

## From Agriculture to Non-Farm: Agrarian Change among the Scheduled Castes of Central Assam

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### Abstract

*This paper examines how agrarian change and production relations have been shaped by myriad factors like caste, landholding, and social position and livelihood choices. While land is central to agricultural production, the nature of its access as manifested through landownership and land tenure defined by the agrarian relations of a society vary. Apart from the primitive or simple societies, agrarian social relations are invariably hierarchical in nature underscoring differential access of people to land. The paper aims to understand the complex nature of such hierarchical relationships as well as the nature of their transformation with the unfolding of changes in the agrarian practices and other forms of livelihood in contemporary Assam vis-à-vis India. Located in a multi-caste village of central Assam, the article moves around the issues of land and livelihood, new alternatives to supplement the traditional production process, the inter caste relationship and the nature of landholding. The article is an attempt to understand the process of transition- from being engaged in agriculture (what they were) to their disinterest in the production process and the factors which contribute to expedite this process.*

### Introduction

In recent times, the changing agrarian relations coupled with emerging livelihood practices among the rural populace have brought about significant transformation in the traditional Indian rural society. While some of these changes are the result of the positive state intervention in the form of land reforms, pro-poor schemes, technological inputs in agriculture, etc., some other changes in the rural society are the consequences of state's indifference as well as lopsided approach to development. Such initiatives, while on the one hand, helped people counter some of the challenges of agrarian backwardness, on the other, gave birth to a series of socio-economic problems arising out of ambiguities in the legislations, slow bureaucratic procedures, ignorance and insufficient resistance by the people (Mohanty, 2012).

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New studies on land ownership and reform from across the world present an interesting picture of the changing agrarian economy vis-à-vis state. Boon (2014) in his discussion on the relationship of state and land in the African context argues that struggle over land and confrontation of state and citizens in the everyday affairs of African political system has become an apparent reality today. Lund (2008) talks of the issues of land and labour in the West African region. The issues of land and property determine the political agenda at the local level. Borras et. al. (2007) on another account brings in the discourse from Philippines and refers to the World Bank experiments in market led agrarian reforms and its anti-poor outcome. Murray (2007) while referring to Indonesia brings into focus the constraints that fail to improve the conditions of lives, livelihoods and landscapes of the people and narrates how everyday issues of corruption, violence remain the biggest challenge.

In the Indian context it is evident that the measures initiated by the Indian state such as land reforms and agricultural modernization along with green revolution could not remove social inequalities. Introduction of improved means of technology in agriculture by the state gave birth to a new mode of production within the Indian economy (Rudra 1975; Thorner 1982; Patnaik 1976, Banaji 1976; Alavi 1981, Bhaduri 1973; Chandra 1974). Further, such change accentuated regional inequalities as green revolution and its advanced technologies were introduced only in select pockets of the country (Jodhka, 2004, Dhanagare 1991; Brass 1994). Thus, green revolution created binaries across the country; the beneficiaries (farmers) not only dominated the rural areas but also had a substantial influence in the state and regional politics and over time this class started moving out into different non-agricultural activities (Karnath 1991). Some had migrated to urban areas (Upadhyaya 1988) and some entered agricultural trade (Harris-White 1996). The pauperised peasantry on the other hand became landless and agricultural wage labourers and many also migrated to urban areas in search of livelihood. These emerging processes changed many traditional relationships within the village and social structure gradually became redundant. Aggarwal (1971), Breman (1974) observe 'depatronisation' as a process being experienced in many areas which were affected by the green revolution.

The process of rural outmigration peaked since the 1990s after structural adjustments in the Indian economy. A visible outcome was the real estate boom and many youths migrated to work in these nonfarm sectors. Parthasarathy et. al. (1998) argue that rural unemployed go out searching for jobs and are willing to do whatever comes their way. This process of rural outmigration became a pan Indian phenomenon. Chakravarti's (2018) ethnographic account of the lives of the Dalit agricultural labourers in Bihar reflected through their stories of life brings out the crisis in accessing the basic necessities such as health care, education for the marginalized. Though the village under study remained unaffected by green revolution, yet rural outmigration remained a major phenomenon there too, though the pattern was different. The youths moved out of the traditional agrarian economy and started looking for alternatives beyond agriculture. While some joined non-farm employment many migrated for joining the informal sector.

### Focus of the paper

The paper is based on ethnographic account and analysis of the lives of people in Dakhinpat *Satra*, a revenue village, under the Nagaon Sadar revenue circle, of Nagaon district in Assam (which is located in the northeast of India). The village is 12 kms, south west of Nagaon town<sup>1</sup> and falls under Dakhinpat Gaon Panchayat and Pakhimoriya mouza.

