

# **Becoming a Young Farmer in Madhya Pradesh, India**

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**Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai  
December 2020**

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## Abstract

*In India, as well as globally, agriculture faces an apparent generational problem, with youth reluctant to take up farming as an occupation. Yet there has been limited research in India using a generational lens to understand young people's trajectory in farming – their entry into and their continuation in farming. This study draws on in-depth qualitative interviews of a small sample of young men and women in farming communities in Madhya Pradesh. It focusses on young people's experiences in becoming and being farmers, privileging their own perspectives on the challenges they encounter in accessing land, knowledge and other resources and how they negotiate them. The study finds that contrary to popular perception and notwithstanding aspirations to move away from agriculture, several young farmers given a choice would rather engage in agriculture as a full-time activity and seek support to be able to do so. The study underscores the need to treat young farmers, both men and women, as a distinct analytical category from the perspective of policy making.*

**Keywords:** youth, agriculture, farming, gender, India

**JEL Code:** Q19; J13; J16

## Acknowledgements:

This paper draws on research as part of a larger project titled Becoming a Young Farmer, funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada), Insight Grant (PI: Dr Sharada Srinivasan, University of Guelph) in Canada, China, India and Indonesia. I thank Haroon Akram-Lodhi, Ben White, Roy Huijsmans, M.Vijayabaskar, Sharada Srinivasan, Pan Lu, Hanny Widjaya, Aprilia Ambarwati, Sony, Charina Chazali, Isono Sadoko, Travis Jansen, Annette Desmerais for valuable feedback. I thank the staff of Under the Mango Tree and Samarthan for their invaluable support and assistance in the field. Thanks are due to Shreshti Rawat, Udayan Rathore, Nirali Bakhla for assistance in the field and to Shree Saha for assisting in the analysis. Any errors and omissions are my own.

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## **1. Introduction**

In India, as elsewhere in the world, agriculture faces a looming generational problem. Parental and youth aspirations see off-farm employment as a means of social and economic mobility. Yet even as youth try to exit agriculture, jobs in the non-farm sector are limited. Meanwhile, the small size of landholdings in India, rising population pressure, increasing farm land prices, low profitability make farming an increasingly challenging occupation for those who are interested in taking up or continuing farming. This is even more so for women, for whom access to land and other resources remain limited. Further, the downgrading of a life in farming and of agriculture itself as an occupation, its association with manual labour and social status.

Yet there has been limited research in India using generation as a lens to understand the trajectory of farming and rural communities (See Vijayabaskar et al., 2018 for a review). This study attempts to contribute to this gap in our understanding. It focusses on young people's experiences in becoming and being farmers, privileging their own perspectives on and experiences to understand the challenges they encounter in accessing land, knowledge and other resources and how they negotiate them. This approach is consistent with young people's right to be properly researched on their own terms and in their own perspectives (Huijsmans, 2014; Naafs and White, 2012; Srinivasan, 2014). The study relies on qualitative, in-depth methods of inquiry with relatively small samples to highlight the predicament of young people in farming. This paper is part of a set of studies on this subject and focusses on one site – the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I outline the context, methods and sample. Section 3 focuses on young people's pathways into farming; Section 4 elaborates on the barriers faced by young farmers. Section 5 outlines the kind of support available to them and the support they seek to become and continue as farmers. Section 6 dwells on the future of youth in farming and the role of farming in young people's futures. Section 7 concludes the discussion.

## **2. Context and Methods**

This paper is part of a larger project “Becoming a Young Farmer” that looks at this issue in four countries – Canada, China, India and Indonesia. In India, the states of Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh were selected for study. The two states offer interesting contrasts in context

from the perspective of youth in agriculture, shaping their decisions to become and be farmers. This paper draws on material from Madhya Pradesh.

Madhya Pradesh is the fifth most populous state in India, with a population of 72.6 million, of which only 27.63% live in urban areas. Around 21.1% of the population is tribal (belonging to Scheduled Tribes) relative to 8.6% in India. An estimated 15.6% of MP's population belongs to the Scheduled Castes, a share comparable to the country average (16.6%). MP has been one of the more backward states within India. It lags behind on several key human development indicators and has higher rates of infant mortality (54 per 1000) and child malnutrition (57.9% of those under 5 years are underweight) and lower life expectancy than the Indian average. The rates of rural poverty are high as well at 35.74% compared to 25.7% in rural India as a whole in 2011-12 (Bhanumurthy, et al, 2016); rural poverty among the historically disadvantaged communities is even higher at 55 and 41% among STs and SCs respectively. Being landlocked and with 29% of the land covered in forests, MP does not possess some of the locational advantages of its neighbours in terms of access to ports and large cities. It continues to be primarily agrarian with as much as 34% of the state GDP coming from agriculture (in 2013-14) and over 70% of the workforce still depend on agriculture. In the 2012-13 survey of agricultural households, in MP 76% obtained their incomes from cultivation and animal rearing, suggesting that diversification out of agriculture is fairly limited.

In agriculture, however, Madhya Pradesh has stood out among the major Indian states for having the highest growth rates in agricultural GDP over the past decade. It is among the largest producers of wheat, soyabean, maize, gram, rapeseed and mustard (Government of India 2017). Commentators note that this spectacular increase in agricultural GDP in the context of a widespread crisis in Indian agriculture is attributable to expanding irrigation (both major and minor irrigation, such as canals and wells, respectively) and a government procurement system that assures a minimum price to farmers, notably for wheat (Gulati, et al, 2017). Some point out to that due to better infrastructure in terms of road access, farmers have now been able to monetize their produce more easily. For both wheat and soyabean, MP has emerged as an important source of produce for processors of flour and solvent extractors, respectively. Recent

