

Foundation For Agrarian Studies



November 6 to 9, 2025 | Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

Day-wise Conference Proceedings

Report of Day 4 – November 9, 2025

The final day of the conference started with 3 parallel sessions - 6A, 6B, and 6C, followed by a tea break, and the concluding session, “New Directions for Research,” where the conference participants and speakers discussed the learnings and contributions from the Conference and how these could be integrated into future research and academic/public collaboration for the Foundation for Agrarian Studies. The summaries of sessions 6A, 6B, and 6C are provided in this report.

Session 6A

Vizhinjam Hall, Time: 0915–1100

Chair:

Sudha Narayanan (*Senior Research Fellow at International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)*)

Speakers:

Michael Roberts (*Professor, Agrarian and Labour Studies, SOAS University of London*)

Jayan Jose Thomas (*Professor of Economics, Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT-Delhi*)

P. C. Mohanan (*Chairman, Kerala State Statistical Commission*)

Surajit Das (*Assistant Professor, Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, Jawaharlal Nebru University (JNU)*)

Michael Roberts: Agrarian Change: The Lessons of India and China (online)

Michael Roberts, in his pre-recorded video presentation, discussed the contrasting trajectories of the two countries' rural economies. He argued that China's success rested on thorough land reform, rapid industrialisation, and strong state planning, three areas where India continued to lag.

Following the 1949 land reforms, China redistributed land more equitably, creating larger and more efficient farms averaging over three hectares. India, by contrast, remained marked by deep land inequality and small holdings of just over one hectare, which restricted productivity. Consequently,



China's agricultural output is nearly three times higher than India's, and its crop yields per hectare are about 80 per cent greater. China's extraordinary urbanisation, averaging 7.3 per cent per decade, shifted millions from agriculture into manufacturing and services, raising rural wages by 95 per cent in the last decade. India's slower rate of 2.7 per cent per decade left a large rural

population and stagnant wages, with many workers pushed into low-productivity jobs. Roberts attributed much of China's advantage to decisive state planning and investment. Public investment in agriculture and rural infrastructure in China is roughly three times higher than in India, where only about 4 per cent of GDP is publicly invested. He warned that India's turn toward free-market approaches, rising inequality, and weak rural welfare spending have made agrarian change increasingly difficult, leaving the countryside trapped in low productivity and widening social divides.

Jayan Jose Thomas: Aspirations and Realities in Rural India: Jobs, Incomes, and Inequalities, 1983–2023

Jayan Jose Thomas examined how rising educational attainment among rural youth has not translated into better job opportunities. The share of young men in agriculture declined, while the proportion of students rose sharply. Despite this regular, salaried employment has barely expanded, with most workers pushed into casual or self-employment. For women, participation has increased mainly as unpaid helpers in agriculture, with little change in their overall employment status.

Rural wages, which declined between 2011 and 2019, began to recover after 2019, partly due to greater

social spending by state governments. Still, large numbers of rural and migrant workers remain trapped in low-paid, insecure work. Thomas noted that India's vast young population offered a fleeting



demographic opportunity that will close by 2040. Unlike China's state-led investment model, India's weak public investment and reliance on free markets have constrained job creation. He argued that future growth must depend on domestic demand, higher real wages, and social sector spending. India, he concluded, must adopt a "spend first" approach investing in education, health, and housing to achieve wage-led and inclusive growth.

P. C. Mohanan: Data Systems for Measuring Rural and Agrarian Changes in India

P. C. Mohanan's talk highlighted the challenges of collecting reliable agricultural data and the importance of clear definitions in surveys. He explained that India's key data sources on land, production, and labour included the Agriculture Census, National Sample Survey (NSS) Landholding Surveys, and Situation Assessment Surveys (SAS). These surveys have revealed important trends such as the doubling of operational holdings from 50 million in 1960 to 101 million in 2018, a decline in average operating area from 2.63 to 0.83 hectares, and little change in land inequality, with the Gini coefficient remaining around 0.74. Mohanan noted that crop income is no longer the main source of earnings for agricultural households, which are increasingly dependent on wages and salaries.



A central issue, he emphasised, is the lack of a consistent definition of "farmer" or "agricultural household." Methodological differences between surveys often lead to conflicting results and unreliable estimates. For example, the Agriculture Census used land records while NSS surveys relied on field investigations, producing large discrepancies in total holdings. Mohanan advised researchers to critically assess data sources, understand collection methods, and apply their own stringent definitions to construct a more realistic picture of

agrarian change.

