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**The Rural Economy:
A micro perspective from Western
Uttar Pradesh *circa*, 1930–2014**

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The Rural Economy: A micro perspective from Western Uttar Pradesh circa, 1930–2014*

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Abstract

Economic transition in rural India has been well documented since the early nineteenth century. Yet, long-term accounts of villages covering recent mutations in occupations and amenities, growing migration, and ‘subsidiarization’ of farming in the wake of miniaturization of holdings along with mechanization remain scant. As a small filler, this paper analyses the scale and limits of economic transition in a village called Dhantala (in Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh) over eight decades, focusing specially on the non-farm sector since 1930s.

In what ways did colonial ‘peace’, the decline of Jajmani, the green revolution, economic liberalization, and measures for ‘inclusive growth’ etc. impact secondary, intermediate, and tertiary sectors in Dhantala? What are the principal constraints on rapid economic growth in our fertile irrigated tracts and which theoretical perspectives help us in explaining the bottlenecks as well as the limited spurts in the rural economy as a whole? In order to reflect on these and related issues, the paper compares the trends in Dhantala with those in other village studies in the region and in national economic data over recent decades. It concludes with some policy imperatives and pointers for future research.

Keywords: Non-farm sector, new rural services, Jajmani, economic liberalization, migration.

* Revised version of the lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 8 July 2014.

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.²

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 date and more than a third of our rural population does not earn Rs. 32, per capita, to qualify as non-poor (as per the revised poverty line acknowledged for rural India by the central government) in 2014.

¹ The term ‘development’ has been applied by some thinkers through the prism of growth sequences pioneered by the West. Our use rests 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’ implied here is not West-centric, or against social equity, or environmental sustainability though it acknowledges the lead taken by the West in some parameters since the 19th 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.

² While rural development was pioneered by England and Holland in the seventeenth century with capitalist agriculture and proto-industrialisation, almost all nations with colonies were able to build strong industrial as well as agricultural sectors by the late nineteenth century. Outside the colonizing block, however, rural growth remained slow despite strong industrial and trading sectors, as in India and China (Bayly, 2003).

Is the staggered underdevelopment 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 are large irrigation and river linking projects essential? Can organized manufacturing be encouraged in the countryside or should agro-processing and cottage industries serve as engines for non-farm rural growth? Is the entry of organized private sector in rural infrastructure desirable or public welfare and the government sector sufficient for eradicating rural underdevelopment by themselves?

Questions such as these have been a matter of debate for decades in India. 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 dearth of multi-disciplinary field research throwing light on long term intended and unintended consequences of rural development initiatives.³ As a result, not only policy prescriptions but readings of rural conditions in India have often remained unclear and contradictory. 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

³ Long-term re-studies of the ‘Slater villages’ by John Harriss and others in Tami Nadu has thrown up evidence of greater prosperity in villages like Gangaikondam which have become towns since Slater surveyed them in 1916. On the other hand, even in the well performing state, there are other villages reported by Harriss like Iruvelpattu that continue in the shadow of considerable poverty and underemployment till today (Harriss and Nagaraj, 2013).

have major redistributive programmes 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, specially of unskilled labour, since the 1980s? How does village level census and National Sample Survey data compare with the multi-method account of economic indices in communities? Questions such as these cry out for multi-disciplinary research combining macro and micro and quantitative and qualitative evidence on changes in rural India.

As a minor contribution, this paper offers a structured analysis of economic transitions since the 1930s in one village, in western Uttar Pradesh, set in the wider context for comparisons. This paper has focused specially on non-farm sectors in the studied field, leaving aside a detailed comment on the agrarian transition for a separate forthcoming paper.⁴ In conclusion, some suggestions for addressing rural underdevelopment in India have been listed along with propositions for further research.

The Site

Dhantala is a middle-sized village, 21 kilometres south of Meerut.⁵ Its houses are concentrated in a 100 acre patch surrounded by fields spread across 1,300 acres approximately. In 1989, when I first visited the village (with an emigrant sweeper in my neighborhood in Delhi), its total population was 2,080. According to village elders, Dhantala may have had about 800 residents in the 1930s. In the following decades, the community grew steadily and peaked at 2,692, in 2006, before shrinking slightly to 2,604 by 2014.⁶ The village is dominated today by small and marginal farmers including dalits who benefitted from

⁴ See Vijay (2015)

⁵ The full name of the village (as recorded in official records) is Rasoolpur Dhantala after its first patron named Rasool Baksh who died at the turn of the nineteenth century. Most villagers today call it just by the second name.

⁶ Official counts of Dhantala's population are available in village level census data at the Centre for the Study of Regional Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru



land redistribution in 1984. However, with its population more than tripling between 1930 and 2014, per capita availability of land fell in the village from two to just three-fourth of an acre while 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.⁷ Given the neglect of family planning, the pressure on land would have been 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%).⁸ Among others, the dalit or scheduled castes made up 22% {including Jatavs (19%) and Valmikis (03%)} while muslims constitute approximately 9% 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 the present paper is to offer quantitative as well as qualitative evidence with some historical

University as well as the Block Development Office (BDO) office in Kharkauda. For the last two census (2001 and 2011), these records reflect a surprising decline in the village's population from 2,455 to 2100. My own census in Dhantala shows a much smaller decline (from 2,694 to just 2,604 between 2006 and 2012). These figures were reconfirmed by my assistant through a second house-to-house census in early 2013. It was also reported to us by the village's *anganwadi* workers who had collected the data for the 2011 census that they had inadvertently left out one segment of the village in their count. Surprisingly, the local district and block level enumerators failed to note the magnitude of the misreported decline from the previous count in Dhantala.

⁷ The measure of agricultural land used in this paper is acre while locals generally use *kacha bigha* (equivalent to one fifth of an acre). 2.47 acres make one hectare.

⁸ The term middle castes has been used here to refer to 'other backward castes' including upper middle castes such as Jats and Gujjars and lower middle castes like Kumhars, Lodhs, etc.

depth, on the scale and limits of economic change in a village located in one of the most fertile and well irrigated tracts of India to gauge the process of underdevelopment in our countryside better. The study of such change called for a multi-method approach involving surveys, interviews, focus group discussions and personal sketches besides participant observation and search for local records. House-to-house surveys were conducted in three rounds (1989, 2006–07, and 2013–14), the author's concentration was 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 since local records are sparse and subjects' oral responses also show variations.⁹ At the same time, the option of abandoning or minimizing quantification of economic trends seemed like a needless surrender. Hence an attempt was made to chart change with maximum available data with the caveat that the figures cited are only rough approximations. Approximations in estimates of past wage rates, prices, etc. for the pre-1989 period (culled mainly from group recall) are admitted too. The fidelity of our data to broad trends has been reaffirmed, however, through several safeguards.

For example, the paper uses actual names of places and residents (wherever it was safe and permitted by subjects) and follows quantitative evidence with considerable qualitative

⁹ Tehseel and Block Development records in Dhantala are replete with mistakes like the village's area being shown as 2.1 square kilometres in the Vikas Pustika for 2005 at the BDO office while it is 5.5 square kilometres (including fields) and 0.4 (without fields). Similarly, the total population of Dhantala and the number of workers show obvious flaws in the BDO book which seem to have been copied directly from the erroneous census record of 2011. In contrast to official counts, group interviews and intensive household surveys brought forth more reliable information on the village's social structure while oral evidence from octogenarians yielded useful data on old price levels, wages, yield rates, etc.

observation, case studies, and life sketches making all observations and evidence accessible for critiques and follow-ups. In order to make subjects partners in this multi-vocal study, their comments and field notes were recorded in Hindi—the local language—besides sharing all statistical data and the draft of this paper with the educated in the village. Indeed the extent of interpersonal knowledge among villagers and their extraordinary candor and accessibility (specially of elderly men) and, of course, their generous attitude were of immense help in making this possible.

