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## Patronage and Power in Rural India: A study in three states of India

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# Patronage and Power in Rural India: A study in three states of India\*†

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## Abstract

Land ownership, caste hierarchy and patron-client relation have been regarded as the traditional building blocks of political-economic organization in rural India. However, many believe that gradual urbanization and expansion of market economy have eroded the influence of traditional power structure. This work is a contribution toward identifying the nature of 'local' rural institutions based on primary data collected by ourselves. We took 36 villages in the states of Maharashtra, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh - 12 in each of these states as the sites for our observation and data collection. We quantify nature

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of institutions from data on the day-to-day interactions of households in the spheres of economy, society and politics. The aspect of institution we focus on is the structure of multidimensional and interlinked dependence in these spheres and whether such dependence is concentrated on a few ‘powerful’ entities (called ‘local elites’) dominating over a large number of households or whether this is distributed in a sufficiently diffuse manner.

Our household survey shows that there is enormous variation in power structure across regions. We identified the presence of powerful entities called ‘local elites’ in 23 villages out of 36 surveyed. We conducted a follow-up survey, called ‘elite survey’, to get detailed information about the identified elite households. Our primary objective was to learn the socio-economic-political profile of the elite households and their involvement in village life. This paper provides a summary of our findings. We observe that landlordism has considerably weakened, land has ceased to be the sole source of power and new power-centres have emerged. Despite these changes, caste, landownership and patron-client relation continue to be three important pillars of rural power structure.

**Keywords and Phrases:** Clientelism, Lanlordism, Network

## 1 Introduction

Economic Survey of India (2017) estimates that about 377 million people from India’s total population of 1.21 billion are urban dwellers. If urban-like features, high population density in a contiguous area and high density of build-up area, are used then the estimate is even higher. According to World Bank’s agglomeration index, 55.3 per cent of India’s population already live in areas which have urban-like features. Moreover, 10 million people, as per Economic Survey of India (2017), migrate to cities and towns every year. There is a common perception among policymakers and academics alike that India is about to become, if not already, an urbanized nation. How is rural India transforming in this context?

Gupta (2005) asserts that “the village in India, where life was once portrayed as ‘unchanging’ and ‘idyllic’, has in recent decades seen profound changes. The twin shackles that once decided matters for India’s villagers,

caste and agriculture, no longer exercise their vigorous hold.” What are the channels of such transformation? Existing literature on this can be classified into three broad (but indeed interconnected) categories - economic changes, social changes and political changes. On the economic front two distinct channels have received particular attention - agrarian stagnation and gradual urbanization. As far as landholding is concerned, big landlord estates have mostly disappeared, average landholding has declined by 60 per cent in the last 50 years. The rural landscape now is believed to be characterized by cultivator-owners and landless labourers. In the meantime profitability of farm, once boosted by technological changes during ‘green revolution’, has diminished to such an extent that by one estimate only families whose landholding are above four times of national average are able to earn a positive profit from cultivation (Basole and Basu (2011)). Thus agricultural employment both in the form of casual labour and tenancy, once the most important sources of income for landless households, has become secondary to rural non-farm activities (like small business or self-employment) and urban casual employments. A CSDS study (2013) on the state of farmers revealed that 75 percent of farmers, particularly the younger generation, want to give up farming. Agricultural stagnation, along with a shift towards urban employment is understood to have triggered deep socio-political changes in rural areas. Earlier, landless households, particularly dalit and some OBC (other backward classes) castes, were tied to and dependent on the landed families for employment and credit. This was the main source of political power and social dominance of the landed caste. As agricultural stagnation pushed labouring castes outside the village and out of agriculture, they have ceased to be dependent on the upper castes. Hence it is conjectured that the power of landlords as patron and political leaders has also diminished. Gupta (2005) claims that “caste as a system is dying” in rural India. Decline in power based on land and caste appears to have opened the door for new type of political leaders. Krishna (2003) records that these ‘naya netas’ lack inherited clientelistic networks. Instead this is a group of educated youngsters whose main skill is the capacity to mediate between administration and villagers. Jodhka (2014) asserts that one can observe the process of ‘dis-sociation, distancing and autonomy’ in the emerging rural society: that is, clientelistic links based on an agricultural economy are disintegrating. Contest for power seems to have become more competitive and is being shaped by ‘macro’ factors rather than local constraints.