Surajit Das: Direction of Fiscal Policy for Human Development

Surajit Das examined how fiscal policy shapes human development. Referring to the United Nations Development Programme - Human Development Index (UNDP HDI) 2023 data, he noted India's HDI (0.69) remains below the global average (0.76), with South Asia showing low life expectancy, limited schooling, and high gender inequality (0.46).

He challenged fiscal conservatism, arguing that smaller governments do not necessarily promote growth. Instead, higher social sector spending and active state intervention improve output,



employment, and equity. Drawing on post-Keynesian ideas, he stressed that fiscal deficits are not always harmful but depend on demand conditions. Increasing the ratio of direct to indirect taxes helps reduce inequality, though it may slightly constrain growth. Das cautioned that austerity measures undermine gender equality by cutting social programs, highlighting the need for gender budgeting and decentralised governance. He concluded that fiscal policy should focus on expanding social spending, promoting progressive taxation, and strengthening the labour share to

reduce inequality and advance human development.

Session 6B

Bay Hall, Time: 0915–1100

Chair:

R. Nagaraj (*Retired Professor of Economics at the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Bombay*)

Discussant:

Kalyani Raghunathan (*Research Fellow in the Poverty, Gender, and Inclusion Unit, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)*)

Speakers:

Bheemeshwar Reddy (*Associate Professor, Department of Economics and Finance, Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), Pilani, Hyderabad*)

Madhura Swaminathan (*Professor at the Economic Analysis Unit of the Indian Statistical Institute in Bangalore*)

Bheemeshwar Reddy: Work, Welfare, and Insecurity: Ageing and Economic Survival in India



Bheemeshwar Reddy’s paper highlighted how “India was ageing rapidly, before it became rich,” that is, ageing at a pace faster than per capita income could keep up. The core argument challenged the dominant international policy discourse of “active” or “productive ageing,” which advocated for extending working lives into old age. This approach is fundamentally flawed in the Indian context, where a vast majority of the workforce, including the elderly, is engaged in physically burdensome and demanding labour. Data showed that 68 per cent of the

elderly remain in arduous, troublesome occupations, even as workforce participation drops sharply after age 60, according to PLFS data. The Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI) by International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) reveals that most elderly people face health issues and physical limitations. A very high proportion, both men and women, work 5–6 hours daily in demanding jobs, including care work, domestic work, regular employment, and casual labour, presumably out of necessity. Half do not earn minimum wage; for women, it is worse. A total of 93 per cent of women lack regular employment. Nearly 90 per cent of rural women do not receive minimum wage. In the

government's discourse on active/productive ageing, this reality is conspicuously absent: 68 per cent of the elderly are still trapped in arduous work. Most elderly individuals continue to work out of economic compulsion, not choice. Expecting them to perform hard manual labour into their late 60s denies them dignity.

Yet the all India old age pension, reaching only 22 lakh people (16 per cent of the elderly, leaving 86 per cent without any pension), has stagnated at Rs 200 monthly for decades. The Centre's contribution has remained at 200 for 12–15 years, revealing how little attention this receives. States paying more do so from their own budgets, with no increase in central support. Evidence showed that when pensions were provided, cohabitation increased. It is essential to provide decent social security even when the elderly live with family, given intra-family inequality in food consumption affecting women and the elderly.

Therefore, he made the point that in the Indian scenario, increased old-age work, especially among men, doesn't imply their well-being, since the majority of the elderly are self-employed with low, unstable earnings, and are in casual labour. To lead a dignified life requires choice, yet the discourse of active/productive ageing ignores choice when most aren't living decently. He made a case for better policies for the elderly, including a universal non-contributory pension. Such a pension would provide the elderly with a genuine choice to retire, offering them financial autonomy and a dignified life after a lifetime of labour.

Madhura Swaminathan and Arindam Das: Women's Contribution to Agriculture



In her paper, Madhura Swaminathan pointed out that official labour statistics systematically failed to capture the true extent and value of women's work in rural India. The core contention is that standard surveys are ill-equipped to measure the intermittent, seasonal, and varied nature of women's labour, which is often unpaid, home-based, and interwoven with domestic responsibilities. Data from village studies in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh provide a corrective to this statistical invisibility, revealing that women contribute substantially to the agrarian economy. Their labour

accounts for approximately one-third of all work in crop production, encompassing both family and hired labour, suggesting they should rightfully claim a proportional share of agricultural income.

A particularly stark finding concerned livestock rearing, a domain predominantly managed by women. The analysis calculated the returns to this essential labour at a meagre Rs 100 per day, which is less than 40 per cent of the prevailing casual wage rate, highlighting a severe devaluation of their contribution. The research further noted a paradoxical trend where the gender wage gap often widens in regions with higher absolute wage rates. As male migration increases, rural households and the agricultural sector become increasingly dependent on these low and unstable earnings from women. The presentation concluded that this systemic undervaluation, coupled with a lack of gender-disaggregated official data, undermines both women's livelihoods and the stability of the rural economy, demanding urgent policy intervention for proper recognition and remuneration.

