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## Family farming the way of life in the context of Indian agriculture

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**Abstract**

Indian agriculture is structurally small farm and small holder based. The share of small farms in total farm output has increased over time. Small- holder farmers are vital for India's agriculture and rural economy. Small-holder farmers - defined as those marginal and sub-marginal farm households that own or/and cultivate less than 2.0 hectare of land constitute about 78 per cent of the country's farmers (at Agricultural Census 1990-91). These small-holders owned only 33 per cent of the total cultivated land; their contribution to national grain production was nonetheless 41 per cent. Their contribution to household food security and poverty alleviation is thus disproportionately high and is increasing. Moreover, as the national population increases, so does the number of small holdings.

Small- holder families constitute more than half of the national population. It is thus disappointing that notwithstanding their substantial and increasing contribution to the national food supply and to agricultural GDP, these small holder families nonetheless constitute more than half of the nation's totals of hungry and poor. Policies and programmes to lessen poverty and food insecurity, and to enhance equity and sustainability of incomes and livelihoods, should thus seek to achieve an agriculture-led broad-based economic development and to do so by according highest priority to small-scale agriculture.

**Keywords:** Small farmers, food security, poverty, family farming

**Introduction**

Family farming is the predominant form of agriculture in the rural economy. Family farmers carefully manage their lands to sustain remarkably high levels of productivity despite having less access to productive resources such as agricultural inputs and support. A productive unit where the family members are involved directly in agricultural activities, on a piece of land owned legally or traditionally. Family farming is not just about the size of the farm, as when we talk about small scale farming; it is more about the way people farm and lives. This is why family farming is *a way of life*. According to FAO (2013) definition: "a family farm is an agricultural holding which is managed and operated by a household and where farm labour is largely supplied by that household", which avoids quantification but brings in the concept of "household". The United Nations has declared 2014 the International Year of Family Farming. "to promote international awareness and support country-owned plans aimed at strengthening the contribution of family farming and smallholders in eradicating hunger and reducing rural poverty leading to sustainable development of rural areas and food security" (FAO, 2013). The objectives of family farming is to promote sustainable development of family agriculture, strengthen the legitimacy of rural associations and farmers, increase the awareness of the whole civil society and all social agents of the decisive role of family agriculture, achieve recognition of the role of women in family farming, reduce/minimise the migration to the cities, promote as a priority, local and regional markets, promote the different forms of research and technology, including the acknowledgement and promotion of local know how.

Family farmers can make a large contribution to increasing food production and enhancing sustainability. And yet, conventional agricultural education pays very little attention to sustainable family farming, the way it works, or its potential. There is a huge gap between the daily realities of hundreds of millions of family farmers and what is being taught to agricultural students around the world. For instance, when parents encourage their daughters to become educated and leave farming behind this clearly signals a move away from family farming. Many of these people hope that the family farm will remain, yet they realise that circumstances beyond their control require that they make some changes. The need for income from the wife's off-farm activities often leads farm families to adapt their attitudes and farm management. India's subsistence farming system-along with its environmental, economical, social and health benefits – has almost been blown away by the winds of "progress".

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## Results and Discussion

The data gathered from various secondary sources was compiled and the obtained information is stated below:

### Family farming in India

The contribution of small farmers to total farm output in India exceeds 50%, while they cultivate 44% of land. The diversity in farming, crops and livestock, often results in higher productivity than the large farms practising usually monoculture.

According to Agricultural Census 2010-11 out of 138 million farm holdings in the country, 117 million are small and marginal holdings. Small and marginal landholdings together shot up from 70% of total in 1970-71 to 85% in 2010-11 and own nearly 38% of the cultivated area. Interestingly, marginal farmers who share 67% in total number of holdings and 16% of cultivated area can be considered as a distinct class by itself, rather than combining them with small farmers since farming for them becomes a significant source of livelihood often much more than that of small farmer households. Thus, marginal farmers in India aptly fit in the definition described by the FAO.

The operational holding pattern in India has become skewed over the years. The share of marginal holdings in total operational holdings increased. The proportion of small holdings has declined in terms of operational holdings but their share in operated area has increased. The share of medium and large farmers has declined both in terms of operational holdings and area operated over the last three decades. However, the semi-medium category has increased their share in the operational holdings though their share in the operated area has remained constant over three decades

More than 80% of India's farmers are small and marginal farmers. It has been empirically established that small farms produce more per hectare than their larger counterparts. It is therefore imperative to protect the interests of small farmers through measures that help promote and stabilise incomes, reduce risks, and increase profitability, and at the same time improve availability and access to inputs, markets and credit. Extract from the report of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS), 'The Challenge of Employment in India: An Informal Economy Perspective' (2009)

Small holdings agriculture which is the focus of this paper is

important for raising agriculture growth, food security and livelihoods in India. It may be noted that Indian agriculture is the home of small and marginal farmers (80%). Therefore, the future of sustainable agriculture growth and food security in India depends on the performance of small and marginal farmers.

