



# Rural Underdevelopment A Micro Perspective from Western Uttar Pradesh *Circa*, 1930-2014

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## ABSTRACT

India's rural underdevelopment marked by rampant poverty, abysmal infrastructure and poor human indices has defied planners and policy makers for decades even as divisions between development perspectives championed by Liberals, Marxists, Centrists, radical environmentalists and communitarians/ Gandhians etc have remained sharp. In this light, a close scrutiny of the ground impact of initiatives like the green revolution, rural roads, government schools and a slew of welfare pronouncements like the MGNREGA on the rural economy seems imperative?

As a small contribution, this paper analyses the scale and limits of economic transition in a village called Dhantala (in Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh) over eight decades and charts the role of the state, non-governmental organizations and farmers' own movements in a struggle for prosperity since the late colonial era. Based on oral evidence available from the community's elders for the pre-colonial era and on surveys conducted personally since 1989, the study charts a slow decline in poverty and rise in agricultural productivity as well as distribution of welfare in a site blessed with fertile soil as well as irrigation from 1960s. Yet, extreme poverty and pathetic physical and social infrastructure remain characteristic of the village. In this light, the paper relates the findings on Dhantala's economy with those from other sites in the country and also national indicators before concluding with a review of perspectives on rural underdevelopment and the need for harmonizing ideals like economic freedom and social equity for a more balanced growth trajectory in future.

Keywords: Rural Economy, Underdevelopment, Meerut Countryside, State Role, Economic Liberalization, Development Perspectives.

## INTRODUCTION

Rural development calls for a gamut of changes including rapid expansion of infrastructure, increased productivity in farm and non-farm work and sharp reduction in poverty, inequalities, illiteracy and insularity in villages (1). While this transition was visible in north-western Europe as early as the eighteenth century, developing nations struggle to bring down infant mortality and undernourishment specially, in the rural sector, even in the third millennium.

In India, tenancy reform, modern irrigation and agricultural research and community development sprouted in the colonial era and became prime concerns of the state as well as civil society after independence. Yet, most of our villages lack regular electricity and pucca roads till today and more than a third of our rural population does not earn Rs.30, per capita, to qualify as non-poor (as per the revised poverty line acknowledged for rural India by the central government) in 2014.

Is the staggered development of our rural economy a consequence of rigid customs, caste and gender hierarchies or of our political economy and class-state nexus primarily? Would rural prosperity be unlocked by expanding market reforms or will the socialist agenda of land redistribution, collectivization and assaults on caste and patriarchy serve equity and growth better? Can farmers' movements, cooperatives, non-government organizations and self-help groups be engines of rural transformation or high-tech solutions like genetically modified crops and poly-house cultivation etc. would be better guarantors of rural prosperity? Will organic farming and water harvesting sustain agricultural growth in the long run or large irrigation and river linking projects are essential? Can organized manufacturing be encouraged in the countryside or should agro-processing and cottage industries serve as engines for non-farm growth? Is the entry of organized private sector in rural infrastructure desirable or public welfare and the government sector sufficient for eradicating rural poverty and underdevelopment by themselves?

Questions such as these have been a matter of debate for decades. Stands taken by neo-liberals, leftists, Gandhians, communitarians and environmentalists on these have also differed understandably. Unfortunately, rival positions on development planning have been forced to rest often on thin evidence or on secondary national surveys due to a relative dearth of multi-disciplinary field research throwing light on long term, intended and unintended consequences of rural initiatives in this vast country (2). As a result, not only policy prescriptions but readings of rural conditions in India have remained unclear and contradictory at times. Are inequalities in the countryside decreasing? Did the green revolution mainly help the rich farmer? Has rural poverty declined since economic liberalization? To what extent have major redistributive programs like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan made a difference in states like Uttar Pradesh? What explains the sharper wage rise, especially of unskilled labor, since 1980s? How does village level census and National Sample Survey data compare with the multi-method account of economic indices in said communities? Questions such as these cry out for multi-disciplinary research combining macro and micro, quantitative and qualitative and historical, economic and anthropological perspectives on rural transitions.

As a minor contribution, this paper offers a structured analysis of economic transitions since 1930's in one village, in western Uttar Pradesh, set in a wider context of macro and micro comparisons. In order to provide a balanced policy perspective, the paper has focused specially on the changing relationship between the state and the studied community called Dhantala

before revisiting diverse development perspectives for the countryside in India and listing some considerations for future policy debates in the light of our limited findings.

Dhantala is a middle sized village situated twenty one kilometers south of Meerut city. Its houses are concentrated in a 62 acre patch surrounded by fields spread across 1300 acres approximately. In 1989, when I first visited the village (with the help of a sweeper who had migrated from Dhantala to my neighborhood, in Delhi), the village's population was 2080. According to elders, Dhantala may have had about 800 residents in 1930s. In the following decades, the community grew steadily and peaked at 2692, in 2006, before shrinking to 2604 by 2014 (when my assistant counted it last). The village is dominated today by small and marginal farmers including dalits who benefitted from land redistribution in 1984. However, with its population tripling between 1930 and 2014, per capita availability of land fell from two to just three fourth of an acre in the village and most small farms became marginal (less than one hectare) by the third quarter of the last century and sub-marginal (less than one acre) by its end. Given the neglect of family planning and dearth of regular employment, the pressure on land would have been even more but for the emigration of about hundred families over past 25 years.

