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REVIEW PAPER

Inter-State Dispersion in Agricultural Wages in India: Trends and Explanatory Factors

Vijaya Rajni

College of Vocational Studies, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Corresponding author: vijaya.rajni@cvs.du.ac.in (**ORCID ID:** 0009-0008-8646-9964)

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural wages in India have increased substantially over time, yet inter-state disparities have remained persistent and uneven. Evidence from official wage series shows that spatial wage inequality has neither followed a smooth path of convergence nor declined consistently with economic growth or policy expansion. Measures such as the coefficient of variation indicate that inter-state wage disparities narrowed during certain phases but widened during others, including periods of rapid growth and intensified state intervention. This raises important analytical questions regarding why agricultural wages respond differently to broadly similar economic forces across states and why technological change, non-farm expansion, and national employment programmes have failed to generate sustained convergence. This study argues that agricultural wage determination in India cannot be adequately explained by subsistence-based theories or standard neo-classical demand–supply models. Empirical evidence points to the central roles of productivity growth, labour demand, institutional interventions, and alternative employment opportunities, operating within socially segmented and institutionally mediated labour markets. Persistent caste- and gender-based wage gaps, uneven policy effects, and enduring regional inequalities underscore the limitations of purely market-driven explanations. The analysis highlights the need for an integrated framework that links economic forces with institutional and social structures to explain the long-term dynamics of agricultural wages and inter-state wage inequality in India.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Inter-state disparities in agricultural wages persist despite long-term wage growth.
- Wage inequality shows non-monotonic trends rather than steady convergence.
- Economic growth and policy interventions have had uneven regional impacts.
- Agricultural wages are shaped by institutions and social segmentation, not markets alone.
- Persistent caste and gender gaps limit wage equalisation across states.

Keywords: Agricultural wages, Inter-state disparities, Rural labour markets, Wage inequality

Agricultural wages occupy a central position in debates on rural livelihoods, labour market conditions, and agrarian change in India. For a large proportion of rural households, wage earnings from agriculture remain a primary source of income and a key determinant of poverty, inequality, and economic security. Since Independence, India's agrarian economy has undergone significant structural change. The Green Revolution introduced technological transformation through improved seeds, irrigation, and fertiliser use, altering labour demand and productivity in agriculture. Over time, changes in cropping patterns, gradual diversification of rural livelihoods, and uneven regional development further reshaped rural labour markets. In more recent decades, public policy interventions such as the Mahatma Gandhi National

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Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), alongside the expansion of non-farm employment, rising migration, increasing mechanisation, and demographic transition, have further transformed the conditions under which agricultural labour is supplied and demanded. These developments contributed to periods of accelerated wage growth, particularly from the early 2000s. However, wage growth has remained uneven across regions and continues to be marked by substantial spatial and social inequalities.

One of the most noticeable features of agricultural wages in India is the persistence of inter-state disparities despite long-term increases in average wage levels over extended periods. Evidence from official wage series shows that disparities in agricultural wages declined modestly during certain phases but widened during others, including periods of rapid economic growth and intensified policy intervention. Measures such as the coefficient of variation indicate that inter-state wage inequality has not followed a simple or monotonic path of convergence (Fig. 1).

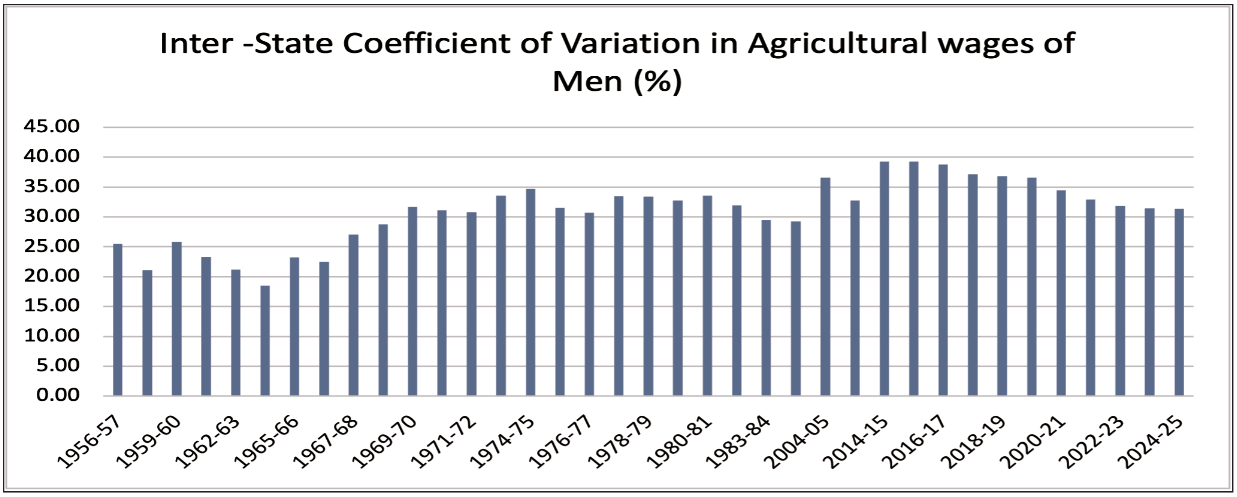
This raises important analytical questions. Why do agricultural wages respond differently to broadly similar economic forces across states? Why have technological change, non-farm expansion, and national employment programmes not produced sustained convergence in wage levels? And how do market forces interact with local institutions and social relations to shape wage outcomes across regions and over time?