The village is home to a number of castes and there are three wide-ranging residential segregations based on caste. They are divided into *Satra* (neo-vaishnavite monastery) *chuk* (corner), Besimari and Dakhinpat. While each segregation is a unit in itself, they are also mutually dependent on each other in terms of their everyday socio-economic activities which primarily revolved around agriculture. *Satra chuk* are at the centre of the village and is surrounded by Dakhinpat on one side and Besimari on the other. In terms of caste composition of the households, *satra chuk* is the most diverse with castes like Brahmins, Kalitas (a middle caste groups in Assam) Koch (a detribalised Hindu group) and *kaibartas* (a scheduled caste group). The Dakhinpat and Besimari area of the village, however, are home to the *kaibartas* and *hiras* (two scheduled caste groups in Assam).

The *satra*, traditionally was the fountainhead of religious, economic and political authority of the village. The local narratives claim that the village was donated by a tribal king in a process of detribalizing himself and sanskritizing into the Hindu fold. Hence, all land including the water bodies in the village were under the control of the *satra*. All major decisions on access to land, production process, share of the produce, and control over produce etc. share to the *satra* was taken by the *satradhikar* (abbot). The economy in the village revolved around the cultivation season in winter and summer. The winter crops cultivated included mustard and pulses like the local variety of *kechhari* (lentil). During the summer, *bau* and *lahi* two different varieties of paddy were grown in the village. Apart from paddy the village also has rich sugarcane and mustard plantations.

The farming and agricultural life had been fairly good in the village earlier. Livelihood in the village spun around agriculture, the labour required was supplemented by the members from various castes, except the Brahmins, from the village. But as the traditional authority of the *satra* declined, the land reforms left the traditional power house to mere embellishments of traditional authority. Land was redistributed among the people. This was also followed by the fissures in the traditional religious supremacy of the *satra*. Towards the late 1970s there were religious assertions by lower castes in the village and they were supported by their fellow caste members from neighbouring villages. Today traditional arrangements have changed and new patterns of agriculture and its alternatives have evolved with time. This paper deals with issues like land fragmentation, changes in agrarian relationship and loss of traditional sources of livelihood.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Statistical Handbook of Assam 2011, Nagaon district is divided into three subdivisions, 17 towns, 1412 villages and 239 Gaon Panchayats.

### Approach and method of study

Evidently, negotiating with issues as mentioned in the previous section called for a certain amount of methodological flexibility and therefore informal discussions and conversations with the villagers helped in understanding and collating the necessary information and data for the study. However it was challenging to work as a non-participant observer especially in the pockets dominated by the marginalised caste group mostly the *kaibartas*. When I decided to stay in another *kaibarta village* located some 4 km away from my study village, the villagers from my study area started cooperating with me and came forward for discussions. They would huddle around me and discuss their problems ranging from the infrequent visit of doctors at the primary health care centre, to difficulties faced by them in procuring the job cards for various schemes under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. The villagers took me to be either a representative from some Non-Profit-Organisation (NGO) or as representative of the government and hence expected some kind of financial help from me. However, with time such perceptions about me gradually changed and they understood my purpose of visit. As I started to spend more time with the people in the village it became apparent that I was neither a benefactor nor a threat to them. My task that seemed daunting became enjoyable.

### Local Agrarian Economy and Caste

Agriculture was the backbone of the traditional village economy. The process of agricultural production involved all the villagers but based on their castes affiliations the individuals worked at various capacities. Besides agriculture, fishing was a supplementary source of livelihood, but such activities were confined to the scheduled castes only. Traditionally all the villagers irrespective of their caste affiliations were engaged in the agricultural fields of the *satra* (*Khatopathar*) at different capacities; the system though open yet production relations were stratified. While the *kaibartas* and the *hiras* were engaged in activities like ploughing, the brahmins, kochand the kalitas were placed in activities that were perceived higher in status compared to ploughing. The brahmins and the kalitas did not directly work on the agricultural fields; they were the officials appointed by the *satradhikar* (abbot) to oversee the agricultural work. The *satradhikar* did not reside in the village, in his absence the production relations were under the supervision of the members of the *satra parichalana samity* (*satra* management committee). This committee comprised of the members of the upper caste who were influential not only in their own village but also in the larger local social setting. The brahmins numerically dominated the committee and were engaged in most of the decision making because of their traditional influence in the *satra*. The *satra* was a part of the brahmo sanghati (one of the four different *sanghati* of *satra*: *purusa*, *kala*, *nika* and *brahma*). The distinction lies in the ideology and the philosophical orientation of the *satras* which emerged in the sixteenth century. The *brahma sanghati* is headed by a Brahmin preceptor, together with Vedic rites and *naamkirtan* lays emphasis on God. (Nath 2011:39). Presence of the brahmin preceptor gave an added advantage to the brahmins in the village who traditionally exerted their influence. Thus, for the sharecropper appeasing the *satra* and its officials was crucial as his good relations with