years have also seen the emergence of several not-for-profit initiatives by firms as part of their corporate social responsibility obligations.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding this success, agriculture in MP faces challenges. Only about half of the land is under cultivation and less than a third of cultivated land is cultivated more than once a year. According to the Agricultural Census of 2015-16, there are 10 million operational holdings in the state covering 15.67 million hectares. The average size of operational holdings is therefore 1.567 hectares. In 1970-71 the average size of operational holdings was over 4 hectares and it is evident that landholding size here is declining rapidly like in most of the other Indian states, mainly on account of subdivision. Over the years between 2010 and 2015, MP has registered among the largest increase in the number of operational holdings. As much as 71.46% of the operational holdings counted in the Agricultural Census of 2015 are small or marginal (under 2 hectares). The context of MP also provides a specific context unique to tribal areas. The constitution of India mandates that land in tribal areas (denoted as Schedule 5/6 areas) cannot pass hands to non-tribals, as a safeguard to prevent land alienation. MP's forests are also governed by the Forest Rights Act, which shapes access to forests and exerts an influence on both agriculture and livestock practices.<sup>3</sup>

We chose two districts in Madhya Pradesh, Sehore and Chhindwara, that represent fairly diverse agricultures and socio-demographic characteristics. Sehore, located 37 km from Bhopal, has ample groundwater and canal irrigation with deep black soils that support high yields. Over the past two decades, the widespread adoption of soyabean by Sehore's farmers had rendered it a cash crop-dominated agriculture (Kumar, 2017). Bhopal's growth as a city shapes life in this district, especially in terms of employment options. Sehore's farmers mostly come from traditional landowning castes. With a Scheduled Tribe population comprising 11.1% of the total (in 2011), Sehore however has a few pockets that are predominantly tribal.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In 2014, India implemented a CSR provision in the Company Law Act requiring certain companies to spend at least 2 per cent of their average net profits made in the preceding three years on certain eligible activities for the larger social good.

<sup>3</sup> The Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006  
<https://www.fra.org.in/document/FRA%20ACT-Eng.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Scheduled Tribes are officially designated groups of historically disadvantaged people in India, recognized by the Constitution of India.

In contrast, Chhindwara is overwhelmingly tribal, with 36.8% of the total population classified as being from the Scheduled Tribes; Gonds and Bhils constitute the major tribal groups. It is located amidst rich forests and hills. Its undulating terrain and mostly light stony soils that don't hold water are not ideal for agriculture. Its relative lack of accessibility implies that the cropping pattern is dominated more by food crops than cash, although that is gradually changing. In recent years, those with irrigation have been able to grow wheat and gram in the winter season. Here too soyabean has emerged recently as an important cash crop and most sell their produce in the government regulated markets or to private traders in the nearest towns. It is however wheat that dominates cropping patterns in Chhindwara. Migration to nearby cities within the state has been a way of life for people here, given that agriculture is restricted on one or at most two seasons during the year. In the absence of a vibrant non-farm sector, migrants tend to work on other farms if not in construction.

The cropping pattern in the two districts we studied are soyabean and pigeon pea in the rainy season (*khariif*); wheat and gram in winter (*rabi*) – the winter crop was usually grown only when the rains were good or by those with irrigation facilities. Many farmers (men, women, old and young) also migrate for work – usually in soyabean fields or construction – but all of them migrate only for short spells and never go too far from their village. A majority of households have some livestock 1-4 buffaloes/crossbred/native cows. Although at the state level, livestock is growing in importance as evident from figures on milk production, we found in our sample that livestock ownership had reduced over time. The reasons most commonly articulated include the shrinking of pastures, limited access to forests due to restrictive forest use rights, water constraints and the fact that there was nobody available to graze the cattle and mind them. Few households own poultry or goat; ownership of goats and poultry were deemed to be markers of low social status and associated with specific lower castes.

We interviewed 57 farmers in all. Forty-six are young farmers, of whom 11 were women. We also interviewed 11 older farmers of whom two were women. Our entry points into the farming communities were established via two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) - Under the Mango Tree (UTMT) and Samarthan. Whereas UTMT had been working with tribal communities to promote beekeeping, Samarthan's work in this area was around rights and had recently been assisting farmers to access government programmes. We selected farmers to

interview such that we would cover a range of ages and land size classes. They are not necessarily representative of all farmers in the district. The farmers we selected also came from different types of families, and from different major castes and tribes represented in the village, both traditional land owning classes and others. A fifth of our sample constituted women, identified via Self-help groups in the village. Our respondents come from 10 different villages in all (five each in Sehore and Chhindwara). We ensured that we covered villages that included both those where NGOs were active and where they were not. Although our selection of Sehore and Chhindwara was driven by the contrast they would likely offer, Sehore's tribal areas resemble Chhindwara more than they resemble the other parts of Sehore.

A majority of our respondents were from tribal communities: 32 Scheduled Tribes (mainly Bhils and Gonds), 16 Other Backward Communities (OBC), 6 Scheduled Castes (SC).<sup>5</sup>. In terms of religious profile, most barring one identified themselves as Hindu. The average age of young farmers in our sample was 35.8 years, with as many as 20 of them under 30 years. The youngest farmer we interviewed was 18 years. Most of the farmers we interviewed owned between 1 and 10 acres, much larger than the country average. While a majority of farmers (old and young) in our sample had little formal education – 25 of them had not gone beyond primary school or were not illiterate –younger farmers, both women and men had more education than their older counterparts. Eight young farmers had even completed tertiary education. In our sample, most farmers from Chhindwara had no access to irrigation– an issue that will come up later as one of the key challenges for farming in general and for young farmers in particular. In Sehore, most farmers did have access to irrigation; their problem was that yields for soyabean had plateaued and did not bring in the returns in the market that it used to. In different ways therefore farmers in general were operating in contexts where farming is challenging. Our interviews with the farmers focused on their pathways into farming, the barriers and opportunities faced by youth in agriculture.

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<sup>5</sup> As with Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Communities are officially recognized as socially disadvantaged.