Discussion

Discussant Kalyani Raghunathan summarised the session into two critical analyses that reveal how societal values systematically undervalue essential demographics: the elderly and women. The first paper exposes a profound societal failure in valuing old age, a universal human experience. This neglect is starkly illustrated by meagre pensions and a glaring gap in India's social protection framework, which prioritises early life support while overlooking the urgent, growing needs of an ageing population. The second paper addressed the devaluation of women's work, highlighting a three-fold failure: the lack of recognition for caregiving and domestic labour, the inadequacy of surveys to capture the seasonality and agency in women's time use, and the systemic underpayment of their labour. It further warns that economic transformation is not a panacea. As employment shifts from farm production to "midstream" agri-food system jobs like processing and retail, women are often segregated into lower-paying roles, thereby perpetuating and potentially widening the gender wage gap.

Session 6C

Waves Hall, Time: 0915–1100

Chair:

R. Ramakumar (*Professor, School of Development Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai*)

Discussant:

T. Jayaraman (*Senior Fellow, Climate Resilience Policy, MSSRF*)

Speakers:

Marcus Taylor (*Professor and Head of Department, Department of Global Development Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada*)

Rita Ghedini (*President of Legacoop Bologna, Italy*)

Pratap Singh BIRTHAL (*Director, ICAR-National Institute of Agricultural Economics and Policy Research (ICAR-NIAP)*)

K. S. Kavi Kumar (*Professor, Madras School of Economics*)

Marcus Taylor: Playing with Time: The Temporalities of Agrarian Change under Climatic Instability



Marcus Taylor's paper examined how agricultural intensification and climate change intersect to reshape smallholder farming and deepen rural inequalities in Maharashtra. Centred on the theoretical concept of time and the "experience of time within these villages," the study captured how farmers have shifted from "test match to T20 agriculture," a metaphor for the accelerated, high-pressure cropping cycles driven by market forces and climatic uncertainty. When Taylor asked about the biggest constraint to profitability, farmers emphasised that timing is the most important factor, as each phase of production, marketing, and credit repayment must align perfectly to

sustain income.

He observed that "climate change is changing what we think of seasonality," disrupting established agrarian rhythms and intertwining multiple temporalities: agricultural seasonality, market dynamics,

labour taskscapes, intermittent off-farm livelihoods, household and social reproduction, credit and debt timelines, and bureaucratic temporalities. Based on fieldwork in the Program on Climate Resilient Agriculture (POCRA) villages, Taylor found that while climate-smart initiatives promise stability, they have led instead to a “class differentiation of who can control labour, who can control storage,” enabling larger farmers to capture state-subsidised assets such as shade-net houses, farm ponds, and machinery. He concluded that these intersecting pressures of climate and capital are producing new temporal inequalities, accelerating time for some, eroding security for many, and fragmenting the agrarian landscape of rural India.

Rita Ghedini: The Challenge of Adaptation

Rita Ghedini, in her presentation, drew on the Italian cooperative movement as a cornerstone of

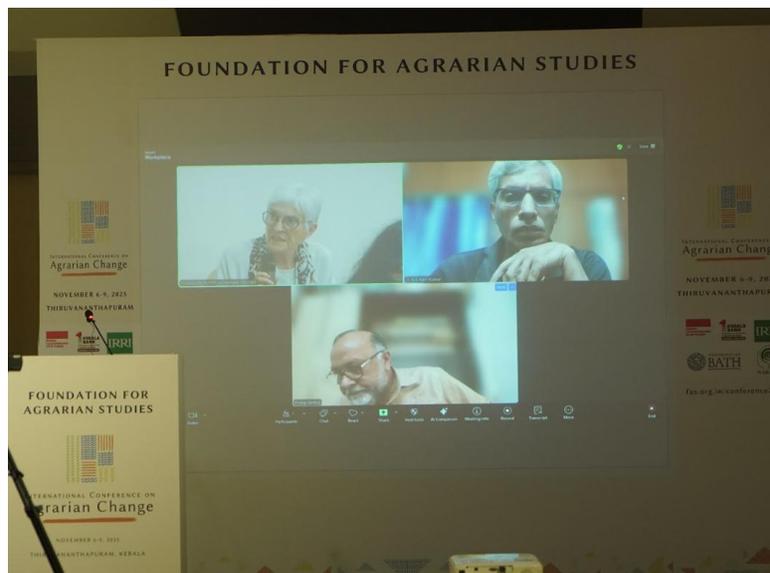


inclusive, sustainable, and innovation-driven development. Cooperatives accounted for nearly 24 per cent of Italy’s adult population, with Legacoop encompassing user, worker, and support cooperatives across multiple sectors. In the Emilia-Romagna region alone, cooperatives generated around 6 per cent of regional GDP, demonstrating their strong economic and social presence. Legacoop Bologna, which represented 185 member cooperatives and over 2 million members, aligned its strategy with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), tracking progress through a collective