them marked a way for his good share in *kahtopathar* and for which he may at times had to put an extra effort to keep them contented. There are instances when a cropper from *kaibarta* or a *hirash* community would go and work in brahmin houses as *kamla* (daily labourer) without any economic remuneration (free labour service). In a certain sense, for the sharecropper the *satra* as an institution was the lifeline, dominating their major socio-economic relations.

The elderly men from the village narrated that such relations of production were hereditary. The *adhihars* (sharecroppers) would inherit their titles. While they could not transfer the land, they could pass on the right to cultivate in a piece of the *satra* land to the members of the next generation.

The *satra* occupied the centre stage and owned the village land (it had a total of **651** bighas of land under its control till the land reforms). The traditional edifice started losing its power with the implementation of land reforms since India's independence especially since 1973 (which were subsequently repealed and implemented again). Thus, the upper castes men by being members of the *satra* parichalana samity exercised control over the *satra* land and the rest of the villagers. The land reforms brought alteration in the total acreage of land in the village. This was welcomed by most of the villagers who were contented with the reforms. However, in terms of the total land holding, the *satra* till date remains the biggest landholding institution in the village.

Agricultural engagement of the villagers today varies. Based on their contribution in agriculture and ownership of land four categories can be found in the village. These categories are not exclusive and can be inclined with the categories of Thorner (1973). The categories regionally vary except the category of Mazdur who more or less has a lot of similarity with the *kamla*.

- i. *Landowner*: This category has maximum land in the village. On an average, they own more than 15 *bighas* of cultivable land. Some of them lease out and some lease in land. This category is found across all the castes. While the primary source of income revolves around agriculture, some are engaged in government jobs, some in small businesses like grocery store, tea stalls, hardware shop pharmacy, etc. in the village. This category can also be called as the small farmers.
- ii. *Adhiar*(share cropper): This is a category which is mostly found amongst the middle and marginalised castes in the village. On an average, they own more than 10 *bighas* of land. Often the produce they generate from land is not enough for them to sustain for a year. Hence, they also engage in other forms of income generation besides engaging in agriculture.
- iii. *Haluwa*(plough-man): This is a category which owns less land 5 *bighas* of cultivable land. They work as wage labourers and the only supplementary skill was with the *hal* (plough). But with an increase in the mechanised methods of agriculture especially the use of tractors, they have started losing their traditional occupation.

- iv. *Kamla*(daily wage labourers): They are landless and the only source of income for them is by working as agricultural labour. Occasionally they also work under MGNREGA, but this is not a regular source of income as the functioning of the schemes is irregular.

Apart from the *landowners*, other categories include members from lower and marginal castes. The households of the upper caste officials of the *satra*, which belong to the brahmin and kalitas enjoyed usufruct rights over *satra* land provided to them by the *satra* (by virtue of being members of the *satra* parichalana samity). With the enforcement of Ceiling Act the *satra* had to surrender its land above the ceiling limits, but the land under the possession of the upper caste households mentioned was not brought under the purview of the Act. The land under their possession was treated as family land and not as *satra* land even though such lands belonged to *satra*. However, land owned by these households was not large in sizes and it varied 10 to 15 bighas of land<sup>2</sup>. The ceiling surplus land of the *satra*, however, was distributed among the villagers. Though this provided many marginal and landless peasants, especially kaibartas and hiras with some land, this was much less than what the upper castes secured after the redistribution of land. As narrated by a kaibarta villager, he could get 12 bighas of land as his uncle was close to the revenue officials. However, leaving out the land under the possession of the upper caste, the *satra* and the wetland areas (which were declared as commons), only 250 bighas of land was left for redistribution among more than 200 other families of the village.

Besides agriculture, traditionally the commons (mostly wetlands) in the village were an important source of supplementary income. Conventionally the commons were accessed by all the castes with a certain edge administered by the *satra* and its parichalana samity. However, over the years there has been a decline in an individual's access to such commons as most of the water bodies have dried up. The river which contributed significantly as a supplementary source of income went under private lease. The villagers now seek permission from the lessee to engage in fishing.