Principal castes living in Dhantala are: upper middle castes or Gujjars and Jats (58%) and lower middle castes or Kumhars and Lodhs (11%). Among others, the dalit or scheduled castes made up 22% {including Jatavs (19%) and Valmiki (03%)} while muslims constitute approximately nine per cent of the community. In 1989, Dhantala had the same communities in similar proportions. However, two *savarna* (upper caste) families also lived in the village then.

## METHODOLOGY

As stated, a major concern of this study was to offer quantitative as well as qualitative evidence with some historical depth on the limits of economic change in a village located in one of the most fertile tracts of India to chart the process of underdevelopment closely in India. The study of such change called for a multi-method approach involving surveys, interviews, focus group discussions and personal sketches besides the scrutiny of local records. While house to house surveys were conducted, in Dhantala, by my assistants in three rounds (in 1989, 2006-07 and 2013-14), I concentrated (in my numerous short visits of up to a fortnight at a time) on conducting focus group discussions and in-depth interviews besides counter-checks on assistants' work and comparing field data with district records and old family papers.

Tracking occupations, yields, earnings etc., in Dhantala, over eight decades necessitated a major engagement with quantitative data. The task was extremely tedious, however, given the historic depth sought in this study despite scarce local records and variations in subjects' oral responses at times. In this light, several safeguards were maintained for maintaining reliability of evidence. For example, the paper uses actual names of places and residents (wherever it was safe and permitted by subjects) making all observations accessible for critiques and follow ups. In order to make subjects partners in this multi-vocal study, I also tried to give space to their comments and maintained field notes in Hindi--the local language--besides sharing all statistical data and the draft of this paper with the educated in the village. The same is being readied for posting online too. Lastly, the extent of interpersonal knowledge among villagers and their extraordinary candor and accessibility (specially of elderly men) and, of course, their generous attitude to my endeavor were of immense help in bringing this long term project to fruition.

In 2011, 68% of India's population was rural (down from 82% in 1951). The decline of agriculturists in the country's workforce was even sharper at 49% (from 73% in 1951). However, this delayed turn around in India's countryside pales before the ratio of villagers and agriculturists in countries like UK and USA (at less than five per cent for more than a century). Even in developing countries like Malaysia the proportion of agriculturists among workers is below 20% now (3). Given a low count of agriculturists, it is not surprising that the average farm size in USA, in 2001, was 180 hectares. In India it is just about a hectare while the optimum holding size is more than 10 hectares. Even more worrying is the fact that per worker productivity in agriculture, in India, (at \$500, per annum, on average) is less than a hundredth of an agriculturist in USA, France and even Japan (at about \$50,000 per annum)(4).

No doubt, advances have been made in rural India over the past century. Check on large scale mortality during famines, freedom from external food assistance and marked improvements in human indices in states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu and in inspiring initiatives in villages like Punsari Gaon, Tilonia, Ralegaon and Hirway Bazar are cause for some celebration. The most important development has been the increase in national food grain output from about 50 million tons, in 1950, to 250 last year; of milk to about 120 million litres and of fruits and vegetables to 190 million tons (from 90 million in 1991). Interestingly, crop yields in some provinces of India are not far below international records. Thus, wheat harvest in Ludhiana delivers up to 60 quintals per hectare compared to highest yields of 75 quintals in UK etc. It is worth remembering that most farms in Punjab and Haryana also yield upto three crops a year.

However, with 60% of India's cultivable area staying unirrigated, the average national yield for cereals, in 2011, stood at just 23 quintals per hectare (having risen from seven in 1950-51). Apart from the introduction of high yielding varieties (HYV) seeds after 1965, the rise in crop yields, in India, benefited from growth of irrigation, increased mechanization and greater use of fertilizers. Still, it is worrisome that post harvest losses remain among the highest in India due to a very poor rural infrastructure and barriers on trading in farm produce. Thus, 25 million tons of cereals and 25% of fruits and vegetables were wasted, in 2013, even as six per cent of crops alone were insured in the country and just 1.5 % of world trade in agricultural produce went out from India. According to an official estimate, the cultivator gets only about 25% of the amount paid by the consumer for horticultural produce.

Not surprisingly, the National Sample Survey Organization, in 2003, found that 40% of agriculturists in India wish to move out of agriculture. Forty eight per cent of our agriculturists were indebted in the same year while total rural debt amounted to more than one lakh crore in 2007; half of this was from non-institutional sources at high interest rates of up to 100% per annum, forcing some to commit suicide and some to join extremist politics (5).

Given the saturation in landownership, the rural non-farm economy has been recognized as the key to poverty alleviation, steady job creation and reduction in slumming in developing economies. Historically too, rural manufacturing, proto-industrialization and high value agro-processing have been the principal growth catalysts in emerging economies. Yet, in comparison with rural industrialization in rapid developers like Japan and Taiwan, the expansion of India's rural non-farm sector at the most at 4% per annum, after 1999, does not appear impressive. In comparison with pre-liberalization decades, however, it represents a departure (6).

Above all, rural manufacturing remains bottled up in the absence of adequate infrastructure and skills in most parts of India though rural construction and services have been drivers of growth. Thanks to this limited spurt, relative stagnation in farming, in regions like Uttar Pradesh, has not thrown up a major crisis despite growing pressure on land. It is also pertinent that regions

(like Punjab and Kerala) where agriculturalists started moving towards non-agricultural jobs early, within or outside the country, prospered much more than those where such mobility was poor. To complement this macro understanding, we now attempt a long term portrait of change in the selected village called Dhantala which has been observed continuously by me since 1989.

