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Diversification of rural economy and narrowing rural urban divide: A study of Barddhaman city and surrounding large villages

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Abstract

This article addresses the significant structural changes unfolding in the rural economy and the substantial narrowing of the rural-urban divide that has been the hallmark of regional development in the past. Rural societies are opening up non-farm activities as a significant alternative. To provide insights into this transformation, the study draws upon both secondary data analysis and empirical research conducted in four villages in the Purba Barddhaman district. The use of secondary data enables the identification of the trends related to the changing workforce composition in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. Data collected from selected villages reveals increasing adoption of economic activities beyond traditional farming consequent upon substantial ongoing diversification of the rural economy. Economic diversification, household participation in multiple economic activities, and intergenerational and caste-based occupational mobility have all played important roles in this transition, resulting in an increase in disposable income leading to a considerable decline in the persistent rural-urban divide.

Keywords: *Economic diversification, farm worker, nonfarm economy, occupational mobility, structural transformation.*

Introduction

The rural economy of India has maintained remarkable stability in the proportion of its labour force engaged in agriculture over many decades, yet there's been a gradual but noticeable shift towards non-agricultural employment in recent years. Both census data and recent rounds of the NSS (National Sample Survey) substantiate this shift. However, the nature of the shift to non-agricultural or the non-farm sector in rural areas remains poorly understood. This knowledge gap nurtures the belief that the rural non-farm sector is a low-productive sector and is unable to accommodate a substantial portion of the workforce. This perception reinforces the continued notion of a rural-urban economic divide, where the rural sector is largely reliant on agriculture that inhibits and restricts diversity in contrast to urban economies that encompass a wide array of activities such as manufacturing, services, trade, finance, and technology, providing opportunities for employment and income generation across various sectors. Scott *et al*., (2007) challenged this perception and criticized it as a 'stereotypical view'. Many other academics

too (Mujumdar, 2002; Joshi *et al.*, 2004; Lanjouw and Shariff, 2004; Gupta, 2005; Lanjouw and Proctor, 2005; Reardon *et al.*, 2007; Jatav and Sen, 2013, Christiaensen and Todo, 2014; Jodhka, 2014; Mehotra *et al.*, 2014; Reddy and Swaminathan 2014; Gupta, 2015; Tacoli and Vorley, 2015; Kumar, 2016; Singh 2016; Guin, 2018; Majumdar, 2020; Choithani *et al.*, 2021) have found little justification for relying on the notion that agriculture still dominates rural economies. They asserted that the rural economy is undergoing significant transformations, gradually reducing its reliance on the farm economy by integrating non-farm activities on a continuous basis. This process is effectively bridging the economic gap between rural and urban areas. However, a substantial body of research, including works by Pradhan *et al.*, (2000); Banerjee and Piketty (2001); Deaton and Dreze (2002); Bhalla (2003); Rajasekhar and Sahu (2004); Deaton and Kozel (2005); Dubey *et al.* (2006); Pateman (2011); Hnatkovska and Lahiri (2013); Kundu and Pandey (2020) and Sahasranaman and Kumar, (2022) assert that a notable gap still persists between these two spaces. Contrary to these findings, studies by Pal and Ghosh (2007), Jodhka (2014 and 2016), Kumar (2016) argue that much of this research focuses on measuring inequality or poverty between rural and urban areas based on limited rounds of NSS data, neglecting ground realities. Jodhka (2014:28) contributes to this discourse by demonstrating that while many official statistics indicate a majority of rural workers are employed in agriculture, the number of households exclusively dependent on agriculture has been on the decline. Today, a larger proportion of rural households earn their livelihood from non-farm activities and engage in multiple economic endeavors, resembling their urban counterparts. Additionally, they noted that the majority of the studies addressing the rural-urban economic divide have typically compared rural and urban economies using metrics such as labour force participation in farming or elementary occupations, wage disparities, and migration patterns from rural to urban regions. As a result, these analyses have often found significant rural-urban gaps. Gupta (2005) offers a critical perspective, suggesting that these studies suffer from a one-sided approach and may lack balance in considering all relevant factors shaping rural-urban dynamics. This concern is echoed by Ghosal (2002), Gupta (2015), Banerjee and Duflo (2008), Basile and Mukhopadhyay (2009), Shah and Harriss-White (2011), Jodhka (2012), Berdegue *et al.* (2013), Majumdar (2020) and many others. They argue that a narrow focus on traditional indicators like labor force participation in farming, wage differentials, and rural-urban migration overlooks contemporary factors that significantly contribute to the rural economy, thereby failing to capture the complexities of today's rural economy. At the same time, researchers underscore that the 'rural' is not merely the place where cultivators or farm workers reside. People engaged in different sorts of economic activities, such as small entrepreneurs, professionals, and managers, who are in other words salary earners, are also residents of villages. These individuals are educated professionals from rural areas and represent a significant segment of the rural working population today (Misra, 2004; Banerjee and Duflo, 2008; Heley, 2010; Kumar, 2015; Aslany, 2019, 2020). Their engagement in non-farm activities is reshaping the rural economic landscape (Bhattacharyya, 2007; Dudwick,