The Macro Setting

In 2011, 68% of India's population was rural (down from 82% in 1951). The decline in the number of agriculturists among workers in the country was even sharper at 49% (from 73% in 1951). However, this delayed turnaround in India's countryside pales before the ratio of villagers and agriculturists in countries like UK and USA (at less than 5% for more than a century). Even in developing countries like Brazil and Malaysia the proportion of agriculturists among workers is below 20%. Given their low count of agriculturists, it is not surprising that the average farm size in USA, in 2001, was 180 hectares while in India it is just about a hectare even as the optimum holding size for a couple can easily be 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 Japan (at about \$50,000 per annum).¹⁰

No doubt, advances have been made in rural India over the past century. Check on large-scale mortality during famines, freedom from external assistance for food, marked improvement in human indices in Kerala and Punjab etc. and inspiring initiatives in villages like Tilonia, Ralegaon, and Hirway Bazar are a cause for celebration. The most important development has been the increase in national food grain output from about 50

¹⁰ Tata Services Limited (2013, p. 273) and Balakrishnan (2012, p. 178).

million tons in 1950 to 250 last year (2014); 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, for example, wheat harvest in Ludhiana is up to 60 quintals per hectare compared to the highest yields of 75 quintals in UK etc. It is worth remembering that most farms in Punjab and Haryana also yield up to 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 (HYVs) of seeds after 1965, the rise in crop yields benefited from growth of irrigation, increased mechanization, and greater use of fertilizers. It is worrisome that post-harvest losses remain among the highest in India due to poor rural infrastructure and official barriers on trading in farm produce. Thus, 25 million tons of cereals and 25% of fruits and vegetables were wasted in 2013, even as 6% of crops 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 Organisation 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 1.1 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.¹¹

¹¹ For cited data see Department of Agriculture and Cooperation (2014).



The Non-farm Sector

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 slum's growth in developing economies.¹² 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.¹³ In comparison with pre-liberalization era however, it represents a departure.¹⁴

Within our non-farm economy, rural manufacturing remains bottled up in the absence of adequate infrastructure and skills in most parts of India though construction and services have been drivers of faster 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 important to note 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.

Trends in Dhantala

We shall now examine each sector of Dhantala's economy since the 1930s highlighting continuities as well as changes across five major phases in our economy; the late colonial era, the development phase after independence, the populist turn from the 1970s, years of economic liberalization, and of 'inclusive growth' between 2004 and 2014.

In a longer perspective, seven shifts can be identified in Dhantala's economy beginning with since its resettlement, in the

¹² Binswanger (2014).

¹³ On Japan's economic growth since 1868, see Macpherson (1987).

¹⁴ Coppard (2001), Harris-White and Janakirajan (2007).

late eighteenth century (following a long spell of political disturbance towards the end of the Mughal rule).¹⁵ The 20 Gujjar lineages that dominate the village today trace their histories to the 1780s when their ancestors are said to have come from Faridabad and 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 encouraged the settlers to adopt cultivation and realize the limited prosperity from which Dhantala's name (implying 'abode of wealth') is derived.

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 mainly in the wake of the peasant upsurge accompanying the national movement.¹⁶ The next break in the agricultural history of Dhantala came in the 1950s and 1960s 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 1960s and 1970s 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 1992) from the commons which was under the watch of Dhantala's Land Management Committee (LMC) then.¹⁷ As a result, the proportion

¹⁵ For a history of Meerut region incorporating Gujjar folklore see, Kumar (2007); Verma (2003).

¹⁶ On limited tenancy relief in the first half of the twentieth century, see Whitcombe (1975). Randhawa mentions land rentals in the range of Rs. 5 and Rs. 15 per acre, in the United Provinces, in the 1920s (1983, p. 367).

¹⁷ The agitation which brought this change was backed by labourers and aided by the local unit of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) led by a dedicated comrade—Satpal. Similar attempts were made in other villages but with little success. The conjuncture which enabled the radical change in Dhantala included factors like availability of 300 acres of common land; the unity shown by dalits and Kumhars who demonstrated at Meerut for a fortnight; rivalry within the dominant Gujjars because of a rebel called Tekram who aligned



of male landless labourers came down to practically zero in 1984. Even today their share is less than 15% in contrast to surrounding villages like Doymi where it goes up to 50%. The increased number of small and marginal farmers benefitted considerably from the green revolution which increased yields on all farm sizes as long as inputs such as fertilizers and seeds were the same.

The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a ‘grey revolution’, whereby motorized machines replaced manual appliances such as *rahats* and ploughs on farms. This turnaround reduced labour 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 mainly based on manual work even now. The latest transition in the local economy 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 the 1990s.¹⁸ This helped in raising real wages (specially of unskilled workers) and in increasing the state’s revenues for more welfare spending.¹⁹

with the landless; and the helpful attitude of the commissioner of Meerut towards the agitationists.

¹⁸ Ironically, the era of economic liberalization brought increased state intervention in the rural economy of India through enhanced support price for food grains and continuing restrictions on sale of farm produce etc.

¹⁹ The nominal wage of an agricultural labourer in Dhantala, increased from Rs. 0.25 per day in the late 1930s to Re. 1 in the 1950s, Rs. 20 in 1989, Rs. 125 in 2009, and Rs. 250 in 2014 or by about 1000 times. Taking 1993–94 as base year, the wholesale price index over the same period rose from 1.5 in the mid-1930s to 4.5 in 1951, 15 in 1971, 75 in 1991, and 375 in 2014 or 250 times approximately (Tata Services Ltd, 2013, p. 236). Consumer prices have shown similar change over the long term in India (Department of Agriculture and Cooperation, 2012). Interestingly, throughout the colonial era, real wages for agricultural workers rose but at a much slower rate up to the beginning of the green revolution. In 1873 prices, they rose from Rs. 27 per annum to Rs. 42 per annum between 1780 and 1968 (Roy, 2004, pp. 48–49). A report from rural Thane cited by Guha (1984) shows that laborers in cane fields were paid four paise for women and eight paise per day for men; a servant could be paid Rs. 100 annually along with food and a skilled mason up to Rs. 15 per month.

However, the impact of such measures on the ground has been limited because of rampant corruption, mismanagement, and poor design of most schemes.²⁰

Occupations

The occupational profile of Dhantala exhibits a notable transformation since the late colonial era including the erosion of the centuries old overlap between rurality and agriculture lately. Thus, out of 430 households in the village (identified by their shared kitchens), in 2014, 340 had agricultural land and 237 had at least one member engaged in non-farm work. Significantly, the proportion of non-agriculturists in the village crossed 349 in a total of 1,013 workers, i.e., 35% by 2014 (in contrast to just 22% in 1989).

The precise estimate of time spent in different occupations by multi-tasking rich or poor earners was difficult to make. But, the estimate is that about 150 men, who describe themselves as '*kisans*' or agriculturists actually spend more time in non-farm work (in construction and services etc). Most of them also earn more from their non-farm pursuits. Of the 430 households 370 had milch cattle in 2014 and many marginal farmers were earning more from milk than from cultivation. It is also noteworthy that many farm or cattle-owning households have at least one woman member helping in the field and/or the cattle shed. They may be seen as an additional workforce of about 400 odd women subsidiary workers who spend at least a couple of hours in 'economic work' but appear undercounted in official surveys.²¹ About half of these women also contribute to family earnings by

²⁰ For detailed comment see Vijay, 2013, pp. 607–10.

²¹ For example, the last census shows only 25% of rural women as workers in India whereas most rural households have at least one woman helping with livestock and/or in cultivation and fodder processing daily. The census data for Dhantala also shows only 135 women workers in 2011. The basis of this undercount became obvious from local teacher-surveyors who admitted that they did not count women livestock rearers even in households which sold milk and considered them as homemakers only.



selling milk and need to be counted as workers though the census enumerators do not seem to do so.

