

## **Informal Tenancy and Financial Inclusion among Tenant Farmers: Institutional Credit Access and Digital Finance Adoption in Coimbatore District**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper investigates the role of informal tenancy as a barrier to financial inclusion among the landless cultivators of India. Based on a structured survey of 150 tenant farmers from Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu it was found that 80 percent of the tenants were working under informal arrangement. The main cause for informality is found to be an absence of documentary proof. It was found that credit flows are dominated by cooperative and commercial banks although some informal lending also exists. On the other hand, there has been tremendous uptake of digital technologies including use of Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and ATM card but digital literacy remains at a moderate level. Financial Inclusion scores stand at a moderate level. The analysis reveals significant positive relationship between the degree of formality in rental agreement (as measured by chi-square statistic  $\chi^2=16.82$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p=0.032$ ) and financial inclusion (positive Spearman correlation  $r=0.28$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Therefore, the paper suggests enhancing the documentation process for better tenancies and investing in targeted digital literacy programs to ensure broader participation in financial services.

**Keywords:** Digital finance; Financial inclusion; Informal tenancy; Institutional credit; Tenant farmers

### **Introduction**

Tenant farming is central but largely invisible aspect of the agrarian economy in India. Many rural households grow crops on land that they do not own and under informal arrangements that are not officially recorded. These tenant farmers play a significant role in agricultural production but are often not included in the institutional financial system because they lack formal title to land and do not have tenancy documentation. While institutional credit is being provided by commercial banks, cooperative banks and regional rural banks, it is still the mainstay of agricultural finance in India, but the availability of official credit is subject to proof of ownership and documentation which informal tenants often lack. The Reserve Bank of India has pointed out that the absence of legal rights and land records for oral lessees, sharecroppers and tenant farmers makes it difficult for them to access institutional credit.

Meanwhile, the Indian financial market has been undergoing digitalisation at a fast clip. UPI, mobile banking, internet banking, Aadhaar enabled payment services and digital wallets have been extensively championed as measures to enhance financial inclusion of the unbanked populations. One of the key assumptions of digital finance is that it will make it easier to enter the financial system, by eliminating the need for physical paperwork and physical visits to financial institutions. Whether these digital services really address the institutional marginalisation of informal tenant farmers or simply replicate a form of documentation marginalisation is still an open and little studied question. Access to financial services is just the first step in financial inclusion. Financial inclusion includes digital literacy and capability to use services safely and independently.

The study uses a district level context where tenant farming is prevalent and the share of digital finance usage is relatively high and thereby provides empirical evidence of the relationship between tenancy formality and financial inclusion and of the potential of digital finance as an inclusive channel for landless cultivators.

### Review Of Literature

**Tenancy and institutional credit:** In the literature, it has been repeatedly noted that tenant farmers and sharecroppers are not part of the formal financial system. Choudhury & Mahapatra (2026) constructed an Institutional Access Index for Odisha and noted that tenants had 47.4% lower probability of receiving formal finance and 49.7% lower probability of obtaining crop insurance, which they attributed mainly to the lack of land ownership titles. Similarly, in Rajasthan and Haryana, tenants relied on a mix of institutional and non-institutional credit and insecure tenure and a lack of financial literacy hindered their access to credit (Jakhar et al., 2024). Households that do not access formal credit sources are more likely to access informal lenders and thus continue to rely on more expensive and less secure credit sources (Mishra & Bhardwaj, 2022).

**Financial literacy and digital finance:** The extent of farmer's use of formal and digital products seems to be influenced by financial literacy. Based on Financial Inclusion Insights data for South Asia, Das & Maji (2023) identified that Indian farmers lacked financial knowledge as they were found to be weakly financially literate with ownership, education and confidence being among the key determinants. Financial literacy is as important as digital credit availability for farmer's awareness of the credit product, which implies that capability is as key as availability (Sarfo et al., 2023). As with every technology, digital financial literacy has been accompanied by opportunities and challenges in rural India, especially if the confidence and safety skills are imbalanced (Mandal & Madaan, 2024). Digital literacy and financial inclusion are also beneficial to well-being, with Chinese evidence showing that digital financial literacy can increase the income of rural households, in part via social capital and financial development in the region (Kamble et al., 2024).

