



Less influence means more work for women. Photo: Ramesh Sharma

Accessing livelihoods through shared farming

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In eastern Uttar Pradesh, more than 90 percent of the economy is based on primary production. The area has a high population density with some 1200 persons per square km. Land is divided each generation between the sons of the family and this has led to very high land fragmentation. The average land holding is now extremely small and around 70 percent of the families have access to less than 0.4 ha. This includes the 10-15 percent of families who are landless and work as agricultural labourers, cattle rearers, or as wage labourers in nearby towns.

This article is based on a study conducted in some villages in Gorakhpur district where the Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group (GEAG) is active. However, it reflects the general situation in eastern Uttar Pradesh. In the villages studied 60 percent of the land holdings are smaller than 1ha and farmers with larger holdings are considered to be better off. Only about 5 percent of farmers own more than 2 ha of land and this, in combination with other sources of income through employment or running small businesses, makes them relatively wealthy.

Land reforms have not helped much in this area. Laws such as the *Land Ceiling Act* that limits the amount of land that can be held by one individual, have only benefited small farmers in those areas where there are land holdings of more than 10-15 ha available for redistribution.

Livelihoods in the area are largely dependent on land-based activities, and opportunities continue to shrink as population and land fragmentation increases. The adoption of high input agriculture, including the use of hybrid seeds and agrochemicals, has led to increased costs and a reduction in crop diversity. This means that the economic margins in farming are becoming very small.

Markets and government purchase centres give priority to larger quantities of produce, which also disadvantages small producers both in terms of sale and price. As a result many small farmers often have no option but to migrate to the city.

Increasing labour costs and decreasing gains have also created problems for larger farmers. Absentee landlords who live and work outside the region, large landowners and families with older or physically less able members are not able to manage their own farms. Nevertheless, they want their land to be used and if possible to receive some income or products - food, fodder or fuel - from their fields. At the same time, there are a large number of smaller and landless farmers who have agricultural skills, but no way of earning a livelihood.

These two groups of people have developed a tradition of sharing their resources for mutual benefit. Where the resource base is shrinking this is a considerable help to resource-poor farmers. Share cropping has become a viable and acceptable mechanism for generating income for deprived communities.

Sharing resources

The history of present share cropping arrangements can be traced to the Zamindari abolition days in the 1950s. During this time, land titles and the right to transfer land was handed over to farmers. This changed the nature of negotiations as far as land use and payment of revenue was concerned. Previously, farmers ("asami") paid the revenue to collectors ("zamindari") for the use of land. Today, share cropping arrangements are agreed between farmers themselves. There has been no significant change in land ownership in the area since then, although hierarchical divisions (land being split between sons) and land consolidation (small plots belonging to one holder being brought together to create larger areas) have continued.

Currently, approximately 30 percent of the agricultural land in the villages studied was being worked under share cropping agreements. Some 45 percent of the smaller and resource poor farmers depend on share cropping for their livelihoods (see Figure 1).

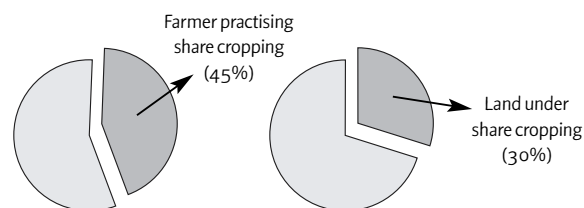


Figure 1: Percentage of farmers practising share cropping and land under share cropping in the study villages

There are three main kinds of share cropping systems:

Adhiya

Land is cultivated by resource-poor farmers who share inputs and outputs with the landowner on a 50-50 basis. In this system, the landowner provides land and one or more of inputs (oxen, labour, fertiliser, and seed). The produce is shared equally. This is the most common practise in the area and causes very little conflict. This arrangement is also common amongst farmers with equal status.