While the dairy sector is rich and remunerative in Dhantala, lately a slow ‘subsidiarization’ of cultivation is taking place. Factors propelling agriculturists towards non-farm occupations are: growing demand for labour and rising wages specially in construction; shrinking of landholdings and increasing mechanization leading to less requirement for labour on diminished fields; and improvements in educational facilities and transport and communication links.²²

Shades of Multi-tasking

Tejram Jatav was 20 years old in 1984 and, being landless, he was also allotted a holding of 3 acres following the land agitation in Dhantala. He had been a leading participant in the movement and stood boldly as witness against the old *pradhan* (headman) of the village despite threats in the ensuing court cases.

Meanwhile, he had been pressurized by his parents to marry his brother’s widow, in 1973, and was burdened with the upkeep of three children at a young age. While the ownership of 3 acres made Tejram secure, his expenses were also rising as one son and two more daughters were born in quick succession. In order to make ends



²² In his long term study of Phalpota, in colonial Punjab, Tom Kessinger has shown that in a population of 565, there were 150 workers in 1848. Of these, 74% were agriculturists (including 12% farm workers) while 16% were craftsmen (including 11% textile workers), 9% were service providers and 2% were shopkeepers. The village had 535 acres of cultivable land of which 31% was double-cropped with irrigation from brick wells (1984, p. 250).

meet, he began working as a mason after 1995. His wage grew from Rs. 100 in 1995 to Rs. 400 per day in 2013. In addition, he receives rent from his field leased out to another farmer for Rs. 20,000 per annum for an acre while the remaining 2 acres are being tilled by his grand-daughter's husband who live with him with three children (after his own sons separated).

The total earning of the extended family, in 2013, was Rs. 14,000 per month including Rs. 6,000 from masonry (working for about a fortnight per month); Rs. 1,800 average from rental and about Rs. 6,000 per month from cultivation. The family of seven thus earned about Rs. 2,000 per month, per capita, by diversifying their earnings.

Agriculture

Forestry, fishing, and mining are absent in Dhantala but agriculture remains the backbone of the village's primary sector despite its recent marginal contraction. Thus, two-thirds of the workers describe themselves as agriculturists even though a fourth of the 493 cultivators were engaged in some non-farm work simultaneously or, in succession, in 2014. Agriculture, however, has several facets and includes besides cultivation, live-stock rearing, use or sale of side-products of rabi and kharif crops and of fodder and dung, and an additional third harvest (mainly of vegetables) in about 10% of the fields. Till the 1970s, millets and peas were commonly grown, along with wheat. Today, major rabi crops sown are wheat and mustard and the kharif ones are paddy and pulses. Seventy per cent of the village's fields grow sugarcane that gives only one harvest in a year but has a two-year cycle and can be sold to sugar mills at prices supported by the state though delayed payments from the mills are a major complain of the peasants.

The principal concern of a farmer is the difference between his costs and gross returns. In 2013, from a combined harvest of wheat and paddy under normal precipitation, a marginal farmer, with one acre land, could earn up to Rs. 47,000 net or Rs. 3,900, per month, at best (including returns from side products like hay).



Sugarcane cultivation yielded a higher income of up to Rs. 4,500 per month, per acre. These estimates are of optimum yields expected with sufficient inputs under normal weather. According to residents, actual farm yields for many farmers rarely cross two-thirds of the optimum even with sufficient rain and adverse weather may bring down the same to one-third or less. In this light, the average net earning of a farmer over a quinquennial may be taken as half of the optimum income noted above.²³

However, animal husbandry is a close ally of cultivation. Most cultivators in Dhantala rear buffaloes (but negligible poultry or other livestock) and earn from each up to Rs. 3,000, per month net. Thus, the earning of a marginal farmer from two crops, in one acre, and from milk drawn from one buffalo goes up to Rs. 5,000, per month, in current prices.²⁴ In other words, a modal family of five members having a marginal farm of an acre and one buffalo would, on average, earn merely Rs. 33 per capita, per day, which is close to the poverty line of Rs. 32 per capita, per day, in rural Uttar Pradesh, in 2014.

It has been seen that the distribution of 3 acres among all the landless had increased the number of small farmers dramatically in 1984. However, the repeated division of family holdings has made many of them sub-marginal holders with less than an acre now. In this scenario, it is not surprising that many try to combine farming with other occupations or wish to leave agriculture altogether. Constraints on the expansion of the non-farm sector, in the region, however, limit this option too.

Secondary Occupations

Till mid-twentieth century, Dhantala was home to a variety of crafts including pottery, oil pressing, weaving, shoe making, tool making, carpentry, blacksmithy, and jaggery making. As

²³ Door-to-door queries also fail to fetch better estimates as self-reported earnings tend to be big undercounts.

²⁴ It is assumed that a small farmer with two milch animals will normally sell the milk from one and consume that of the second.

transportation and other links with cities grew and factory-made tools, utensils, wheels, cloth, sugar, oil, and shoes became available in small towns like Kharkauda and Hapur, local patronage declined and artisans began migrating or switching to cultivation or new crafts like motor repair, construction, etc. Traditional craftsmen that have survived to this day, in the village, include two potters, three blacksmiths and two carpenters. Their implements have improved over time as in the case of brick kilns, furnaces and crushers that use electricity and more metal now. Besides this, modern tools and machinery has been used for refrigeration, motor winding, and in pottery.

Still, the shortage of electricity, all-weather roads, and cold storage in the village have kept modern manufacturing for urban and rural markets highly restricted. Food processing, which could have been a major source of secondary employment, has been confined to jaggery making and some alleged production of adulterated milk and liquor. The potential for tapping available cheaper labour and land, in the countryside, for making milk products, snacks, bio-fuel etc. (not to speak of machine-made cloth, carpets, etc.) remains completely untapped, in the absence of adequate power, roads, credit, and training.²⁵

These obstacles to the growth of industry and the difficulties faced by local entrepreneurs can be gleaned from the story of a *khoya* (dried milk) unit that was started in Dhantala, in 2005, by nine men. Demand for the product is high in summer. The main material—milk, was easily available within the village and the partners managed a small loan too. Yet, the venture did not succeed since power was available for less than 10 hours a day and the road connecting Dhantala to the towns of Kharkauda and Mohiddinpur was in a bad shape. In this situation, *khoya* often got spoiled. Besides this, quarrels and police complaints also complicated the matter and the business was wound up within a few months.

²⁵ For a better rural industrial scenario reported from Karnal see Jodhka (2014).



Some villages around Dhantala like Naya Gaon and Tori report some manufacturing of products like ply-boards, milled oil, iron and wooden frames and industrial grease. However, most such units are small and unstable while bigger ones are confined to the surrounding highways and are generally run by town dwellers. These include slaughter houses, sugar mills, brick kilns, and some tanneries and distilleries. Larger clusters of industries like sports goods, brassware, sweets and snacks, garments and apparel are seen in cities like Meerut, Ghaziabad and Hapur, Noida and Greater Noida only.

Even these large manufacturing units have not picked up much in the region though towns and cities have been growing rapidly since the 1990s. The three new 'census towns' (Mohiddinpur, Aminanagar, and Amehra) which have been added to the list of the existing 15 in Meerut district, within the last decade, do not have any manufacturing apart from milk processing. In fact, many industrial units that had emerged in the colonial era, also wound up and have shifted to states like Gujarat and Uttarakhand in recent times. The tales of closing business houses such as Mohan Meakins and the Modis which were manufacturing tyres, thread, sugar, liquor, and cloth in the region are instructive. After a series of strikes, these businesses shifted from the region in 1980s. The Modi cloth mill was burnt down and some workers got killed; while the owners got insurance money after removing machinery, according to a villager who had worked in the mill.