**Digital finance and policy context.** Reviews of digital financial inclusion in agriculture point to mobile banking, Fintech and digital credit as important drivers of rural finance (Subhashini et al., 2026). In the policy arena, NABARD has implemented the Joint Liability Groups approach to distribute credit to tenants and other borrowers without land ownership, as a way to overcome the lack of documentation (NABARD, n.d.).

### Objectives

- To assess the prevalence of informal tenancy among agricultural tenant farmers.
- To examine the extent of access to institutional credit.
- To assess level of digital finance adoption and digital literacy.
- To examine the relationship between informal tenancy and financial inclusion.

### Statement Of The Problem

In India, a large portion of land is used by tenant farmers who are in a precarious situation within the agricultural economy. Tenancy is predominantly informal, making tenants unable to present the documentary evidence lenders employ in determining eligibility, as is done with a registered lease. This creates barriers to accessing formal credit, crop insurance and welfare aid and can push them into informal lenders with higher interest rates and less protection (Choudhury & Mahapatra, 2026). The oral lessees, sharecroppers and tenant farmers are particularly disadvantaged in availing institutional credit (Reserve Bank of India, 2019). Digital finance has been touted as a means of reducing these barriers by minimising the need to use paper and branches. However, relying on digital services is not sufficient for inclusion. The demand for digital literacy, confidence and the safe way to transact business is one that can be unevenly distributed amongst tenants, particularly amongst those with less education and who are older. Whether digital finance really adds to the informal tenant's experience of inclusion or simply replicates the exclusion, is not yet clear. There is a lack of primary evidence, despite the policy relevance. Existing studies primarily examine tenant credit exclusion and digital finance individually and few attempt to directly test the relationship between the formality of tenancy and financial inclusion. This study aims to address this by quantifying the informal tenancy prevalence, analysing the institutional credit access, exploring the adoption and financial literacy of digital finance and testing the relationship between the tenancy formality and financial inclusion among the tenant farmers in Coimbatore District.

### Scope of the Study

The study is restricted to the Coimbatore district of Tamilnadu, India where tenant farmers are working. It is concerned solely with the tenant farmers cultivators who are engaged in the cultivation of land owned by others and who are subject to different tenancy systems and does not include the owner cultivators. It examines four main dimensions of the scope: informal tenure prevalence and characteristics, institutional credit access, digital financial services adoption and digital literacy, and financial inclusion.

### Research Methodology

**Research design:** The study adopted a descriptive and analytical cross sectional design, combining descriptive profiling of tenant farmers with inferential testing of the association between tenancy formality and financial inclusion.

### Source of data collection

**Primary data:** Questionnaire was administered to tenant farmer cultivators operating land under tenancy arrangements to obtain first hand insights.

**Secondary data:** Information was gathered from websites, journals and official reports to supplement and validate findings from primary data source

**Study area:** The study was conducted in Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu. The respondents were tenant farmers cultivators operating land under tenancy arrangements identified through a structured questionnaire designed specifically for this population.

**Sampling method:** purposive sampling method was used, supplemented by snowball sampling where tenant farmers were difficult to identify, given that informal tenants are often not recorded in official lists.

**Sample size:** 150 tenant farmers within Coimbatore was chosen for the study.

**Tenancy formality operationalization:** A dual approach was used in the study to operationalize tenancy formality. A simplified three category classification (informal, formal, others) was used for descriptive clarity and for statistical testing, the full five category classification (oral agreement, written unregistered agreement, registered agreement, combination of verbal and written and other arrangements) was used for statistical testing. This option offers transparency of reporting prevalence and rigor in associations.

**Construction of Composite Indices:** Informal Tenancy, Digital Literacy, and Financial Inclusion indices were computed as the mean of relevant five-point Likert scale items, with reliability assessed using Cronbach's alpha reliability scores above 0.70

### Tools used for study

**Descriptive Statistical Analysis:** Frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to profile socio-economic characteristics, tenancy, credit access, and digital-finance adoption.