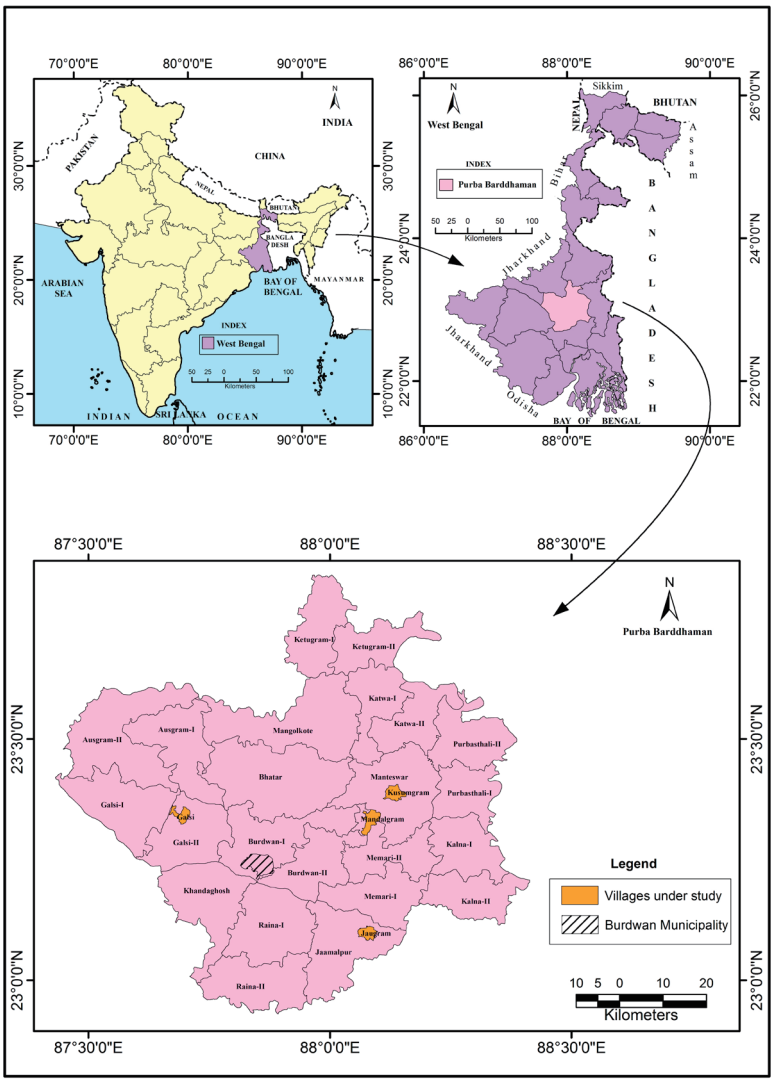

Fig. 1: Study area

2011; Majumdar, 2020; Choithani *et al.*, 2021). Recent studies by prominent social scientists such as Fernandes (2006), Banerjee and Duflo (2008), Shah and Harriss-White (2011), Gilbertson (2017), Krishnan and Hatekar (2017), Guin, 2018; Aslany (2020), Jakobsen and Nielsen (2020) and other emerging researchers have brought attention to the presence of self-employed individuals and professionals in rural areas. These studies also highlight the significant impact of these groups on rural-urban dynamics at the macro level (Sharma, 2005; Reardon *et al.*, 2007; Imai *et al.*, 2015; Katsushi and Malaeb, 2016; Chandrasekhar and Mukhopadhyay, 2017; Ghosh et. al., 2020)). However, there is still limited research on how their existence is gradually narrowing the rural-urban divide

at the grassroots level. This research aims to illuminate the occupational patterns in rural and urban households in Barddhaman, West Bengal addressing three interconnected issues: exploring whether the rural economy is truly diversifying and transforming at the ground level; whether economic diversification is effectively mitigating the income gap between rural and urban areas and the underlying factors driving this rural change and the consequent narrowing of the rural-urban economic divide.

