rodgers and Rodgers (2001). Large farmers and landlords are still the primary lenders, but in the study sites in Madhubani, respondents noted that they have more choice today compared with the 1970s and 1980s. In one village, respondents noted how there were four lenders to choose from for large loans of more than \$1000, and around twenty households who could give smaller loans of \$200 or less. The cause of this change is difficult to pinpoint, but the increasing diversity of the landed class which includes medium to rich farmers as well as the traditional 'zamindars' is significant, as is the expansion of markets and the greater circulation of cash in the community, which gives some other farmers the opportunity to accumulate and to start giving out loans.

What is important to emphasize though is that despite a decrease in bondage to single landlords and a decline in some of the *ideological* mechanisms of semi-feudal reproduction, change in the relations of production has been less notable. In fact, with rising articulations with capitalism, some forms of surplus appropriation such

as usury have reportedly intensified, despite the reduced debt bondage to single landlords. The rising cost of living has increased the demand for loans considerably. The process of rising indebtedness in the context of market expansion echoes Takashahi and Mins' (1952) intervention in the Transition Debate, where they note how rising trade and monetization in medieval Europe resulted not in capitalist development, but reinforced feudalism through the expansion of usury. In the case of Nepal, debt is associated with overseas migration. Farmers from Dhanusha, Morang, and Sunsari must take loans of up to \$1500 per person to send a family member abroad, making money lending an increasingly attractive option for large farmers and rural businessmen with cash at hand.

New patterns of surplus appropriation and control over the means of production

Aside from the increase in money lending, there are new patterns of surplus appropriation and control over the means of production which are bolstering the power of the medium and large farmer class in particular—the most notable of which is the control over agricultural equipment. Migration has increased seasonal labor shortages, increasing the demand for equipment such as tractors and threshers. As shown in Fig. 5, ownership of this equipment among tenants, part-tenants, and marginal farmers is negligible. For example, 58 % of the tractors in the community belong to farmers with more than 1 ha. These are generally rented out to poorer farmers, providing an additional rent, with the cost varying according to supply and demand and the bargaining power of the farmer. For example, in villages with few tractors available, the income during the plowing time can be lucrative. Tractors are normally paid per unit area cultivated.

One of the most lucrative sources of additional rent is the pump set. In the context of increasingly erratic rainfall patterns, groundwater irrigation is increasingly important for farmers to adapt to climate change. This adaptive capacity is, however, intricately connected to one's position in the agrarian structure (Sugden

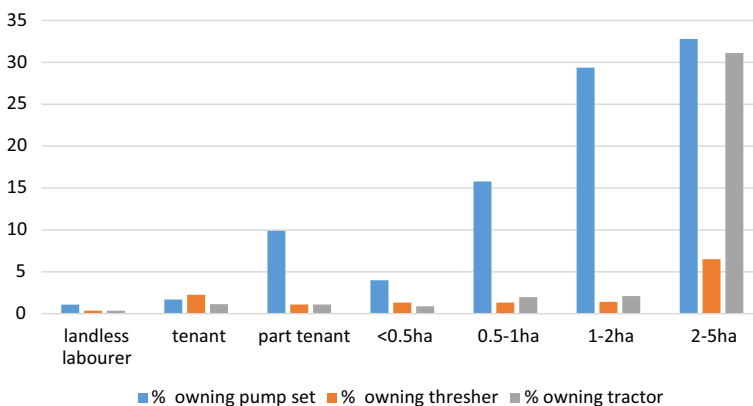


Fig. 5 Ownership of agricultural equipment by farmer group

et al. 2014). For marginal farmers, and in particular, tenants, their marginal holdings and surplus appropriation through rent and usury mean they are not only more vulnerable in the first place to economic and climate stress on a day-by-day basis, but the available cash to invest in irrigation is also far more limited. This plays into the hands of pump set and tubewell owners who can rent out their equipment. Fifty-four percentage of pump sets belong to the middle, large, and landlord categories of farmer, a group constituting just 17 % of the sample. Renting a pump is considerably more expensive than operating one's own, as the hourly fee includes not only increasingly costly diesel, but a 'rent' for the owner of the equipment. These rents are also driven up by local monopolies, particularly if there are only a few pump sets or tubewell owners in a village (Sugden et al. 2014).