## RESULTS

### A. Occupations

The twenty Gujjar lineages that dominate Dhantala today, trace their histories to 1780s when their ancestors are said to have come from Faridabad and other neighbouring districts on the initiative of Rasool Baksh—a scion of Yahya Khan—the local zamindar of five villages who held on to his estate under the British with a base in the adjacent village of *Tori*. The new settlers were cattle rearers. The fertile soil of the village and the presence of two ponds and a water channel here encouraged the settlers to adopt cultivation and thus realise that limited prosperity from which Dhantala's name (implying 'abode of wealth') derives.

Meanwhile, 'colonial peace' benefitted titleholders whose land values rose with stability and declining taxes (relative to prices) after 1914. On the other hand, tenants benefitted only marginally from laws passed in the wake of the peasant upsurge accompanying the national movement (7). The next break in the agricultural history of Dhantala came in 1950s and '60s when the abolition of zamindari and the introduction of chemical fertilizers raised yields and reduced requirement of fallows too. This was followed by a jump in wheat and rice yields as well as milk production, in the late sixties and seventies and by land allotments after a major agitation of the landless in 1982-84. Three acres of cultivable land (including any held by a beneficiary) was allotted to 106 men (90 in 1984 and 16 in 1990) from the commons which was under the watch of Dhantala's Land Management Committee (LMC) then. As a result, the proportion of male landless laborers came down to practically zero, in Dhantala's workforce, in 1984. Even today their share is less than 15% in contrast to surrounding villages like Doymi and Churiyala where it goes up to 50%. The number of marginal and sub-marginal farmers (holding fields between one hectare and one acre and less than an acre respectively) increased from 45 to 202 between 1989 and 2014, in Dhantala, due to sub-divisions across generations and a few distress sales. These small holders would have been impoverished severely but for the green revolution which increased yields with the help of fertilisers and improved seeds on all farm sizes and also because of the white revolution based on milk cooperatives.

The last quarter of the twentieth century also witnessed what may be called a 'grey revolution', in Dhantala, whereby motorized machines replaced muscle-driven appliances like *rahats* and ploughs on farms. This turnaround reduced labor as well as financial costs of farmers in ploughing, sowing and irrigating as well as harvesting, threshing and transporting though the intervening stages of weeding, manuring and spraying is largely based on manual work even now. The latest transition in local agriculture came with a fall in the ratio of farmers and growing emigration from the village due to the growth of construction and services in cities, in the wake of limited economic liberalization ushered in 1990s. This helped in raising real wages (specially of unskilled workers) and in increasing state's revenues for more welfare spending. As shown in Table-I, non-farm employment as well as the proportion of formal sector employees have grown in Dhantala since 1989 when the village was first surveyed by me. Yet, low paid manual work remains at almost ninety per cent of the workforce.

Table-I Estimated Occupations in Dhantala: 1989-2014  
(Usual Principal + Subsidiary Status Workers; Figures in brackets denote women workers)\*

Occupations// Years	1989	2014	SCs in 2014
<b>All Workers</b>	<b>843 (193)</b>	<b>1013 (215)</b>	<b>226 (70)</b>
Total Population	2080 (980)	2604 (1209)	599 (259)
Workers' Ratio	41% (20%)	39% (18%)	38% (27%)
Employers**	30 4%	24 2%	02 01%
Self Employed	689 81%	705 69%	143 51%
Casual Laborers	91 10%	177 18%	66 31%
Regular Wage Earners	33 5%	107 11%	17 17%
Unaid Women Workers (inc form labor)	52	41	19
Annual Workers	797 95%	888 89%	211 93%
Low skilled Workers	705 85%	791 79%	179 79%
Non Agriculturists***	165 22%	348 35%	77 41%
Manufacturing	A	8 inc 25 artisans and 02 employers	
<b>Agriculturists:-</b>	<b>678 78%</b>	<b>664 (169) 65%</b>	<b>149 59%</b>
Rear Livestock Alone \$	25	16	04
Women Livestock Rearers/	101	158	31
Near Landless	10	51	13
Sub Marginal Farmers	61	67 (1)	18
Marginal Farmers \$\$	80	128	12
Small Farmers	207	127 (1)	32
Small Leasors	10	05	01
Semi Middle Farmers	85	45	03
Middle Farmers	17	04	00
Absentee Landlords	00	00	00
Capitalist Farmers	06	03	00
<b>Tenant Cultivators</b>			
Small Tenants	16	04	01
Substantial Tenants	00	01	00
<b>All Cultivators</b>	<b>93 (3) 58%</b>	<b>85 (2) 31%</b>	<b>80 (1) 29%</b>
<b>All Labor</b>	<b>87 (46) 10%</b>	<b>126 (19) 15%</b>	<b>53 (12) 22%</b>
<b>Artisans and Servers</b>	<b>92 (14) 11%</b>	<b>121 (15) 10%</b>	<b>33 (1) 5%</b>
<b>All Formal Employees</b>	<b>27 3%</b>	<b>106 (17) 10%</b>	<b>16 17%</b>
<b>Rural Bourgeoisie</b>	<b>19 2%</b>	<b>50 (4) 5%</b>	<b>09 4%</b>
<b>All Workers</b>	<b>843 (193)</b>	<b>1013 (215)</b>	<b>226 (8)</b>
No. of Households	302	430	90