Database and Methodology

To analyse economic diversification and rural-urban occupational similarity, this study has chosen Barddhaman city and four villages- Galsi, Jaugram, Mandalgram, and Kusumgram, of Purba Barddhaman District. The selection of rural areas has been made based on index value analysis. Population size, population density, literacy rate, and workers engaged in non-farming activities (collected from the Census of India 2011) and village amenities of the selected villages have been taken into account for this calculation. Individual scores for villages were generated based on each parameter, and these scores were subsequently amalgamated to ascertain a comprehensive composite index value.

Subsequently, villages were ranked in accordance with their composite index value. All the villages were then categorised into four distinct classes using quartile divisions. Finally, the highest-ranking village from each quartile was selected for inclusion in the study. Thus, Galsi, representing the first quartile, Mandalgram from the second quartile, Kusumgram from the third quartile, and Jaugram from the fourth quartile were chosen for this study (Fig. 1).

This research mainly depends on data collected from the field survey though secondary data have also been used to understand the broad pattern of the growth of non-farm sectors. Data has been collected from 400 households with the help of structured schedules. For the selection of sample size, this study has chosen Cochran's (1977) sample size selection technique, producing 382 households. This was then rounded up to a total of 400 households. The whole sample was then divided into two equal subsets, with 200 households drawn from rural areas and another 200 drawn from the urban area, for a balanced representation. With the help of information collected from the household survey, the occupational and income patterns of the rural-urban households have been analysed. To address the research issues stated earlier, different indices have been used for quantitative analysis. This study has employed the proportional Z-test method to compare non-farm employment between rural and urban settings. The formula for the proportional Z-test is as follows:

Where,

P1 and P2 are the sample proportions of the two groups

$$\frac{(\bar{p}_1 - \bar{p}_2) - 0}{\sqrt{\bar{p}(1 - \bar{p})\left(\frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2}\right)}}$$

n1 and n2 are the sample sizes of the two groups

Afterward, the extent of economic diversification of the rural economy was assessed initially with the help of the secondary data relevant to the district and the specific study areas. Finally, the diversity pattern has been assessed using the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI), utilising the data collected from the field survey. The

calculation of the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI) is performed as follows (Chakraborty, 2014; Sengupta and Samanta, 2022):

$$HHI = 10{,}000 \sum_{i=0}^{n} S_{i^2}$$

Where, n = Number of the total income sources, s = shares of income sources. The value is multiplied by 10,000. The value ranges either from 0 to 10,000. A value towards 10,000 means occupational diversification increases, whereas a value towards 0 means low concentration of livelihood choice, or occupational diversification decreases. The income levels of households have been determined using Sopher's Disparity Index in order to analyse its second concern. Sopher's Disparity Index is calculated as follows:

$$DI = \text{Log } (X2/X1) + \text{Log } \{(100\text{-}X1)/(100\text{-}X2)\}$$

Were,

DI = Disparity Index

X1 = Average monthly per capita income (in percentage) of Rural

X2 = Average monthly per capita income (in percentage) of Urban

i.e., X2 > X1

This disparity index ranges from 0 to 1. The greater the value of DI, the higher the extent of disparity, and vice versa. Finally, factors influencing rural economic transformation have been identified and discussed. In this phase, a transition matrix was calculated to elucidate the trend of occupational mobility and to delve into the aspirations of rural youth. This was undertaken to achieve a comprehensive understanding of non-farm employment dynamics in rural areas.

Results and discussion

Differential growth of workforce by sectors

Analysis of the available secondary data reveals a conspicuous decline in the proportion of workers in the agricultural sector in the district of Purba Barddhaman coterminous with a notable increase in the participation in the secondary and tertiary sectors. Census data from the last few decades and information from the district statistical handbook illustrate a significant reduction in the share of farm activities (Table 1), while the non-farm establishments have witnessed a significant rise (Table 2).