### 3. Becoming a farmer

#### *Entry into farming*

The young farmers we interviewed were farming well before they became farmers in their own right. In that sense, it seemed that the line between becoming and being a farmer was not very clear. Most men started helping their parents or grandparents when they were as young as 8 or 10 years of age. Those who started helping that young typically started by grazing livestock – taking livestock to the pastures or into the forests nearby, minding them until the day was done. One young farmer recollected that he regarded the bamboo stick he used to guide his small herd as his first agricultural tool. Almost every respondent in the sample was already acquainted with some of the key farming operations by the time they were 12 years old. Usually, the boys assisted adult men in ploughing and field preparation. It was only later, when they had built stature and strength, perhaps even skill, were they able to use the plough independently. One young farmer recollected how at the age of 15 years, he was frustrated at being unable to handle the plough and fell repeatedly trying to do so. All the young male farmers we interviewed came from families that owned agricultural land, even if meagre.

Among young women farmers, there were three who did not belong to farming families and began farming only after they were married. For young women farmers, their first roles in agriculture involved assisting adult women in the family in harvesting and weeding, when they were around 8-9 years of age. In Madhya Pradesh, as in most of India, farm tasks are historically gendered with women almost never involved in using the plough, while tasks such as sowing, weeding and harvesting are often considered women's work. Although these norms have diluted over the years, the accounts of young farmers suggest that their entry into agriculture was quite in traditional ways, in keeping with the gender norms of the time.

Overall, we saw little evidence of new farmers as such – for reasons that are discussed later – and there are none in our sample. The young farmers, especially the men, in our sample were of three broad kinds. The first group became full-fledged farmers by force of circumstance, even if some of them entered farming willingly. A second group consists of those who had been able to finish school and/or vocational training or tertiary education, but were unsuccessful in

finding jobs in the non-farm sector. They were farming, but constantly looking for opportunities outside the farm sector. The third group of young farmers, had had little interest in education, and despite the best efforts of their parents, they looked for an opportunity to drop out of school to take up farming.

Farmers in the first group entered farming upon quitting school, often due to family exigencies. Typically, it was because their parents could not afford to keep them in school or because a family member died or because the father had other responsibilities and they had to take over the responsibilities of the farm, especially if they were the older amongst siblings. For example, one young male farmer, son of a former village headman said:

*My father did not ask me to drop out of school. He wanted me to study. But I saw that he needed help, so decided to discontinue (school). I was the eldest so I had to bear this burden. My mother always used to tell me that there is no one in the house to look after farming and people were always calling my father in the village as he was the village head. So I had to do it. If I did not, farming would have been adversely affected. [42 years, ST, farms 12 acres, Chhindwara]*

Some of them dreamt of an alternate life – wanting to become policemen, engineers and so on – and had little interest in farming. One young male farmer recounted:

*I have done an M.Com and MBA. I wanted to have a nice job in some good MNC company. But something happened in my family because of which I had to come back. I was done with my MBA and looking for jobs in Indore in 2006. I got the news that my father was sick and he was paralyzed. In 2008, he expired and the entire household burden was then on me. So I decided to stay in village to fulfill the needs of my family. [32 years, ST, farms 2 acres, Chhindwara]*

Another young man was forced to migrate for non-farm work in order to support the family farm, that he helped his father manage:

*I used to look up to different people back then. I wanted to be something. I had big dreams. I wanted to get a good service (job) but when my mother passed away, everything got affected. Then I left studies and joined farming. At that time, money was*

*needed for farming and for the household, so I started going to Pachmarhi to work. [36 years, ST, farms 12 acres, Chhindwara]*

Some young women farmers too rue the fact that their parents perhaps did not realize the importance of education and pulled them out of school to work.<sup>6</sup> One young female farmer recounted how she aspired to get a job as an anganwadi worker (government-run crèche) but did not have the minimum schooling required to apply for the post.

Young farmers in the second group were biding their time farming. Farming to them was a fallback option. Some of the younger farmers in this group were still hopeful of landing a job outside and hoped to exit farming, in equal measure because farming was not deemed to be viable (especially in the context of very small landholdings) and because they aspired for a different life. Some of them had enrolled and completed many courses to increase the probability of securing a job. These courses include vocational training to become a mechanic, electrician, computer operator, mobile phone repairer and so on. One young male farmer in Chhindwara, had completed a Bachelor's degree and had additionally completed two vocational training courses, waiting to see which one would land him a job. A government job, and the security that comes with it, continues to be the aspiration of many.

Within this group, however, not all of them harbored the feeling that they were 'stuck' in farming. Some of them had come to terms with their own status as farmers and were seeking ways to become successful farmer. In this, their engagement with NGOs working in the regions had energized them into becoming enterprising farmers.

Given the low profitability of agriculture, many parents had rather their sons left agriculture. They invariably saw school education as a pathway out of agriculture. For daughters, while basic schooling was deemed as desirable, the education of daughters was not specifically seen as a vehicle out of agriculture, since the future that was envisaged for daughters was to marry them well. Yet given that jobs in the non-farm sector are scarce and of poor quality, the option of a career outside farming is little more than notional. This is especially true in Chhindwara, where jobs were hard to come by in nearby towns.

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<sup>6</sup> This fits in with the broader pattern of not sending girls to school for other reasons.

One young male farmer, who had never worked outside explained that getting decent work outside the village was not easy:

*Even if I went out, getting a job would have taken time. I would need resources at that time for maintenance. I had no such means – no contacts in town who could help me get a job.  
[32 years, ST, Chhindwara]*

For those without these networks or resources, essentially farming was the only option.

Further, for some, the constraints are often so overwhelming that it leaves them no choice at all. One young male farmer had completed an undergraduate degree but could not get a job. He was the only son, had no interest in farming and had this to say about his father.

