

Agricultural Labour in India - A Close Look

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It is one of the primary objects of the Five Year Plan to ensure fuller opportunities for work and better living to all the sections of the rural community and, in particular, to assist agricultural labourers and backward classes to come to the level of the rest.

One of the most distinguishing features of the rural economy of India has been the growth in the number of agricultural workers, cultivators and agricultural labourers engaged in crop production. The phenomena of under-employment, 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.

Agricultural workers constitute the most neglected class in Indian rural structure. Their income is low and employment irregular. Since, they possess no skill or training, they have no alternative employment opportunities either. Socially, a large number of agricultural workers belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Therefore, they are a suppressed class. 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 four decades of planning.

This can also be seen from the Prime Minister's speech made in Lok Sabha on August 4, 1966. The Prime minister emphasized -

"We must give special consideration to the landless agricultural labour. Although there has been tremendous progress in India since Independence, this is one section, which has really a very hard time and which is deserving very special consideration."¹

Seasonal unemployment is a characteristic feature of Agricultural Industry and under employment of man power is inherent in the system of family farming. According to first A.L.E.C., adult male agricultural labourers were employed on wages for 189 days in agricultural work and for 29 days in non-agricultural work i.e. 218 day in all. They were self-employed for 75 days. Casual male workers found employment for only 200 days, while attached workers were employed for 326 days in a year. Women workers employed for 134 days in a year.

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.

Difficulties in defining agricultural labour are compounded by the fact that many small and

marginal farmers also work partly on the farms of others to supplement their income. To what extent should they (or their family members) be considered agricultural labourers is not easy to answer.

However, it will be useful to refer some of the attempts made by experts in this connection.

1. The First Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee 1950-55 defined Agricultural Labourer as - "Those people who are engaged in raising crops on payment of wages"

2. The Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee 1956-57 enlarged the distribution to include -

"Those who are engaged in other agricultural occupations like dairy, farming, horticulture, raising of live-stock, bees, poultry etc. "In the context of Indian conditions the definition is not adequate, because it is not possible to completely separate those working on wages from others. There are people who do not work on wages throughout the year but only for a part of it.

Therefore, the first A.L.E.C. used the concept of agricultural labour household. If half or more members of household have wage, employment in agriculture then those households should be termed as agricultural labour household. This concept was based upon the occupation of the worker.

The Second Committee submitted that to know whether a household is an agricultural labour household, we must examine its main source of income. If 50% or more of its income is derived as wages for work rendered in agriculture only, then it could be classed to agricultural labour household.

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 workers. For a major part of the year they should work on the land of the others on wages."

Classification of Agricultural Labourers :

Agricultural labourers can be divided into four categories -

1. Landless Labourers, who are attached to the land lords;
2. Landless labourers, who are personally independent, but who work exclusively for others;
3. Petty farmers with tiny bits of land who devote most of their time working for others and
4. 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 :

1. Landless agricultural labourers
2. 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 :

1. Permanent Labourers attached to cultivating households.

2. 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.

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 :

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

Agricultural Serfs or 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. In Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, a large aboriginal population live and the condition of this agricultural labours is very much like that of slaves. These are called in different names in different States.

The following table-3 indicates the number of bonded labourers identified, released and rehabilitated as on 31.12.1995.

Statement showing the number of bonded labourers identified and released as on 31.12.1985 as per the reports received from the State Governments.

Name of State	No.of bonded labourers	Identified, freed & Rehabilitated
Andhra Pradesh	61,336	14,017
Bihar	11,002	9,472
Gujarat	61	38
Haryana	195	21
Karnataka	62,689	40,033
Kerala	829	820
Madhya Pradesh	4,655	2,912

Maharashtra	772	319
Orissa	41,065	27,817
Rajasthan	6,813	5,770
Tamil Nadu	32,581	31,591
Uttar Pradesh	16,199	13,420
Total	1,93,197	1,46,230
Balance	46,967	

means 22.7% of the total labour force. Similarly as per 1991 census, the total number of agricultural labourers was increased from 92.5 million in 1981 to 110.6 million in 1991. This means the percentage of agricultural labourers over total labour force, increased from 22.7 in 1981 to 26.1 in 1991. This can be seen in the following table.

According to 1981 census, the number of agricultural workers was 55.4 million, which

Population and Agricultural Workers

Year	Total Population (millions)	Annual Compound growth rate (%)	Rural Population (millions)	Cultivators	Agricultural labourers	Other workers	Total
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1951	361.1	(1.25)	298.6 (82.7)	69.9 (49.9)	27.3 (19.5)	42.8 (30.6)	140.0 (100.0)
1961	439.2	(1.96)	360.3 (82.0)	99.6 (52.8)	31.5 (16.7)	57.6 (30.5)	188.7 (100.0)
1971	548.9	(2.20)	439.1 (80.1)	78.3 (43.4)	47.5 (26.3)	54.7 (30.3)	180.5 (100.0)
1981	685.2	(2.22)	525.5 (76.7)	92.5 (37.8)	55.5 (22.7)	96.6(a) (39.5)	244.6 (100.0)
1991@	844.3	(2.11)	627.1 (74.3)	110.6 (38.8)	74.6 (26.1)	100.2 (35.1)	285.4 (100.0)
2000	987.3	(1.02)					

* Estimated population, as on 1st March 2000.

@ Figures of total/rural population include the projected population of Assam, whereas in respect of data on workers, Assam has been excluded.

(a) Includes marginal workers.

Note : Figures in brackets give percentage to total.

Source : Registrar General's Office for the data of years 1951 to 1991

Causes for the Growth of Agricultural Labourers :

There are a number of factors responsible for the continuous and enormous increase in the number of agricultural labourers in India.

The more important among them are :

1. Increase in population
2. Decline of cottage industries and handicrafts

3. Eviction of small farmers and tenants from land
4. Uneconomic Holdings
5. Increase in indebtedness
6. Spread of the use of money and exchange system
7. Capitalistic Agriculture
8. Displacement of means of subsidiary occupations
9. Disintegration of peasantry
10. Break-up of joint family system.

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

1. Passing of minimum wage Act.
2. Abolition of Bonded Labourers
3. Providing land to landless labourers
4. Provision of Housing cities to houseless
5. **Special schemes for providing employment**
 - 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)

6. Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (which come in with the merger of NREP and RLEGP)
7. Desert Development Programme
8. National Scheme of Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSM)
9. Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)
10. Abolition of Bonded Labourer Act
11. Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP)

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 :

1. Better implementation of legislative measures.
2. Improvement the bargaining position.
3. Resettlement of agricultural workers
4. Creating alternative sources of employment
5. Protection of women and child labourers
6. Public works programmes should be for longer period in year
7. Improving the working conditions
8. Regulation of hours of work
9. Improvements in Agricultural sector
10. Credit at cheaper rates of interest on easy terms of payment for undertaking subsidiary occupation.
11. Proper training for improving the skill of farm labourers
12. Cooperative farming

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