

## 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 20th century.

Agriculture is one of the three most hazardous sectors of activity, both in industrialized and developing countries. According to estimates from the International Labour Office (ILO), some 170,000 agricultural workers are killed each year. This means that workers in agriculture run at least twice the risk of dying on the job as compared with workers in other sectors. Agricultural mortality rates have remained consistently high in the last decade as compared with other sectors, where fatal accident rates have decreased. Millions of agricultural workers are seriously injured in workplace accidents with agricultural machinery or poisoned by pesticides and other agrochemicals. Furthermore, due to the widespread under-reporting of deaths, injuries and occupational diseases in agriculture, the real picture of the occupational health and safety of farm workers is likely to be worse than what official statistics indicate.

**Keywords:** Agriculture, Technology, Globalization

### 1. 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 Labour Unlike industrial labour, agricultural labour is difficult to define. The reason is that unless capitalism develops fully in agriculture, a separate class of workers depending wholly on wages does not come up. Different experts and various committees have been set up by the Government of India to study the problems of agricultural labour have attempted to provide a precise definition of the term 'agricultural labour'. The basic definition of agricultural labour was provided by the department of Census, Government of India. According to the Census 99 of India, 1961, all those workers were included in the category of agricultural labour who worked on the farms of others and received payment either in cash or kind (or both).. According to the National Commission on Labour "an agricultural labourer is one who is basically unskilled and unorganised and has little for its livelihood, other than personal labour." Thus, persons whose main source of income is wage, employment fall in this category. 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.

### 2. Types of Agricultural Labourers

Agriculture laborers can be classified into two broad categories:

#### i) Landless Agricultural Laborer

The laborers don't possess land and can be further sub-divided into:

Hired Labourer and bonded labourer: Hired labour can further be divided into two groups; casual labour and attached labour. Attached workers who are more or less in continuous employment, are under some sort of contract with the employers during the period of employment, while casual workers are employed from time to time according to the exigencies of work.

Casual Labourers are employed on daily wages for specific operation which lasts only for a short period. While attached

workers are often employed on contract, mostly oral contract, extending over a longer period that is quarterly, half yearly or yearly. The wages of attached Labourers are generally lower than those of casual Labourers who are employed on piece work basis. The terms and conditions of employment of attached workers vary from region to region, according to local tradition. A striking difference between the casual and attached labour is that the former is free to choose his own employer as well, as jobs, while the latter is not free to do so. The bulk of agricultural labour is casual labour in our country as most Labourers prefer individual freedom and higher wage to security of job. In recent times the annual contract are fast disappearing and Labourers are employed on monthly basis and they are free to change their employers and jobs whenever they want to do so.

#### Bonded Labourer

There is also a special class of agricultural labour called the 'bonded labour' who are at the bottom of agricultural ladder in India. The prominent feature of this system is that a man pledges himself or sometimes a member of his family against a loan. Inability to pay back the loan results in the attachment of that person to the creditor till such time when the loan is finally paid.

#### ii) Small and Marginal Land-Owners

These are very small cultivators whose main source of earnings due to their small and marginal holdings is wage employment. These laborers can again be divided into three subgroups:

- i) Cultivators: Cultivators are small farmers, who possess very little land and therefore, have to devote most of their time working on the lands of others as Labourers.
- ii) Share croppers: Share croppers are those who, while sharing the produce of the land for their work, also work as Labourers.
- iii) Lease holders: Lease holders are the tenants who not only work on the leased land but also work as Labourers.

### 3. Characteristics of Agricultural Labourers

#### i) Agricultural Laborers are scattered

Agricultural labour in India is being widely scattered over large number of villages in the country and so cannot be effectively organized. 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.

#### ii) Unorganised

Agricultural laborers are not organized like industrial laborers. These laborers are illiterate and ignorant. They live in villages scattered all over the country. A lack of contact between workers makes it impossible to develop any meaningful organization. Hence they could not be organized in unions. Agricultural workers need not work in unison. 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 secure good wages.

#### iii) Unskilled and Lack Training

Agricultural Labourers, especially in smaller villages are generally unskilled workers carrying on agricultural operation at a very low wages. They may not be skilled even in the art of cultivation. Consequently, their supply is perfectly elastic and therefore whatever they earn is in the nature of transfer earnings. Majority of them are generally conservative and tradition bound. There is hardly any motivation for change or improvement. Since there is no alternative employment, the agricultural labourer has to do all types of work- both farm and domestic for landlord.