*He would scold me and ask me to come to field and work. I was not very interested in farming but would go to avoid being scolded. We were financially weak so I had no other option. [32 years, SC, graduate, operates 7 acres, Chhindwara]*

The third group consists of those who were either passionate about farming or those who preferred farming to being in school. Most had become enthusiastic farmers – proactively seeking information from civil society organizations that worked in agriculture and the government agriculture department. Most of them were actively experimenting with new techniques (System of Rice Intensification, for example, in eastern Chhindwara, experiments with organic agriculture, etc.), new crops, new ways of doing things and exploring ancillary activities such as beekeeping, mushroom cultivation and aquaculture.

In general, among men, the younger generation today seems to have greater say in the decision to enter farming than did the older generation when they were young. Older farmers recollect that when they were young, there was really no question on whether or not they would farm. In most cases, villages did not have schools and going to school was a rare option. Jobs outside the farm sector were unheard of.

There was no room for aspiring for a life outside of farming. An older male farmer exclaimed:

*What aspirations? My father handed farming to me and said cultivate and feed yourself!  
That is it. I started farming young and did not consider anything else. [55 years, ST,  
Shore]*

Another older farmer said “*One is born a farmer*” Yet another said “*My father was a farmer. This then passed on to me.*” Among the older farmers, therefore, there seemed to be no room for imagining an alternate livelihood.

For women, it did not seem that things had changed very much across generations. In the site of our research, even though young women had studied more than their older counterparts, finding non-farm jobs was not articulated as an aspiration. As with the older generation of women farmers, women were generally socialized into playing a supporting role in family farm operations, rather than the lead. Younger women farmers today had had an opportunity to go to school, whereas the older women farmers typically had not, but across both groups schooling was not viewed as a way to secure a non-farm job. That said, at least a few young women farmers we met did articulate their aspirations – of becoming a schoolteacher, an anganwadi (state-run child crèches) worker and so on. Almost all of them indicated that they regarded, or rather came to accept, not necessarily out of their own choice, farm and domestic work as being intrinsic parts of their life and its responsibilities.

### ***Generational shifts and succession***

Across generations, helping with farming did not actually give young farmers a major say in decisions, neither in farming operations nor of how to use the proceeds. Most decisions continued to be taken by the older adults in the family – these included the choice of what crops to grow, inputs that were required, what seeds to use (stored/saved or bought). One father-son pair we interviewed said that they discussed the decisions thoroughly – the son, all of 18 years old, had his own ideas about digging a farm pond, doing aquaculture and buying a tractor. The father said that he did give a free hand to his son to experiment, but ensured that they took small steps that would not rock the boat. The limited role in decision-making did not seem to deter the young farmers.

In contrast, young women farmers, typically had little say in any decision, not as daughters, not as daughters-in-law. But not all women were in that position. Older women had more agency, unsurprising in the context of patriarchal structures that bestow some privileges based on seniority. One young man told us how his grandmother took all the decisions on what to grow and how to grow it, saying that in their family no one disputed her knowledge of farming. Another older woman farmer (55 years old) mentioned that they usually discussed decisions on what to grow together with the older women in the family.

A young male farmer would become an independent farmer, fully managing his farm, only when he married and had a family of his own, partitioned and obtained ownership of farmland or both. The lack of ownership rights over land was however not always seen as a deterrent to adoption of new technologies because most young farmers.

*Ownership doesn't matter. We use the latest technology irrespective of whose name is on the patta (the land record).[24 years, OBC, High school, operates 6 acres, Sehore]*

Another young farmer however said

*I will be more proactive to use new technologies and new farming methods ...(once the land is in my name). [30 years, OBC, High school, operates 4 acres, Sehore]*

For young women farmers, neither marriage nor inheritance was likely to give them full control over managing the farm unless they were single women or headed the household. Managing a farm single handedly, however, came with its own challenges. Women in these cases, invariably, leased out land or hired farm managers to handle the operations. We interviewed one young widow in Sehore who said she relied fully a hired manager to operate and sell produce. She received half the produce or proceeds from sale while the farm manager kept half. The decisions on what to grow and inputs to use were decided jointly after consultation.

### ***Doing things differently***

Across the board, farmers felt that compared with the previous generation, knowledge of practices had increased. As one farmer put it, before agriculture used to be “*dekha-dekhi*”, meaning that you did what you observed around you. Today, one could obtain training,

knowledge and rules for doing different things. Today's young farmers rely more on machines than did their parents, for harvesting sowing, and tilling. Weedicides had replaced manual weeding on many farms and purchasing hybrid seeds rather than relying on saved seeds had become the norm. Perhaps the most significant shift has been changes in the cropping pattern; the emergence of the borewell<sup>7</sup> and access to water has resulted in a shift to crops such as wheat and gram. Millets had gone out of cultivation, replaced by maize, soyabean and pulses. For a brief while, the new cropping pattern proved very lucrative, especially soyabean in Sehore. However, in recent years, it seems that yields have plateaued, prices have remained low and more and more farmers are switching to maize. Those with ample irrigation water are also diversifying to fruits and vegetables, both in Chhindwara and Sehore. In some villages, especially in Chhindwara, farmers seem to have started using inorganic fertilizers only a decade ago. But many young farmers had recently got acquainted with agroecological farming and organic farming and had a shared sense that chemical inputs are unsustainable. *"Once you use it, you need to keep using it...and more of it"* was the refrain of most young farmers. Both NGOs and government seem to have been instrumental in promoting vermicomposting and applying organic manure. Yet few defined themselves as organic farmers. Most were still experimenting and testing out methods in some plots. Indeed, no farmer we interviewed was an exclusive organic or agroecological farmer although many were practicing several principles of these techniques.

For each of these decisions – whether to go organic or not, to diversify, and in the choice of seeds – the younger generation negotiated with the older generation. One young male farmer in Chhindwara had set up what comes close to an experiment, using organic methods in one plot and inorganic in the other to test the relative merits of each. His father had passed on and he was the sole heir, the sole male member in his family and manager of the family farm. This afforded him the space to make decisions that might be harder in multigenerational family farms. In these latter cases, young farmers had to persuade the older adults in the household, usually the father, to dedicate a small patch where they could plant and do what they wanted. Young women farmers, in contrast, had virtually no agency. Their exposure to new ideas and techniques were

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<sup>7</sup> A well drilled vertically into the ground, as opposed to an open dug well.

limited as well, bypassed as they were by an extension system with male trainers that was oriented to training male farmers, for example.

