

Problems of Agricultural Labour in India

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ABSTRACT: In today's world the agricultural sector employs half of the world's labour force with an estimated 1.3 billion workers active in agricultural production worldwide. The majority of agricultural workers are found in developing countries. A great majority are small scale farmers. They have been more often victims rather than beneficiaries of the green revolution, the technological development and the globalization trends which characterized the 21st century. This means that workers in agriculture run at least twice the risk of dying on the job as compared with workers in other sectors.

KEYWORDS: Agriculture, Technology, Globalization, Workers and Farmers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture labor may be defined as labor who works in agriculture or allied activities for the whole or part of the year in return for full-time or part time work. The agriculture laborer has no risk in the cultivation, and no right of lease or contract on land but merely works on another person's land for wages. Agricultural Mishra and Puri have stated that "All those persons who derive a major part of their income as payment for work performed on the farms of others can be designated as agricultural worker. For a major part of the year they should work on the land of the others on wages."s. Agricultural labourers constitute the most neglected class in Indian rural structure. The phenomena of underemployment, under-development and surplus population are simultaneously manifested in the daily lives and living of the agricultural labourers. They usually get low wages, conditions of work put an excessive burden on them, and the employment which they get is extremely irregular. Their income is low and employment irregular. Since, they possess no skill or training, they have no alternative employment opportunities either. Agricultural Labourers who are mostly landless and form a significant section of rural society mainly depend on wage employment in agriculture. Majority of them belong to the category of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and are among the worst exploited section of the society. Their income has always been meagre, resulting in poor living and heavy indebtedness. Much worse are those who get casual agricultural work merely exist and do not live. Their morning holds no promise for the evening and they can never sleep without tensions for they have no stocks left for the morning. Struggling for their morning and evenings they pass their whole life. They are not organised and they cannot fight for their rights. Because of all these reasons their economic lot has failed to improve even after five decades of planning.

Agricultural labour constitutes the most important single element in the gainfully employed population in Indian agriculture. Data on the proportion of agricultural labour to the gainfully employed population and to total population, and the proportion of gainfully employed to total population, derived from Census of India 1951. Theoretically, the gainfully employed population includes employ-ers, employees and own-account workers and unpaid household labour engaged in productive occupations. The same number of the total gainfully employed could be obtained by deducting the number of persons deriving their earnings from non-gainful sources from the total number of earners and earning dependents. In the Agricultural Labour Enquiry, "earners" and "helpers" have been taken to constitute the gainfully employed. Thus defined, the gain-fully employed include a negligible proportion of "earners" and "helpers" engaged in non-productive occupations.

Growth of Agricultural Labourers in India:

It appears from available evidence that before independence our country was unaware of any such phenomenon which later on came to be known as the class of agricultural labourer. The Indian census reports from 1961 to 2011 are one of the earliest warning notes about the growth of surplus population on land. It was cumulative effect of a large number of factors like land tenure, monetization and commercialization of the agriculture and decline of the handicrafts, etc. During the period after independence the proportion of agricultural labour continued to be increased.



Table: 1

Year	Number (in million)
1951	28.0
1961	32.0
1971	48.0
1981	55.5
1991	74.7
2001	107.4
2011	144.4

Source: Census 2011.

The data provided in Table shows that the proportion of agricultural Labourers tended to rise with the increasing year in Indian economy. Such proportion was estimated at 28.0 million and 144.3 million in 1951 and 2011, respectively.

Classification of Agricultural Labourers:

Agricultural labourers can be divided into four categories -

- Landless Labourers, who are attached to the land lords;
- Landless labourers, who are personally independent, but who work exclusively for others;
- Petty farmers with tiny bits of land who devote most of their time working for others and
- Farmers who have economic holdings but who have one or more of their sons and dependants working for other prosperous farmers. The first group of labourers have been more or less in the position of serfs or slaves, they are also known as bonded labourers.

Agricultural labourers can also be divided in the following manner:

- Landless agricultural labourers
- Very small cultivators whose main source of earnings due to their small and sub-marginal holdings is wage employment.

Landless labourers in turn can be classified into two broad categories:

- Permanent Labourers attached to cultivating households.
- Casual Labourers. The second group can again be divided into three subgroups :

- (i) Cultivators
- (ii) Share croppers
- (iii) Lease holders.