Honda

In this system, the land is hired on fixed terms by a resource-poor farmer. The fixed terms include the type of crop to be grown and how much of the harvest should be used to pay for the land. The landowner only supplies the land. All other inputs are provided by the share cropper. In some cases, the land owner provides a loan in kind (fertilisers and seed) or cash. This loan has to be repaid in addition to the share of the harvest agreed upon. At present, as share cropping becomes more common, landless people have started to compete for these arrangements. Under *Honda*, the element of exploitation is stronger, as the share cropper is responsible for any loss or damage caused by rainfall or other natural disasters. More conflicts occur under these arrangements.



Share croppers harvesting a field, Gorakhpur district.

Photo: Ramesh Sharma

Rehan

In this arrangement, land is leased at an agreed price for an average period of one to three years by a resource-poor farmer or group of farmers. The amount of cash involved in this system is relatively high and normally cash crops are grown on this type of land.

Other arrangements

In addition to crop-based sharing arrangements, resource poor farmers rear cattle - but more often pigs and goats - on a shared basis. The farmer cares for the animal(s) and also provides them with fodder. Offspring from these animals is shared on a 50-50 basis. Similar sharing arrangement also exists for fruit trees, where the resource poor farmer takes the tree at an agreed price, looks after it and harvests and sells the fruit. The income generated is shared between the owner and the farmer in accordance with the agreement between them.

Access and control

Share cropping mechanisms have evolved around the principal of mutual interest. The involvement of both partners can be seen in different farm activities. Table 1 provides an overview of the power relationship between farmers and landlords in share

cropping situations. The column "Influence" shows who has a say in decision making, and the column "Control" indicates who has the final word. For example, when decisions about the choice of variety have to be made farmers and landowners discuss this together. However, if there is a difference of opinion it is the landowner who decides.

The preferred crops for share cropping are paddy, wheat, sugar cane, maize, groundnuts and vegetables. The landowner and the farmer usually have different preferences about which crop to grow. Labour intensive cash crops are generally preferred by the landowner, whereas farmers usually prefer crops that provide safer returns and require less labour. Share cropping arrangements are mostly agreed between a male farmer and the landowner. This means that women involved in working these fields have even less influence on decision making than is normally the case in family farming. For them, share cropping usually means more work.

The agreement between landowner and share cropper is bilateral and in a conflict situation, decisions are controlled by the land owner. However, as the system of share cropping has become more prevalent and socially accepted, generally agreed and uniform rules have emerged. The land owner is morally bound to adhere to these rules. However, there is nothing that can stop landowners from taking other decisions. If a conflict of interests arises, resource poor farmers are at a disadvantage. However, in the absence of other viable livelihood options, the system of share cropping provides large numbers of resource poor farmers with access to a livelihood.

Effects on farming systems

The crops grown on shared land and farmers' own land do not differ very much. However, on closer inspection it becomes clear that farmers give priority to their own land when implementing LEISA techniques. GEAG has been dealing with both types of land and has found that it is on farmers' own land that effective LEISA models have been developed. Farmers incorporate organic compost and bio-fertilisers and practise principals of diversification on their own land because these practises ensure long-term benefits from the extra labour and precious organic inputs invested.

Conclusion

In the prevailing situation of landlessness and a complete lack of alternative livelihood options in the villages, the shared farming system has brought land controlled by comparatively better-off farmers who are unable to farm it fully back into agricultural production. More importantly, although such arrangements can be exploitative, they provide a source of livelihood to significant numbers of people.

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Table 1: Influence of landowners and farmers on different farm activities

Activities	Influence	Control
Choice of variety	landowners, farmers	landowners (sometimes farmers)
Use of fertiliser	farmers	farmers (sometimes landowners)
Use of pesticides	landowners, farmers	landowners (sometimes farmers)
Irrigation	farmers	farmers (sometimes landowners)
Type of crop	landowners (sometimes farmers)	landowners
Type of products produced	landowners, farmers	landowners, farmers
Decisions on labour and other investments	farmers (sometimes landowners)	landowners (sometimes farmers)