Young farmers, in both Chhindwara and Sehore, were also seeking to diversify into allied activities<sup>8</sup> - including mushroom cultivation, beekeeping, etc. The 18-year old male farmer in Chhindwara, from the father-son pair referred to earlier in the text, was an enthusiastic farmer who felt beekeeping was his new passion. An NGO had introduced him to it. Many young farmers were looking to do things differently. In this both government, CSR efforts and peer networks seem to play a major role, a point we return to later in the paper.

#### **4. Barriers faced by young farmers**

##### ***“Farmers cannot buy land”***

It is hard to have any conversation with young farmers without a mention of the small size of their holdings. Although Madhya Pradesh has larger average land holding sizes than most other states in the country, successive subdivision over generations had left holdings too small to be remunerative. Over the years, land prices had also risen significantly, dramatically in some villages, especially those closer to the city or those that have access to water. This put the possibility of buying land to expand the farm out of reach for most farmers.

*“A farmer cannot buy (land)... if there is a businessman or someone with a job, they can buy. But not a farmer.”*

A 60-year old male farmer in Sehore, with 10 acres of land, leasing an additional 6 acres, said that in contrast to when he was young,

*“A farmer today cannot dare to buy land.”*

The farmers who have managed to do so are those with non-farm occupations to supplement the income. A few others have bought land using a loan, paying it off by leasing out the very land they bought. Farm incomes, we were told, are not large enough to repay such loans in both

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<sup>8</sup> Allied activities in the Indian context refers to those other than cultivation, such as animal rearing including livestock, poultry, beekeeping, and primary processing.



Sehore and Chhindwara. In Sehore, where soyabean farming has been financially rewarding, recent increases in costs of cultivation without commensurate increase in soybean prices had left many farmers indebted.

Some young farmers had larger than average landholdings, typically because their parents had had the opportunity to buy land a couple of decades ago (when prices were still affordable). Almost in every village, it seemed that “outsiders”, i.e., not from the village, had bought up land and many were leasing it back to the villagers for farming. At the same time, many farmers also emphasized that those who sold their land, only did so because of extreme circumstances. No one, except those in distress, sold land today, they said, in part because it is impossible to acquire any later on and because there was barely enough to subdivide amongst the next generation. More importantly however, getting employment in the non-farm sector and in nearby towns was so difficult that land served as a fallback option, an insurance of sorts. In the tribal areas in the study, restrictions on land sale to members outside the community meant that it did not make sense to sell land, but it also meant that those in distress often had to sell land for a paltry sum within their tribe. The larger implication of this is that for those aspiring to become farmers without land of their own, the difficulty in securing their own land posed formidable entry barriers to farming. This is despite the fact that in the study area, caste was rarely considered a barrier to land ownership.

For most farmers who cannot afford to purchase land, the only way to expand farm operations is by leasing in land. Leasing is common and by all accounts, caste and social identity did not play a role in who leases to whom; but lease rates are high for land with irrigation and leasing poor quality land simply does not make sense for most smallholders. Leasing is based fully on trust. Some farmers had got around the constraint of land by ‘encroaching’ forest land. Although most of our examples came from tribal communities in Sehore, this was widespread in Chhindwara as well. It seemed that all they needed to do was to pay forest officials a modest sum to farm forest plots that, in a few cases, they had been cultivating for decades, pre-dating the restrictions on use of forest land. The state had recently been attempting to regularize these plots. In the larger context of limited scope for expansion of farms, illegal occupation and usurping of land by powerful interests seemed common. A young farmer we interviewed was farming his mother’s plot. He stated that although his father had land in his native village, it had been

illegally occupied by a powerful family in the village. Since they could not evict them, they had left the village altogether to be able to farm his mother's land. They had managed to buy a few acres in his mother's village to make the farm viable.

In the literature on youth and farming, access to land is often regarded as a chief barrier to becoming a farmer. In the context of Madhya Pradesh, since most land is inherited and given the limited capacity to purchase more land, most farmers get land in their name only when the parent (usually the father) dies. It is typical to see young men and women identify him/herself as a farmer, be fully involved in managing the farm but without ownership of the land, again blurring the boundary between becoming and being a farmer. As long as the father was alive, it is not uncommon to see all the children farm together their parent's land, with varying involvement in decision making. When the father passes on, usually, if survived by his wife, the land ownership documents will reflect the names of the wife and his children. It is common for male siblings to then carve out space for themselves and farm separately. Until then, siblings tend to farm together with the parents. On occasions, they might farm collectively but demarcate their individual shares. Marriage is a similarly important life event – when sons marry, fathers often settle the property in their name to ensure that they can farm independently, sometimes even if they lived in a joint family. It is common practice to demarcate the land anticipating future partitioning, even if the formal partitioning was several years away in the future. An older farmer (52 years) in Chhindwara, with three sons of his own, spoke of his arrangement with his siblings over the 12 acres he managed that had still not been formally divided.

*We have not done the paper work, but we each have 12 acres of land based on understanding. We have also demarcated land.*

In some families, the demarcation of plots implies that these are now managed separately. In other cases, the demarcation is notional and families farm jointly. One young farmer pointed out

*Father divided the land (16 acres) amongst us 4 brothers, but we work together and collectively rent in 5-10 acres.*

Our study is replete with examples of full-fledged farmers with land not in their name. A young farmer we interviewed stopped school to help his grandfather farm, when his father abandoned his mother to live with his new wife. He had been farming for several years.