The rise in non-agricultural establishments in the rural areas must been far more spectacular (Table 2) than in the urban area which has a substantial impact on the rural employment in the district. The village-level data from the census substantiates this fact (Fig. 2 and 3). In order to examine the

Table 1: Barddhaman district - share of cultivators in the working force

Census Year	Cultivators		Household industry worker		Other worker	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
1991	30.36	3.01	7.72	8.32	19.79	83.02
2001	24.42	1.47	4.9	3.3	34.64	93.13
2011	21.31	1.48	3.84	3.6	31.49	91.9

Source: District Statistical Handbook, Burdwan, 2013

Table 2: Share of nonfarm establishments in rural and urban areas in the district of Barddhaman

Sector	Non-agricultural establishments		
	1998	2005	2013
Rural	117128	176648	228846
Urban	107618	115245	174659

Source: District Statistical Handbook, Burdwan, 2013

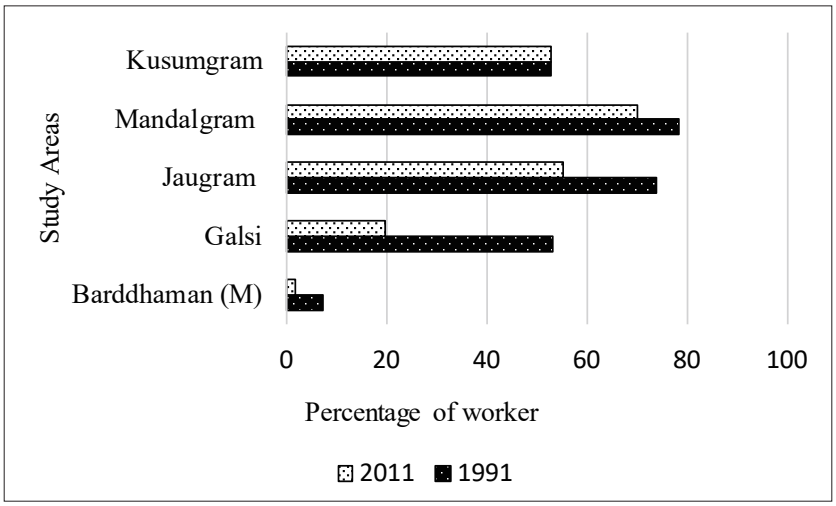

Fig. 2: Workers in farm sector
Source: Census of India

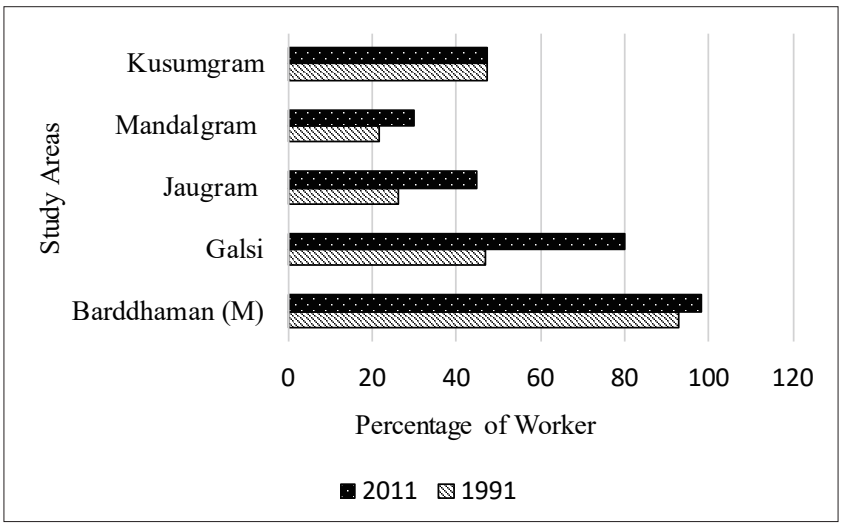

Fig. 3: Workers in non-farm sector
Source: Census of India

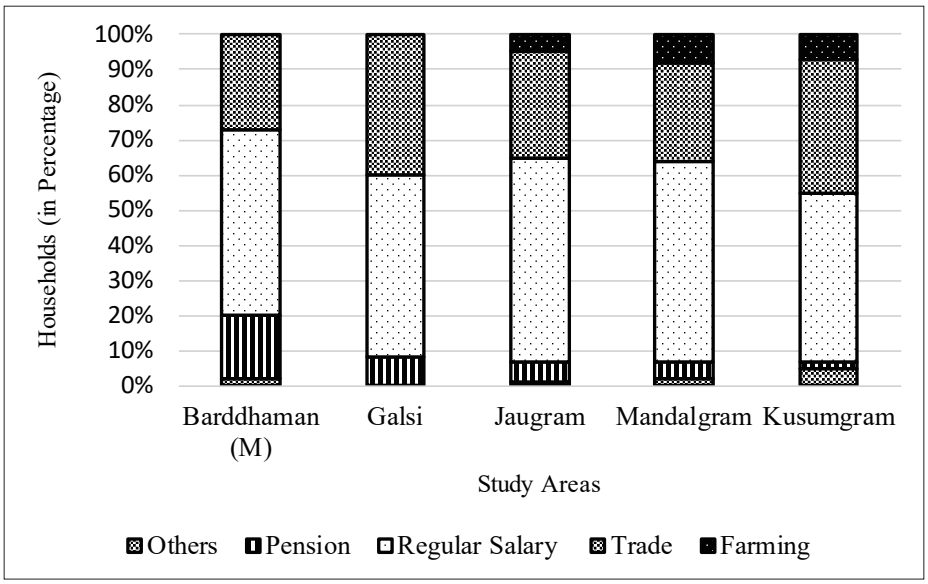

Fig. 4: Households as per their principal economic activities
Source: Field Survey

facts on the ground, information was gathered on farm and non-farm employment from rural and urban households. It is evident from Figure 4 that more and more rural households are adopting non-farm employment as their principal economic activity.

Salary earnings, entrepreneurship, and employment in formal private sectors are common among these households. Utilizing a proportional Z-test, the participation of rural and urban workforce in non-farm sectors was compared. The findings reveal that the rural-urban divide in the extent of non-farm employment is not statistically significant (Table 3). This suggests that there is a near-comparable level of non-farm employment between rural and urban areas, highlighting a convergence in occupational patterns between these regions.