The Intermediate Sector

Amidst such industrial stagnation, non-farm growth, in western Uttar Pradesh, has come largely from a booming construction and service sector in recent decades. The growth of *pucca* houses increased the demand for labourers, masons, carpenters, brick makers, etc. in towns and villages after 1990. During my first visit to Dhantala, in 1989, I found only two *pucca* houses in the dalit quarter; now, out of 90, only two had mud walls and a thatch roof. Apart from construction within the village, masons and carpenters also drawn to surrounding towns and cities

daily or have emigrated to construction sites (specially high-rise apartment blocks) in Noida etc.. On the other hand, road and bridge construction is still sluggish in the region.²⁶ Work on about 20 flyovers was started between Delhi, Ghaziabad, and Meerut in the last decade but many are still incomplete causing traffic jams (specially near railway crossings) and resulting in long diversions through bumpy village roads. Similarly, lanes inside Dhantala are not yet topped by bricks while the outer road, connecting Dhantala with Mohiddinpur and Kharkhauda (on either side of Dhantala) also remains pot-holed.

The impact of a growing housing sector on local wage rates seems extremely significant. The current wage for a man's unskilled work was Rs. 20 in 1989, while that for skilled work was Rs. 40 per day. In 2014, the corresponding wage rates were Rs. 250 and 400; representing a 100% rise in real wage (specially of unskilled labour) as the consumer price index over the same period has risen by 600%.²⁷

The Tertiary Economy

The tertiary sector has registered considerable growth, in Dhantala, in the last three decades with village servers increasing marginally from 30 to 33 between 1989 and 2014 but formal sector employees (like sweepers, teachers, para-medics, etc.) jumping from 27 to 106 over the same period. Many of the latter go out to work in towns daily. Apart from the overall share of services, ups and downs in segments within services, are also

²⁶ At the all India level too, it has been estimated that employment in construction grew from 12 to 18 million between 1991 and 2001, and further, to 41 million by 2011.

²⁷ At the macro level, rural real wage rose very marginally till the mid-1970s and by nearly 2.5%, per annum, between 1983 and 1993 and by 3.9% per annum between 1993 and 2012 (Institute for Human Development, 2014, p. 96). However, the long-term study of Palanpur in neighbouring Moradabad (Dreze et al. 1998) has shown a rise in wheat wage of casual agricultural labourer from 2.5 kg., per day, to 8 kg. between 1953 and 1993 and of real wage (in 1960–61 prices) from Rs. 0.9 to 1.9 over the same period (nominal wage rising from Rs. 1 to Rs. 25).

noteworthy. A host of these including those of the barber, the mid-wife, cobbler, priest, was herman, traditional healers, sweepers, etc. have been present for ages. Almost all were low skill, kin-trained, and associated with specific castes. The proportion of such workers fell from 4% to 1% between 1989 and 2014. Meanwhile, new services as of compounders, accountants, mechanics, post graduate teachers, and lawyers etc. have grown; these often require professional training and yield better returns specially when geared to towns.

Among services which have declined or disappeared, over the past eight decades, are those of water carriers and entertainers like puppeteers and animal trainers, etc. New services that cropped up are those of nurses, motor and pump repairers, electricians, chemists, insurance agents, social workers, and political activists. Services which have continued in altered form are those of tailors, the mid-wife, tool makers, medical practitioners, postmen, and veterinarians. Services continuing largely unaltered are those of the barber, cobbler, and vendors. Between 1989 and 2014 the number of shops went up from three to 23. Fourteen of these were on rent and were costing between Rs. 300 to 500 per month; three were medical stores while eight were grocery stores. There was no dhaba, dispensary, or cloth shop, in Dhantala, till 2014.²⁸

By activity status, the tertiary sector jobs in Dhantala, can be classified into three categories: 1) formal sector employment in central, state or local government or in the organized private sector or, in local NGOs and voluntary organizations; 2) informal wage employment (casual or regular); and 3) self-employment (petty, professional, or capital-intensive). Among all occupations, public sector jobs are the most sought after among villagers and include those in grade I-IV which can in turn be regular, temporary, or casual. These jobs fetch not only a regular salary but also medical and other benefits and are considered much less demanding than cultivation or even business by most. Wage

²⁸ For growth of shops in two villages in Karnal district over the same period see, Jodhka, 2014.

earners employed in the private sector work in trade, transport, shops, and real estate (mostly outside the village).

According to elders, there were only two grade III and four grade IV organized sector employees, in Dhantala, in mid-twentieth century. By 1989, the number had gone up to 27. Of late, their count has gone up even more sharply. In 2014, there were 99 grade III and IV organized sector employees. The number of literates has also increased from 38% in 1989 to 67% in 2014 and graduates themselves were 105 two years back. The expansion of para-health workers has been extremely significant for women even though their salaries are low at Rs. 500 per month for a helper and Rs. 1,500 for heads of two *anganwadis* (crèches). Interestingly, Dhantala has some prosperous families (including 49 semi-middle and middle farmers owning between 10 and 15 acres of land). Yet, the village has had no instance of a regular domestic servant as most housework is done by women (even among the well-off), in contrast to cities.²⁹

Services which are urgently needed by villagers but remain missing are those of qualified doctors, a post office, bank, and provisioning of potable water. Some businessmen have opened units in surrounding cities; these included two property dealers, one building contractor, two dry cleaners, and one grocer. In 2014, Dhantala had 124 individuals covered by life insurance; 195 reported indebtedness while six were local creditors.

Entrepreneurs and the Shadow Economy

In monetary terms, the most dynamic segment of the village comes from small businessmen, shopkeepers, traders, and middlemen whose proportion was negligible till 1989 but grew in the era of economic liberalization to about 5% of the workforce. Some of them are petty traders but a handful are rich and enterprising multi-taskers combining various jobs such as formal

²⁹ In this respect, Dhantala presents a contrast to the village named Sripuram by Andre Beteille where, in 1961, Brahmin householders employed regular servants in homes as well as fields (Beteille, 1962).

sector employment with brokerage, moneylending, and quasi-legal work too. One extremely lucrative activity, has been private schooling, another is the production and sale of liquor. Besides two government schools, the village has two English medium private schools which charge up to Rs. 150 per month while a senior secondary public school on the boundary of the village charges Rs. 300. In 2009, it was estimated, in a group discussion, that liquor worth Rs. 5,000 is being sold daily within Dhantala. While two suppliers were getting it from towns at Rs. 17, per pouch (25 mls), they sold the same for Rs. 30. With the opening of an authorized liquor shop, in 2011 (under a major expansion of such vends sanctioned by the Mayawati regime in Uttar Pradesh), this local trade was hit hard.

Jajmani and Barter

Along with the changing composition and balance between its major sectors, Dhantala's economy has witnessed a mutation in its exchange practices (relations between employers and servers and sellers and clients). Till about 1960, Dhantala's crafts, services, and agriculture were integrally connected through the system of jajmani (also called 'lagbandi' in this belt). Under this arrangement, each craftsman or service provider (*kamin*) was attached to a specific landholder (*jajman*) on a hereditary bases. In return, the jajman paid the kamin with grain ranging between half to two quintals annually (for a barber) or two kilograms of wheat, as daily wage, for a construction worker or, a few chapattis (given to sweepers daily), or one meal for a casual labourer, per day, along with some grain at harvest time.

Another feature of jajmani was that each craft and service was associated with a specific sub-caste and families were not supposed to take up vocations of other sub-castes. While laboring kamins were mostly outcastes or from lower middle castes, the jajmans were mostly upper middle caste farmers and landowners. For example, Rajkali, an 80-year old ex-sweepress recollected that she used to clean drains and lift refuse from the houses of a dozen odd *kisans* daily, around the middle of the previous century,

and was given two chapattis by each household (along with some *subzi*, [cooked vegetable] at times) in a second round, in the afternoon. In addition, she received up to 30 *ser* of wheat at harvest, from each patron.³⁰ Besides disposing refuse, she also worked as the midwife of the village while her husband carried ashes from the cremation ground to the jajmans' houses in case of a death. Apart from payments in kind, the kamin or worker could also claim support from his jajman(s) in times of crisis and at festivals, weddings, etc. Skilled workers like the barber and the carpenter were attached to a whole section of the village while sweepers, labourers, etc. were attached to groups of families.