Permanent or attached labourers generally work on annual or seasonal basis and they work on some sort of contract. Their wages are determined by custom or tradition. On the other hand temporary or casual labourers are engaged only during peak period for work. Their employment is temporary and they are paid at the market rate. They are not attached to any landlords. Under second group comes small farmers, who possess very little land and therefore, has to devote most of their time working on the lands of others as labourers. Share croppers are those who, while sharing the produce of the land for their work, also work as labourers. Tenants are those who not only work on the leased land but also work as labourers.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The present study is concerned with the ‘dynamics of occupational change of agricultural labour in India. The review of literature has given here relevant studies related to the field selected for study.

Verma, A.K. (2006) explains that “the dark side of the picture emerges when it is reported by 99.32 per cent of the local agricultural labourers that they are never paid by the farmers for extra work done”.

B. Jha (2006) Agriculture sector in India accounts for almost 60.00 per cent of aggregate employment in India. 97.00 per cent workers of agriculture hail from rural sector. The rate of growth of agricultural employment is abysmally low (.006 per cent) and was insignificant during the 1990’s. The agriculture sector almost stopped absorbing more labour in

it and it is found that there have been mixture of the both push as well as pull factors being responsible for these changes in employment in agriculture sector.

Bhaumik, S.K. (2007) states that “the rural work force flocked during the post reform period whenever the prospects of farm employment dwindled like present phase of agrarian crisis in India. The recent spurt in rural non-farm employment seems to have occurred due to slack in farm sector employment. In any case, the rural non-farm sector in India appears to have been the sector of ‘last resort’ to the growing workforce, and it would remain so in future too unless there is marked improvement in employment opportunities in the farm sector.”

Sunita Sanghi A Srija and Shirke Shrinivas Vijay (2015) discusses about that economy transforms from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy decline in participation of female labours force has been observed. Finally, they concluded that declining fertility rate, caring of child and other factors which have caused for the decline of women participation in outer works in India.

Venu B. N, Umesh K.B. and Gaddi G.M (2016) reveals that migration of labours from their native place to small distance and within the district is high in rainy season but in other season agriculture labourers’ migration to other district was relatively high in Karnataka.

Neela Multami and Sanghvi A.N (2017) states that womens’ participation in agricultural activities is less as compared to men and faces more problems than mean in India.

Sawant T.R (2017) Agricultural labours condition is not good in India and government should twice its budgetary allocation to improve the condition of agricultural labours.

Venkateswarlu & M. Ramakrishna Reddy (2017) argued that agriculture labour is counted in the category of unorganized sector so the income is not fixed they are not covered any nsecure and full uncertainty in their earnings.

III. METHODOLOGY

The method used in this paper is descriptive-evaluative method. The study is mainly review based. It is purely supported by secondary source of data, i.e. books, journals, papers and articles and internet.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Characteristics of Agricultural Labourers:

Before any attempt is made to evolve a rational policy to improve the living conditions of agricultural labours which happens to belong to the lowest rung of social and economic ladder, it is essential to know the distinguishing features that characterize agricultural labourer in India. The main features, characterizing Indian agricultural labour are as follows :

Agricultural Labourers are Scattered:

Agricultural labour in India is being widely scattered over 5.6 lakh villages, of which half have population of less than 500 each. And therefore, any question of building an effective organization, like that of industrial workers, poses insurmountable difficulties. Thus as the vast number of agricultural labour lies scattered all over India, there has been no successful attempt for long, to build their effective organization even at the state level not to speak of the national level.

Agricultural Labourers are Unskilled and Lack Training:

Agricultural labourers, especially in smaller villages away from towns and cities, are generally unskilled workers carrying on agricultural operation in the centuries old traditional wages. Most of them, especially those in small isolated villages with around 500 population, may not have even heard of modernization of agriculture. Majority of them are generally conservative, tradition bound, totalistic and resigned to the insufferable lot to which according to them fate has condemned them. There is hardly any motivation for change or improvement. Since, there is direct supervision by the landlord, there is hardly any escape form hard work and since there is no alternative employment. The agricultural labourer has to do all types of work-farm and domestic at the bidding of the landlord.