**Inferential Statistical Analysis:** The chi-square test of association and Spearman's rank correlation were used to explore the relationship between tenancy formality and financial inclusion.

### Limitations

- **Cross-sectional design:** Data were obtained from only one time point in time, thus providing associations and not causation; the design cannot be used to establish causation.
- **Self-reported data:** All measures, such as tenancy arrangement, credit access, digital literacy and financial inclusion are self-reported and may be subject to recall and social desirability bias.
- **Sample size and sampling:** purposive and snowball sampling methods and the small sample of 150 respondents, restricts statistical power and the representativeness of the sample compared to the broader tenant farmer population.

➤ **Classification of tenancy:** The classification of tenancy (three categories) used for descriptive purposes may conceal the heterogeneity within the informal and formal categories.

### Data Analysis And Interpretations

**Table 1 Socio Economic And Farm Profile Of Tenant Farmers**

| Variable           | Categories          | Frequency<br>(N=150) | Percentage |
|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|------------|
| Age                | Below 30 years      | 12                   | 8.0        |
|                    | 30–39 years         | 35                   | 23.3       |
|                    | 40–49 years         | 42                   | 28.0       |
|                    | 50–59 years         | 38                   | 25.3       |
|                    | 60 years and above  | 23                   | 15.3       |
| Education          | No formal education | 15                   | 10.0       |
|                    | Primary education   | 28                   | 18.7       |
|                    | Secondary education | 40                   | 26.7       |
|                    | Higher secondary    | 32                   | 21.3       |
|                    | Diploma/ITI         | 20                   | 13.3       |
|                    | Undergraduate       | 15                   | 10.0       |
| Farming Experience | Less than 5 years   | 10                   | 6.7        |
|                    | 5–10 years          | 22                   | 14.7       |
|                    | 11–20 years         | 55                   | 36.7       |
|                    | 21–30 years         | 40                   | 26.7       |
|                    | More than 30 years  | 23                   | 15.3       |
| Tenanted land size | Less than 1 acre    | 25                   | 16.7       |
|                    | 1–2 acres           | 40                   | 26.7       |
|                    | 2.01–5 acres        | 45                   | 30.0       |
|                    | 5.01–10 acres       | 25                   | 16.7       |
|                    | More than 10 acres  | 15                   | 10.0       |
| Major crop         | Paddy               | 45                   | 30.0       |
|                    | Maize               | 20                   | 13.3       |
|                    | Vegetables          | 35                   | 23.3       |
|                    | Banana              | 25                   | 16.7       |
|                    | Sugarcane           | 15                   | 10.0       |
|                    | Coconut             | 10                   | 6.7        |
|                    | Turmeric            | 10                   | 6.7        |

Source: Primary Data

**Interpretation**

The socio economic profile shows that the highest percentage was for the age group 40-49 (28.0%) followed by 50-59 (25.3%). In terms of education, secondary education was the largest group (26.7%) followed by higher secondary education (21.3%). The majority of farmers had experience in farming in the age group of 11-20 years (36.7%). The highest percentage of tenanted land is under cultivation of 2.01-5 acres and paddy is the main crop cultivated under tenancy system (30.0%). The respondents were mainly middle aged, highly experienced in farming and owned a small or medium sized farm.

**Table 2.1 Prevalence And Characteristics Of Informal Tenancy**

| Variable                  | Categories                                     | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Type of Tenancy Agreement | Verbal/oral agreement only                     | 65        | 43.3       |
|                           | Written agreement without registration         | 30        | 20.0       |
|                           | Registered written agreement                   | 20        | 13.3       |
|                           | Combination of verbal and written arrangements | 25        | 16.7       |
|                           | Other                                          | 10        | 6.7        |
| Current Tenancy Duration  | Less than 1 year                               | 18        | 12.0       |
|                           | 1-3 years                                      | 40        | 26.7       |
|                           | 4-6 years                                      | 35        | 23.3       |
|                           | 7-10 years                                     | 32        | 21.3       |
|                           | More than 10 years                             | 25        | 16.7       |
| Tenancy Payment Method    | Fixed cash rent                                | 70        | 46.7       |
|                           | Combination of cash and produce                | 40        | 26.7       |
|                           | Share of agricultural produce                  | 25        | 16.7       |
|                           | Crop-dependent/flexible arrangement            | 10        | 6.7        |
|                           | Other                                          | 5         | 3.3        |