Some scholars have expressed nostalgia about jajmani ties in traditional villages.³¹ Undoubtedly, the structure worked for ages and gave some protection to servers from sudden starvation, exigencies, etc. Despite its benign front, however, the relation between the kamin and the jajman(s) was exploitative as the former was expected to show commitment consistently while the latter offered protection at whim.

The jajmani system was dependent on an ethos of loyalty and absence of competition. Yet, contractual work and cash payments (based on casual or regular wage for an assigned task) started replacing jajmani from mid-twentieth century and particularly from the 1970s. Among factors eroding jajmani were increased mobility of goods and men between the village and towns; legal protection given to dalits and the landless since independence; tenants' rights and redistribution of land; surplus generated by the green revolution, and, spurt in the non-farm economy. However, the transition is not thorough. In Dhantala, even today, some agricultural workers are paid in grain while some tenant cultivators also pay their dues by dividing the harvest. Momin, the village barber, informed me that many of his clients insist on partial payment or part cash and part goods payment for his

³⁰ The unit for weight used in the region in early twentieth century was 'ser' which denoted 0.9 kilogram.

³¹ For elaborate comment on the jajmani system see Breman (1961) and Wiser and Wiser (1935/ 1971).



services. In the last meeting, in 2011, he mentioned, “I shall shift to Meerut to first work in a saloon and then open own shop *inshaallah* (God willing).”

Rural–Urban Integration

Along with changes in jajmani, barter and caste-based occupations, another structural change in Dhantala’s economy since early twentieth century is its increasing integration with the outer world with a deepening urban influence. Dhantala is still not a semi-urban community. Yet, slow movement in that direction is evident. Till the first quarter of the twentieth century, Dhantala’s interaction even with neighbouring towns such as Hapur and Meerut was minimal. Evidence from other village studies also show that while these rural communities sent ghee, jaggery and grain to cities, to provide for tax payments, the villages’ imports were restricted to salt and metal largely.³²

In Dhantala too, commuting for education or grocery to cities appeared first in the second quarter of the last century along with the coming of bicycles. This was followed by radio, newspapers, construction of a pucca road and entry of motorized vehicles in the third quarter, and by television, cell phones, computers, and the internet (on smart phones) in succeeding decades.³³ Western and Chinese snacks and cold drinks and audio and video cassettes arrived in Dhantala after 1990 when nearby towns also began being accessed for synthetic clothing, construction material, and electronic gadgets, etc..

In 1958, Kharkauda, the nearest township, was recognized as a *nagar-panchayat*. Now it has the block development office, dispensaries, one inter-college, one degree college, an upcoming engineering institute, post office and three banks. Such ‘rurbanization’ has lead, in the last decade, to the rise of four more census towns in Meerut district. These have food processing units,

³² See Kessinger (1984).

³³ Randhawa (1983).

wholesale markets, and cyber cafés which villagers are also using increasingly.

Another link emerging between Dhantala and surrounding towns is the land market and the growing interest of townsmen in buying agricultural land.³⁴ Individuals such as Kuleshwar sold off his 3-acre plot after getting a teacher's job in Delhi; Pushpendar, a rich farmer on the other hand, has increased his joint family holding; three Lodh brothers purchased 40 acres, in Dhantala, for horticulture after receiving compensation for the takeover of their fields (near Meerut city) by local authorities; Bhopal who wished to sell his land in order to repay debt; and many who wish to act as middlemen facilitating property deals, represent the different sides of this tangle.

Commuting and Migration

Another manifestation of growing ties between Dhantala and surrounding towns is the growing number of immigrants as well as migrants from Dhantala. In 2014, Jasbeer Singh, the ex-pradhan of the village stated that since 1989, 98 families had left Dhantala. These migrations happened in all castes though middle castes have moved out more for salaried jobs and higher education while dalits have shifted mainly to slums as labourers. In the last decade, only four families arrived in Dhantala from outside; all were from other villages, none from a town. Even those who returned to Dhantala from cities due to financial or health problems are few while many more youngsters wish to leave. The village, in this sense, may be 'vanishing' as an aspirational space. Yet, it cannot be denied that it is a more democratic and egalitarian community than ever before.

Apart from those who left Dhantala and return mainly for family functions, in 2014 about 100 residents, were commuting to cities for work, daily or weekly. Going to Meerut, Hapur, Delhi, or Ghaziabad by train or, by bus, some were casual labourers and masons while others were sweepers, peons, mechanics, etc. and

³⁴ See Vijay (2014)



a few were clerks, lawyers, and small entrepreneurs. The latter belong to richer families who have educated youngsters for better jobs and include some dalit lawyers, clerks, and teachers.³⁵ No woman commutes from Dhantala, for work as yet.

An important reason behind migration is that services fetch a better price in cities than in a village. For example, in 2009, Momin was charging Rs. 5 for a hair cut in Dhantala while in a Delhi slum, in the same year, the charge was Rs. 10 on the footpath and Rs. 25 in a saloon. Similar ratios can be seen in tailoring, driving, etc. A spin-off of growing migration from Dhantala has been an increasing shortage of cheap labour inside the village. This has been a force behind rising rural real wages too.

Visitors from Towns

The winds of change blowing over Dhantala are specially visible in the arrival of visitors from cities on business. For centuries, Indian villagers knew mainly three sets of townsmen—the tax-collector, soldiers, and an occasional priest or sadhu. The British added the postman, the assessor, and an occasional veterinarian, teacher, etc. The post-independence state brought new faces into the village. These included three teachers, two private medical practitioners, paramedics and vaccinators, one state appointed sweeper, the panchayat secretary, *patwari* and block development officer, some inspectors and banking and insurance agents, bunches of vote seekers appearing before each election and some researchers and media personnel who arrive after a mishap or tragedy. While talking to a 50-year old dalit woman, Suresh, I found that the only town-dwellers she had personally met are the doctor, hospital staff, and the van driver who took her to a city hospital after an accident she suffered in 2005. Within Dhantala, the only people who visited her from cities have been politicians, a voter card distributor and a researcher (the author).

³⁵ In her re-study of Karimpur in Agra district, Susan Wadley has noted that, in 1989, from 143 households of Karimpur, 138 individuals were going out daily for work in contrast to the situation in the 1920s when Wisers had found pilgrimage as the only purpose for which villagers went out.

Most recently, the village is beginning to see traders and labourers coming for weddings and other functions. While some city-dwellers are coming on business or on government assignment now, it is striking that instances of emigrant workers returning to the village, even in old age, are few. The pulls that impel Dhantala's emigrants to stay in city slums and lower class colonies (forgoing the cheaper, safer, and more intimate and healthy environment of the village), are not just earnings but also greater freedom from caste and community *diktat*. Clearly, the aspirations of villagers have grown much faster than available opportunities in the countryside. This is despite the fact that Dhantala, since the 73rd constitutional amendment, is more democratic and less poverty stricken than ever before.

A Gendered Space

Caste, gender, and occupations have had strong connections in India. In much of countryside, for example, women often describe themselves as homemakers even though their routine is full of hard labour in the home and the field. As a result, work participation rate of women in Indian villages seems low at about 25%. The count in Dhantala shows that about 160 women were engaged in subsidiary agricultural work while 55 others were principal workers like farm labourers, tailors, sweepers, health-workers, etc. The number of female farm labourers, interestingly, has come down, as dalit households now tend to withdraw women from farm work as soon as their remittances or favourable land deals enable them to do so.