A young boy from the village in his early twenties narrates:

*Agriculture is no longer an appealing area of livelihood for two reasons: it is not as productive as it used to be and it is time taking. Moreover with disappearance of the wetlands and the river Kolong which was the life line for the villagers going under amahaldar (lease holder) people's access to the alternate sources of livelihood has become limited.*

Thus, from being a common asset, the river today has not only become a private space but in the process, has also weakened the supplementary source of income for the villagers.

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<sup>2</sup> Only in a single case, I found one brahmin landowner with 30 bighas of land.

Lack of irrigation has been often cited as a major setback to agriculture. During the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Kolong (the only river) which covered the length of the village had been blocked at Hatimura in Kaliabor (a place which is at 54 km from village). During one monsoon, the river created debacle in the downstream areas of Nagaon town, following which the civic authorities had blocked the river at its mouth. This had a severe effect on the downstream villages in the district. Further this has stopped the constant flow of water from Brahmaputra to the river Kolong. Not only did it brush off the inflow of water but also affected the aquatic life in these villages. Villagers (from Dakhinpat) rue that the village which was once known for its fertile river beds is today under extreme agricultural poverty. The river no longer continues the same flow and can today be considered almost a dead river; this has further added to the livelihood miseries of the youths in the village. The blockade of the river Kolong at its mouth not only stopped the normal flow of the water in the river but the flood water that replenished the wetlands periodically and also deposited fertile silt in the agricultural fields in its flood plain had been cut off. Today, the wetlands have become a pale shadow of their past self. Villagers, who once had flourishing fishing activity, today hardly have anything worthwhile to offer. There are evidences that reflect the crisis faced by the scheduled castes and the plight of their livelihood with the death of the river (Bora:2004). Landlessness is also an important factor contributing to disinterest amongst the scheduled caste villagers. Thus, shifts in livelihood practices and the transition from agriculture to non-farm activities have become fashionable in the village<sup>3</sup>.

### Land Distribution and Fragmentation

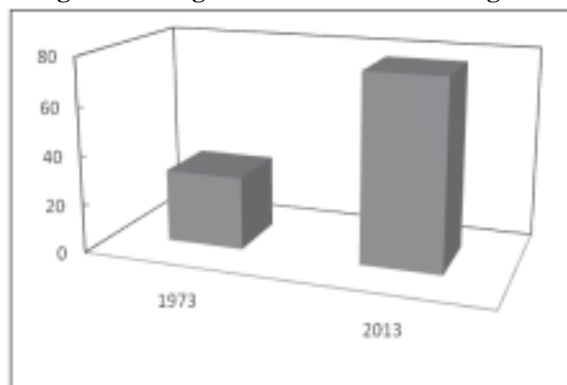
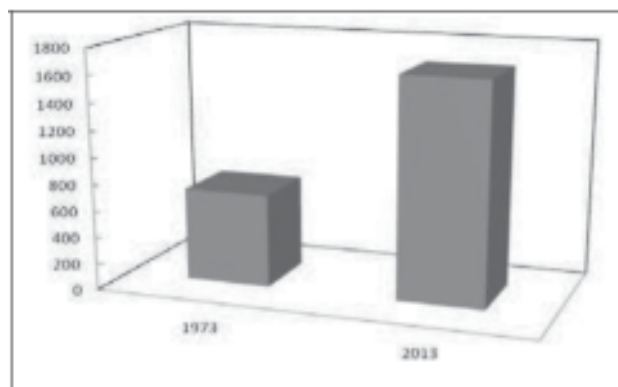
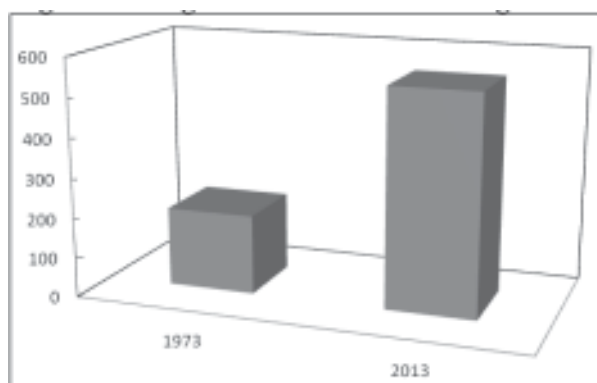
A look at the caste wise land distribution in the village reveals that out of the total 610 bighas of land in the village, the SCs have maximum land under their possession. Table I below represents caste wise distribution of land among the villagers. However, the data on fragmentation of land (in figure I, II and III) portray a contrary picture.