Although the recent academic studies revolve around the above narrative;

a few unconvinced voices remain. Pattenden (2011) argues that although traditional route to power has weakened, more subtle kinds of political control by the upper caste persists. Ramachandran et. al. (2010) find persistence of landed power and wealth in their study. Harris (2013) cautions that “the idea that land is no longer so important as the basis of status and power should certainly not be overestimated.”. Ananthpur et. al. (2014) observe that traditionally dominant households, even without formal positions in political office, can still influence decisions of local governments. Anderson et. al. (2015 a,b) also document the presence and impact of clientelistic power relation in agrarian economy through control over resources.

In this backdrop, our study aims to systematically address the following questions. Has clientelistic power relations, embedded in agrarian economy, lost its prominence or does it still survive in a more subtle and diversified form? Are there ‘local’ powerful elements who control the patronage network? If so, are they the erstwhile landlords or new entrants? What is the source of their power - is it their ability to mediate between administration and villagers or is it their control over important economic resources? We offer a new approach which brings together aspects of qualitative village studies and quantitative economic modeling. We believe that institution is not merely an economic category - it is sum total of social relations that operate within political-economic sphere. Hence nature of institution can not be identified by merely looking at economic indicators (as in Basole and Basu (2011)). We consider it to be more illuminating to measure the nature of institutions from data on the personalized day-to-day interactions of agents in the spheres of economy, society and politics.

## 2 Conceptual framework

We primarily conceptualize institution as the structure of multidimensional dependence in the spheres of economy, society and politics. We seek to explore whether such dependence is concentrated on a few entities dominating over a good many of households or whether this is distributed in a sufficiently diffuse manner. Moreover, our emphasis is on such dependence at *local* level, roughly at the level of a village and the neighbouring villages and town(s). Meiksins Wood (2003) emphasizes this aspect while distinguishing between institutions. She observes ‘...only capitalism has a distinct economic sphere. This is so both because economic power is separate from political

or military force and because it is only in capitalism that the market has a force of its own, which imposes on everyone, capitalists as well as workers, certain impersonal systemic requirements of competition, accumulation and profit-maximization...Although the sovereign territorial state was not created by capitalism, the distinctively capitalist separation of the economic and the political has produced a more clearly defined and complete territorial sovereignty than was possible in non-capitalist societies. At the same time, many social functions that once fell within the scope of state administration or communal regulation now belong to the economy'. While we do not seek to characterize institutions as 'capitalist' or 'pre-capitalist'; we use the pattern of dependence as an identifier of changing institutional dynamics.

The basis for constructing our institutional variation is the multidimensional directed network where the primary nodes are the sampled households (HH hereafter) in each village. In our survey we gathered information on links the sample households have for help in spheres of day-to-day economic interactions (like whom the HH depends on for getting productive inputs, for selling of outputs if any, for loans etc), social interactions (like whom the HH approaches for advices on family matters and disputes, religious matters etc) as well as political ones (like whom the HH accompanies to political events if any etc). We aggregate this information on multidimensional linkages of HHs on other HHs or entities to derive an unidimensional *dependence* network in each village (the details of which are given in the following section). The main underlying principle for constructing these dependence networks is that a HH A is 'dependent', when it receives certain economic/social/political input from another HH B and the converse is not true. An entity with sufficiently many such dependents is called a local *elite*. A village having at least one local elite is called an elite. Note that most of the papers, which try to identify power centres, either rely on direct queries about important entities, which is vulnerable to misreporting and under reporting, or is based on researcher's impression. We systematically derive the set of 'important' entities from the revealed behaviour of the respondents themselves in several spheres of their actual lived experiences.

We collected data from 36 villages in three states of India (Maharashtra, Orissa and the (eastern half) of Uttar Pradesh (UP)) using personal interviews at the HH level<sup>1</sup>. One noticeable feature of what we call an elite village

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<sup>1</sup>The HH survey, covering mainly Orissa and Maharashtra, took place during March-April, 2013 and the survey UP, took place in November-December, 2013.

is that such a village consists of a small number of persons (in our data we find them to be usually less than four or five) who have control over a number of households in terms of crucial economic dimensions (like providing credit or employment) and very often these same persons dominate in the spheres of social interactions as well as in political arenas around the village. In many cases the village *sarpanch/pradhan* (head) happens to be *one* such person<sup>2</sup>. Note that local elites were identified based on HH responses and they themselves may not have been part of the HH sample. Therefore we conducted a second round of survey to interview them personally<sup>3</sup>. In addition to local elites, we also interviewed a selection HH, who were not elites by our criterion but came close. This survey will be referred to as ‘Elite survey’. We discuss our findings from elite survey, which is the core of this paper, in Section 4. Section 3 describes our construction of dependence network and identification of local elites. All tables and diagrams can be found at the end.