**Source:** Door to door surveys carried in Dhantala through one assistant in February 1989 and again in January 2014.

### Notes for Table I

Figures in italics are sub totals and in bold are grand totals. Percentages are of respective grand totals of all workers in concerned columns. Women workers are shown in bracket under major categories; SCs stands for scheduled castes;

#### Index:-

\* The principal occupation of workers with more than one profession may be identified on basis of time spent on particular work in a year or self identification with a job. In our survey, the first criterion namely, labor/ time invested has been used as per NSS criterion of minimum 183 days earning activity. The count of women workers is in brackets.

\*\* Employers include big farmers and entrepreneurs. Casual laborers include most sub-marginal farmers and some non farm workers. Self employed (excluding employers) include all artisans and service providers, petty shopkeepers and all agriculturists excluding middle farmers and sub marginal farmers.

\*\*About half of the non-agriculturists in Dhantala work on farms also at least occasionally.

\$ All but 90 families of Dhantala owned agricultural land in 2014. Of the landless families fifty had parents with marginal holdings. All villagers except 60 have livestock and tend as subsidiary activity.

\$\$ Cultivators include independent and tenant farmers. Near Landless are those with less than half acre plots (2.5 *kuchcha bighas* in popular local measure); sub-Marginal farmers have between half acre and one acre; marginal farmers own 1 to 2.5 acres (one hectare) of field; small farmers have holdings between 2.5 and 5 acres (two hectares); semi-middle farmers hold between five and ten acres while middle farmers are owners of less than twenty five acres but more than ten.

### B. Gender and Work

The gender profile of the workforce is also important to note here. Ironically, the standard definition of 'work' excludes most women from the category of workers even though the fair sex is excessively burdened with work specially in villages. The number of paid women workers, in Dhantala also was found to be only 242 (18% of all village females in 2014). But, the extent to which 'home-makers' and unpaid women cattle rearers are overburdened with work can be gleaned from below (Table-II) showing the daily time table of a relatively better off peasant woman of Dhantala called Jagwati.

**Table II Daily Routine of a Middle Caste, Middle Peasant Woman in Dhantala (November 2013)**

**Name:** Jagwati **Age:** 63 years **Caste:** Gujjar **Work:** Home Maker and subsidiary cattle rearing; **Education:** illiterate

**Family** of 10 including two other women; **Occupations:** agriculture and legal profession (the family has ten acres of land and eight buffaloes; one son is an advocate).

**5 to 6 am:** Goes to the field and gets ready for the day

**6 to 7 am:** Helps husband/ elder son in milking and feeding cattle;

**7 to 8 am:** Collects cow dung for making cakes; Prepares buttermilk and ghee.

**8 to 8.30 am:** Bathes and Prays; Boils milk and makes tea on an earthen chullah (gas cylinder used only for heating during day time).

**8 to 9 am:** Cooks rotis/ parantha on mud chullah.

**9 to 12 noon** Goes to field to collect fodder; chops it in a machine (operated manually since power is not available during day).

**12:00 to 1:00 pm:** washes cattle and cleans house including the cattle shed; (cow dung cakes are prepared by two daughters in-law).

**1 to 3 pm:** Takes rest (if no guests in the house); watches TV, if power available.

**3 to 4 pm:** Collects water from hand pump for family and for cattle;

**4 to 5 pm:** Feeds the cattle with grass soaked seeds and husk along with left over's.

**5 to 6 pm:** Milks cows and buffaloes;

**6 to 7 pm:** Boils milk and cooks evening meal;

**7 to 8 pm:** makes chapattis and serves meals

**8 to 9 pm:** Clean utensils and watch television before going off to sleep with children.

**Note:** Jagwati is assisted in these chores by her two daughter in-law's who take care of washing and children primarily.

### **The State and the Countryside**

At this point, we would like to assess the role of various agencies related with the rural economy directly. Among the main levers of development over the past century, in our countryside, have been the state, technology and the market, non-governmental organizations and farmers' movements. For centuries, the interface between the state and the countryside had been confined largely to tax collection and occasional remissions. The colonial state went further and provided 'law and order' and minor steps in rural development while the post independence state brought a massive engagement through welfare schemes, infrastructure development and subsidies on agricultural inputs and outputs. Yet, poverty persists in most of rural India and our democratic order remains a veneer on an inefficient and daunting 'governmentality' for villagers (8).

The British had extracted most of their revenue from agriculture till 1920s and left us with a life expectancy of just 33 years, on average, foodgrain availability of 360 grams, per capita, and 3700 electrified towns and villages in 1947 (far behind developments in Asian colonies like Korea and Formosa too). On the positive side, the British need to be credited for controlling constant warfare within the subcontinent, introducing tenancy protection, launching agricultural research, building 50,000 kms. of rail tracks (about three fourth of our present network), creating eight million hectares of canal fed agriculture (half of today's) and reducing the tax on

agricultural produce, by 1947, to about one fifth of the rental (down from half in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century).