**Table 1: Caste wise distribution of land in 2013<sup>4</sup>**

Caste	Land holding (in Bighas)
Scheduled Castes (Hirasand Kaibartas)	442.89
Others (Brahmins, Kalitas)	103.79
OBC (Koch, Sut)	63.62
Total	610.30

<sup>3</sup> Since the late 1980s, there was a massive effort to step up irrigation for boosting agriculture in the state by the then government under the aegis of the regional political party (Assam Gana Parishad AGP). Shallow pumps were installed in the paddy fields for better irrigation. But the programme was unsuccessful and the village still bears the relics of the program in the form of unused irrigation pumps. The villagers lament that the pumps and pipes that were erected in few fields had been stolen.

<sup>4</sup> Table source: Land Documents, Revenue Records of the villagers at the Maujadars office at Pakhimoriya

**Figure 1: Fragmentation of land among OBC****Figure 2: Fragmentation of land among SC****Figure 3: Fragmentation of land among Others**

To understand the story of land fragmentation in the village, 1973 has been taken base year (as land reforms were initiated that year in the village). The data on land holding indicates that the SCs have the maximum land. However, the data on land fragmentation



indicate a different picture. The figures I, II and III indicate that the SCs have had maximum land fragmentation in between 1973 to 2013. There has been an increase of 200% in the total fragmentation of land. Compared to the SCs the Others and OBCs (numerically less) have only 50% land fragmentation records. Hence, despite having access to land the SCs in the village continue to be the marginal landholders.

The gaonbura( village headman) narrates:

*Although every caste in the village has undergone land fragmentation, but when it comes to continuing the agricultural practices most groups stay together. It is only among the SCs that there is a split in agricultural land which means a divide in their production activities as well. As a result, agricultural activities become unproductive for them. Adding to this unproductive agricultural cycle, the disappearance of the erstwhile commons has further multiplied the crisis by limiting their livelihood choices. Such instances act as pre-cursor hastening the inclination towards non-farm activities.*

While fragmentation of land in general has affected the entire village, it was much adverse in case of the scheduled castes. Since the members of other castes have found permanent employment outside the village because of their education, there is much less pressure on their land stemming the process of land fragmentation. The scheduled castes, however, because of their limited life choices and low educational attainment, have hardly found any sustainable permanent employment outside the village. As a result, there is increasing pressure on their agricultural land leading to its fragmentation. This has compelled the poor scheduled caste villagers to look for unskilled and semiskilled livelihood opportunities in distant places as opportunities in the vicinities of the village are either limited or non-existent. This is testified by the fact that today the incidences of landlessness among the Scheduled Castes in village are quite high, and there are as many as 40 landless families among them.

Although, the *satra* lost most of its land after the enactment of the land ceiling act, it continued to be the biggest institutional landholder in the village with 50 bighas of agricultural land. The landless (mentioned above) families besides depending on the better off scheduled caste villagers' agricultural land, also heavily depend on the *satra* land (*khatopathar*) as sharecroppers and also as *kamlas*. It needs to be mentioned that today only in the *satra* land sharecropping is exclusively practiced. The other landowners in the village practice both sharecropping and a new system of contractual arrangement (*chukti*) with those who lease in land this new practice is much more favourable to the landholders than the landless peasants. In *chukti*, irrespective of the produce, a peasant should give a fixed amount to the landowner. This system puts pressure on a peasant because even in case of a crop failure, he is bound and obliged to pay the landowner in terms of produced or in cash as agreed and fixed by the contract. This practice takes away whatever human considerations that existed in the erstwhile sharecropping (*adhi*) system where a sharecropping peasant had to give half of whatever was produced. It is no wonder therefore that the scheduled caste landless and the marginal peasants still prefer to work in *khatopathar*.