Another more complex source of surplus for the landed classes is indirect and entails the appropriation of state resources meant for marginalized groups, what Sinha (1996) terms as 'bureaucratic feudalism' with regard to Bihar. For example, in 2014, early rains during the spring ruined the wheat crop in Madhubani. For several poor farmers interviewed who had paid to rent pump sets as well as investing in labor and other inputs, this represented a significant loss. Although the government provided compensation, the financial relief was taken by land owners and not the tenants who had farmed the land. Accessing other state resources such as education grants for Dalits was also reportedly challenging and mired in corruption. In this context, a burgeoning sector of rural brokers and middlemen has emerged in Bihar, who mediate access to state services and resources (Perwez 2014).

This can be viewed as going hand in hand with the rollback of social services by the state following liberalization, and the emergence of an unregulated private sector for essential services, which again offers new opportunities for wealth accumulation among the rural elite. This includes expensive private schools or clinics (Sinha 1996), which often absorb a large portion of the remittance cash of migrants (Sugden et al. 2015a). Another burgeoning private sector enterprise in Nepal is the 'manpower' industry, which takes large fees from migrants to arrange foreign employment in the Gulf and Malaysia, which are often disproportionate to the services offered. Whether these forms of surplus appropriation are 'feudal' or 'capitalist' is open to debate; yet, it is clear that it represents an economic process intricately connected to a semi-colonial social formation, and the unique form of capitalism which operates there grounded in importing commodities and exporting labor.

Semi-feudalism under stress?

Many of the characteristics of feudalism outlined at the start of this paper are still present. Land is still concentrated among a small, albeit diverse class of landlords and money lenders at the apex of the agrarian structure, with surplus being appropriated, usually in kind through rent, labor, and interest. It is clear though that the external market forces associated with globalization and internal political changes are driving change in the semi-feudal mode of production. Set against a backdrop of continued out-migration, a critical question is whether the relations of production are under stress. Chandra (1974) suggested that the growth of industries

which demand labor would reduce poor farmers' dependence on usurious capital, which (in classical models of South Asian semi-feudalism) was central to the bondage between landlords and tenants. In Mithilanchal today, there has been a boom in labor migration. However, wages are insufficient to support a family at a time of rising living costs and monetization, and thus, farmers still depend on sharecropping and even consumption loans to meet part of their subsistence needs.

In fact, with the rise in out-migration and off-farm labor, it represents a classic articulation of modes of production (Sugden 2013). Farmers engage in labor in both the pre-capitalist agrarian economy and in capitalism in urban centers or abroad, while the aggregate surplus is shared between pre-capitalist exploiting classes and capitalism. In fact, the semi-feudal agrarian economy can be said to 'subsidize' wages in the capitalist sector, given that the costs of labor reproduction for workers are met on the farm (see Meillassoux 1981).

There is no need for debt bondage to landlords to reproduce semi-feudalism. The continued concentration of land, combined with increased fragmentation and a rising cost of living, means many households require rented land and loans to subsist. While finding land to rent is not difficult, tenants' capacity to bargain with landlords remains limited, and demand is still high enough for there to be no downward pressure on rents. In Nanour and Korahiya of Madhubani, it was reported that land owners would rather leave land fallow than accept less than 50 % rent, in the fear that other farmers may follow in demanding a lower rent. Farmers themselves reported that they are afraid to challenge the landlords, as they could just replace them with a new tenant. With persuasion and cultivation of a good relationship with landlords, the only concessions they would give would be to contribute to fertilizer costs, but this was present on just 15 % of rented plots in Purnea and 7 % in Madhubani in the 2015 survey. It had reportedly increased in Nepal recent years due to migrant-induced labor shortages, with half of landlords in Dhanusha and two-thirds in Sunsari sharing fertilizer costs. However, it has by no means reached a point where meaningful negotiation over rents and input contributions can be made—and landlords would never contribute to the much more costly investment in tubewell irrigation.