Unorganised Sector:

Agricultural labourers are not organized like industrial labourers. They are illiterate and ignorant. They live in scattered villages. Hence they could not organize in unions. In urban areas workers could generally organize themselves in unions and it is convenient for political parties to take interest in trade union activities. This is almost difficult in case of farm labour. Accordingly, it is difficult for them to bargain with the land owners and secure good wages.

Low Social Status:

Most agricultural workers belong to the depressed classes, which have been neglected for ages. The low caste and depressed classes have been socially handicapped and they had never the courage to assert themselves. They have been like dump-driven cattle. In some parts of India, agricultural labourers are migratory, moving in search of jobs at the time of harvesting. Government measures to improve their lot by legislation have proved ineffective so far due to powerful hold of the rural elite classes in the rural economy.

Demand and Supply of Labour:

The number of agricultural labourers being very large and skills they possess being meager, there are generally more than abundant supply of agricultural labourer in relation to demand for them. It is only during the sowing and harvesting seasons that there appears to be nearfull employment in the case of agricultural labourers. But, once the harvesting season is over, majority of agricultural workers will be jobless especially in areas, where there is single cropping pattern.

Less Bargaining Power:

Due to all the above mentioned factors, the bargaining power and position of agricultural labourers in India is very weak. In fact, quite a large number of them are in the grip of village money lenders, landlords and commission agents, often the same person functioning in all the three capacities. No wonder, the agricultural labour is the most exploited class of people of India.

At the Bidding of the Landlord:

There is generally direct and day to day 'contact between agricultural labourers and the landlords' on whose farm they are working. Unlike industrial workers, this direct contact between the employer and employees is a distinct feature of agriculture labourer. The above mentioned few important characteristics distinguish agricultural labourers in India from industrial workers. Thus partly because of factors beyond their control and partly because of their inherent bargaining weakness, the farm labourers have been getting very low wages and have therefore to live in a miserable sub-human life.

Bonded Labourers:

At the bottom of the agricultural cadre in India are those labourers whose conditions are not very different from those of serfs. Agricultural serfdom has been most prevalent in those parts of India where the lower and the depressed classes and most in numerous. The ethnic composition of villages which governs the social stratification is responsible for the survival of the slavish conditions.

Causes for the Growth of Agricultural Laborers:

There are a number of factors responsible for the continuous and enormous increase in the number of agricultural laborers in India. The more important among them are:

vi) Increase in Rural Population:

The increase in population is the major cause of sub-division and uneconomic land holding in the rural area as the same piece of land gets distributed among large number of persons in the family which becomes inadequate for their own basic requirements. Thus the rural families have to search for the employment to fulfil their economic needs.

ii) Decline of Cottage Industries and Handicrafts:

The rural industries are on the decline due to increased competition from modern industries. In the absence of the alternative employment opportunities for workers engaged in these village industries there is an increase of agriculture labor in India.

iii) Eviction of Small Farmers and Tenants from the Land:

During the british rules increase in the number of intermediaries, the land started slipping out of the hands of small farmers and they were forced either to adopt the status of tenants or work as agricultural labourers. A majority of these people had no alternative but to seek employment as agricultural labourer.

iv) Uneconomic Land Holdings:

The vast inequality in the distribution of land-holding has resulted in the need to search for the rural employment.

v) Increase in Indebtedness:

A very large proportion of rural population is in the grip of non-institutional source of credit especially money-lenders that charge huge interest. In order to pay these debts, poor farmers have to sell their land and look for the employment on other's farms.

vi) Break-up of Joint Family System

The economic support system has been reduced with the break-up of the joint family system. This has increased the need to work outside the family's land-holding.