In Dhantala, elders like Suraj Bhan and Parmanand recall that at the time of independence, a combination of wheat and millet harvest could yield up to Rs.40, in an acre, in a year. While rent charged by the zamindar from a regular tenant was fifty per cent of that, the tax due to the state annually had fallen below Rs 4 per acre. Significantly, different castes in Dhantala did not pay differential rents to the muslim landlord in contrast to reports of such discrimination from several villages before independence (9).

### **Democracy and Centralized Planning**

After 1947, adult franchise and planned development were introduced in India along with the abolition of zamindari, introduction of land ceilings and promises for redistribution of land to the landless (10). A near freeze on revenue demand (at Rs.75/- on holdings of more than five acres in Uttar Pradesh) also led to a fall in the tax rate to less than 0.5% of the gross produce when optimum income from an acre, stands at Rs. 40,000, per annum, today. Dhantala is among the few villages in Meerut where almost all the landless and jobless men managed to get up to three acres of land after a valiant agitation. Yet, most land allottees also remain poor due to repeated divisions of said holdings over generations while a handful managed to break out of poverty through hard work, prudence and investment in children's education.

**Struggle of a Landless Dalit-** Mangte Ram was born in a Valmiki family of Dhantala around 1923 (he was eighty five years old, when I first met him, in 2008). His father--Baldeva was a landless cattle rearer and mother--Manbhari was the village's sweepress and mid-wife. Manbhari received one chapati daily from each house she served (with stale curry or buttermilk or a piece of jaggery) daily.

Valmiki children were not allowed to sit inside the village school then and Mangte spent most of his childhood collecting grass or grazing animals along with his three siblings besides preparing fodder with a hand chopper which left him injured often. In 1940, at the age of 17, Mangte was married to Rajkali. He hunted for a regular job in Meerut but failed and fell back on pig rearing while Rajkali took over her deceased mother-in-law's work of the village's sweepress and mid-wife. In 1984, Mangte received a plot of three acres from the village commons. But readying it for cultivation was hard as Mangte had never been a cultivator. As his five sons came of age and raised their own families, the field became inadequate even for subsistence and had to be sold off to repay a debt. Mangte had neglected his children's education but, in 1970s and '80s, sweepers' jobs were growing in cities. Three of Mangte Ram's sons migrated and became sweepers with the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. In 2007, the youngest—Srinivas--died after coming in contact with a live wire in a slum called Aradhaknagar in east Delhi. He left behind a widow and three small children. Mangte Ram and Rajkali were forced to shift to Aradhaknagar in order to support their grand children. Mangte tried to raise pigs again for a living. But, in 2009, most died, poisoned possibly by a jealous neighbor. Since then, aged Mangte (who doesn't have even an identity card in Delhi) is surviving on his daughter-in-law's earnings (from a sweepress' job in a school). The only reason he withstands humiliation and isolation, in the city, is his love for his grandson--Tushaar.

## Welfare and Infrastructure

Apart from land reforms, a number of other measures for agriculturists have been proclaimed by central and state governments in independent India. Chief among these are guaranteed support price for crops like wheat, rice and sugarcane, subsidies on agricultural inputs like fertilizers, diesel and electricity (costing about Rs.60,000 crores to the exchequer in 2012), provision of cheap credit to farmers and loan waivers (including 60,000 crores waived in 2008) besides investments in agricultural research and infrastructure. By 2006, 1.1 lakh crores of loans were due from agriculturists to banks and other institutions. Unfortunately, the bulk had been cornered by rich and middle farmers despite quotas for marginal peasants and SCs and STs. In Dhantala too, 90% of landowners have Kisan Credit Cards (introduced in 2002) that fetch short term loans up to Rs.50,000, for short terms, at 3% interest per annum. Those who are unable to pay within a year lose their eligibility for further bank credit. The landless (numbering 90 households, among 437 in the village) have no such facility.

Apart from peasants, the Indian state also proclaimed schemes for other rural segments specially, after 1970. These included relatively successful measures like the distribution of subsidized foodgrains for the poor and near eradication of polio and malaria; some partially successful schemes like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan, monthly pensions for the aged and the disabled and mid-day meals for school children; and some measures like the Mahatma Gandhi Employment Guarantee Scheme, National Rural Health Mission, the Sanitation Mission and Indira Awas Yojna whose implementation has been extremely poor in the studied region.

In Dhantala itself, only 25 below poverty line (BPL) ration cards (09 red and 16 white) (fetching wheat at Rs. 2.5 and 3.5 and rice at Rs.4.5 and 6.5, per kg. respectively) had been issued till 2014 even though the number of needy families (below the declared poverty line of Rs.32 per day in 2014) was 50 approximately (11). Besides this, eight widows and six handicapped had been sanctioned a meager pension of Rs.300, per month, in 2014. No pension for elders has been sanctioned in this village and even widows and the disabled have not been covered fully. The list of BPL families has also not been revised for almost a decade in the village (12).

Decline in absolute poverty is a litmus test of developmental success. My surveys suggest a decline in the number of persons living below the rural poverty line (of Rs.900, per month, at 2013-14 prices) from about 20% to 10% of Dhantala's population between 1989 and 2014 (13). For early 20<sup>th</sup> century, this study lacks household data. However, the long term Palanpur study also shows that the proportion of BPL families there came down from about 50% to 33% between 1953 and 1983(14). This suggests that the official claim regarding a slow decline in poverty levels in the region since the abolition of zamindari, the growth of Green revolution and rising wages in recent decades is convincing. However, a glance at the poverty levels in most Asian and Latin American nations today shows how insignificant this belated achievement is on an international canvas (15). However, it would be erroneous to blame the state alone for continuing destitution in villages like Dhantala that have a relatively fertile land and agronomy. Farmers own efforts and of civil society in this regard are also important to look at.