Source: Primary Data

**Interpretation**

The above table shows that tenancy arrangements classified as informal, formal and others. Verbal/oral agreements, written agreement without registration and combinations of both were classified as informal (n=120) 80.0%, registered written agreement were classified as formal (n=20) 13.3% and other were separate category (n=10) 6.7% Tenancy periods are mostly short to medium term, while fixed cash rent (46.7%) dominates payment methods.

**Table 2.2 Informal Tenancy Index**

| Informal tenancy measure              | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---------------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| Tenancy based on mutual understanding | 3.5  | 0.9                |
| Lack of formal documentary proof      | 3.6  | 0.8                |

|                                                                  |             |            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Tenancy terms can change through discussion                      | 3.2         | 0.7        |
| Limited security of continuation                                 | 3.3         | 0.8        |
| Lack of documentation creates institutional-service difficulties | 3.4         | 0.9        |
| Dependence on landowner confirmation                             | 3.1         | 0.7        |
| <b>Overall Informal tenancy Index</b>                            | <b>3.35</b> | <b>0.8</b> |

Source: Primary Data

Reliability Cronbach's Alpha: **0.81** (Good internal consistency)

### Interpretation

Documentary evidence (Mean = 3.6) and reliance on understanding (Mean = 3.5) are the most commonly reported indicators. Tenancy overall (Mean = 3.35, SD = 0.8) shows that tenancy is still insecure and largely dependent on landowner discretion

**Table 3.1 Access To Institutional Credit**

| Variable              | Categories                                | Frequency<br>(N=150) | Percentage |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------|------------|
| Credit Sources        | Cooperative bank/society                  | 45                   | 30.0       |
|                       | Commercial bank                           | 30                   | 20.0       |
|                       | Regional Rural Bank                       | 20                   | 13.3       |
|                       | Microfinance institution                  | 15                   | 10.0       |
|                       | Informal lender/moneylender               | 20                   | 13.3       |
|                       | Relatives/friends                         | 10                   | 6.7        |
|                       | Self-help group                           | 10                   | 6.7        |
| Primary Credit Source | Cooperative bank/society                  | 40                   | 26.7       |
|                       | Commercial bank                           | 25                   | 16.7       |
|                       | Regional Rural Bank                       | 20                   | 13.3       |
|                       | Microfinance institution                  | 15                   | 10.0       |
|                       | Informal lender/moneylender               | 25                   | 16.7       |
|                       | Relatives/friends                         | 15                   | 10.0       |
|                       | Self-help group                           | 10                   | 6.7        |
| Digital Services Used | UPI payments                              | 120                  | 80.0       |
|                       | ATM/debit card                            | 110                  | 73.3       |
|                       | Mobile banking                            | 70                   | 46.7       |
|                       | Aadhaar-enabled payment services          | 40                   | 26.7       |
|                       | Banking Correspondent/Bank Mitra services | 25                   | 16.7       |
|                       | Rarely                                    | 25                   | 16.7       |

|                   |                 |    |      |
|-------------------|-----------------|----|------|
| Digital Frequency | Occasionally    | 40 | 26.7 |
|                   | Frequently      | 50 | 33.3 |
|                   | Very frequently | 35 | 23.3 |

Source: Primary Data

### Interpretation

Access to credit is primarily through cooperative banks (30%) and commercial banks (20%), though reliance on informal lenders (13.3%) remains notable. Primary credit sources mirror this distribution, with cooperatives (26.7%) and informal lenders (16.7%) playing key roles. Digital adoption is widespread, as UPI (80%) and ATM/debit cards (73.3%) dominate usage, while mobile banking (46.7%) and Aadhaar-linked services (26.7%) show moderate uptake. Frequency of digital use is fairly balanced, with 33.3% reporting frequent use and 23.3% very frequent use.