As stated, the village has no woman commuting daily for work yet. Also, private sector employment is avoided by Dhantala's women even after migration to cities. Indeed, the proportion of women employed in the non-farm sector is very small and consists mainly of health-workers and teachers. Many of these are low paid with salaries less than even a labourer's.³⁶ Some extra remuneration comes to these health-workers from incentive awarded for overseeing successful deliveries, vaccination, etc. The only secure women workers in Dhantala are the regular



teachers in government schools who get up to Rs.30,000 per month, besides assured increment, medical leave etc.

The majority of Dhantala's women, however, are economically disempowered with little command over property, their own earnings, or even over their time and bodies. A glance at the grinding routine of a 'home maker' in a well-off middle-peasant family reveals the drudgery that village women go through daily.

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 10 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 the 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 the day).

12:00 to 1:00 pm: Washes cattle and cleans house including the cattle



³⁶ The English medium private school in Dhantala pays only Rs. 2000 to each of its eight women teachers while it charges Rs. 150 to Rs. 200 per month from pupils.

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 overs.

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: Cleans utensils and watches television before going to sleep with children.

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

Caste

Next to gender, castes and sub-castes have shaped the occupational profiles of villages for ages. While caste restrictions may have come down slightly among urban middle classes, overt as well as covert discrimination and prejudices still remain strong in villages. In Dhantala too, till the mid-twentieth century, work options were strongly determined by hereditary vocations and sub-castes of workers. Today, the hereditary occupations of *Kumhars*, *Ahirs*, *Nais* etc. have been interchanged on a large scale. Indeed, some traditional occupations have disappeared and new ones like that of motor mechanics, drivers, security guards do not have a strong association with any sub-caste.

Such cross-caste exchange and mobility, however, seems constrained among castes within the *varnas*. Most dalits thus remain confined to hard and/or unclean jobs even though Jatavs may take up sweepers' profession (traditionally limited to Valmikis) while a *Pasi* may adopt hide cleaning, etc. (traditionally confined to *Chamadhs*). Similarly, ex-shudra castes of Gujjars have combined cattle-rearing with settled agriculture now while Jats and Yadavs who were agriculturists par excellence now dominate the police, army, and local administration. Instances of



occupational mobility across varna extremes are, however, uncommon. Till 2014, there was only one example in Dhantala of a middle caste man, Ved Prakash, who took up a sweeper's job under the state government and a Brahmin who took to hard labour and died, in penury, in 2005.

At the other extreme, instances of dalits breaking into top-level professions are more common now. Increasing migration, literacy, birth control, and dalit political organizations (growing since the 1990s) have helped in this turnaround and a segment of teachers, lawyers, and even judges are emerging among Dhantala's lower castes. Most of them struggled on their sole rope for upward mobility—cheap education in government-run schools and colleges; with or without the benefit of reservations in jobs and educational institutes. For example, Manoj is a Jatav who completed his PhD and is now teaching in a college in Meerut while Ramavtar has been appointed as an assistant judicial magistrate in a district court. Such dalit men are an inspiration for many in their caste and a source of pride for parents who struggled to educate them.

Village and the State

The study of Dhantala's transition would be incomplete without a glance at its changing relations with the state, civil society, and farmers' movements. For centuries, the relation 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.³⁷

³⁷ See Akhil, Gupta, (1998).

The British had extracted most of their revenue from agriculture till the 1920s and left us with average life expectancy of just 33 years foodgrain availability of 360 grams per capita, and 3,700 electrified towns and villages in 1947 (far behind developments in Asian colonies like Korea and Formosa). 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-fourths 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 the mid-nineteenth century).³⁸

In Dhantala, elders like Suraj Bhan and Parmanand thus 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 50% of that, the tax due to the state annually had fallen below Rs 4 per acre.³⁹ Significantly, different castes did not pay differential rents to the Muslim landlord in contrast to reports of such discrimination from several villages before independence.⁴⁰

³⁸ Rental was the share claimed by the landlord from temporary tenants and stood at about 50% of gross production where inputs were provided by the former. In the 1930s, with prices collapsing to 1905 levels, Malcolm Hailey's administration reduced land revenue by about 20% in the United Provinces. But real fall in revenue rates came in the 1940s when prices rose by 100% but demand remained fixed leading to a 75% fall in the incidence of tax, according to Stokes (1984, pp. 83–84).

³⁹ A revenue receipt of March 1947 available with Shri Khem Singh—the biggest present landowner of Dhantala—shows a total of Rs. 5000 deposited by his father Gopal Singh (as headman of the village) with the government (on behalf of the landlord) as annual revenue for 1,200 acres of holdings. On the other hand, the rent paid by a regular tenant to the zamindar, in 1946, was Rs. 68 for 5.2 acres (or Rs. 13 per acre), as reported by Prahlad Masterji—an octogenarian in Dhantala.

⁴⁰ For instances of lower rents on Brahmins and dominant castes see Stokes (1984, p. 67) and Srinivas (1978).

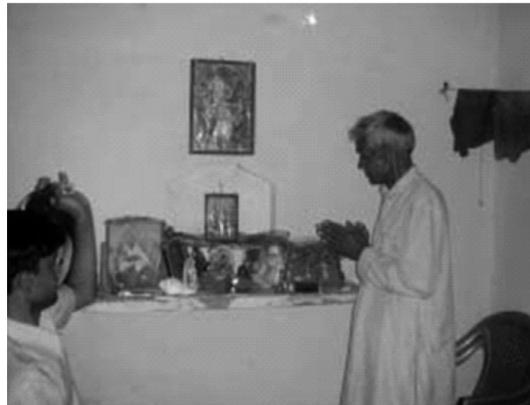


In the Wake of Democracy

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.⁴¹ A near freeze on revenue demand (at Rs. 75 on holdings of more than 5 acres only 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 3 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, as is evident in the following case studies.

Potential of Independent Farming

Shri Prahlad Singh—my generous host in Dhantala since 1989, contracted a severe lung infection and passed away at the age of 80 in May 2013. He had seen many ups and downs. Starting as a *mashuri* (temporary) tenant in the 1940s, he later became a manual labourer and then a marginal dalit farmer after receiving a little less than a hectare from the village commons in 1984.



⁴¹ In countries like Taiwan, up to 30% of agricultural land was redistributed to the landless. In contrast, in India only 2% of the cultivable land got distributed, 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 also (Datta et al. 2012 and Harris, 2013).

The most remarkable aspect of Prahladji's struggle was his investment in the allotted land and in his children's education. His sacrifices bore fruit and his fourth son became a magistrate, in 2012; another is a reputed lawyer, one looks after the family field, and the eldest is a teacher in a government school. The family's achievements are exceptional even among beneficiaries of land distribution and are lauded in and around the village.

In 2007, Prahladji recollected: "After independence, *gujjargardi* (domination by the Gujjars) increased in our village and we had to surrender a major part of our rented holding to them as they became the new landowners. Following this, I worked as a farm labourer along with my wife, Mukundi. It was a hard time. But two developments improved our position by the 1980s. Firstly, Parag dairy arrived in Dhantala and we started getting better return on cattle rearing. I also purchased two buffaloes. Secondly, in 1984, the landless in Dhantala were allotted 3 acres of land from village commons by the newly elected pradhan, Tekram. Lately, my health has deteriorated. Stomach pain has troubled me for months now. Gautam (the elder son) took me to several doctors but the problem is growing. Mukundi still continues to be my big support. She looks after our buffaloes and brings grass from the fields to make fodder besides drawing milk with Laxman, my youngest son. My only dream now is to see my second daughter married before God's call comes."

Struggles of a Landless Dalit

Mangte Ram was born in a Valmiki family of Dhantala around 1923 (he was 85 years old, when I first met him in 2008). His father, Baldeva was a landless cattle-rearer and mother, Manbhari, was the village's sweeppress and mid-wife. Manbhari received one chapati daily from each house she served (with stale curry or buttermilk or a piece of jaggery).