The increasing number of non-farm activities in rural areas however does not imply a complete abandonment of farming by rural households, but a reduction in their reliance on agriculture resulting in less labour participation in farm sectors. This trend is evident in the field data, which shows that in all four villages, the number of people directly involved in farming is significantly lower compared to those engaged in non-farm sectors. Upon closer investigation, it is found many engaged in farm activities are lessors (owners of land that is leased) farmers. They are not directly involved in farming activities. They often oversee their ancestral farming, employing agricultural labourers, acting as supervisors, or consuming a significant share of crops through sharecropping systems. In many cases, these lessor farmers or their offspring are simultaneously engaged in other economic activities including self-employment or other small salary-earning jobs. Some of them are retired defence workers receiving pensions from the Central

Table 3: Rural-urban comparison of non-farm worker

District	Villages	Proportional Z test	p Value	Level of significance
Barddhaman	Galsi	1.8887	0.05876	Not significant
Barddhaman	Jaugram	1.9193	0.05486	Not significant
Barddhaman	Mandalgram	1.9484	0.05218	Not significant
Barddhaman	Kusumgram	1.9002	0.05744	Not significant

Source: Field survey

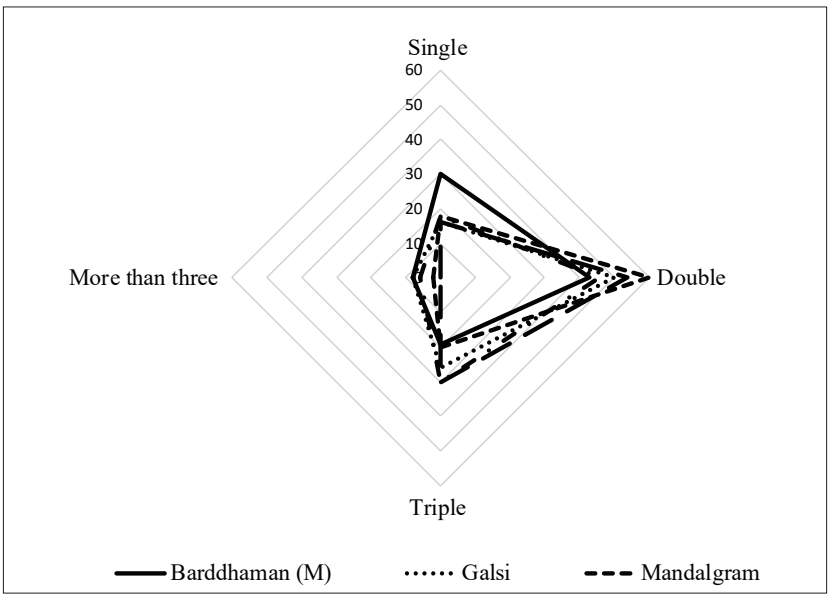

Fig. 5: Household engagement in multiple economic activities
Source: Field Survey

Government. Farming is only an additional source of income for them. The percentage of households solely dependent on agriculture or only on a single source of income is minimal (Fig. 5). This pattern indicates that households in both rural and urban areas are engaged in multiple economic activities which is a clear sign of economic diversification.