Agricultural Census data shows that there were about 121 million agricultural holdings in India in 2000-01. Around 99 million were small and marginal farmers. Average size has declined from 2.3 ha. In 1970-71 to 1.37 ha. In 2000-01. Small and marginal farmers account for more than 80% of total farm holdings. But their share in operated area is around 44%. Thus, there are significant land inequalities in India.

India is a land of small farmers. According to Agricultural Census 2000-01, there were an estimated 98 million small and marginal holdings out of around 120 million total land households in the country. As shown in Table 3, the share of marginal and small farmers accounted for around 81% of operational holdings in 2002-03 as compared to about 62% in 1960-61. Similarly, the area operated by small and marginal farmers has increased from about 19% to 44% during the same period. Recent data for 2005-06 shows that the share of small and marginal farmers in land holdings was 83% (Chand *et al*, 2011). Thus, the small holding character of Indian agriculture is much more prominent today than even before. The average size of holdings in India declined from 2.3 ha. in 1970-71 to 1.33 ha. in 2000-2001. It may be noted that 63% of land holdings belong to marginal farmers with less than 1 ha. The average size of marginal holdings is only 0.24 at all India level.

Small-scale family farmers in India constitute the vast majority of farmers and are facing a deep and protracted crisis. Over the past eighteen years, number farmers have committed suicide many because of enormous debts due to heavy dependencies on expensive chemicals. Pests are an issue, all farmers agree on that. However, many farmers, the main problem was not pests but their addiction to pesticides. Pesticides are expensive, are harmful to the health of farmers and their families, create ecological problems and, most importantly, do not solve the problem. The more pesticides you use, the more you disturb the ecosystem, and the worse the pest problem gets. Many family farmers in have experienced this first hand. It became clear that there was a pressing need for a solution to this problem.



**Fig 1:** Family members of the farmers are performing their role/duty in the field

Family farming is also difficult to grasp because it is a complex, multi-layered and multi-dimensional phenomenon. The ten qualities of family farming are not always present at the same time in every situation. The most important thing to remember is that the reality of family farms is far richer than the two single aspects that are most commonly used to describe them: that the farm is owned by the family and that the work is done by the family members. Family farming is not just about the size of the farm, as when we talk about small scale farming; it is more about the way people farm and life.

The farming family has control over the main resources that are used in the farm. Not only land, but also the animals, the crops, the genetic material, the house, buildings, and machinery and, in a more general sense, the know-how that specifies how these resources need to be utilised and combined. Access to networks and markets, as well as co-ownership of co-operatives, are also important resources. Family farmers use these resources not to make a profit, but to make a living; to acquire an income that provides them with a decent life and, if possible, allows them to make investments that will further develop the farm.

The family provides the main part of the labour force. This makes the farm into a place of self-employment and of progress for the family. It is through their dedication, passion and hard work that the farm is further developed and that the livelihood of the family is improved. The nexus between the family and the farm. The farm is there to meet the many needs of the family, whilst the family provides the possibilities, the means and also the limitations for the farm. Thus nexus is the core of many decisions about the development of the farm. Each particular farm has its own specific balances, for instance between the mouths to be fed and the hands to do the work. These balances tie family and farm together and make each family farm into a unique constellation.

Family farms provide the farming family with a part or all of

its income and food. Having control over the quality of self-produced food and being confident that it is not contaminated is becoming increasingly important for farmers around the world. The family farm is not only a place of production. It is also home to the farming family. It is the place they belong to, as much as the place that gives them shelter. It is the place where the family lives and where children grow up.

The farming family is part of a flow that links past, present and future. This means that every farm has a history and is full of memories. It also means that the parents are working for their children. They want to give the next generation a solid starting point whether within, or outside, agriculture. And since the farm is the outcome of the work and dedication of this and previous generations, there is often pride. And there can also be anger if others try to damage or even destroy the jointly constructed farm.

The family farm is the place where experience accumulates. The learning takes place and knowledge is passed on, in a subtle but strong way, to the next generation. The family farm often is a node in wider networks in which new insights, practices, seeds, etc., circulate. The family farm is the place where culture is applied and preserved, just as the farm can be a place of cultural heritage. The family and farm are also the part of the wider rural economy. They are tied to the locality, carrying the cultural codes of the local community. Thus, family farms can strengthen the local rural economy. It is where people buy, spend and engage in other activities.

The family farm is part of a wider rural landscape. It may work with, rather than against nature, using ecological processes and balances instead of disrupting them, thus preserving the beauty and integrity of landscapes. When family farmer works with nature, they also contribute to conserving biodiversity and to fighting global warming. The work implies an ongoing interaction with living nature – a feature that is highly valued by the actors themselves.