#### iv) Low Social Status

A large number of agricultural workers belong to the depressed classes, which have been neglected for ages. Most of them are illiterate, their income is low and employment irregular. In some parts of India, agricultural laborers are migratory, moving in search of jobs at the time of harvesting with a lot of dislocation of family life, dislocation of education of children and numerous other handicaps. 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.

#### v) Low 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. The farm laborers have been getting very low wages and have therefore to live in a miserable sub-human life.

#### vi) More supply less demand

The agricultural Labourers are abundant in supply in relation to their demand. It is only during the sowing and harvesting seasons that there appears to be nearful employment. But, once these seasons are over, majority of agricultural workers are jobless especially in areas, where there is single cropping pattern. The problem is further aggravated due to the fact that these labors are generally unskilled and so couldn't find alternative employment.

### 4. 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

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

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.

### 5. 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:

#### i) 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 fulfill 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 laborers. 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 un 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 laborers 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.

### 6. Government Measures

The Government has shown awareness of the problems of agricultural workers and suggested ways and means to improve the conditions of agricultural laborers. These are discussed as follows:

#### i) Legislative Measures

The minimum wages Act was passed in 1948, according to which every state Government was asked to fix minimum wages for agricultural labour within three years. The minimum

wages are fixed keeping in view the total costs and standard of living. Subsequently, the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 was enacted to provide certain basic facilities to plantation workers. Many other existing labour laws are applicable or have direct bearing on agricultural labour. The Zamindari system has been abolished by law in all the states and with that all the exploitation associated with the system has been removed. Besides, tenancy laws have been passed in most of the states protecting the interests of the tenants and Labourers and enabling them to acquire the lands they cultivated. Since Independence, attempts have been made to abolish the evil of bonded labour because it is exploitative, inhuman and violative of all norms of social justice. In the chapter on Fundamental Rights in the Constitution of India, it has been stated that trading in humans and forcing them to do begar is prohibited and can invite punishment under the law.

#### **ii) Abolition of Bonded Laborers**

Since Independence, attempts have been made to abolish the evil of bonded labour because it is exploitative, inhuman and violative of all norms of social justice. In the chapter on Fundamental Rights in the Constitution of India, it has been stated that trading in humans and forcing them to do begar is prohibited and can invite punishment under the law. Since 1975 the concept of bonded labor has been abolished. Under the Bonded labour system (Abolition) Act, every bonded laborer is free and is discharged from any obligation to render bonded labour. The rehabilitation programmes have been initiated to improve the conditions of erstwhile bonded laborer.

#### **iii) Providing Land to Landless Laborers**

Land reforms in terms of land ceilings and redistribution of land to small and landless laborers have been initiated. The government's fallow and wasteland has been given to agricultural laborers. The state government gives priority to landless laborer especially to those belonging to scheduled castes and tribes in the allotment of government land and surplus land.

#### **iv) Special Employment Schemes**

The special employment programmes have been initiated to promote social justice among the poor such as i) Crash Scheme for Rural Employment (CSRE) ii) Pilot Intensive Rural Employment Project (PIREP) iii) Food for works programme (FWP) iv) National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) v) Rural Landless Employment programme (RLEP) vi) Drought Prone Area Programme (It was known as Rural Works Programme) Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act MGNREGA. These programmes help in providing supplementary employment to agricultural Labourer.

#### **v) Welfare Measures**

The welfare measures to help the agricultural laborer include provision of house-sites to homeless, primary education for rural poor, rural health services, supply of safe drinking water, educating and organizing rural workers.

#### **vi) Provision of housing sites**

Laws have been passed in several States for providing house sites in villages to agricultural workers.

#### **vii) Special agencies for development**

Special agencies - Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA) and Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labourers Development Agency (MFAL) - were created in 1970-71 to solve the problems of Agriculture labour of the country.

#### **viii) Organization of Labour Co-Operatives**

During the Second Five-Year Plan, efforts were made to encourage the formation of labour co-operatives. These co-operatives whose members are workers would undertake the contract of government projects, such as construction of roads, digging of canals and tanks, a forestation etc. They provide employment to agricultural workers during off-season and also eliminate the possible exploitation of workers by the private contractors. The basic idea of the movement is commendable. The movement has yet to gain momentum in the rural areas.

#### **ix) 20-Point Programme**

In July, 1975, the Government introduced the 20-point economic programme which included a number of measures to improve the economic condition of the landless workers and other workers in the community of the villages. These measures were i) Speedy implementation of ceiling legislation and distribution of surplus land among landless Labourers and small peasants; ii) Provision of house sites for landless Labourers and conferment of ownership rights of the houses if they have been occupied by them for a certain period; iii) Abolition of bonded labour; iv) Liquidation of rural indebtedness and moratorium on recovery of debts from landless Labourers, artisans and small peasants.