Problems of Agricultural Labour in India:

The agricultural Labourers are one of the most exploited and oppressed classes in rural hierarchy. Marginalization of Agricultural Workers: The workforce in agriculture (cultivators plus agricultural Labourers) was 97.2 million in 1951 and this rose to 185.2 million in 1991. As against this, the number of agricultural Labourers rose from 27.3 million in 1951 to 74.6 million in 1991. This implies that (i) the number of agricultural Labourers increased by almost three times over the period from 1951 to 1991; Agricultural Labourers increased from 28 per cent in 1951 to 40 per cent in 1991. These facts indicate the fast pace of casualisation of workforce in agriculture in India. Moreover, the share of agriculture and allied activities in GDP at factor cost has consistently declined over the years – from 55.3 per cent in 1950-51 to 37.9 per cent in 1980-81 (at 1999-2000 prices) and further to 14.0 per cent in 2011-12 (at 2004-05 prices).the implication is that the gap per worker GDP in agriculture and non –agriculture widened markedly over the post –independence decades The widening gap, considered in the context of casualisation of workforce in agriculture mentioned above appears to provide a clear indication of the marginalization process operating in agriculture. Wages and Income: Agricultural wages and family incomes of agricultural workers are very low in India. With the advent of the Green Revolution, money wage rates started increasing. However, as prices also increased considerably, the real wage rates did not increase accordingly. Currently labours are getting around Rs. 150/day under the MGNREGA in rural areas.

Employment and Working Conditions: The agricultural Labourers have to face the problems of unemployment and underemployment. For a substantial part of the year, they have to remain unemployed because there is no work on the farms and alternative sources of employment do not exist. Indebtedness: Because of the low level of their incomes, agricultural workers have to seek debts off and on. However because of their extreme poverty, they are not in a position to provide any security. Therefore institutional agencies are reluctant to provide loans to them. In the absence of banking system in the rural areas and trial process of sanction by the commercial banks, farmers prefer to take loans from an institutional sources like Sahukars (moneylenders), landlords at the very high rate (in some cases at 40% to 50%). This exorbitant rate traps in the vicious circle of debt. In fact, the debt of agricultural labourers passes from generation to generation and is never fully paid up.

High Incidence of Child Labour:

Incidence of child labour is high in India an estimated number varies from 17.5 million to 44 million. It is estimated that one-third of the child workers in Asia are in India.

Increase in Migrant Labour: Green Revolution significantly increased remunerative wage employment opportunities in pockets of assured irrigation areas while employment opportunities nearly stagnated in the vast rain fed semi-arid areas.

Measures taken by the Government to improve the Conditions of Agricultural Labourers :

The Government has shown awareness of the problems of agricultural workers and all plan documents have suggested ways and means to ameliorate the lot of these people. Measures adopted by the Government for ameliorating the economic conditions of Agricultural labourers are

- Passing of minimum wage Act.
- Abolition of Bonded Labourers
- Providing land to landless labourers

- Provision of Housing cities to houseless

Special schemes for providing employment:

- Crash Scheme for Rural Employment (CSRE)
- Pilot Intensive Rural Employment Project (PIREP)
- Food for works programme (FWP)
- National Rural Employment Programme (NREP)
- Rural Landless Employment Programme (RLEP)
- Drought Prone Area Programme (It was known as Rural Works Programme)
- Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (which come in with the merger of NREP and RLEGP)
- Desert Development Programme
- National Scheme of Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSM)
- Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)
- Abolition of Bonded Labourer Act
- Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP)
- MG MNREGA

Suggestions for the Improvement of Agricultural Labours :

The following suggestions can be made for the improvement of the socio-economic position of the agricultural labourers :

- Better implementation of legislative measures.
- Improvement the bargaining position.
- Resettlement of agricultural workers
- Creating alternative sources of employment
- Protection of women and child labourers
- Public works programmes should be for longer period in year
- Improving the working conditions
- Regulation of hours of work
- Improvements in Agricultural sector
- Credit at cheaper rates of interest on easy terms of payment for undertaking subsidiary occupation.
- Proper training for improving the skill of farm labourers

V. CONCLUSION

In India agriculture is the largest sector of economic activity. It provides not only food and raw materials but also employment to a very large proportion of the population. Being the dominant sector the improvement or changes in national output depend on agriculture. Agriculture forms the back-bone of the Indian economy. In order to guarantee sustainable agricultural development in the new millennium, rural workers and their families should have access to adequate working and living conditions, health and welfare. An adequate balance between agricultural growth and the protection of the environment is also crucial for the future of the world's food production and for its sustainability. Occupational health in agriculture must be integrated into a rural development policy with a well-defined strategy.

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