Methodology

This paper utilizes a qualitative and analytical literature review methodology to examine the determinants of agricultural wages in India. The review draws on peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, edited volumes, and policy-oriented studies from economics and development studies. Historical review since the 1970's has been provided for a better perspective of the working of the rural labour markets. More recent post-2000 research is reviewed separately to capture evolving institutional and structural dynamics.

The literature is sourced primarily from journals such as the Indian Journal of Labour Economics, Economic and Political Weekly, Journal of Development Economics, and Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics, as well as from major scholarly works on agrarian labour relations and rural political economy. Both macro-level quantitative studies and micro-level village ethnographies are included in order to capture regional variation and institutional heterogeneity.

The analyses is organised thematically (i) institutional and public policy interventions (ii) Structural Transformation in the rural labour markets caused by growth of non-farm employment, technological change, and gender norms (iii) Analyses of Micro level Studies. This integrative approach enables a critical assessment of how explanations of wage determination have evolved in response to changing agrarian and labour market conditions.



Source: *Data from 1956-57 to 1984-85 has been collected from Jose, (1974, 1988). Data for 2004-05 and 2009-2010 has been collected from Rural Labour Enquiry Reports. 2014-15 to 2024-25 has been collected from AWI, Labour Bureau.*

Fig. 1

Historical Literature Review

A substantial body of literature has examined agricultural wage determination in India. Early theoretical contributions, rooted in development economics, conceptualised rural labour markets in terms of surplus labour and subsistence wages (Lewis, 1954). This Lewisian hypothesis was extended by many scholars, including H. Leibenstein, D. Mazumdar, and P. Wonnacott, which shaped early thinking on rural wages. Within this framework, wages were expected to remain stagnant until surplus labour was absorbed.

Subsequent empirical work tested these propositions using demand-supply frameworks, emphasising the roles of labour availability, productivity, irrigation, cropping intensity, and landholding patterns in shaping agricultural wages (Bardhan, 1973; Lal, 1988; Parthasarathy, 1996). These studies demonstrated that wages were responsive to economic forces, particularly changes in labour demand and productivity, though the strength and direction of these relationships varied across regions.

Parallel to this strand, institutional and political economy analyses emphasised the embeddedness of rural labour markets in social and political structures. Studies highlighted the role of caste relations, unionisation and bargaining power, labour market segmentation, patron–client ties, and state intervention in shaping wage outcomes (Bardhan, 1984; Drèze and Mukherjee, 1989). Bardhan's West Bengal study and subsequent work by Rosenzweig and Binswanger show that labour markets respond to economic incentives but labour markets are not cleared in a neo-classical sense. While Athreya et al.(1990) and Kapadia (1993) highlight collective bargaining by women workers, Rudra (1984) and Sarap (1991) emphasise village-specific power relations and caste-based segmentation, questioning the general applicability of neo-classical models. This literature challenged the assumption of competitive labour markets and showed that wages are often governed by local norms, power relations, and institutional arrangements rather than by market-clearing mechanisms alone.

Despite their contributions, these strands of literature have largely evolved in parallel. Market-based analyses and institutional approaches frequently offer partial explanations of wage dynamics, with limited integration between them. Moreover, much of the post-2000 research, focusing on MGNREGA, non-farm employment, migration, mechanisation, and gender norms, has tended to examine contemporary wage changes without explicit engagement with earlier debates on surplus labour, labour market rigidity, and bargaining power. As a result, recent wage dynamics are often treated as a break from historical processes rather than as their reconfiguration under new economic and institutional conditions.