However, is this diversification in rural areas comparable to the urban areas? The Herfindahl–Hirschman Index (HHI) (Table 4) for both rural and urban areas demonstrates that the occupational pattern in the four sample villages has indeed diversified and increasingly resembles the pattern of the Barddhaman city reflecting considerable narrowing of the divide between rural and urban economy. The next pertinent question relates to the question of the income divide between rural and urban areas as a consequence of the diversification of occupations.

Rural-urban income gap

Data collected from the four villages as well

Table 4: Occupational diversification

	HHI	HHI*10000	Diversity type
Barddhaman (M)	0.1143051	1996.7378	Moderate
Galsi	0.1172460	1172.4602	Moderate
Jaugram	0.1996737	1153.2632	Moderate
Mandalgram	0.1153263	1143.0511	Moderate
Kusumgram	0.1282677	1282.6773	Moderate

Source: Calculated from field data

as from Barddhaman town reveals an increase in household income in both rural and urban locations. The majority of the households (nearly 87 percent) reported a rise in family income over the last ten years, resulting in a reduction in the income gap between rural and urban areas. This is evident from Sopher's Disparity Index (Table 5) on household per-capita income.

In general, a pattern of income convergence is emerging between the rural and urban households implying that the rural households are gradually aligning with their urban counterparts in terms of income earning, eventually reducing rural urban income and occupational gap. In order to find out the underlying processes that have led to this convergence, the study undertakes an extensive scrutiny of occupational trends.

Table 5: Pattern of income similarity in four villages

Rural areas	Income disparity index
Galsi	0.19
Jaugram	0.27
Mandalgram	0.34
Kusumgram	0.33

Source: Calculated from field data

Growth of non-farm employment in rural areas

The household survey measured the extent of change in non-farm employment in rural areas and the results identified three significant drivers for the observed occupational diversification in these areas: agricultural modernization, intergenerational and caste-based occupational mobility, and desire for social mobility.

Agricultural modernisation

Interviews with household members in rural areas revealed that the emergence of non-farm economies in rural areas is linked with the growth of overall agricultural development that has ensured a rise in both production and income. This surge in agricultural output has enabled a significant part of the farm income to be invested inside and outside of agriculture. Concurrently, it has accelerated the process of agricultural modernization and freeing more labour from conventional farming activities. This surplus labour force finds alternative livelihoods in trade or other informal sectors within rural areas leading to economic diversification which has stimulated local entrepreneurism.

Many modern non-farm economic activities, commonly associated with urban cultures, are finding a place within rural areas. The data collected from the Panchayat

Table 6: Rural enterprises

Before 2010 (Panchayat records)	2010 – 2015 (Panchayat records)	After 2015 (Field survey)
Grocery – variety – medicine - sweet shop	Confectionary	Fast food centres, restaurants, café
Garment and cosmetic shop - Jewellery shop - shoe shop	Personal networking for companies like Amwaya-Oriflame	Boutique shops
Garage	Motor vehicle parts shop	Showroom for bikes
Doctor's Chamber	Health Clinic	Pathology centres
Tailoring shops	Parlor	Parlor and bridal makeup
Cable centres	Cyber cafe	Internet services, 'Tathya Mitra Kendra'
Private tuition-coaching	Art schools for - music- dance-guitar- art	Running kindergarten schools
Telephone booth	Mobile Recharge	Electronics and mobile shop
	Hardware store	Drawing house plan
	Photo Studio	Gym centre
		Local courier service

Source: Panchayat records and field survey

office, field survey, and interviews with rural residents revealed that more than half of the shops have emerged within the last five to ten years. Among these, shops catering to consumer goods and services such as photocopy shops, mobile shops, ladies' parlours, computer shops, etc., are the most recent additions (Table 6). These establishments are predominantly owned by young men, primarily falling within the age group of 20–40, with educational backgrounds ranging from higher secondary to graduation. While some of them have fathers engaged in agriculture, it is interesting to note that none of the young shop owners in the mentioned categories are involved in cultivation themselves.