### **7. Socioeconomic Condition of Agricultural Labourers in India**

Agricultural Labourer is at the lowest rung in the socioeconomic set-up of the rural society as would be seen from the following facts.

1. A major part of agricultural labour households do not own any land. As per the 32nd round of the NSS about 51.37 per cent of the agricultural labour households did not own any land. The average size of land cultivated per agricultural labour households was 1.33 acre only.
2. Agricultural labourer remain as unemployed for a large part of the year, he finds only seasonal employment. This is the period when he is forced to borrow and fall in debt. Once if he falls in debt he finds it hard to get out the bondage.
3. Hours of work in agriculture depends upon natural factors. The working conditions obviously are fixed by nature. Since they have to work in the open they work both in sun and rain. The hours of work vary from place to place, season to season and from crop to crop. The working hours are generally from sunrise to sunset. Sometime they are made to work during the nights as well for irrigation and threshing. In fact, terms are dictated to them and they have absolutely no bargaining power.
4. The household income and consumption expenditure of an average agricultural labour households are precariously balanced, and that too when they find some work. Otherwise, most of them are in debt, which they owe to the money lenders and other local sources. As per NSS estimates, 52.32 per cent of agricultural labour

households were indebted at national level. The percentage of indebted households was observed to be higher than the national level in many states, like A.P., Haryana, J&K, Kerala, Punjab, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. The highest proportion was found in Kerala (80.76%) and lowest in Assam (11.75%). The total outstanding debt per households at the all India level was reported to be Rs. 680. The highest (Rs. 1,808) was in Rajasthan and the lowest (Rs. 244) in West Bengal.

5. The money wages of agricultural labourer are miserably low. In spite of the fact that minimum wages legislation has been enacted in most of the states, this is hardly observed. 112
6. Finally the standard of living of agricultural Labourers is degrading. The abject poverty, which is largely the consequence of a meager income level, haunts every aspect of their living. This can be quantified in terms of low consumption expenditure on the one hand and the pattern of consumption on the other. As is to be expected food forms the most significant items of consumption expenditure of these households. As per the Agricultural Labour Enquiry Reports these households spend 85.3 per cent of their income on food, 6.3 per cent on clothing and footwear and 8.4 per cent on services and miscellaneous. The consumption pattern is indicative of extreme backwardness and unemployment

### 8. Suggestions for the Improvement of Agricultural Laborers

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

- Better Implementation of Legislative Measures: The poor laborers are not in a position to bargain for reasonable rewards for their hard work due to lack of organized efforts to implement the legislations.
- Improvement the Bargaining Position: The agricultural laborers may be organized so that they can effectively bargain for better working conditions and enable better enforcement of legislations.
- Resettlement of Agricultural Workers: The schemes of land redistribution to small and landless laborers needs to be strengthened so as to raise their income level and social status.
- Creating Alternative Employment: The training and skill improvement programmes are required to be developed to allow alternative employment opportunities for rural workers. The public works schemes should be for longer period in the year so as to provide useful employment throughout the year. Non-agricultural industries should be developed so as to absorb surplus labor. The Development of medicinal plants and energy Plantation which have high growth and employment potential should be encouraged. Horticulture, farm management programmes, agri-clinics and seed production are other potential areas for employment generation.
- Improvements in Agricultural Sector: The rural infrastructure development like better irrigation facilities, warehousing, easy access to agricultural inputs etc, and effective implementation of land reforms and spread of farm mechanization can help to improve economic well-being of agricultural laborers.

- Better Credit Availability: The financial assistance at cheaper rates of interest and on easy terms of payment for undertaking subsidiary occupation should be provided.
- Cooperative Farming: The cooperative farming by pooling of land by small and marginal farmers may be developed. This measure would provide better incentive to improve productivity of farm as these farmers will continue to be owners of their land and share the fruits of their efforts. Government should facilitate the smooth working of these cooperatives by providing cheap credit, marketing and inputs.
- Increase in Public Investment: There is a need to step up public investment in agriculture especially in creating affordable rural social infrastructure like cheap education, health facilities, drinking water etc. This would help in improving the growth potential of rural poor. The subsidies are required to be better targeted towards rural poor. The public expenditure may be directed towards re-generation of degraded forests, watershed development, wasteland development and other highly labor intensive activities.
- 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
- Proper training for improving the skill of farm Labourers

### 9. 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. It should place an emphasis on prevention and environmental protection to be consistent with current trends and should be addressed both at national and international levels.

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