**Table 3.2 Digital Financial Literacy Index**

| Digital financial literacy                          | Mean        | SD          |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Ability to make digital payments independently      | 3.4         | 0.8         |
| Ability to check bank balance digitally             | 3.3         | 0.7         |
| Ability to identify successful transactions         | 3.2         | 0.7         |
| Ability to use ATM/debit card without assistance    | 3.5         | 0.8         |
| Understanding of transaction charges                | 3.0         | 0.7         |
| Ability to identify suspicious messages/calls/links | 3.1         | 0.8         |
| Confidence in using digital services independently  | 3.3         | 0.8         |
| <b>Overall Digital Literacy/Capability Index</b>    | <b>3.26</b> | <b>0.75</b> |

Source: Primary Data

Reliability Cronbach's Alpha: **0.81** (Acceptable reliability)

### Interpretation

Digital literacy among tenant farmers is moderate. Practical skills such as using ATM cards (Mean = 3.5) and making digital payments (Mean = 3.4) are relatively strong, while understanding transaction charges (Mean = 3.0) and identifying suspicious links (Mean = 3.1) remain weaker. The overall literacy index (Mean = 3.26, SD = 0.75) suggests farmers are capable of basic digital finance but lack deeper awareness and risk management skills.

**Table 3.3 Barriers To Digital Finance**

| Barriers to digital finance      | Mean | SD  |
|----------------------------------|------|-----|
| Documentation difficulties       | 3.2  | 0.8 |
| Technical issues                 | 3.1  | 0.7 |
| Collateral/security requirements | 3.3  | 0.8 |
| Distance to institutions         | 2.9  | 0.6 |
| Confidence barriers              | 3.2  | 0.8 |

Source: Primary Data

**Interpretation**

Barriers remain significant, particularly collateral/security requirements (Mean = 3.3) and documentation difficulties (Mean = 3.2). These constraints limit effective participation in digital finance despite moderate literacy levels.

**Table 4 Level of Financial Inclusion Among Tenant Farmers**

| Variable                            | Categories          | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|------------|
| Access to Formal Financial Services | Low access          | 45        | 30.0       |
|                                     | Moderate access     | 60        | 40.0       |
|                                     | High access         | 45        | 30.0       |
| Usage of Financial Services         | Rarely              | 40        | 26.7       |
|                                     | Occasionally        | 55        | 36.7       |
|                                     | Frequently          | 55        | 36.7       |
| Financial Capability                | Low capability      | 50        | 33.3       |
|                                     | Moderate capability | 65        | 43.3       |
|                                     | High capability     | 35        | 23.3       |

| Overall Financial Inclusion Index | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|-----------------------------------|------|--------------------|
|                                   | 3.0  | 0.7                |

Source: Primary Data

**Interpretation**

Financial inclusion among tenant farmers is moderate overall, with 40% reporting moderate access to formal services and 30% indicating high access. Service usage is evenly split, as 36.7% use financial services frequently, while another 36.7% use them occasionally. Capability levels are mixed, with 43.3% at moderate capability and 33.3% at low capability, suggesting gaps in financial literacy and confidence. The overall financial inclusion index (Mean = 3.0, SD = 0.7) reflects a community that is partially integrated into formal finance but still faces barriers to full inclusion.

**Table 5.1 Relationship Between Informal Tenancy And Financial Inclusion**

| Tenancy Agreement Type                 | Low Inclusion (%) | Moderate Inclusion (%) | High Inclusion (%) | Total (n=150) |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| Verbal/oral agreement only             | 30 (46.2%)        | 25 (38.5%)             | 10 (15.3%)         | 65            |
| Written agreement without registration | 10 (33.3%)        | 15 (50.0%)             | 5 (16.7%)          | 30            |
| Registered written agreement           | 5 (25.0%)         | 10 (50.0%)             | 5 (25.0%)          | 20            |
| Combination of verbal and written      | 8 (32.0%)         | 12 (48.0%)             | 5 (20.0%)          | 25            |
| Other arrangements                     | 2 (20.0%)         | 3 (30.0%)              | 5 (50.0%)          | 10            |
| Total                                  | 55 (36.7%)        | 65 (43.3%)             | 30 (20.0%)         | 150           |