### Cooperatives and NGOs

An economy in which most producers are small, any pooling of resources to obtain economies of scale is highly desirable. In countries like Switzerland and Japan, such attempts have been successful in the primary sector too. In India, on the other hand, producer

cooperatives have generally failed while marketing cooperatives in milk and agri-products have made a mark (16). Dhantala's experience confirms the many difficulties faced by cooperatives in north India. The village has three cooperatives collecting milk at a price of Rs. 32.50 per litre (in 2014). These started operating from 1980's and benefitted villagers by cutting down commissions pocketed by middlemen earlier. Apart from milk distribution, the district also has five sugar mills where villagers can sell cane at an assured price. Of these, the one at Mohiddinpur is run by the government. But most of the mills are running in losses and payments to farmers are delayed. Besides cooperatives, there are a number of mixed bodies of peasants, professionals and officials like cooperative banks and NGOs also that have been supported by the state and civil society but again they figure nowhere as agents of change in the region.

### **Farmers' Movements**

A better deal for 'Bharat' has been a clarion call in Indian politics since the late colonial era. Given the fact that half of our population is dependent on farming and elected representatives claim to be 'farmers' this is natural too. Yet, the gap between the rhetoric and the rural reality is stark. A major factor behind this paradox appears to be the domination of peasants' struggles by regional elites who have been interested in job quotas and state largesse for specific groups more than rural development.

Western Uttar Pradesh witnessed some of the most powerful farmer's movements from the late Mughal era including the Jat and Satnami movements, the rebellion of 1857, peasants' massive participation in Civil Disobedience, the Quit India Movement, Kisan Sabhas, the Bhartiya Kisan Sangharsh Samiti and many other protests by farmers for lower taxes and better price for crops etc. Attempts have also been made to bring together peasant's organizations from other states like Maharashtra to galvanize 'Bharat' against 'India' (notably under Mahender Singh Tikait in 1980s) and get better price support, subsidies and investments for villages.

In Dhantala, the failure of the rural vote in bringing a turnaround in the countryside is visible in the condition of village roads, power supply, educational and health infrastructure and a shoddy delivery of welfare in general. Villagers' indifference towards family planning amidst mounting land scarcity is also critical in this context.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Development Perspectives**

At this stage, it would be useful to note the extent to which trends in Dhantala's economy match broader perspectives on development and to check on arguments which help in explaining the nature of observed underdevelopment in the studied village. Major political perspectives on development, in India, have been :1) the colonial administration's interest in minimal state involvement in the economy beyond developing proprietary rights for the elite; 2) the Gandhian critique of colonial and technocratic modernity and a call for constructive work, Swadeshi, cottage industries and gram swaraj; 3) the Marxist vision of a social revolution against all inequalities to actualize social justice as well as economic growth; 4) Nehruvian stress on tapping modern technology along with large scale irrigation and dam projects besides the abolition of zamindari, rapid industrialization and community development through Panchayati Raj and cooperatives and NGOs; 5) populist welfare pursued by the Indira and Janata regimes propagating small budget programs for various marginal groups; 6) a limited switch to

economic liberalization and freeing of market and capital specially in trade and industry from 1980s; 7) the experiment with 'inclusive growth' in the preceding decade based on a rights approach to food, employment, education, information etc. along with increased restrictions on industrial projects and biotechnology to protect the environment as well as marginal communities; and 8) stress on rapid industrialization and business friendly governance for rapid job creation in the private sector under PM Modi's leadership.

Outside the government sphere, six academic perspectives on rural development can be noted. The scholarly position closest to the mixed economy model (of private capital operating under state controls) has been of thinkers like Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze etc who have laid stress on public investments in education, health and social security with role for private capital outside the strategic sectors(17). The drawback in this model appears to be its idealist view of the public sector and the panchayats and NGOs and underestimation of bureaucratic dirigisme. The Nehruvian and Senian perspectives also seem to have neglected the need to discipline bureaucracy through conditional rather than automatic promotions/ increments and to rethink education in terms of skills training along with critical thinking and knowledge.

The liberal school in India has stressed that development and poverty issues can be addressed better by working with, not against the market since the latter's efficiency, productivity and innovational potential cannot be matched by the public or the voluntary sector(18). For the countryside, this implies allowing corporate and private investment a freer entry in the agricultural sector and in rural industry and also greater freedom to the farmer to sell output and land. Liberals also emphasize the potential role of big corporates in reducing waste in rural supply chains and for integrating with the world market and reducing untargeted subsidies generally.

While the agricultural sector in India has not been 'liberalized' yet, the reforms introduced in trade and industry themselves helped in accelerating migration and raising wages indirectly. This also explains why poverty came down more rapidly in India, after 1991, (despite negative expectations of most left economists) as trickle down worked even before the ushering of 'inclusive growth' in the last decade.