Intergenerational occupational change

The field survey conducted in Galsi, Jaugram, Kusumgram, and Mandalgram indicates that a substantial proportion of the present generation in rural areas has chosen to abandon the traditional activities practiced by their fathers and have transitioned to other sectors. The mobility matrix calculated stands scrutiny to this. The mobility matrix approach is applied to two generations within families (father-son pair): heads of households and their co-resident adult sons, as well as heads of the households and their fathers. Considering the occupational relationship between fathers and sons or daughters, the elements of the inter-generational occupational matrix are calculated using the following formula:

$$aij = \frac{\sum o_{ij}}{\sum o_j}$$

where $\sum Oij$ *is* the number of workers in the *i-th* occupation whose fathers were in occupation j, and $\sum$Oj is the total number of workers whose fathers were in occupation j. The *aij* represents the outflow from the father's occupation to the son's occupation or the transition probability from the

Table 7: Occupational matrix across generations in rural areas

Occupational engagement		Father's occupation					
		O1	O2	O3	O4	O5	O6
		CL	IL	SE	GE	PE	OT
Cultivator (CL)	O1	0.04598	0	0	0	0	0
Casual labour/ Informal labour (IL)	O2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Self-employed (SE)	O3	0.31034	0.625	0.51429	0.2115	0	0.25
Govt. employee (GE)	O4	0.36782	0.375	0.25714	0.4807	0.4285	0.5
Private sector employee (PE)	O5	0.27586	0	0.22857	0.3076	0.5714	0.125
Others (OT)	O6	0	0	0	0	0	0.125

Son's occupation

Source: Calculated from field data

Continuation of Table 7

	aij	1-aij
O1	0.04598	0.95402
O2	0	1
O3	0.51429	0.48571
O4	0.48077	0.51923
O5	0.57143	0.42857
O6	0.125	0.875

father's occupation to the son's occupation. Additionally, the diagonal pattern of *aij: i=j*, represents the proportion of individuals who continue in the same occupation as their fathers. Therefore, *1- aij* can be interpreted as the proportion of individuals who deviate from their fathers' occupations, indicating a measure of occupational mobility.

The inter-generational occupational mobility matrix was constructed using data obtained from a household-level survey conducted in both rural and urban areas. The rows in the matrix signify a father's occupation, and the column denotes the corresponding occupation of the son or daughter allowing for a comprehensive view of changing occupational patterns over generations, Table 7 shows that in rural areas, the majority from the younger generation show a notable departure from continuing their fathers' occupation in farm or farm-related activities; 31 percent of them transitioning to self-employment and the majority (63 percent) shifted to regular salary employment. Within the group of regular salary earners, 36 percent was absorbed in government service while 27 percent joined private jobs indicating a substantial shift to formal sectors of employment. Among urban residents whose fathers were cultivators, 38 percent of them are self-employed, 53 percent are government employees, 8 percent are private sector employees and no one remained in the same occupation. A similar trend is observed among those whose older generation was casual labourers or engaged