A further limitation of the literature lies in the persistent divide between macro-level and micro-level analyses. State and district-level econometric studies identify robust associations between wages and factors such as irrigation, productivity, and non-farm employment, but typically abstract from local institutions and social relations. In contrast, village-level ethnographic and micro-studies document wage norms, collective bargaining practices, and segmentation along caste and gender lines, yet their findings are difficult to generalise across regions. The absence of an integrative framework that accommodates scale, heterogeneity, and institutional mediation limits our ability to explain persistent inter-state wage disparities over time.

Objectives

This paper addresses these gaps by developing an integrated analytical framework for understanding agricultural wage determination in India. Rather than privileging a single theoretical perspective, agricultural wages are conceptualised as the outcome of interactions among three interrelated domains.

First, demand-supply forces shape the underlying conditions of wage determination. These include labour availability, landholding patterns, irrigation, cropping intensity, productivity growth, technological change, and the expansion of non-farm employment. These factors influence labour demand and reservation wages, but their effects vary across regions depending on agrarian structure and labour market integration.

Second, institutional and political structures mediate how these economic forces translate into wage outcomes. Caste and gender relations, bargaining power, labour contracts, unionisation, and state interventions, most notably MGNREGA, shape wage-setting processes, influence outside options for workers, and condition the responsiveness of wages to changes in demand and supply. These institutional features vary significantly across states, contributing to persistent spatial disparities.

Third, broader processes of structural transformation reconfigure labour markets over time. Migration, rural-urban linkages, infrastructure development, and exposure to economic and climatic shocks alter labour availability, employment opportunities, and risk, thereby reshaping wage trajectories. These processes interact with both market forces and institutional arrangements, producing regionally differentiated outcomes.

By synthesising evidence across periods, regions, and methodological traditions, the paper demonstrates that determination of agricultural wages in India cannot adequately be explained by one single theoretical model. In fact wages in India have emerged from a layered process which is continuously evolving and market forces operate within that process and are shaped by institutional and structural conditions. This perspective moves beyond binary oppositions such as market versus institution or surplus labour versus labour scarcity, and provides a coherent explanation for both persistent inter-state wage inequality and episodes of wage growth. Also this integrated approach enhances our theoretical understanding and give us solid ground for interpreting empirical findings and designing policies for rural development.

DISCUSSION: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND EXTENSIONS

While early research on agricultural wage determination in India focused primarily on classical economic variables such as labour supply elasticity and marginal productivity, a substantial body of post-2000 literature has broadened this framework to incorporate institutional, structural, technological, and socio-economic determinants. This newer strand of research emphasises that agricultural wages are shaped not only by demand-supply conditions but also by policy interventions, non-farm labour dynamics, infrastructure, gender norms, and labour market frictions. These developments significantly extend earlier analytical models and provide a more realistic understanding of wage formation in rural India.

Institutional Interventions, MGNREGA, and Wage Floors

One of the most significant institutional developments affecting rural labour markets in the twenty-first century has been the implementation of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2006-07. By guaranteeing up to 100 days of employment at statutory wages, MGNREGA effectively establishes a wage floor and alters reservation wages in rural labour markets.

A growing body of empirical evidence demonstrates that MGNREGA has had a positive and statistically significant impact on agricultural wages. Narayanmoorthy & Bhattarai (2013) observe significant increases in agricultural real wages for both male and female during post MGNREGS period using Labour Bureau data. It has been shown that growth is much faster in agriculturally developed states like Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu compared to others. Gujarat and West Bengal being the only exceptions where wage rates declined. Nagaraj *et al.* (2016) show that villages with higher programme intensity experienced increases in both agricultural and non-agricultural wages, reflecting reduced underemployment and tightened labour markets. Using state-level panel data, Kumar *et al.* (2020) find that MGNREGA participation remains positively associated with agricultural wage rates even after controlling for irrigation, literacy, cropping intensity, and labour availability. Berg *et al.* (2018) in their district level analyses finds positive impact of MGNREGS on agricultural wages with Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Rajasthan performing better than many other states because of better implementation of the programme. Imbert and Papp (2015) also show in their district level analyses that MGNEREGS has been able to raise the wage floor for casual workers. These findings indicate that institutional wage floors can weaken surplus labour effects and enhance labourers' bargaining power (Chand *et al.* 2009; Jose, 2013).

MGNREGA's influence also operates through seasonal mechanisms. By providing employment during agricultural slack periods, the programme reduces distress-driven labour supply and diminishes workers' dependence on low-paid farm employment during peak seasons. This institutional channel, long emphasised in political economy analyses (Bardhan, 1984), is now supported by micro- and panel-level evidence. However, Jose (2022) documents a slowdown in real wage growth after 2015-16, partly attributing it to weakening MGNREGA implementation, highlighting the importance of administrative capacity and funding continuity.