### 3 Localized Institution: Dependence, Elites, Clients

Our formalization is based on the following core components. First, dependence is embedded in day to day activities, both economic and socio-political. Access to inputs of production, market access for products, dispute resolution and participation in political process are a few examples of such activities. The second aspect of dependence is *personalized interaction*. This is distinct from formal institutional interactions. Borrowing from banks, approaching police station for dispute resolution etc. are instances of formal institutional interactions, while borrowing from informal lenders, approaching local political leaders for dispute resolution are personalized interactions. These two aspects together imply that the dependence structure we are exploring is essentially localized in nature. Finally, high concentration and interlinkage of dependence links are indicators of stronger localized power.

Recall that the primitive in this context in our set-up are the households’ links for getting help in social, economic and political spheres. If HH  $M$

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<sup>2</sup>Very similar institutional features are corroborated by Ananthpur et al (2014) in their micro-study in Karnataka (a state different from the ones from which we collected data)

<sup>3</sup>This took place one year after the HH survey

receives an economic, social or political service from HH  $N$ , then HH  $M$  is said to have an **outgoing service link** to household  $N$ . We also classify outgoing service links into two groups - *crucial and non-crucial* - based on their relative importance. This classification is based on our perception and judgment. For instance, a service-link of seeking advice for resolution of household disputes is categorized as non-crucial whereas seeking advice for profession-related disputes is categorized as crucial. Admittedly, this classification is subjective but not arbitrary. The full list of services, classified as (i) economic/social/political and (ii) crucial/non-crucial can be found in Table 1. Since we ask survey households whether such services are reciprocated, we also have data on outgoing links from Household  $N$  to Household  $M$ . In case, Household  $M$  is also part of our sample, we have an independent verification of such claims (we could not make such cross-verification *in general* though)<sup>4</sup>.

Note that, in our network data, there can be multiple such service-links between two nodes: i.e., households. First we aggregate these to a single dimension, called **dependence-connection**. To capture relative strength of dependence relation, we classify dependence-connections into three types. T

Type *A*: HH  $M$  is said to have Type *A* outgoing dependence-connection to HH  $N$  only if  $M$  has exactly one crucial outgoing service-link to  $N$ . A single non-crucial link is unlikely to be an indicator of clientelistic relation.

Type *B*: HH  $M$  is said to have Type *B* outgoing dependence-connection to HH  $N$  only if  $M$  has at least two outgoing links to  $N$  that are of similar kind, either all economic or all social or all political. This captures interlinkages in received services .

Type *C*: HH  $M$  is said to have Type *C* outgoing connection to HH  $N$  only if (i)  $M$  has at least two outgoing links to  $N$  and (ii) not all of them are similar kind (economic/social/political) of services. This captures interlinkage in different spheres of daily/usual interactions.

Clearly we make the definition of dependence more demanding as we move from Type *A* to Type *C*. Since (clientelistic) dependence should be conceived as an asymmetric power relation (in contrast to a reciprocal relationship like friendship), we exclude all bilateral, mutual outgoing dependence-connections from our network. Directed cycles of higher length do not appear

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<sup>4</sup>In case of mismatch, though such instances are rare, claims of the household which has received the service is accepted.

in our data. Thus HH  $M$  is said to be **dependent** on HH  $N$  if (i) HH  $M$  has an dependence-connection of at least one type to HH  $N$  and (ii) HH  $N$  does not have the same or higher type of dependence-connection to HH  $M$ . This completes our description of dependence network.