### Emerging Livelihood Practices

There has been an ongoing change in the production relations in the village. Changes in landholding patterns, fragmentation of land across caste groups, landlessness, and loss of commons are usually the primary reasons. With these emerging changes there is a need for the people to look for an alternative. Apart from the move towards nonfarm activities like poultry and piggery (which are far and few in the village) there is also a surge in outmigration from the village. The failure of the state to bring about the desired change and the pauperization of the poor rural masses had been subjects of great debates and discussions in the India in the 1970s and 1980s. But such discussions are far and few since the early 1990s when the Indian state changed its socialist path of development and to neo-liberal process of development. Studies (Shiva 199; 2004) indicate, with the inception of the neo-liberal economy in India since 1991, the plight of the peasantry has worsened over the years. There has been an escalation in the incidents of landlessness amongst the peasants, suicides, mono cropping and monopolies by the capitalist giants. Further there are also instances of growing indebtedness amongst the small and marginal farmers, development-induced regional disparities in the wake of integration with the global economy. This adds to the burning agrarian crisis and increases the number of farmer's suicides (Despande and Aurora, 2010). In the context of our village under study, though there is a crisis looming in the agrarian economy of the village, the villagers have been coping with the challenges of cycles of continuous agricultural failure and indifference in agricultural activities. Yet there has been no cases of farmers suicide reported in the village essentially because of the social organisation of the villages in Assam are different from other Indian villages. The traditional patron client relationship is usually not present in the villages. As discussed the land ceiling act had taken most of the land from the *satra*, but it continues to be the biggest institutional landholder with maximum land and people under its protection and control.

In the village under study, while on one hand, there is large acreage of agricultural land which lies fallow, on the other, there are many young men in the village who are jobless and seeks alternative livelihood outside agriculture. The poor villagers lamented that production of rice (the principal agricultural crop) has become unproductive because of uncertainty in rainfall, lack of irrigation, dwindling agricultural subsidies on paddy saplings, fertilizers, etc. Moreover, since every family below the poverty line (BPL) gets 35 kg of subsidised rice (Rs. 3/- per kg) under the Public Distribution System (PDS) of the state, the basic requirement of staples is ensured. This security of food grain is also another reason for people moving out of agriculture in the village.

### Out-migration

Young unemployed men from the BPL( Below Poverty Line) migrate out of village to the various urban centres like Noida (in the National Capital Region of Delhi), Silvya (capital of Dadra and Nagar Haveli), and Surat and Gandhi Nagar (in Gujarat) in search of employment. The lure of better opportunities in cities also has its own demonstration effect and there is a negative attitude among the youths towards agriculture. The end result is a crisis of agricultural labour in the village.

**As narrated by the Gaonbura:**

*There is a crisis of labour in the village. Agricultural works like ploughing the fields, threshing the paddy, etc. were traditionally carried out by the family labour. Today, such family labour is not found as most of the youths have moved out of the village. The educated youths have become teachers, clerks, etc. in other areas of the state while the 'under matriculates have become labourer outside the state.*

He further adds that the government is also responsible for creating this crisis in agriculture. According to him, the schemes like MGNREGA, AAY, IAY, etc. have had a negative effect on agriculture. However, one needs to critically evaluate whether such schemes have affected the rural agrarian economy in the village. It needs to be mentioned that social security benefits of the government ushering change in rural landscape and subsequently changing the agrarian economy across villages is not limited to the village under study but is a general phenomenon across villages in India.

This issue of out migration from agriculture has been studied in depth by many scholars. A section of scholars argue that this outmigration is an outcome of the process of change that has occurred in the traditional agrarian sector (Arjan De Haan, 2002). The latter is breaking up under the onslaught of new forces of production and paving the way for a new production relation in the country side. The scholars uphold the view that migration is a welcome and a necessary process of change. There are scholars who contradict such claims are critical of this process of rural outmigration. They argue that the process has been hastened not by the availability of some better and sustainable opportunities outside agriculture, but because of an extremely sluggish agricultural sector without the necessary government support including irrigational facility, subsidised power, minimum support price, etc. turning agriculture into an unproductive sector. This has induced growth of alternative opportunities of employment in the informal economy. However, the challenge for this informal sector of the Indian economy lies in the fact that it is impossible to demarcate it as a separate category and any such attempt would lead to inconsistency in the larger framework (Bremar:1976).

Though migration is not a new social phenomenon and mostly has a pattern, many people migrate because of the remittance economy which grows with migration. The desire for better life and income attracts the people to move out and explore new avenues. However, the factors that trigger such outmigration of the villagers make for an interesting study. An important thing to be noted here is that the spread of the stories of opportunities associated with the large scale rural outmigration from Assam to other Indian states in recent years has acted as the immediate trigger for such outmigration from the village. Because of this outmigration, a crisis for agricultural labour has unfolded in the village.

Migration can also be a strategy of different groups for creating remittance income (De Haan 2002). The youths perceive the process of moving out of the village as a strategy to cope with uncertainty in livelihood opportunities however whether migration has

been a gainful bargain remains a question. It has been observed that often remittances sent by migrants are not sufficient for the families back home and experiences of people from rural Bangladesh reveals how people in households where there is outmigration cope with their indigenous ways of meeting the household requirements (Katy1995).