Closely related is the role of statutory minimum wages. Recent studies show that increases in minimum wages raise earnings at the lower end of the wage distribution and reduce inequality even under imperfect enforcement (Khurana, 2023). These "lighthouse effects" imply that statutory wage floors influence prevailing market wages beyond directly covered workers. Surender & Pattanaik (2025) highlights inter-state convergence in rural wages during the post 2014 period as a result of targeted policy initiative to uplift poor states.

Structural Transformation, Non-Farm Employment, and Labour Mobility

Recent literature increasingly recognises the centrality of non-farm employment in shaping agricultural wage outcomes. Non-farm wages act as alternative reservation wages for rural workers, strengthening labour mobility and reducing acceptance of low-paid agricultural work.

Empirical evidence consistently supports this linkage. Jose (2013, 2016) shows that agricultural wages move closely with non-farm wages, indicating substantial inter-sectoral labour market integration. Kumar *et al.* (2020) find that a one per cent increase in real non-farm wages raises agricultural wages by nearly 0.8 per cent, making non-farm earnings among the strongest predictors of farm wage rates. These findings reinforce earlier insights by Bhalla (1993) and Sen (1996), while extending them across broader spatial and temporal scales.

Structural transformation and labour mobility further mediate these relationships. Chand and Srivastava (2014) emphasize that diversification of employment along with MGNERGS have been responsible for narrowing sectoral as well as gender variations in rural wages. Reddy (2015) finds that structural change has been faster in some states such as Kerala, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu caused by faster growth of non-farm sector, urbanisation and increasing agricultural productivity. As a result these states have reached the Lewis turning point. Few other states such as Maharshtra, Gujarat, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh also have the potential to cross Lewis turning point because of their higher economic growth. Himanshu and Kundu (2017) argue that declining labour absorption in agriculture combined with expanding non-farm opportunities has tightened rural labour markets. Both seasonal and long-term migration plays a key role in linking regional labour markets. Jose (2022) shows that real wage growth has been faster in labour-exporting states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Assam, and West Bengal, while labour-receiving states exhibit relatively slower growth due to migrant inflows. Srivastave *et al.* (2020) also notice rising wages in agriculture due to employment diversification from agriculture to non- agricultural sectors. These patterns indicate that agricultural wages increasingly reflect economy-wide labour market conditions rather than farm-sector dynamics alone.

Labour Supply, Scarcity, and Demographic Change

Earlier surplus labour models posited that high labour-land ratios suppress agricultural wages (Bardhan, 1970; Jose, 1974, 1988). However, recent evidence suggests that labour scarcity has emerged as an important wage-push factor since the 2000s.

Kumar *et al.* (2020) show that labour availability per hectare of net sown area has a statistically significant negative effect on agricultural wages, indicating that declining labour supply driven by migration, demographic transition, and diversification has contributed to wage growth. Gulati *et al.* (2014) highlight both "push" factors (distress-driven exit) and "pull" factors (non-farm opportunities) in tightening rural labour markets. These findings challenge the notion of a perfectly elastic labour supply and point to changing demographic and economic conditions in rural India.

Technology, Mechanisation, and Wage Effects

The relationship between mechanisation and agricultural wages has become increasingly nuanced in recent research. While traditional views assumed that mechanisation displaces labour and depresses wages, contemporary studies highlight differentiated effects depending on technology type, crop mix, and labour scarcity.

Binswanger & Singh (2018) argued that mechanisation is typically adopted in response to rising wages rather than as an autonomous labour-displacing force. Foster and Rosenzweig (2004) further demonstrate that mechanisation does not uniformly reduce labour returns, instead, it can increase demand for specialised labour and processing activities. Indian evidence supports this perspective. Kumar *et al.* (2020) find a negative association between tractor availability and agricultural wages, but also identify a positive interaction between mechanisation and labour scarcity, suggesting complementarity under tight labour market conditions. Thus, mechanisation moderates wage pressures rather than eliminating labour demand (Bardhan, 1970; Prabakar *et al.* 2011).

Infrastructure and Productivity

Infrastructure and productivity-enhancing factors play a critical role in wage determination. Classical studies argued that higher productivity enables higher wages without compressing profits. Irrigation, by increasing cropping intensity and labour demand, remains one of the most robust determinants of agricultural wages.

Narayanmoorthy and Deshpande (2003) and Sant Kumar et al. (2020) find strong positive associations between irrigation intensity and wage rates. Jose (2017) notice a striking positive correlation between agricultural wages and the per capita net state domestic product and concludes that productivity increase is a necessary but may not be sufficient condition for wage increase. Datt and Ravallion (1998) argue that productivity growth mediated through irrigation reduces poverty and strengthens labour market participation. Recent studies also emphasise the role of infrastructure such as electricity and roads, which simultaneously facilitate mechanisation and expand non-farm employment, producing context-specific wage effects.