Next we use network data to identify the presence and pattern of clientelist network of sampled villages. If a clientelist network is present then it would be characterized by patrons and clients. It is expected that clients will be dependent on patron(s) for various (often interlinked) services and a number of clients will be dependent on a patron. Thus a ‘hub and spoke’ type network is expected to emerge in such villages. To this end, we define a patron, called **elite** as follows. If more than five percent of the sampled households are dependent on a household  $X$  then  $X$  is potentially an important patronage-provider in the village and is called an elite. This captures concentration of dependence in our network data. A household which is dependent on at least one elite is called a **client**. Any household, which is neither a client nor an elite will be called **non-client**. In Diagram 2 we plot dependence-connection network of two villages, one with presence of elites and another without.

A couple of comments are due at this stage. First, since we have not done census for each of the sample villages, we only see the village dependence networks partially. We can not rule out presence of additional hubs in dependence network and our elite identification could be incomplete. Second, other than mutual dependence, higher order directed cycles are rare in our village network. Therefore network centrality measures are somewhat superfluous for our purpose and we choose to stick to the simple definition of elites described above.

In our sample, we observe massive heterogeneity across regions. Out of 36 sampled villages, 13 villages have no elites and 23 villages have at least one elite. We have identified 53 elites and 511 clients in 23 villages. State wise division of elites are as follows: 15 elites in 8 villages of (Eastern) Uttar Pradesh, 18 elites in 6 villages of Maharashtra and 20 elites in 9 villages of Orissa. During the ‘Elite survey’, we tried to interview all the elites but due to refusal and non-availability, we could meet only 40 of them - 14 in (Eastern) Uttar Pradesh, 7 in Maharashtra and 19 in Orissa. We have already mentioned that our technique may underestimate number of elites. To take care of this possibility, we additionally interviewed a selection of HH who did not meet our definition of elites but came ‘close’. These HHs will be called ‘quasi-elites’. At least one HH must be dependent on a quasi-elite.

Additionally, any two of the following three must be true - (i) quasi elite should be from a dominant caste - that is castes which do not fall under SC (scheduled caste), ST (scheduled tribe) and OBC (other backward classes) categories, (ii) a quasi-elite must have a business or farm or salaried job, (iii) a quasi-elite must have some social-political position - such as, member of panchayat or member of jati panchayat or member of a political party or member of erstwhile landlord family. During the elite survey we interviewed a selection of quasi-elites; 35 in (Eastern) Uttar Pradesh, 26 in Maharashtra and 39 in Orissa. It is important to reiterate that although we use subjective criterion to select quasi-elites, our main targets, that is elites, are identified by aggregating household experiences.

## 4 Results

This section addresses our core questions. Who are the power centres in rural India? Are they the erstwhile landlords or new entrants? What is the source of their power - is it their ability to mediate between administration and villagers or is it their control over important economic resources?

### 4.1 Elite Profile

First we document a few characteristics of elites and non-elite households. More than 80 per cent of elites are either upper caste or OBC whereas the rest, that is SC, ST and other religions, consists of 40 per cent of our non-elite household sample. As far as occupations are concerned 27.5 per cent of elite households have salaried job and 50 percent have business. None of the elites is engaged in manual labour. In contrast, 33 per cent of households are engaged as labourer, 7.5 per cent have some business and 6.8 per cent are in salaried job. We also construct an index of non-land asset as the sum of twelve dummy variables. Each takes value 1 if an household item is owned by the household and 0 otherwise. These households items are non-kacha (not mud built and thatched roof) house, flat/house in town, palang (expensive bed), TV, two/four wheelers, Tree/ fruit bearing plant etc. Average non-land asset score for elite household is 7.8 (out of 12) compared to 1.9 for non-elite households. These comparisons show that our identified elite households are from wealthy and socially dominant sections. Moreover it underscores the asymmetric nature of dependence links. Our dependence network is

quite different from other social networks (for example friendship) that have homophily as a primary feature.