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





often left him injured. 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 as the village's sweepress and mid-wife.

In 1984, Mangte received a plot of 3 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 the 1970s and 1980s, 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 grandchildren. Mangte tried to raise pigs again for a living. But, in 2009, most died, poisoned possibly by a jealous neighbour. 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's 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. 70,000 crores to the exchequer in 2012), provision of cheap credit to farmers and loan waivers (including 60,000 crores waived in 2007) besides investments in agricultural research and infrastructure. By 2006, 1.1 lakh crores of loans were due from agriculturists to public sector and cooperative banks in India. 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 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 430) have no such facility.

Apart from peasants, the Indian state also proclaimed schemes for other marginal groups in the countryside 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 have been extremely poor in the studied region.

In Dhantala, only 25 ‘below poverty line’ (BPL) ration cards (9 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.⁴² In 2014, eight widows and six handicapped had been sanctioned a meagre pension of Rs. 300, per month.⁴³ 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.

⁴² 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.

⁴³ In India, the state has counted the poor on the basis of consumption indices. The same was found difficult for long-term reconstruction in the present field work. Hence, I have relied here on rough estimates of family incomes by counting the earnings of working members.

Decline in absolute poverty is a litmus test of development policies in general. The 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 less than 10% of Dhantala's population between 1989 and 2014.⁴⁴ For the early twentieth century, this study lacks household data. However, the Palanpur study also shows that the proportion of BPL families there came down from about 50% to 33% between 1953 and 1983.⁴⁵ This suggests that the official claim regarding a slow decline in poverty levels in the region since the abolition of zamindari, the introduction 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.⁴⁶ While the state has extended support on agricultural subsidies, rural infrastructure including power supply remains hugely neglected in the region. In Dhantala, the failure of the rural vote in bringing a turnaround in village roads, power supply, educational and health infrastructure, and delivery of welfare in general is stark indeed. Yet, it would be erroneous to blame the state alone for continuing destitution in villages like Dhantala that

⁴⁴ My count of poverty is based on income rather than consumption data as gathered through house-to-house surveys in three successive rounds completed through three different surveyors in 2012–2015. Consumption among many poor households doesn't seem to differ much from income as saving is low and aid and borrowing is also on a small scale generally. However, our estimate of just about 10% families falling below the poverty line of Rs. 900 per capita, per month, in 2014 differs from the NSS estimate of 30% BPL count in rural UP as a whole. Partly this can be explained by relatively better off farming in western UP where Dhantala lies. But it is also possible that the suggestion offered by scholars like S.S. Bhalla and Devesh Kapur that the NSS consumption data in India underreports household consumption hugely may be valid. Anyway, some decline in absolute poverty (or starvation) in the region over the past quarter century is apparent though its scale is small and it seems to have come from both technological breakthroughs like HYVs and the communication revolution as also the massive growth of the construction sector since the 1990s and greater spending by the state on farm and food subsidies etc.

⁴⁵ Dreze and Himanshu (1998).

⁴⁶ Economic and Social Affairs (2010).



have a relatively fertile land and agronomy. Farmers own efforts and of civil society in this regard are equally 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 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.⁴⁷ Dhantala's experience confirms the many difficulties faced by cooperatives and civil society in poorly governed regions. The village has three cooperatives collecting milk at a price of Rs. 38 per litre (in 2014). These started operating from the 1980s 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 often delayed. Besides cooperatives, there are a number of mixed bodies of peasants, professionals, and officials like cooperative banks and NGOs that are 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.

⁴⁷ For a detailed note on agricultural cooperatives in India see, Sen and Bhatia (2004) volume on coops.

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 the 1980s) and get better price support, subsidies, and investments for villages. On the other hand, one realm where local initiative could have preserved the viability of shrinking farms is family planning. Unfortunately, this has been neglected in recent times by the state as well as the local community.

Some Imperatives

Dhantala's economic history has been one of extremely slow but continuous growth since the early twentieth century with some acceleration in the Nehruvian era, the years of the green revolution and land redistribution, and after economic liberalisation in the 1990s. In most of these breaks, growth seems to have followed breakthroughs in technology and infrastructure more than social engineering or state intervention (tenancy reform, land redistribution, or higher welfare spending etc). Thus, the green revolution, mechanization and the telecom revolution, and construction boom in recent decades brought down poverty faster than radical initiatives of the first three decades after independence.⁴⁸ No doubt, the distribution of agricultural plots to the landless and loan waivers offered by the United Progressive Alliance to farmers helped many. Yet, poverty persisted in Dhantala because of underdeveloped infrastructure, poor governance, and negligible manufacturing and formal sector employment. Above all, shrinking agricultural holdings made farming a subsidiary activity and placed many barely above our poverty/starvation line. The unintended consequences of general economic grant thus seem deeper than formal targets set by centralized planning.

⁴⁸ See Bhagwati and Panagariya (2012).

In this light, greater focus on local initiatives combined with appropriate technologies and a bigger role for the private organized sector in rural development seem desirable. Concrete measures for agrarian transition have been listed in numerous official and academic reports.⁴⁹ The present work also suggests that a diversification of the farm as well as the non-farm economy with the help of region-specific agro-industries, micro-finance, rural manufacturing, crop-insurance, and a cautious use of genetically modified non-food crops need to be tried. In addition, expansion of irrigation along with water conservation and flood control, subsidized drip irrigation, water harvesting, and better returns to farmers through higher support price for crops; bypassing of multiple middlemen between farmers and consumers; promotion of professionally managed cooperatives; reduction of wastage and inefficiency in supply chains between fields and the mart through organized retail; more space for the corporate sector in marketing, storage, and infrastructure creation; and computerization of land records and use of information technology tools to disseminate technology and data also need to be promoted.

Given the excessive underemployment of small farmers, rapid development of the rural non-farm sector including rural industry cannot be ignored. Such a growth calls for skills training in schools and colleges accompanied by reduction of textual load, easy credit for rural entrepreneurs, increased investment in rural infrastructure specially power supply and freer conversion of agricultural land and redeployment of labour with assured rehabilitation and wholesome compensation for those keen to move out of marginal farming. Bhopal Singh's search for a buyer for his unviable field, in Dhantala, suggests that many peasants would welcome industry in the countryside today as a channel for moving out of poverty. Restrictions on large scale manufacturing in the name of protecting small farms and factories seem unhelpful since the former can better withstand competition in a globalized economy while the latter would benefit as feeder

⁴⁹ For a summary of required measures for rapid agricultural growth see, Swaminathan (2006).



and ancillary units by using cheaper rural land and labour, as seen in many East Asian economies now.⁵⁰

Concerns for Justice

Yet, concerns for equity and justice are equally important. This study shows that the bulk of propertyless, cashless, and overburdened women in our villages are largely untouched by development initiatives. They also suffer domestic violence and increasing harassment outside the home. Expansion of health and educational infrastructure for women, secure formal sector jobs, and micro-credit for women's enterprises, etc. need to be turned into urgent development priorities in this light, along with improvements in governance and law and order.

Another ideological implication of the study is that harmonization between contending ideals of economic growth and environmental balance and between equity and freedom principles is extremely important. Interestingly, political compulsions and circumstances themselves compel governments and political parties to mix principles and practices. Yet, a clearer and systematic calibration between contending ideals would benefit rural development better. 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 inheritance tax on the rich. However, this need not make us hostile to the useful role that a relatively free market and a right to make legitimate profit 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 actually generates revenues essential for comprehensive social security for 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 and justice also depend on quality of governance.

⁵⁰ See Leinbach (2003) and Mukherjee and Zhang (2005).