Interaction with the youths<sup>5</sup> of the study village revealed that income generated from agriculture is not enough to sustain their families for the year. Apart from the landless and marginal farmers who are compelled to depend on the rice distributed under the PDS, the other villagers prefer to consume rice from their own agricultural field. Among those raising their own paddy, a section of the households produce more than what is required for their domestic consumption, while for the rest of the households, it is barely enough to last for the whole year. Those who produce surplus do not find a market which can fetch a fair price for their produce and therefore, are compelled to sell their produce at a cheaper price to the middleman (mostly the Bihari traders from outside). On the other hand, those who do not produce more than their consumption requirement find it extremely tough to run their families as they do not have any other alternative source of income outside agriculture. Both groups of farmers are seasonally unemployed but, lack of locally available alternative sources of income compels them to remain out of work during the lean agricultural season.

The locally available alternative sources of livelihood in the district like the brick kilns, stone crushing units, etc. are sites of seasonal migrants from Bihar, poor immigrant Muslim community from within the state but they do not attract the local villagers. There is perceived sense of shame among the villagers to seek work in these places. At the same time, the expectation of better work and income also continue to elude the seasonally unemployed cultivators in the village. Therefore, the only alternative as revealed by the villagers is to move out of the village for durable employment from where they can earn income that would exceed their income from agriculture. Across village households, it was observed that unless there is one member of the household with a permanent job, youths have moved out from the village in search of livelihood. Also it was found that families which have a steady income from other sources including services continue with their engagement in agriculture in the village.

Studies from Punjab and Uttar Pradesh indicate that with rural outmigration from these states, there has been a transformation in the traditional village economy. Adi-dharmis and the Jats in Jalandhar are now engaged in various non-traditional works such as running telephone booths, grocery stores, eateries, etc. Many of them also stitch footballs for various multinational companies (Abbi and Singh, 1997). It is evident that the most pronounced trend in the Indian villages today is the move from the shackles of caste and agriculture (Gupta 2005). Further the traditional notion of unchanging and idyllic village has changed across India as people have started moving out of the traditional occupations breaking the stereotypes associated with their traditional

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<sup>5</sup> The information was gathered from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted amongst the youths in the village.

occupations. At the same time, employment in non-farm sector is largely determined by the socio-economic position of the household and recent trend across Indian villages shows that caste based occupational arrangements have withered (Gupta 2005).

Although the villagers from Dakhinpat *Satra* did not have many options with respect to the traditional occupations, yet there was a relationship of dependence which revolved around the authority of land. As discussed earlier, all land traditionally belonged to the *Satra* and therefore the villagers had to surrender themselves to the absolute authority of the *Satra*. Hemendra, a young Kaibarta boy, from Dakhinpat in his 30s while narrating the nature of outmigration from the village identified some critical factors which according to him were responsible for people moving out of the village. Decline in agricultural productivity was the primary reason behind the outmigration of the villagers, and he argued that outmigration has not only helped them earn an income, but also has helped them move out of the traditional stereotyped occupations in the village. He further adds that increasing aspiration for upward mobility among the scheduled caste youths has also contributed to the process of their outmigration. Thus aspiration for better life and social position is also emerging as a prime factor for rural outmigration among the youths.

Echoing similar views Tikendra, another Kaibarta boy from Dakhinpat, in his early 20s, who himself has been a migrant also holds that the fragmentation of land among the Scheduled Caste families was the main reason for migration among the Scheduled Caste youths. The income varies with the type and place of occupation and a majority of the youths who had migrated from the village have an income earning varying between Rs.3000/- to Rs.6500/-. As revealed by him, often this income is insufficient to meet the monthly expenses at the new city. Tikendra had left the village in early 2013 but returned in March of 2015.

He maintains that as the income generated from agriculture is less, the youths are compelled to look beyond agriculture and in the absence of other alternative avenues for supplementary income in the area there is a growing tendency to move out of the village. Interestingly, Tikendra discloses that the fascination among the youths about certain places, specially the developed urban centres of the country such as Delhi, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad etc. and the perception about the economic opportunities in them also triggers the tendency to migrate to these places. Be that as it may, it is clear from the accounts of Hemendra and Tikendra that youths move out of the village in search of better livelihood.

### **Social divisions and alternative livelihood**

A section of youths (scheduled caste) from the village have taken up non-agricultural activities like poultry, fishery and piggy in partnership. The village has three poultry farms, two piggeries and a fishery. These businesses were started with the financial assistance taken from State Institute of Rural Development (SIRD), National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), besides occasional loans from the village households who were economically and financially better off.