sustainability report since 2018. Ghedini emphasised that 71 per cent of the cooperative workforce are women, and 86 per cent of employees benefit from company welfare programs supporting children through scholarships and childcare. Cooperatives outperform conventional enterprises in gender equality, inclusion, and work–life balance. The region’s innovation ecosystem fosters collaboration between cooperatives, research institutions, and the Data Manifattura (DAMA) Technopole, with new initiatives such as data cooperatives and climate-oriented projects like Tornatura, which predicted pest infestations under changing climate conditions, and Biocast, which managed agricultural waste. She also referred to the Mediterranean Diet Manifesto as a model integrating sustainability, health, equity, education, and innovation, reinforcing how cooperative principles can guide a fair ecological transition rooted in community welfare and shared prosperity.

Pratap Singh Birthal: Climate Change and Agriculture in India: Impacts and Projections (online)

Pratap Singh Birthal joined online and spoke on the profound challenges that climate change poses for Indian agriculture, highlighting that India is one of the hotspots of climate change. He discussed how small farmers and low-income states are particularly vulnerable due to limited adaptive capacities and noted that the frequency of extreme climate events has increased considerably. Birthal explained that climate change has already been affecting cropping patterns, with chickpea, pigeon pea, and millets expected to be the most impacted. He emphasised that farmers face multiple simultaneous risks, such as droughts, heatwaves, and erratic rainfall, and manage these through a combination of strategies, including irrigation, micro-irrigation, crop diversification, solar-powered pumps, and crop insurance. While irrigation remains the most effective adaptation measure, its benefits are diminishing due to water scarcity, and solarisation of tubewells remains very low, at hardly 1 per cent. He concluded by stressing that “there’s no single blueprint for climate-smart agriculture. Farmers need a bundle strategy” tailored to local conditions and supported by research, climate finance, and appropriate policies.



**K. S. Kavi Kumar and Anubhab Pattanayak: Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation:
Indian Agriculture (online)**

Kavi Kumar, in his online video presentation, highlighted the critical challenges of climate change for Indian agriculture, emphasising that climate data at administrative levels, such as districts, are largely unavailable and that there is limited understanding of impacts on livestock productivity, labour under heat stress, and broader livelihoods. He explained that adaptation generally improves outcomes, whether through intensifying existing practices or undertaking more transformative changes, but most documented strategies remain incremental and disconnected from climate impact assessments. Cost estimates for adaptation are based on projected productivity declines and the expenses of mitigation strategies, yet analyses like India's State Action Plan on Climate Change (SAPCC) show little correlation between state vulnerability and expressed adaptation needs, reflecting differences in awareness rather than actual risk. He stressed that short-term responses should not be conflated with true climate change adaptation and underscored the overarching importance of research and finance, stating the need for "better understanding and measurement of climate change impact, adaptation, and its costs."

Discussion

During the discussion, T. Jayaraman highlighted the micro-level realities of climate change for farmers and the institutional potential of FPOs, stressing that while they can be leveraged for adaptation, they differ from cooperatives, and emphasised the need for locally tailored, multifaceted approaches and decision-support tools to address gaps in on-ground knowledge. The discussion emphasised the need for multiple, locally tailored approaches to decision-making and adaptation, potentially supported by decision-support tools to address knowledge gaps on the ground. Several speakers noted that climate change is often framed as the ultimate driver of agricultural problems, but regional environmental and developmental issues, such as soil degradation, water scarcity, and infrastructure, are equally critical. Micro-level studies raised questions about crop cycles, family labour, socio-cultural aspirations, and farmers' decisions to stay in agriculture. Issues of waste and loss in food systems were highlighted, with calls for systematic research and cooperative solutions. The role of insurance, particularly parametric/weather-based schemes, was discussed in relation to climate risk, incentives for companies, and public subsidy structures. Data quality and availability, the evolving role of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in guiding literature, and the need for a comprehensive assessment of adaptation costs and implementation were also emphasised. Overall,

the session underscored that effective climate adaptation requires integrating technical, institutional, social, and economic strategies, while addressing both climate change and underlying environmental and developmental challenges.