Let us now examine the question of landed power. 90 per cent of elite households and 86 per cent of quasi elite households report that they still consider farming as one of their main sources of earning. However 42 per cent of elite households and 28 per cent of quasi-elite households have business as an alternative occupation as well. We already mentioned that 27.5 per cent of elite households have at least one member in salaried occupation as well. This number is higher, 38 per cent for quasi-elite households. It is evident that elite households have massively diversified into other occupations. This finding is in conformity with the recent literature. However, it is also clear that elite households have not moved away from agriculture. As far as land ownership is concerned, we believe that there is huge underreporting in our data as well as in official statistics. It is instructive to note that India may have unique identification number for every citizen but its land record data is notoriously poor. As reported by the elite households, average landholding of elite household is 5.4 acre. Informal conversation outside the formal interview, however throw up figures between 30 to 50 acres. Still, these numbers are nowhere close to that of erstwhile big landlords. In fact only 40 per cent of elite families report that their ancestors were erstwhile royals or landlords. So it is safe to conclude that land has ceased to be the sole source of power. But at the same time local elites are holding on to their land. Below 10 per cent of elite households admitted that they have sold land in last 10 years. In contrast, about 30 percent of elite households reported that they purchased land in last 10 years. We also have data on occupation of every member of elite households. We divide members of elite households into two groups - age 18 - 40 who are not studying and age above 40 who are not studying. We find that 57 per cent of the former group and marginally higher 69 per cent of the later group are involved with farming. These are clear indications that land is still considered as an economically valuable resource for reproduction of power, though it is not the only one. Our conclusion here differs from that subset of the literature which does not see any role of land behind perpetuation of dominance (though a few paper like Sbriccoli (2016) admits that land still plays a fundamental role but he attributes it to its market value).

We have already mentioned that only 40 per cent of elites are from royal or landlord families. Therefore like Krishna (2003) we find that many new powerful entities have emerged who do not belong to the class of traditional elites. What are their source of power? We address this question in next

subsection.

## 4.2 Source of Power

Krishna (2003) attributed the rise of new entrants to decentralization of governance. He argued that educated youth found new political space which was hitherto unavailable. Their capacity to mediate between administration and villagers gave them electoral advantage over traditional elites. Our findings do not entirely support the above narrative. About 40 per cent of elites and 5 per cent of quasi elites have held panchayat (rural local government) positions while only 6 percent of the elites claimed that they were political party functionaries. Thus it seems that political office is not a necessary condition for political influence. About 15 percent of the elites hold position in religious and caste organizations, which are informal bodies. Moreover 50 per cent elite households have relatives in influential social and political positions, which indicates that dynastic power matters as much as individual entrepreneurship.

Finally we try to locate elites' sphere of influence as reported by the elites themselves. Elites typically have control over and are involved in disbursement of different kinds of resources. We classify them into three categories - economic resources, political resources and social resources. Details are available in Table 3. We find that 67 percent of elites are active in economic sphere, 87 percent is active in political sphere and 63 percent is active in social sphere. Corresponding figures are 60 percent, 67 percent and 55 percent for quasi-elites. Thus the assertion that control over economic resources has become unimportant for understanding the contour of rural power is clearly unsustainable. We find that control over economic resources, a variety of them - not just land, still plays a significant role. Moreover interlinkage of different spheres is also important - 55 per cent of elites are engaged in at least two of the above three spheres and 33 percent is involved in all three spheres.

Our preliminary analysis throws up a story which questions the narrative of gradual urbanization and democratization. First, there is massive heterogeneity across regions. Second, we find evidence that land, caste and clientelistic dependence continue to be important factors for reproduction of local power but not in its pristine form. It is obvious that local power operates within the arc of global capitalism, it also seems that the relative balance might be tilting towards global powers, but local power still remains

an important category.

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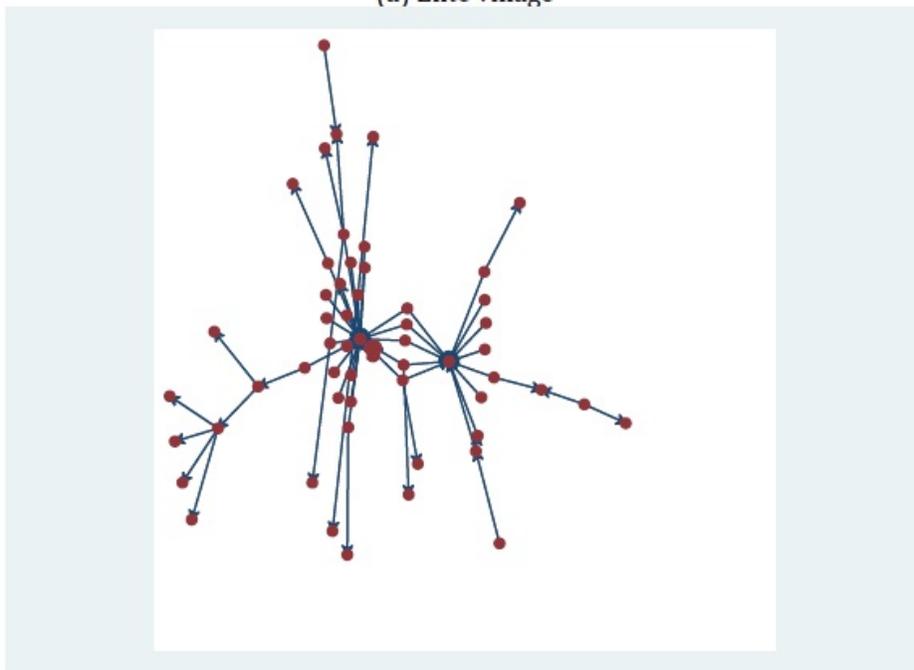
Table 1: Classification of services by type. Based on Household Survey