For Further Research

For future rural economic research, this work underlines the need for follow-ups on the unit level data of official surveys on employment, poverty, amenities, etc. in order to identify gaps and sharpen work categories in a rapidly changing rural environment. For example, jobs that stand outside simple binaries of farm and non-farm and self-employed and wage-workers, etc. came to light in this study that seem neglected in official surveys. Some of these are: numerous part time farmers, rural cum urban workers, home-based workers, quasi-legal occupations, ‘multi-taskers’, etc. In addition, the study suggests that fruits of syntheses between concerns as well as tools of economics, anthropology, and oral history and between micro and macro approaches, qualitative and quantitative data, field work and documents, and ideology and praxis can be many.

Appendix I: The Rural Economy of India: *Circa, 1950–2011*

Dimension/Year	1950s	2001/2011
Rural Population	83%	68%; 50% in China
Rural Workforce	45% (55% M; 34% F)	40% (55% M; 25% F)
Agriculturists in Total Employment	70%	49%; 39% in China
Agri Share in Rural	85%	60%
Rural Share in GDP	70%	33%
Agriculture Share in GDP	56%	14%
Per capita rural income	About half of Rs. 264 (national PCI)	About half of Rs. 60,000 (national)
Rural Poverty (as per Rs. 33 pcpd)	66% in 1974	33%; 4% in Malaysia
New Amenities in Villages	Cycles, radio	Fourwheelers, dish TV
Net Area Sown		150 m hectares
Gross Sown Area		190 m hectares
Irrigated Area	17%	45%
Per Capita Availability of Land	0.89 hectare in 1951	0.27 hectare in 2011
Rural vs Urban Worker Productivity	1:1.8	1: 2.8

Food grain production	50 m ton; 120m in 1980	250m ton
Average Cereal Yield	11 quintal/ hectare	24 quintal/hectare vs 66 in UK and 56 in Japan
Horticultural Output	97 m ton in1992	190 m ton in 2006
Livestock Share in Agriculture		25% (4%of GDP)
Milk Production	20m Ton in 1960	122m Ton in 2011
Worker Tending Live stock	4% main workers	2% main, 60% subsidiary
Non Farm Share in Rural Income	34%	55%
Non Farm in Rural Production	30%	50%
Non Farm in Rural Employment	22% in1983; 24% in 1997	35% in 2011
Construction in Non Farm Sector		25% in 2000
Manufacturing in Non Farm Sector		16%
Trade in Non Farm Sector		30%
Other Services in Non Farm Sector		11%
Transport in Non Farm Sector		16%
Rural Manufacturing to Total Manufacturing	5.3 in 1972–73	8.1 in 2004–05
Rural Construction to Total Construction	1.4 in 1972–73	4.9 in 2004
Rural Trade to Total Trade	2.5 in 1972–73	6.1
Rural Transport to Total Trans	0.5in 1972–73	2.5
Rural Services to Total Services	3.5in 1972–73	5.0
Public Investment in Agriculture	22% in First Plan	18% in XI Plan or 6.7L.Cr.
Institutional Credit to Agriculture	6000 crore in 1984–5	5 lakh crore in all
Minimum Support Price for Wheat	60 in1971 to 630 in 2004	1,300 in 2013
Food + Subsidy (Centre and states)	24,000 crores in 2002–3	72,000 crores in 2010–11

Fertilizer Subsidy	11,000 crore in 2002–3	62,000 crore 2010–11
Other Agricultural Subsidies (including irrigation and support price)	16,000 crore 2002–3	39,000 crore 2010–11
Minimum Support Price for Wheat	60 in 1971; 330 in 1992; 630 in 2004	1,400 in 2014
Public Capital Formation in Agriculture as percent of Agri GDP	2% in 2002–03	3.5% in 2007 and 2.7% in 2011
Private Capital Formation –ditto–	16% in 2007	20% in 2012
Per worker Productivity in India (Primary vs tertiary)		1: 8.7
Per Worker productivity (rural vs urban India)		1: 4
Rural per worker productivity (farm vs non farm)		1: 2.4
Per worker Productivity in Agriculture (India vs US vs Japan)		480 vs 51,000, vs 48,000 per annum
Proportion of Worker in Agriculture (India vs US vs Japan vs Australia vs Malaysia)	75% vs 07% vs 33% vs? vs?	49% vs 1.6% vs 3.7% vs 3.3 % vs 13%
Agriculture Share in total GDP (India vs US vs Japan vs Australia vs Malaysia)	NA	14% vs 1% vs 1% vs 2% vs 9%
Industry's Share in Total GDP (India vs US vs China vs Indonesia vs S. Korea)	NA	27% vs 22% vs 46% vs 44% vs 41%

Segments within Farmers

Category	1951 etc.	Features	2011 etc.	Features
Independent Farmers (do not hire in or out)	65%		55% of agriculturists	

Marginal and Small Farmers	66% in 1991	20% of cultivated land	86 % of Farmers	40 % of Cultivated Land
Medium Farmers	27%		10%	
Tenants	11% in 1990		9 %	
Big holdings (above 15 acres)	2.2 million big holdings in 1981.	Covering 90 million acres	4% of Farmers (own 30 % of land)	1 million big holdings (0.8% of total)
Rural Labour (Farm and Non Farm) Agricultural labour	33% in 1991 30% of agriculturists in 1993		45% in 2011 (?) 25% of agriculturists in 2004 (20% landless and 80% marginal farmers)	98% of agricultural labour are casual and 2% are regular wage earners
Landless	?			
Agricultural Labour			6 % of agriculturists 20% of Agricultural Labor	
New Migrants Workers (in past one year)	30 million in 2008		40 million	

Sources: National Accounts Statistics and NSS rounds 66th; Department of Agriculture and Cooperation (2012); Unni (2014, p. 5, 12); Balakrishnan (2012, pp. 28–29, p. 178); Datt and Mahajan (2013); and Dreze and Sen (2012, appendix).

Appendix II: Some Other Villages

Gharaunda, Karnal District, Haryana, September 2014

A 12-acre farm was started in village Gharaunda by Haryana government in association with Israeli experts in 2007 to promote precision agriculture with polyhouses, drip irrigation, automated spraying, solar panels, etc.



After a couple of years, earnings of Rs. 2,00,000 per acre, per annum, (four times of open field agriculture), have been obtained here with yields, prices and quality being better (specially of vegetables) and variable costs less than in the latter.

However, fixed investments are high in polyhouse cultivation as the cost of covering an acre with screens is approximately 40 lakhs per acre while pipes and valves for drip irrigation cost another one lakh. The state government offers 75% subsidy on the fixed costs to farmers willing to invest.

Jhargram Sub-Division, West Midnapore District, West Bengal, February 2014

Jhargram is a small town in Midnapore district of West Bengal. Its population increased from about 25,000 to 1,00,000 between 1990 and 2013; the district as a whole has 70% Santhal tribals. Big zamindars dominated the belt under the British. The biggest landowner, Raja Veerendra, became a supporter of the Congress party. The Munda rebellion of 1890s led to a new law protecting tribals but Santhals did not benefit much from Operation Barga under the Left Front government in Bengal as confiscated estates were partitioned mainly among Mahatos and Bangals (refugees from east Bengal), according to the tribals.

Most Santhals are still labourers; some are forest dwellers with small plots. The district has only one agro processing unit and a few



rice mills. Unions are active but divided between SC and ST factions. Tribals earn more from labour than farming generally; they are known for their hard work and honesty; very few run shops; but educated tribals increasingly aspire for regular urban jobs.



After Chief Minister Jyoti Basu's retirement, CPM's party discipline broke down even as the party tried to force land acquisition on behalf of industrialists; Kishanjee and other Maoist leaders found support among tribals; many were killed in the Lalgarh agitation of 2008. The present TMC government is said to have improved ration distribution, MGNREGA works, and the functioning of dispensaries. But unemployment remains high and crime seems to be growing.

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