Gender, Social Norms, and Labour Market Segmentation

Despite rising average wages, gender disparities persist as a defining feature of agricultural labour markets. Jose (2017) gender analyse of wages post 2005-06 period show that women wages are consistentenly lower than men wages in 17 major states and the gender disparity have remained stable over the years. Inter-state variation has also been stable for women wages with states of Bihar, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa , Madhya Pradesh showing lower inequlity whereas southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh consistently having very high inequality. Kannan (2018) emphasizes that gender based disparities are persistent and are more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas. Women consistently earn lower wages than men, even after controlling for skills and task types (Kapadia, 1993; Jose, 2016; Kumar *et al.* 2020). Occupational segregation, weaker bargaining power, and social norms continue to disadvantage women workers.

Institutional interventions such as MGNREGA have had heterogeneous effects on gender wage gaps, narrowing them in some contexts but failing to eliminate entrenched biases (Das & Usami, 2017). Caste relations, patron-client ties, and local power structures further mediate wage outcomes (Bardhan, 1982; Breman, 1996), underscoring the importance of social institutions alongside economic variables.

Micro-Level Evidence and Labour Market Frictions

Micro-case studies and ethnographic work continue to shed light on the non-market, institutional, and cultural determinants of wage variation. Sneha *et al.* (2024) document persistent seasonality and inter-state disparity even when broad wage trends are rising. Village ethnographies echo findings by Dreze and Mukherjee (1989) and Rudra, showing that local norms, collective action, and labour market segmentation can produce neighbourhood-specific wage regimes. These studies challenge the assumption of a single competitive rural labour market and document persistent wage dispersion driven by norms, collective action, and segmentation.

More recent study by Baysan *et al.* (2023) provide compelling micro-evidence that wage gaps persist within villages due to labour market frictions rather than productivity differences. Using employer-worker matched data, they demonstrate that imperfect information, limited mobility, and heterogeneous bargaining power generate wage dispersion even within small geographic units. Rao (2017) uses Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural Household to show that discrimination based on caste leads to low returns. Sinha (2024) also emphasize that in Punjab Dalit agricultural women are discriminated and excluded from paid agricultural work. Sengupta & Guchhait (2021) studied four villages of Purulia district in west Bengal and show that caste is important in explaining income inequalities. These findings reinforce earlier institutional analyses (Bardhan, 1979; Breman, 1996) and suggest that aggregate wage growth may conceal persistent inequality and highlight the importance of micro-level analysis alongside state-level panel studies.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

It has been demonstrated that agricultural wage determination in India is a complex, context-specific process that cannot be adequately explained by subsistence-based theories or neo-classical demand-supply models alone. Empirical evidence accumulated over several decades decisively rejects the assumption of a perfectly elastic labour supply and shows that wages respond to productivity growth, labour demand, institutional interventions, and alternative employment opportunities in institutionally mediated ways.

A consistent finding across studies is the importance of demand-side factors such as irrigation, cropping intensity, technological change, and landholding structures in shaping wage outcomes. At the same time, labour supply dynamics, including migration and non-farm diversification, have altered wage trajectories across regions and periods. Agricultural labour markets are thus responsive to economic forces.

Equally significant is the role of institutional and social factors. Gender and caste-based wage disparities persist despite rising average wages, highlighting the limitations of market forces in addressing structural inequalities. Programmes such as MGNREGA have altered reservation wages and bargaining relations, while mechanisation and structural transformation have had differentiated, context-dependent effects.

Policy Implications

First, policies promoting agricultural productivity, irrigation expansion, and crop diversification can meaningfully raise rural wages. Wage stagnation is not inevitable in labour-surplus economies. Second, institutional interventions matter. MGNREGA has functioned not merely as an employment programme but as a gender neutral wage-setting institution. Ensuring adequate funding, timely wage payments, and effective implementation ensure wage gains. Third, persistent gender and caste-based wage gaps require targeted interventions beyond aggregate wage growth, including enforcement of equal wages, task standardisation, and policies addressing social discrimination. Fourth, the growing importance of non-farm employment and migration implies that agricultural wage policy cannot be formulated in isolation. Investments in education, skills, and rural infrastructure that facilitate labour mobility can indirectly raise agricultural wages. Finally, reliable and comparable wage data are essential for informed policy-making. Harmonisation of rural wage statistics across surveys should be prioritised to improve evaluation of labour market interventions.

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