**Table 1:** Number of holdings– All Social Groups

S. No	Size Groups	Number of Holdings (in 000)								
		1970-71	1976-77	1980-81	1985-86	1990-91	1995-96	2000-01	2005-06	2010-11
1	Marginal (Less than 1 hectare)	36200 (50.97)	44523 (54.58)	50122 (56.39)	56147 (57.79)	63389 (59.44)	71179 (61.58)	75408 (62.87)	83694 (64.76)	92826 (67.14)
2	Small (1 to 2 hectare)	13432 (18.91)	14728 (18.05)	16072 (18.08)	17922 (18.44)	20092 (18.84)	21643 (18.72)	22695 (18.92)	23930 (18.51)	24779 (17.92)
3	Semi-Medium (2 to 4 hectare)	10681 (15.04)	11666 (14.30)	12455 (14.01)	13252 (13.64)	13923 (13.05)	14261 (12.33)	14021 (11.69)	14127 (10.93)	13896 (10.05)
4	Medium (4 to 10 hectare)	7932 (11.17)	8212 (10.06)	8068 (9.07)	7916 (8.14)	7580 (7.10)	7092 (6.13)	6577 (5.48)	6375 (4.93)	5875 (4.24)
5	Large (10 hectares and above)	2766 (3.89)	2440 (2.99)	2166 (2.43)	1918 (1.97)	1654 (1.55)	1404 (1.21)	1230 (1.02)	1096 (0.84)	973 (0.70)
	All Holdings	71011 (100.00)	81569 (100.00)	88883 (100.00)	97155 (100.00)	106637 (100.00)	115580 (100.00)	119931 (100.00)	129222 (100.00)	138248 (100.00)

Source: Agricultural Census 2010-11, Govt. of India

**Table 2:** Operated area– All Social Groups

S. No	Size Groups	Operated area (in 000 ha.)								
		1970-71	1976-77	1980-81	1985-86	1990-91	1995-96	2000-01	2005-06	2010-11
1	Marginal (Less than 1 hectare)	14599 (8.99)	17509 (10.71)	19735 (12.04)	22042 (13.39)	24894 (15.04)	28121 (17.21)	29814 (18.69)	32026 (20.22)	25908 (16.23)
2	Small (1 to 2 hectare)	19282 (11.87)	20905 (12.79)	23169 (14.14)	25708 (15.62)	28827 (17.41)	30277 (18.53)	32139 (20.15)	33101 (20.90)	35244 (22.08)
3	Semi-Medium (2 to 4 hectare)	29999 (18.48)	32428 (19.85)	34645 (21.15)	36666 (22.28)	38375 (23.18)	38953 (23.84)	38193 (23.95)	37898 (23.93)	37705 (23.62)
4	Medium (4 to 10 hectare)	48234 (29.71)	49628 (30.38)	48543 (29.63)	47144 (28.64)	44752 (27.03)	41398 (25.34)	38217 (23.97)	36583 (23.10)	33828 (21.19)
5	Large (10 hectares and above)	50064	42873	37705	33002	28659	24160	21072	18715	16907

		(30.84)	(26.24)	(23.01)	(20.05)	(17.31)	(14.78)	(13.21)	(11.82)	(10.59)
	All Holdings	162318 (100.00)	163343 (100.00)	163797 (100.00)	164562 (100.00)	165507 (100.00)	163355 (100.00)	159436 (100.00)	158323 (100.00)	159592 (100.00)

Source: Agricultural Census 2010-11, Govt. of India

**Table 3:** Average size of holdings – All Social Groups

S. No	Size Groups	Average holdings (in ha.)								
		1970-71	1976-77	1980-81	1985-86	1990-91	1995-96	2000-01	2005-06	2010-11
1	Marginal (Less than 1 hectare)	0.40	0.39	0.39	0.39	0.39	0.40	0.40	0.38	0.38
2	Small (1 to 2 hectare)	1.44	1.42	1.44	1.43	1.43	1.42	1.42	1.38	1.42
3	Semi-Medium (2 to 4 hectare)	2.81	2.78	2.78	2.77	2.76	2.73	2.72	2.68	2.71
4	Medium (4 to 10 hectare)	6.08	6.04	6.02	5.96	5.90	5.84	5.81	5.74	5.76
5	Large (10 hectares and above)	18.10	17.57	17.41	17.21	17.33	17.20	17.12	17.08	17.38
	All Holdings	2.28	2.00	1.84	1.69	1.55	1.41	1.33	1.23	1.15

Source: Agricultural Census 2010-11, Govt. of India

### Importance of the study

Family farming carries the promise of creating agricultural practices that are highly productive, sustainable, receptive, responsive, innovative and dynamic. Given all these features, family farming can make a strong contribution to food security and food sovereignty. It can strengthen economic development in a variety of ways, creating employment and generating income. It strengthens the economic, ecological and social resilience of rural communities. It offers attractive jobs to large parts of society and can contribute considerably to the emancipation of downtrodden groups in society. Family farming can also consistently contribute to the maintenance of beautiful landscapes and biodiversity.

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