Although his father was nowhere in the picture, he had this to say about the prospects of inheriting land

*My grandfather has about 15 acres... it will go to my father and then get divided between me and my step brothers. There are 4 of them....right now the land is in my grandfather's name. I will get some part of it in future. I would want to buy some more land and prepare for education of my children when they are born [22 yrs male, ST, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, works on 15 acres of family land, Chhindwara]*

As far as inheritance of land is concerned, gender plays a key role. Until 2005, in India, daughters did not inherit ancestral land and the law deemed sons to be the legitimate heirs to familial property. After that, daughters were also eligible to inherit land. Typically, when the male landowner died, his wife, sons and daughters would each have their name on the land record as heirs. From all accounts, this was the practice followed by the clerks of the government. However, in most cases, the records of ownerships mattered little, and the male siblings would gain full control of the land. In general, most respondents mentioned that sisters typically give up their claims to land. Some suggest that sisters do not want a share of what is already a small inheritance and thereby deprive her brothers of a livelihood. Others suggest that getting sisters married well with dowry is considered equivalent to inheriting land. Frequently, young farmers point out sisters often seek and value that support of brothers even after marriage, and are willing to give up land to ensure they have this support. This is well recorded in other studies in India (Rao,2017 for example).

Whereas the inheritance to daughters is discussed and debated, this is not the case for sons. Irrespective of whether sons migrate, quit agriculture or leave the village, they inevitably partake of the inheritance. In several cases, the young farmers we interviewed had brothers who worked in non-farm sectors and often were settled permanently in neighbouring towns, letting the brother who remained to take care of the farm. In many of these cases, they seemed to have a symbiotic relationship – the brother working outside would send money to maintain the household of the farmer-brother and fund investments on farm, contributing to land levelling, boring a well, etc. A share of the food produced from the land would go the other way. In that sense, even those who exited farming continued to maintain links with farming. Our interviews suggest that in the bequeathing of land there is no discussion of succession, of which brother

among many would take over the farm and whether more (all) land would be allocated accordingly. The quote below reflects this uncertainty - although this is in the context of whether he thinks he will inherit land.

*I don't know what is there in their (my parents') hearts. We will see, if they wish to give they will give, if not, that is also okay. [32 years, SC, graduate, 7 acres; Chhindwara]*

Irrespective of the difference in the situations, subdivision of property appears to demand cooperation amongst siblings in ways that perhaps was not required in the previous generation – both whether or not to give land to the sisters but also how it works between them, since earlier, all of them remained in farming

*I have 15 acres in my father's name...When my father is not there, it will depend on what me and my brother decide. If we can't cooperate then we shall divide it equally. [36 years, ST, sole operator of family land, Chhindwara]*

### ***Land quality and water availability***

While the size of land is a big constraint, the quality of land too came up as a significant barrier in the study area. In several villages across the two districts Sehore and Chhindwara, especially in the latter, the land was of such poor quality, undulating and with strewn boulders, that several parcels had been left fallow for generations. In many cases, the family had removed boulders manually to bring area under crops. Older farmers point out that in those times, they could afford to leave many of these lands uncultivated partly because their earlier unrestricted access to the forests allowed them to collect enough food. One older farmer recounted that in the years past, they used to buy maize in Chhindwara and sell it in the village. With the growing importance of agriculture, the flow is now reversed. Expansion of agriculture meant that marginal lands were now being brought under cultivation and investments in land were needed to ensure adequate yields from these plots. With the coming of some CSR organizations, they had secured money and the means to level the land (more on their role later). Many young farmers seemed re-energized about farming since these land improvements significantly improved their prospects in agriculture.

Another huge constraint is water availability, especially in Chhindwara. The undulating land and soil structure meant that water was not available throughout the year. CSR initiatives have recently focused on creating and reviving village tanks and ponds to address these needs. Without water, farmers were destined to depend on just one crop a year (the *khariif*) during the monsoon. A second crop would be feasible only if there was enough moisture in the soil in winter. In contrast, if the farmer did have a source of water, this opened up the possibility of harvesting up to three crops a year.

### ***The imperative of secondary occupations***

For young farmers, these constraints circumscribe the extent to which they can farm and identify themselves as farmers, despite their preference for farming. Many are forced to seek alternate sources of income. Most young farmers felt that as long as they were seeking to migrate and take up non-farm occupations to supplement their farm incomes they would consider themselves as workers rather than farmers. Indeed, for every young farmer we interviewed, the idea of who would qualify to be a successful farmer typically centered on the capacity to sustain a livelihood solely from agriculture. Most considered someone to be successful at farming if agricultural incomes alone were enough to support the family. Others articulated related issues – a successful farmer was variously one who can earn profits, has large land holdings, is free from debt, has irrigation (is able to “grow wheat and gram”), has knowledge, is industrious and does things in a timely manner. Each of these attributes in some way linked with profitable agriculture.

For many young farmers, supplementing income from non-farm sources was the only way they could invest in their farm. On the other hand, both older and younger farmers maintained that today youth’s needs (both of men and women) have expanded vastly

*Today a farmer has compulsory need for a motorcycle, good quality food at home, and mobile and other things. For all these, a farmer does not have enough means to fulfill... so has to go out. [32 years, ST, Chhindwara]*

An older 60 year old male farmer in Sehore was less charitable

*Today, people want fashion, everyone wants to wear jeans and shoes that cost Rs 1000. How will agriculture provide that? ... Even a child these days wants a couple of pairs of shoes. They don't adjust. Also, education has become expensive these days.*

Older farmers, both men and women, in Sehore, point out that young women farmers in their families are interested in expensive 'make up' and 'beauty' products.

The state-run, employment programme (the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act – MGNREGA)<sup>9</sup> used to be a reliable source of work within the village. It seems that in recent years, these works were not implemented. The more enterprising farmers were trying their hand at mushroom cultivation, bee keeping and so on, but a majority continued to depend on construction. Several were engaged in petty trade, running tea shops, tailoring units, driving a tractor, working with NGOs in the area and so on. For many, however, the only option is to migrate for work, usually to the nearest towns and cities.