Services	Economic, Social or Political	Crucial or Non crucial
Lease-in land or sharecropping	Economic	Crucial
Purchase input of production	Economic	Not crucial
Sale output	Economic	Crucial
Getting employment	Economic	Crucial
Getting informal credit	Economic	Crucial
Paying bribe for governmental welfare services	Economic	Crucial
Assistance for welfare	Political	Crucial
Getting <i>information</i> about MGNREGS	Economic	Not crucial
Household related dispute mediation	Social	Not crucial
Employment related dispute mediation	Social	Crucial
Guidance on political matter (like whom to vote or accompanying to political meetings or rallies)	Political	Crucial
Guidance on religious matter	Social	Not crucial

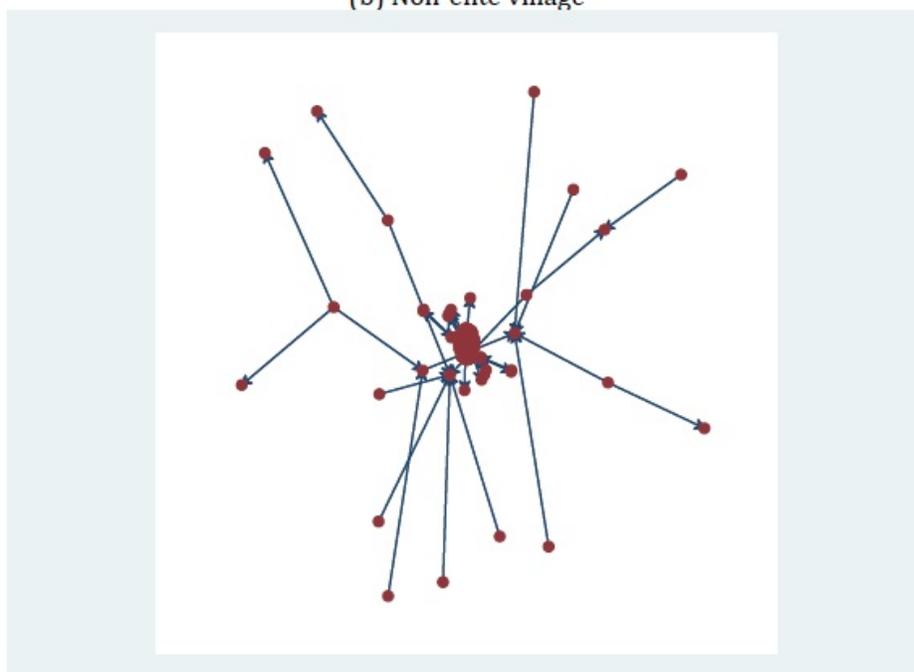
Table 3: Classification of resources by type. Based on Elite survey.

Type	Services
Economic Services	Rent out land for farming
	Rent out farm inputs
	Provides employment
	Provides money lending as an ancillary service
	Owens a rural business
Political Services	Helps villagers with government schemes
	Offers politics related advice
	Organizes political rallies
	Mediates between administration and villagers
Social Services	Mediates in occupation related disputes between villagers
	Mediates in family disputes
	Organizes religious/ charity/ cultural events
	Offers religion related advice

Diagram 2 : All dependence -connection in two villages  
(a) Elite village



(b) Non-elite village





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