Source: Primary Data

### Interpretation

The cross tabulation indicates differences in financial inclusion according to tenancy agreement type. Among respondents with verbal/oral agreements, 46.2% reported low financial inclusion, compared with 25.0% among those with registered written agreements. The proportion reporting high financial inclusion was 15.3% among those with oral agreements and 25.0% among those with registered written agreements.

| Test                   | Statistic Value  | df | p-value | Interpretation                                                                  |
|------------------------|------------------|----|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Chi-square test        | $\chi^2 = 16.82$ | 8  | 0.032   | Significant association between tenancy type and financial inclusion levels.    |
| Spearman's correlation | $r = 0.28$       | -  | <0.01   | Positive correlation: more formal tenancy linked to higher financial inclusion. |

Source: Primary Data

### Interpretation

Chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 16.82$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p = 0.032$ ) shows that financial inclusion levels vary significantly across the five tenancy categories. Farmers with verbal/oral agreements are more excluded, while those with registered agreements demonstrate stronger integration into financial systems. The Spearman's correlation ( $r = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) further confirms that tenancy formality is positively associated with financial inclusion.

### Suggestions

Based on the findings, following suggestions are given

**Policy and institutions:** The consensus conclusion of this study is that documentation is important. Financial inclusion is highly related to the formality of tenancy and encouraging the formalization of tenancy agreements would be a priority. Banks and NABARD can play its role and adopt the creditworthiness of a registered tenancy agreement and expand the concept of Joint Liability Group lending to include those tenants who do not possess land titles. It would also help to have credit products that are targeted towards tenants with the flexibility of paperwork and no collateral.

**Digital finance and capability:** Digital services have reached the tenant farmers but it is not the same as empowering them. While the basic things such as using ATM cards and making transactions on digital payment were comfortable with, the farmers were uncomfortable with understanding transaction charges and identifying suspicious messages, calls or links. Digital literacy programs should thus be built on these less developed areas instead of on basic skills. Meanwhile, the obstacles that emerged prominently documentation problems and collateral or security requirements must be addressed at the institutional level and banking correspondents can help increase confidence of less educated and older tenants.

**Farmers and extension agencies:** The promotion of formal agreements even if no full registration is possible seems worthwhile, given the relationship between formality and inclusion. Farmer cooperatives and extension services can link literacy training and the adoption of digital use in practice.

**Future research:** The study was conducted in one district alone and subsequent studies in other districts would determine if these patterns are seen across the district. Documenting tenancy and its impacts over time may give insights into the nature of tenancy and financial inclusion. Hence future research can examine the nature of the tenancy barriers to credit removed by tenancy documentation and whether this is done on paper or online.

### Concluision

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into informal tenancy and its impact on financial inclusion of 150 tenant farmers in Coimbatore District, Tamilnadu. The general picture that is seen is one of a community that is

partially in the formal financial system, but restricted by the tenancy. The informality index was 3.35, with 80% of respondents indicating that they operated under an informal arrangement, which showed a degree of informality of relying on understanding and ignorance of the need for documentation. The financing sources were mostly cooperative and commercial banks, but the existence of informal money lenders indicated that there were shortcomings in their ability to reach all. The digital adoption rate was quite high with UPI and ATM cards being used by most farmers, while the digital literacy was moderate with the poorest skills being the very ones that would keep the users secure from fraud and hidden charges. These strands were knit together by the statistical results. There was a significant association between tenancy type and financial inclusion ( $\chi^2=16.82$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p=0.032$ ) with a positive correlation ( $r = 0.28$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) suggesting that more formal tenancy is correlated with higher financial inclusion. This distinction was most stark at either end: 46.2% of tenants who had oral agreements said they had low financial inclusion, compared with 25.0% of registered agreements. Thus formal tenancy is strongly linked to greater financial inclusion and although digital financial services have increased access to services, a lack of documentation or literacy is limiting full financial inclusion for many tenant farmers.

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