### ***Migration and city life***

How do young farmers view work in the city? City life per se is not an aspiration, especially among those who preferred farming. Young farmers, both men and women, asserted that if agriculture were prosperous, they would not migrate at all. Even as migrants, they don't necessarily experience life in the city, given that they tend to be confined to the construction sites, with little free time.

Most young farmers felt that being a farmer allowed them to consume what they produced, and not leave them dependent on purchases. Many farmers also valued the freedom and flexibility that farming afforded them relative to a routine job in the town, not to mention the clean environment. Some also associated town jobs with drudgery.

*I feel that in village, one can do different things and grow diverse crops. In town, nature of work is the same. Schedule is also the same. Outside, people get up at a time, bathe and do the same work daily. In the village, I can grow different things and do not have to buy from outside. [22 years, 5<sup>th</sup> grade, ST, Chhindwara]*

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<sup>9</sup>Implemented between 2006 and 2008, the scheme guarantees each rural household 100 days of unskilled manual work within the village at minimum wages paid based on the work done each day.

He shared little with his friends who migrated.

*They mostly talk about money – we earned so much, or got this or that. This is all they talk about. Sometimes I feel that I too should go but then I realize that I should not. Here, I work hard... and I don't have to buy food from outside.*

Among many of the young farmers, not only is there no aspiration for a life in the city, on the contrary, they seem to associate it with a poorer quality of life in the balance, based on their conversations with those who do migrate. This was especially pronounced in tribal Sehore and Chhindwara. In Sehore, in the non-tribal areas, it was not unusual for at least one member in an agricultural household to be engaged in non-farm activities, often in nearby Bhopal. A 24 year old male farmer in Chhindwara told us that many young people in the village who migrate tell him how they feel homesick and miss their families. He added that he therefore never wanted to go. Another 32 year old male farmer in Sehore, farming 7 acres of family land said he never wanted to work outside saying

*I hear from people who go out that they work night and day and conditions are very tough.*

A young male farmer who used to migrate

*Work in Indore was very taxing. We would sleep for an hour or so and then work rest of the time. I got so weak after a while that I had to leave that work and come back to the village to recover.[29 years, ST, farms 3 acres, Sehore]*

Indeed, one male farmer who wanted to migrate for work just to experience it says he asked other youth who migrated regularly to take him along once and narrated their response

*They say “no, you are better off here”. They tell me I should be happy with what I have.*

Another noted that he loved the village –

*My family and home are here. The air here is nice. In towns there is so much heat. Our village is so cool and you can go any direction. There is no tension here. [20 years, ST, studying in 10<sup>th</sup> grade after a break, also farming 20 acres of family land, Chhindwara,.]*

In general it would seem that many who farm today would not go at all if they had a choice – i.e. if their land and the produce they could grow on it provided them a livelihood, free from debt.

Sometimes life events, such as marriage marked their transition to working on farm and giving up migration. One young male farmer, who had migrated extensively each year to work on construction sites said

*... when I got married, I decided to stay here in the village. I also had enough experience in construction so I started getting more work locally. Then I stopped going to town.*

A young woman farmer narrated that she used to migrate regularly for work even after her marriage. When she had a child, she looked for opportunities to become a farmer full time. That opportunity came when she got a well under a state government scheme. Her rainfed farm could now be cultivated throughout the year. She could now afford to stop migrating out for work and engage in farming full time (cite YWF paper). Another young woman farmer said

*It was difficult when we used to migrate because you are working for others, harvesting their produce. We had to listen to others but when you are at home you are working on your own land, on your terms. That makes all the difference. I don't even feel like migrating anymore because now I have a family and I have to look after them... Farming has also become better with new techniques... now we try to get as much work possible in village.*

Some young farmers migrate out just to keep busy, so that the 'empty mind does not become a devil's den'. A young male farmer said, for example,

*I once migrated to Hoshangabad to work in the soybean farms... But this was not out of necessity rather something I did with my peers for going out of the village for 10-15 days. [30 years, ST, unmarried graduate, farms 6 acres, Sehore]*



An older farmer noted that migration was common among youth, but added a cautionary note that those who do perhaps do not evaluate its perils fully.

*Their limbs are working so they can go out and work but there will be a time when they won't be able to do this. Hence, they should stay here and build a strong foundation for the future. But they are not thinking about the future like that.*

## **5. Support for young farmers**

The strongest support systems for the youth in our study area are perhaps the NGOs and CSR initiatives active across many of the villages. These include implementation of watershed works, incubating farmers' groups and producer companies, training in new techniques, in allied activities, arranging farmer visits to other districts and so on. In some places, NGOs such as Samarthan, have identified *Kisan Mitras* (Farmer Friend) who assists farmers in accessing government programmes. Several of them are young male farmers themselves.

In many spheres, the government is supportive – for example, in the provision of subsidies on drip irrigation, sprayers, seeds, etc. There were also many functioning programmes for the welfare of tribal farmers. Credit is another areas where cooperative societies had a role providing crop loans at lower interest rates, cheaper seeds and fertilizers. One farmer also mentioned that there was now a toll-free number to register for tractor services at a cheaper rate of 300-Rs.400 per acre rather than Rs.600.

At the same time, many also express dismay and mistrust of both CSR and government. There are several instances of farmers saying that the programmes for the government are difficult to access. Village social networks and elite capture are not unknown. One young woman farmer claimed that most of the benefits of government scheme accrue to a network of elite families within the village. In other cases, bureaucracy was a barrier.