The initial financial assistance as start-up fund from SIRD and NABARD are subsidised and the subsequent financial requirements are met from borrowings sanctioned by a nationalized bank either on the recommendation of a guarantor or in lieu of mortgage of property. The two piggery farms that were started in the village in early 2013 with financial assistance and loan, burden of repayment of loan availed from the SIRD forced closure of one of the piggeries. The piggery farm that continues also has been facing challenges. The poultry farms have had successful run. It is interesting to note that traditionally the villagers neither reared chicken nor pig and neither the villagers consumed chicken or pork. It was only under the state government's self employment programme that youths in the village started the poultry and piggery farms. Although a section of the elderly in the village does not prefer the activities as they would pollute the clean and pure environment of the village nevertheless, there is no resistance as self employment would bind the village youths within the village and put a hold on outmigration. Thus economic activities which otherwise had been unacceptable within the social norms in the village, tend to change in the wake of changing nature of social crisis (outmigration) induced by economic crisis faced by the village.

However these new farming activities do not find any enthusiasm among the upper castes households from the village<sup>6</sup>. On the contrary, these households have been engaging in speculative land market that has been steadily growing in the periphery of Nagaon town and investing their resources in for acquiring new lands. Engaging in such farm practices has never been part of the socio-economic life of the higher caste households and such activities had been carried by people from lower castes. The stereotyping of activities by castes and absence of mutual trust across caste hierarchy still continues in the village. Social exclusion thus creates barrier in creating gainful livelihood opportunity within the village economy itself.

There is no doubt that agriculture is un- remunerative today, yet it still holds the prospects for a sustainable source of income. Despite the crisis, many villagers continue with agriculture as the main or only source of livelihood. The withdrawal from agriculture is not always a result of non sustainability, but also a result of a wave of information dissemination about the prospects of other opportunities in cities and towns which may accentuate the outmigration given the ongoing crisis in agriculture. The rural economy with high share on agricultural farming has failed to diversify over the years into other non- farm activities have contributed in a significant way in the

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<sup>6</sup> These households stay close to the vicinity of the *sattra*. Also there is a general unwillingness on their part of to take up these activities even though the households have the required land. Often problem of supervision is cited as a reason if farms are located at a distance within the village. They also stressed that for such farms they would have to depend on the scheduled castes from the village who might not be honest. When asked about why they do not invest in fisheries (which is not restricted in the vicinity of the *sattra*), they mentioned, that water bodies in the village which were previously connected to the river are not available as they have dried up and the village as a whole has become somewhat water deficient. So, for them, fishery is not a profitable venture.

current crisis facing the agrarian sector today. The villagers especially the youths today remain discontented with fragmentation of land and falling income from agriculture, absence of alternative livelihood avenues in the village. Therefore, a moving out beyond the village seemed more rewarding.

### Conclusion

The study of Dakshinpat *Satra* brings out a nuanced change taking place across villages in the state. Factors like caste, landholding which determine social position and livelihood choices have undergone transformation. The socio-economic life of the village reflects the crisis- from bounteous agriculture the fields today have turned non remunerative. Various state supports and institutional reforms (land reforms, irrigation) could not lead to desired optimal changes and social and economic transformation. Despite redistributing the ceiling surplus land of the *satra* among the landless villagers it only led to marginal change in the economic relations of the scheduled castes but over the years have not contributed in improve their agricultural production and the *satra* continued its dominance with its total land.

While agrarian change had its impact on the entire village economy, the socially marginalized scheduled castes were its worst victims. Two processes were concurrent in scheduled caste household-on one hand, agriculture became unproductive and on the other, increases in land fragmentation pushed them out of agriculture. To mitigate the crisis, these households either took up non-farm activities like poultry and piggery or migrated out of village. As opportunities for nonfarm activities remain limited given the investment cost and other operational aspects within the village, youths have migrated to other places where work opportunities are available.

As an outcome of the decline in agriculture as a source of income in the village there has been a growth in outmigration of the youth in rural areas of Assam. Since the last one and half decade, the state has witnessed an unprecedentedly large-scale outmigration from its rural areas to other states of India on account of the breaking down of its rural economy. One cannot testify whether such outmigration has been a boon for the state economy as remittance income continues to be low. Outmigration cannot be a long run solution to the problems of the crisis emerging in rural areas. This calls for a revival of the rural economy. In a socially and ethnically diverse society such as Assam, an attempt at the revival of the rural economy needs a holistic multi-pronged approach taking into account the specific character and needs of the local economies and the communities and instead of the stereotyped 'one size fits all' policy.

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