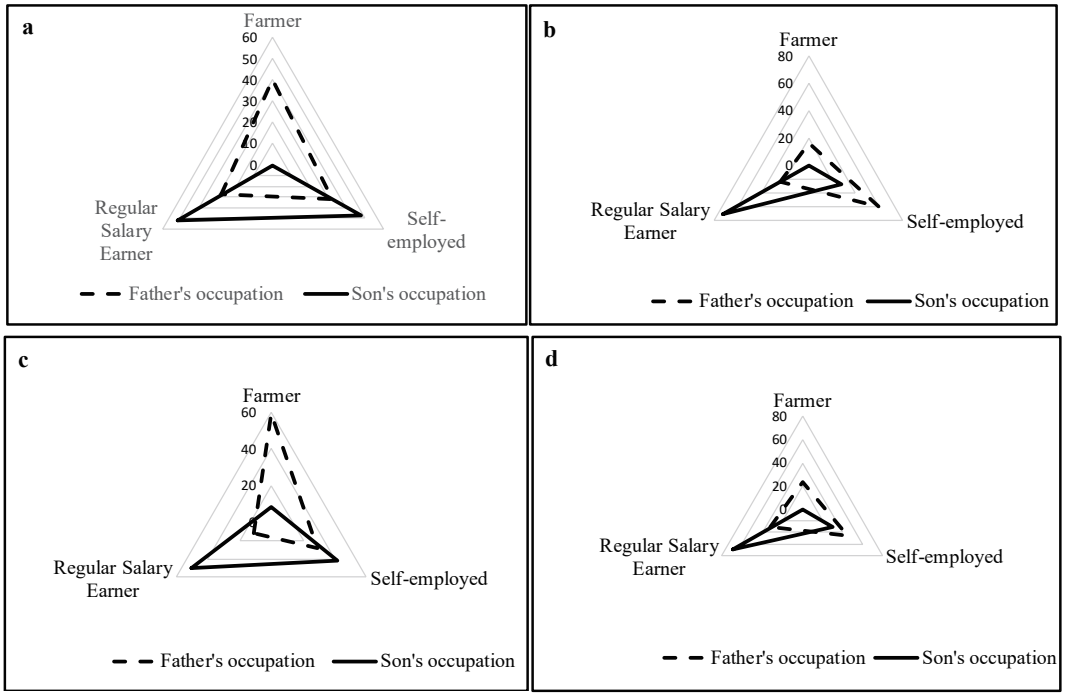

Fig. 6: Caste-based occupational mobility a - General caste-rural; b - General-caste-urban; c - Other-backward class and schedule caste-rural;
d - Other backward class and schedule caste–urban

Source: Field Survey

in informal labour. The young among the casual or informal labour have shifted to various occupations; 14 percent are self-employed, nearly 43 percent are government employees, and another nearly 43 percent join the private sector. On the other hand, there is little evidence of a shift in the reverse direction, i.e. from the formal sector to farm and informal jobs. Individuals whose fathers were employed as casual or informal labour have entirely left their fathers' occupations.

Caste-based occupational mobility

This occupational mobility is not only intergenerational but also caste-based. Traditionally occupation in rural areas is closely linked to the factor of caste. This caste-oriented occupational division remained effective in rural society up to the decades of the 1970s. The more privileged castes were engaged in prestigious secular occupations while the underprivileged castes were forced to continue with low-skill (mainly agriculture), and risky occupations, and were expressly forbidden from choosing privileged castes' occupations (Jodhka, 2017). As a result, the diversification of the rural economy and socio-economic mobility of the oppressed strata of the rural society was less possible (Sharma, 2012). From the 1980s onwards, the rapid transformation of the economy and expansion of education irrespective of caste and creed helped to relax the stranglehold of the caste system on rural

society (Gupta, 2005; Jodhka, 2017).

To establish this fact a data set from the households has been gathered. The change was examined therefore among three broad caste groups namely the more privileged general castes, the middle-ranking other backward castes (OBC), and the most deprived scheduled castes (SC). Figure 6 reveals the far greater intergenerational shift in occupation among the less privileged OBC and SCs. It also reveals a dramatic change in the pattern of occupational choice among traditionally underprivileged groups- the SC and the OBC sections. They have made great strides in shifting from their traditional caste-imposed occupations of their parents to occupations traditionally monopolised by the more privileged general castes. This loosening of caste stranglehold has paved the way for a faster diversification of the rural economy increasing the income earning ability of these depressed castes.

Aspiring for social mobility: A quest for progress and change

Economic transformation often correlates with social development and mobility. For social mobility, occupation stands out as a key indicator of social status, income levels, and living standards. The perceptions gathered from interviews in the villages reflect a desire among rural residents to ascend the socio-economic ladder. Achieving upward mobility often involves moving away from reliance solely on agriculture as the only livelihood option. Many rural households are now selling their agricultural land or leasing out in sharecropping arrangements and are adopting regular salary-earning occupations. In recent times, a distinct class of service professionals is emerging in rural areas. These individuals come from the younger generation within the rural areas. They are aspiring and striving for salaried occupations not only to improve their financial status with a fixed salary but also to enhance their social status. Therefore, the shift towards non-farm occupations is not merely an economic decision but is deeply connected to the aspirations for social mobility and a higher social ranking within the community.

Conclusion

The analysis clearly reveals that the rural economy around Bardhaman has undergone significant changes; is no longer solely dependent on agriculture alone, but has expanded into non-farm sectors, with the concomitant economic diversification. The diversification of the rural economy has inevitably led to a notable shift in labour allocation, from farm-based occupations to non-farm sectors. Change in labour allocation has not only reshaped the composition of the rural workforce but also has engendered structural transformation and raised income levels. This process is driven by factors such as agricultural modernization, intergenerational and caste-based occupational mobility and aspiration for change in social status. All these collectively contribute to the multifaceted process of rural economic transformation, driving the convergence in employment patterns between rural and urban areas. As a result, the rural economy now closely resembles the urban areas in both form and content. This transforming occupational and income patterns in rural areas is narrowing the hitherto wide gap that existed between rural and urban spaces.

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