*There are govt. programmes but these programmes rarely help the poor farmer. The officials make a fool of poor farmers. They make him come to the office 10 times for something and the farmer tires and eventually gives up.*

Another young male farmer said

*Under the government scheme, soil testing cards were made and I also got soil tested. But the farmer has to take initiative here. They have to go to government officials and demand these things as officials just want to sit in office and not work. They fill papers anyway, get any man from village and click his picture to show they are meeting their quota. So the farmer has to be knowledgeable.*

A 55 year old farmer too registered his dismay

*Once a gram sevak (village functionary) informed us that if we take a picture of us using tractors in the farm, we will each get Rs.2000. So we did send them a picture but we didn't get the amount. The officials can also get unreliable at times.*

*Kisan mitras* had provided a useful resource for many young farmers, in enabling access to some benefits. As the quotes above suggest, farmer awareness is key. A 50-year-old farmer explained why he and his children stayed away from the CSR initiatives that seemed to benefit so many other farmers

*They are building wells, planting trees on people's land, if they were to ask for money tomorrow, where will I give it from? So I got scared and stayed away.*

Some expressed cynicism saying that cooperation was no longer there in the village and each one was left to fend for himself/herself. At the same time, many young farmers said that they helped each other out especially during the peak agriculture when timely operations were crucial. Farmers' groups (usually male dominated) and women's Self-help groups were important sources of support. These were often organized by the CSRs. A farmer elucidated the role of these NGOs and CSR initiatives:

*They have introduced organic farming, gardening and maize cultivation to the farmers. They provide good quality seeds to the farmers which then yields a good produce that fetches above average price in the market. Apart from this NGO, there is a KhetPathshala (farmers group) which is quite active in the village. KisanMitra appointment by the government is also associated with it. Basically about 30 farmers in the village meet once*

*in a while and discuss their problems. We are also told about the latest techniques, seeds, chemicals and schemes. This not only helps the farmers but also encourages them to be enterprising. For example, we grew maize last year in about 6 acres of land and it yielded 80-85 quintals of produce (higher than is typical in this area). When we shared this with our peers, the farmers in the neighbouring village grew maize in 25 acres of land and the yield was 500-600 quintals. So everyone benefits from it. [24 years, OBC, high school, farms 6 acres, Sehore]*

Whatever the form, it seems clear, even in the minds of the older farmers, that young farmers of today need active support

*I think some support from government or organization or even people themselves is needed. A farmer alone cannot dig a well. But the community can come together and have some built between a few families. If a blind man is provided a stick then he too finds his way and moves forward slowly [52 years, ST, farm 12 acres, Chhindwara]*

## **6. The future of young farmers and young farmers in the future**

Most young farmers today, even those enthusiastic about farming, would rather their children did not take up farming and preferred that the children take up routine jobs 'outside'. A 55-year-old farmer and father of young farmers, recalled:

*I wanted them to go to school and study. Start a business or get a job. If they couldn't then they could start working in the farm. I wanted them to get a job because there isn't much land left for farming.*

Just as the fathers of today's young farmers wanted them to finish schooling, with farming as merely a fallback option, the young farmers of today state that they would not give up land because it would be a fallback option for the children. Some of them are seeking to buy land to

ensure that this fallback option does not fail them. One young farmer, who was fortunate to have the means to do so, said

*I managed, my age is over... but land is becoming smaller. So for my children, this would be helpful, so I bought 4.5 acres..when the land was still inexpensive [35 years, ST, Chhindwara]*

At the same time, several see their own future in farming in a positive light. Several aspire to invest in a water source, diversify into different crops or ancillary activities and expand the farm. The ones who don't are those who are from the second group of young farmers who are merely waiting to exit farming.

A farmer in his early 20s summarized the problems faced by youth in farming

*The young do not focus on farming because their land is not suited for cultivation. They have inherited land and because their fathers were farmers, they identify themselves as farmers but this is just a name. If their land quality could be improved, land leveled, stones and boulders removed, if possible, water for irrigation provided, then they could produce more and truly be farmer. This will reduce migration and farmers may start taking more interest in farming.*

Another shed light on the predicament of young farmers by pointing to the larger challenges of farming

*There is no ideal farmer... because if someone has a little water, he does not have motor, if there is motor then knowledge about seeds is lacking. So something or the other is lacking. That is why there is no ideal farmer in this or any neighbouring village.*

There are heartening stories as well. One young farmer told us that all his children had stopped studying, but all his sons wanted to work in jobs not related to farming. He added

*My daughter helps me more than my sons in farming.... She doesn't like anything else. She likes farming.*

What are the chances that she will be a successful farmer?

## **7. Concluding Remarks**

The experience of young farmers in Madhya Pradesh provides evidence that the perception that youth want to leave agriculture is not entirely valid. Here are several young farmers who given a choice would rather engage in agriculture as a full-time activity. Both young men and women farmers define good farmers to be those who can live solely off the farm, do not have debts and are able to reap profits from agriculture. In this, the main constraint for young farmers come from larger constraints such as availability of water and the quality of land as to their limited ability to expand farm size through land purchases. To be sure, several young farmers feel stuck in agriculture and are waiting to find off-farm jobs. Even for this group of farmers, however, agriculture seems to provide a fallback option, in a context where these off-farm jobs are hard to come by and are of poor quality. In the study areas within MP, CSR initiatives and NGOs seem to play a key enabling role and for youth to pursue agriculture, with limited role of social media and greater reliance on traditional extension and peer networks. There is evidence too that state support, despite its problems, seem to offer some support, for example via the MGNREGA or through subsidized seeds and so on. As elsewhere, men and women have different experiences as young farmers – whereas today's young men appear to have a greater choice on whether to farm, it appears that young women have less say and see farming and domestic work as intrinsic parts of their married lives. The distinction of becoming and being a farmer are quite blurred. People are already farming well before they get independent charge of their land, which coincides often with either the previous generation's passing or upon the young male farmer's marriage. Women rarely get independent charge, neither as daughters nor as daughters-in-law or spouses. Our study suggests that many young farmers would rather continue farming, if the larger constraints to agriculture, such as water,

were addressed. This seems to challenge our popular understanding that young farmers in India all want to quit farming and the perception that young farmers overwhelmingly aspire for an urban lifestyle connected with work off-farm.

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