#### Critiques of Capital

The liberal concern with free markets and the Nehruvian stress on modern technology, industrialization and large infrastructure projects has been questioned from three angles: the communitarian, the environmentalist and the Marxist. The defenders of alternative modernities and communitarianism view corporate capital and its ally--expansive 'governmentality' as the problem rather than the solution to the 'postcolonial condition'. These critics look forward to an active civil and political society, maximum decentralization of power and people's participation in decision making as an anti-dote to the 'old governmentality' of statist development as well as the 'new governmentality' of MNCs working through intellectual property regimes(19). In the agrarian sector, these voices have stood against large dams, genetically modified (GM) crops, green revolution etc and posed faith in internationally networked movements of farmers and other marginal groups.

Against this, sociologists like Dipankar Gupta and economists like Panagariya have stressed that the school exaggerates the scale of 'new governmentality' as well as the potential of peasant movements and political society in general(20). According to Gupta, the Indian village is now 'vanishing' and is no more the place where youth can plan its futures. While this ignores the slow democratization underway in the Indian countryside, there is no doubt that the

'peasantism' of communitarians do not chime with the urbanist aspirations of peasants' sons today and that several farmers' movements press more for quotas in urban jobs and institutions rather than staying in small farming.

The romanticist view of 'alternative modernities' can be questioned also from the perspective of critical village studies which have noted native cultural traditions (specially the alleged absence of voluntarism and slow adoption of technology in rural areas) as a stumbling block for advancement. Ambedkar himself insisted that India's village hierarchies hindered attempts to incentivize development. In their study of Palanpur, Dreze and Himanshu have also noted the general indifference among residents towards proper application of spacing, weeding etc in the fields and a reluctance to adopt even low priced aids like dust bins, toilets, family planning, sledges in place of headloads, stoves in place of mud chulhas etc.(21). The burden of ensuing drudgery and illness particularly for women and dalits is striking.

Adjacent to communitarian critiques of technocratic advancement are environmentalists, NGOs and cooperatives that have pursued rural development in partnership with the state but criticized the economism innate in the dominant model, relying more on empowering local initiatives for sustainable growth. But beyond exceptions like the National Dairy Development Board and Kudumbshree in Gujarat and Kerala respectively, the achievements of even well funded cooperatives have been meager at the national level. In 2013, for example, about two million NGOs were registered in the country. In villages like Dhantala they are nowhere in sight. The failure of the *khadi* program in India, despite massive subsidies from the state, also reflects the limits of economic 'alternatives'.

Many environmentalists have critiqued rapid industrialization as well as the green revolution for harming the environment. Evidence from Dhantala confirms the rapid fall in the water table (by about one foot every year now) which calls for urgent action. At the same time, it is notable that the green revolution turned out to be a critical prop for the swelling class of the marginal farmer by raising farm incomes and demand for non-farm work indirectly. Similarly, economic liberalization enabled growth of welfare funding by increasing state's revenues too.

### **The Left Perspective**

The most sustained and rigorous challenge to the liberal as well as mixed economy models of development has been thrown by the broad left (including Marxists and Socialists in India) (22). These thinkers sought radical land reforms (either revolutionary collectivization or democratic reconstruction of land rights) for social justice as well as economic growth and criticised the liberalisation agenda for exposing small farmers and traders to dispossession and exploitation by corporates and contract farmers.

Equality is undoubtedly significant in any vision of a just society; wastage inherent in capitalism on artificial demands (generated by advertising and profiteering) is harmful for the environment and culture too. But the major assumption on the left that development will remain anaemic unless equity is realized seems doubtful. The failure of operation Barga in removing rural poverty in West Bengal also suggests that socialist land reforms on their own may reduce economic hierarchy but not destitution. With small holdings constituting 90% of our farms, the prospect of benefitting the landless from redistribution appears weak, in any case, as does the possibility of reviving collectivization or socialist industrialization. On the other hand, the

record of most developed nations shows that rapid economic growth has been achieved without the abolition or redistribution of property repeatedly.

Besides inequalities, some left scholars have been opposed to capital intensive techniques in agriculture particularly and some even argued that the green revolution would only benefit the rich peasant; that economic liberalization would escalate pressures for state withdrawal from welfare; that the water crisis would bring a collapse in food grain production soon; and that agricultural yields decelerated and poverty grew in 1990s. A combined result of these tendencies would have been increasing polarization and proletarianization in Indian villages which in theory could help in a political revolution backed by the landless labor and poor peasantry or the middle peasant or entire peasantry. In the absence of such movements in most parts of India (besides 'Maoist' insurgency), left programs for revolutionary change as well as rural transformation appear devoid of alternatives beyond holding out against the corporates in theory (23).

The economy of Dhantala itself remains burdened by class, caste and gender hierarchies as well as global forces of capitalist competition. It is also true that inequities restrict the delivery capacity of the state specially at the lower level of administration against which mobilization of lower orders is required. Any radical measure to address such inequities is likely to mitigate injustice as well as poverty as seen in the life sketch of Mangte Ram in Dhantala. Yet, family histories from the village also suggest that reduced inequality in itself is not a sufficient condition for rapid growth and that green revolution and economic liberalization contributed more to poverty reduction by promoting urban demand and raising wages (24). Villages like Dhantala still remain in the shadow of poverty less because of the "class character of the Indian state" and more due to misgovernance spawned by identity politics that produces electoral logjam and prevents accountable administration.

