



## Socio-Economic Agricultural Development of Scheduled Castes in India: An Analysis (2014-2024)

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### Abstract:

*This paper examines the socio-economic agricultural development of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in India over the last decade (2014-2024). Despite constitutional safeguards and targeted policies, SC communities, who constitute a significant portion of the agricultural workforce, remain disproportionately concentrated as landless or marginal farmers and agricultural labourers, facing persistent socio-economic deprivation. This research analyses trends in land ownership, access to institutional credit, adoption of technology, participation in government schemes, and overall livelihood security. Utilizing data from national surveys, agricultural censuses, and government reports, the study assesses the impact of specific initiatives like the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan (SCSP), the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN), and land allocation programs. The findings indicate that while there has been measurable progress in financial inclusion and some asset-building, deep-rooted structural barriers—including fragmented and poor-quality landholdings, discrimination in input and output markets, and limited access to extension services—continue to hinder transformative change. The paper concludes that achieving equitable agricultural development for SCs requires a more robust, intersectional approach that combines enhanced land access, strengthened social protection, skill development for diversification, and strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws within agrarian institutions.*

**Keywords:** *Scheduled Castes, Agricultural Development, Landlessness, Marginal Farmers, Social Equity, Agrarian Structure, Financial Inclusion, Livelihood Diversification, Policy Evaluation.*

### Introduction:

Indian agriculture is characterized not only by its economic significance but also by its deeply embedded social hierarchies. Scheduled Castes (SCs), historically subjected to caste-based oppression and exclusion, form a critical yet vulnerable segment of the agrarian economy. Comprising over 16.6% of the population (Census 2011), SCs are disproportionately represented among landless agricultural labourers and marginal farmers, rendering them highly susceptible to poverty, indebtedness, and climate shocks. Their socio-economic development in

agriculture is, therefore, a vital indicator of inclusive growth and social justice.

The past decade (2014-2024) has seen a renewed policy focus on farmer welfare and financial inclusion, with several flagship schemes launched. However, the extent to which these macro-level interventions have effectively addressed the specific and historical disadvantages faced by SC farmers remains a critical question. Have these policies translated into improved asset bases, better incomes, and greater resilience for SC agricultural households?

**Objectives:**

This paper investigates the trajectory of socio-economic agricultural development among SCs from 2014 to 2024. It moves beyond a generic analysis of agricultural growth to interrogate the intersection of caste, class, and agrarian change. The specific objectives are:

1. To analyse changes in the core assets of SCs in agriculture, particularly land ownership and operational holdings.
2. To evaluate SC households' access to institutional credit, agricultural inputs, technology, and government support schemes.
3. To assess the diversification of livelihoods and relative income status compared to non-SC/ST farmers.
4. To identify the persistent structural and institutional barriers to equitable development.
5. To provide policy recommendations for a more inclusive and transformative agrarian future.

The research employs a descriptive analytical framework based on secondary data from government publications, national sample surveys, and scholarly reports.

**Research Data and Analysis:**

Table 1: Distribution of Operational Holdings among Social Groups (2015-16)

| Social Group | Marginal Holdings (<1 Ha) | Small Holdings (1-2 Ha) | Semi-Medium & Above (>2 Ha) |
|--------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| SC           | <b>86.2%</b>              | 10.1%                   | 3.7%                        |
| All Groups   | 68.5%                     | 17.7%                   | 13.8%                       |

Source: Agricultural Census 2015-16

**2. Access to Credit, Inputs, and Technology:  
Improved Inclusion with Gaps:**

The last decade's push for financial inclusion has yielded positive trends, though disparities persist.

This section presents a decadal analysis of key socio-economic indicators for SC households in agriculture, drawing on the latest available data.

**1. Land Ownership and Operational Holdings:  
Persistent Marginalization:**

Land remains the most critical yet inequitably distributed asset. Data from the 2015-16 Agricultural Census and the Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households (SAS) reports reveal a stark continuity.