Caste ideology is likely to still play a role in reproducing semi-feudal relations of production, albeit in increasingly more subtle ways. The power of the middle castes has risen significantly, with caste-aligned social networks offering opportunities for upward mobility. Nevertheless, change has been limited among the *Dalit* community, for whom 87 % are landless laborers, tenants, or marginal owner cultivators (<0.5 ha). In the case of Nepal, exclusionary ethno-nationalist ideology has also succeeded in maintaining an underclass of landless households across the Tarai-Madhesh, through complex processes rooted in ethicized barriers which restrict access to citizenship and state power households (Sugden 2011). Similarly, 62 % of medium farmers, 65 % of large farmers, and 75 % of landlords are upper or middle caste, given their historical role in the tax collection bureaucracy.

The state plays an active role in reproducing both the pre-capitalist mode of production and its articulation with capitalism. The bureaucracies of both Nepal and India (particularly Bihar) have for decades been well represented by landed classes who are fundamentally opposed to land or tenure reform (Kishore 2004; Sugden and

Gurung 2012; Joshi and Mason 2007), as well as comprador classes who are enriched by dependence on foreign capital (Alavi 1990; Ghosh 1983b; Blaikie et al. 2001). Meaningful land reform or the emergence of a strong organic industrial base which pays wages sufficient to completely draw the marginal and tenant farmers out of agriculture seems elusive. Labor migration is thus tolerated or even encouraged in the case of Nepal to keep a lid on social unrest, while in India, it directly provides low-wage casual labor to industry and the service sector (Sugden 2016b). In many ways, the migration economy epitomizes the contradictions of a semi-colonial social formation, whereby an absence of industry, rising cash needs (including demand for imported consumer goods), and persisting pre-capitalist social relations at home drive farmers into the capitalist labor market on unfavorable terms.

There is limited evidence of any capitalistic development initiated by landlords themselves. Proponents of semi-feudalism in the 1970s such as Bhaduri (1973) and Chandra (1974) suggest that capital investment by landlords was undesirable as it would undermine the dependence by tenants on consumption loans. The situation has of course changed with poor farmers no longer dependent on single landlords for loans. Nevertheless, landlord investment is limited, with the exception of the small number of commercial plantations in Purnea. This has multiple causes. Firstly, some farmers noted in interviews that many landlords have income sources outside of agriculture, normally in the bureaucracy, and thus investing on the land is not a priority. Several landlords and large farmers who were interviewed also cited that they were less interested in investing in improved inputs and hiring laborers directly due to high input costs and climate stress and preferred to give land to tenants who would bear the risk. Tenancy in this context had reportedly increased dramatically in the last decade, although there is no data yet to back this up.

There are some unanswered questions regarding how surplus by landlords and money lenders is being used. In theory, surplus could be diverted into productive enterprises. However, evidence on the ground suggested this was limited. Although many landlords had external sources of income, most of those who were interviewed did not have any 'capitalist' investments, with most this external income being from salaried employment, particularly in the government. In Morang, it was reported that landlords often distribute the grain received in rent among their extended family for consumption purposes.

New opportunities for tenant and marginal farmer mobilization

With regard to the future, radical redistributive land reforms would certainly play a critical role in undermining semi-feudal relations. However, this appears unlikely so long as landed interests remain entrenched in the bureaucracy and the kind of grassroots mobilization which made reforms possible in 1970s West Bengal (see Banerjee et al. 2002) appears overly optimistic in the case of Bihar and Nepal.

However, the increased political awareness of the marginal farmer, tenant, and laborer class, combined with the reduced bondage to landlords, provides a valuable opportunity for bottom-up mobilization. One potential form of mobilization among landless and poor farmers is the pooling of land, labor, and resources for improved

political power and increased productivity—the small-scale collectivization of agriculture. Collectives can be initiated in the Nepal Tarai-Madhesh and Bihar through marginal owners pooling their land, or through tenants taking a group lease from a land owner. Agarwal (2010), for example, makes a compelling case for a reinvented group approach to farming which can overcome contemporary agrarian stresses such as high input costs, climate stress, and land inequality. To avoid the pitfalls of Soviet era collectives though, Agarwal proposes a model which is voluntary and democratic, includes small groups, and is socioeconomically homogenous. In several parts of South Asia today, grassroots NGOs and community groups have already set up successful agricultural collectives which meet these criteria. They generally consist of small groups sharing a single tract of land who are jointly investing in inputs and share labor (Agarwal 2010; Friedman-Rudovsky 2014; Landesa 2013).