The vote for development and good governance given by middle and even lower castes, in Dhantala, in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, also suggests that the exclusive emphasis of left ideologues on disparities overlooks the widespread yearning for prosperity and governance among the poor too. It is even possible that the ideals of economic equality do not rank high in villagers' concerns presently, surely not to the extent stressed by left ideologues. This calls for work on the 'long revolution' in culture more than the battle for a 'proletarian dictatorship' through violent means today.

## CONCLUSION

The call for equity and justice is of concerns not only to workers and dalits but also women and the unorganised. Dhantala's experience clearly shows that the bulk of propertyless, cashless and highly overburdened women in our villages are untouched by meaningful development till today. They also suffer domestic violence often and also rising lumpen harassment outside homes now. In this light, along with improving governance and law and order, the expansion of health and educational infrastructure and of secure jobs and micro-credit for women's enterprises specially need to be urgently prioritized now.

Another ideological implication of the study is that harmonization between contending ideals and economic goals need to be given greater attention especially with regard to growth and environmental concerns and between equity and freedom principles. Interestingly, political

compulsions and circumstances compel governments and political parties to mix principles and practices. Yet, a clearer and systematic calibration between contending ideals would benefit rural initiatives too. To illustrate, the socialist vision of equitable distribution of all resources is valuable. Indeed, serious thought needs to be given to abolishing large inheritances or, at least curtailing them through heavy death duties, in order to restrict if not abolish inequalities spawned by the oldest cultural institution—the family. However, this need not make us hostile to the useful role that a relatively free market plays in promoting entrepreneurship and innovation. Indeed, respect for wealth creation by innovators and job-creators is compatible with ideals of social justice as such development alone generates revenues essential for offering comprehensive social security to all. Lastly, in our political debates, governance and probity of leaders and regimes needs to be given much greater importance than ideological posturing by parties since development as well as justice depend on quality of governance too.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'development' has been applied by thinkers like Talcott Parsons and Fukuyama through the prism of growth stages pioneered by the west. Our use rests instead on the assumption of a universal human potential resting on fulfillment of basic needs like food, health, education and social security for all in a measurable manner. In this sense, the concept of 'development' applied here is not west-centric or against social equity or environmental sustainability though it acknowledges the lead taken by the west in some important parameters since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the *World Economic Outlook Report*, 129 countries out of 187 can be described as 'developing' or less developed, in 2014, on the basis of universal development indices. India ranked 135 in the United Nation's HDI list last year.

<sup>2</sup> For exceptional long term restudies of Indian villages see: Himanshu and Lanjouw (2013); Harriss and Nagaraj (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Datt and Sundharam (2013), pp.84-85.

<sup>4</sup> Tata Services Limited (2013, p.273) and Balakrishnan (2012, p.178).

<sup>5</sup> See Department of Agriculture and Cooperation (2012, pp.316-17).

<sup>6</sup> Coppard (2001) and Harris-White and Janakirajan (2007)

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<sup>7</sup> On limited tenancy relief in first half of the twentieth century see Whitcombe (1975). Randhawa mentions land rentals in the range of Rs.five and Rs.15 per acre, in United Provinces, in 1920s. (1983, p.367)

<sup>8</sup> See Gupta, Akhil (1998).

<sup>9</sup> For instances of lower rents on Brahmins and dominant castes see Stokes (1984, p.67) and Srinivas (1978)

<sup>10</sup> In countries like Taiwan, up to 30% of agricultural land was redistributed to the landless. In contrast, only two per cent of the cultivable land got distributed, in India, despite major agitations and parties' promises. Recently, purchase of some land by dalits and by the middle castes has been reported from several villages with increasing flow of remittances to emigrants' rural kin in states like Bihar too. (Datta et.al, 2012 and Harris, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, BPL families have been counted only twice in Dhantala, in 1995 and 2005. In the last survey, many eligible families got excluded from the BPL count because of objections raised by an excluded youth against all households having a pucca house. Surprisingly, the Vikas Pustika (Development Register) for 2005 at the Block Development Office, in Kharkauda, shows the number of BPL families, in Dhantala, as nil.

<sup>12</sup> For my detailed comment see Vijay, 2013, pp.607-10.

<sup>13</sup> More than social engineering schemes of the state, however, this decline seems to have come from limited infrastructure development and specially from technological breakthroughs like HYVs and the communication revolution as also the massive growth of construction sector since 1990s. For similar conclusion see see Datta et.al. op.cit.

<sup>14</sup> Dreze and Himanshu (1998)

<sup>15</sup> Economic and Social Affairs (2010).

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed note on agricultural cooperatives in India see: Sen and Bhatia (2004) volume on cooperatives in India.

<sup>17</sup> See Balakrishanan (2012).

<sup>18</sup> See Bhagwati and Panagariya (2012).

<sup>19</sup> Gupta, Akhil (op.cit).

<sup>20</sup> Gupta, Dipankar (2010).

<sup>21</sup> Dreze, Himanshu (1998), pp.70-71 and Wadley (1994).

<sup>22</sup> For a recent Marxist analysis of poverty and underdevelopment in India see Patnaik (2007).

<sup>23</sup> For left of centre views on Indian economy see: Bhaduri (2008) and Breman (2004).

<sup>24</sup> West Bengal where land reforms were implemented on a major scale after 1977 failed to sustain agricultural growth beyond 1980s and poverty remained high at about 30% of the population in 1997 when states like Punjab had brought it down to less than 15% of their population. (See Dreze and Sen, 2013, pp.298-99.)