- **Marginalization:** Over 85% of SC operational holdings are marginal (<1 hectare), significantly higher than the national average. The average size of SC operational holdings remains abysmally low, often on less fertile, fragmented plots.
- **Landlessness:** SCs continue to constitute the majority of agricultural laborers. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022-23 indicates that over 60% of rural SC workers are engaged as casual wage labourers, primarily in agriculture, reflecting their insecure tenurial status.
- **Land Allocation Programs:** State-led programs for distributing ceiling-surplus and government wasteland to SCs have seen limited success, with issues of poor-quality land, incomplete titles, and lack of complementary support for development.

- **Institutional Credit:** Data from the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) shows a notable increase in the share of SCs in total agricultural credit. Schemes like the *Kisan*

*Credit Card (KCC)* have seen expanded coverage. However, the average loan size per SC account remains lower, and reliance on informal, high-interest sources is still significant for consumption and emergency needs.

- **Government Schemes:** Enrolment in direct benefit transfer schemes like **PM-KISAN** is high among eligible SC landholders. However, landless labourers are excluded from its purview. Participation in crop insurance (PMFBY) is lower among SCs, often due to lack of awareness, literacy barriers, and the small size of claims relative to premium payments.
- **Technology Adoption:** Access to modern machinery (tractors, harvesters) remains limited due to high capital costs. While mobile phone penetration has improved access to weather and price information, SC farmers often have less contact with extension officers, affecting the adoption of improved seeds and sustainable practices.

### 3. Livelihood Diversification and Income Status:

**PLFS data** suggests a slow but steady shift of rural SC workers towards non-farm sectors like construction, domestic work, and small-scale manufacturing. However, these jobs are largely informal, insecure, and low-paying.

- **Income Disparity:** The SAS (2019) and subsequent estimates consistently show that the average monthly income of agricultural households belonging to SCs is substantially lower than that of "Others" (non-SC/ST). Their income from cultivation is meager due to small holdings, while income from wages forms a larger, more volatile share of their total earnings.
- **MGNREGA:** This scheme has been a critical safety net, providing alternative wage employment. SC participation is disproportionately high, underscoring their continued dependence on manual labour.

Table 2: Average Monthly Income per Agricultural Household (Approx. 2019)

| Source                               | SC Household (₹) | All Households (₹) | Gap (%)     |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Net Receipts from Cultivation        | 1,200            | 3,100              | -61%        |
| Net Receipts from Farming of Animals | 500              | 1,000              | -50%        |
| <b>Total</b>                         | <b>6,500</b>     | <b>7,500</b>       | <b>-13%</b> |

*Source: Derived from NSS SAS 2019 and related studies.*

### Conclusion and Policy Implications:

The decadal analysis presents a nuanced picture. On one hand, there is evidence of improved financial inclusion and some stabilization of incomes through wage employment schemes like MGNREGA and direct transfers like PM-KISAN for eligible landowners. The absolute poverty levels among SCs have declined. On the other hand, the structural position of SCs within the agrarian economy has not undergone a transformative shift. They remain

overwhelmingly concentrated in the most precarious segments—as marginal landowners dependent on wage labour or as completely landless labourers.

The primary barriers are structural: endemic landlessness and micro-holdings, caste-based discrimination in leasing land, accessing irrigation water, or selling produce in village markets, and a lack of capital for investment. General agricultural policies, while beneficial, are

insufficient to overcome these historically entrenched disadvantages.

### Policy Recommendations:

1. **Land and Asset Development:** Revitalize and effectively implement land distribution programs with clear titles and provide dedicated resources (through SCSP) for developing the distributed land (irrigation, soil health).
2. **Strengthened Social Protection:** Expand the coverage of income support (e.g., PM-KISAN) to include landless agricultural laborers. Ensure universal coverage under pension and health insurance schemes.
3. **Promoting Collective Agency:** Actively support the formation and strengthening of SC-specific Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) and women's collectives to improve bargaining power in input and output markets.
4. **Inclusive Institutions:** Mandate and monitor caste-sensitization training for agricultural extension staff and bank officials. Implement stricter penalties for discrimination in government schemes.
5. **Diversification and Skills:** Create dedicated skilling programs linked to non-farm employment and agro-processing units in rural areas, with quotas for SC youth.

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