In Nepal and Bihar, the establishment of collectives through joint lease would allow the sharing of costs for fixed investments by tenants themselves, increasing their economic status. By operating a contiguous plot, the use of other technologies and irrigation would be more feasible (Landesa 2013; Agarwal 2010). Enhanced incomes and collective mobilization could increase the bargaining power of tenants when negotiating rental contracts and could encourage a move toward fixed cash rent contracts, where the incentives for increased productivity and opportunities for income generation are significantly higher.

As one would expect though, collective farming can only flourish following a meaningful redistribution of land, as collective leasing itself depends on the support of landlords. However, in the long term, the group solidarity and mobilization through group lease collectives could allow tenants to more easily claim their legal rights to tenure security should a meaningful program of land reform be implemented in the future. At the same time, it could pave the way for mobilization at a national and regional level via larger political movements for both land reforms themselves and more equitable trade regimes and policies for farmers.¹³ Furthermore, to counter criticisms of land reform as impeding dynamism in agriculture (Dyer 2004), collectives could provide a model for a more productive and dynamic post-reform agriculture—one based on a radical new systems of socialistic production.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the changes which have occurred in agriculture in Mithilanchal over the last half a century and has shown how semi-feudal relations of production are reproduced across the generations. There have, however, been significant changes. Pressures associated with climate change and economic liberalization have entrenched an articulation with capitalism through the migrant labor economy. More recently, the division of holdings, changed aspirations, and

¹³ The growth potential of agriculture after reforms has also been cast into question in the context of neo-liberal restructuring and increasingly unfavorable terms of trade (Lerche 2013).

greater political mobilization among tenants and laborers have undermined the authority of the landed classes and have encouraged a breakup of *some* landlord estates. This land has not, however, been distributed equally, and the relations of production remain dominated by sharecropping and low-wage farm labor, with limited capital accumulation among even the richest farmers. Economic stresses following liberalization have also allowed usury to flourish, even if debt bondage to landlords and patron–client relations have declined.

A primary change is that the articulations with capitalism have grown significantly, both through the expansion of capitalist markets, and through the migrant labor economy. While landlords on the one hand, and mercantile or industrial capitalists on the other, represent unique classes, there is a convergence of interests which gives the system some level of stability. Landlords benefit from the unique form of capitalism in a social formation which can be considered semi-colonial in character, with stunted industrial development and dependence on foreign capital and imports. Meanwhile, the capitalist sector within the country and overseas benefits from a supply of surplus labor to which is perpetuated by semi-feudal inequalities.

The paper notes, however, that the increased diversity of the landed class and greater political awareness among the marginal and tenant farmer majority has opened up new avenues for collective mobilization and struggle. The collectivization of tenants and marginal farmers through land pooling or group leases can raise productivity, increase resilience, and build their bargaining power—a process which can take place both within and outside of formal organizational structures. Collective farmer groups however, only represent a mid-way point to empower marginal and tenant farmers in the short term without dismantling the pillars of semi-feudalism; yet, it can also demonstrate a new model of agriculture which can be replicated if and when genuine political–economic transformation takes place, led by the marginal farmers, laborer, and tenant majority, toward a more equitable social formation.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest There are no potential conflicts of interest to report in this paper.

Research involving human participants and/or animals and informed consent Full informed consent was acquired from all research participants before collecting data. While in the context of North Bihar

and Nepal, obtaining written consent was not possible—a common constraint in rural settings, the research team endeavored to give a clear indication of the purpose of the research and how the data would be used. Entry to the field sites was obtained using respected and long-trusted partner organizations and key informants. Minimizing harm to research participants is a priority, and all data collected is confidential and remain anonymous.

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