



PROBLEM AND PROSPECTS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR

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INTRODUCTION:

The First Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee of 1950-51 regarded those people as agricultural workers who were engaged in raising crops on payment of wages. Since in India, a large number of workers do not work against payment of wages all the year round, this definition was incomplete. Accordingly, the Committee laid down that those people should be regarded as agricultural workers who worked for 50 percent or more days on payment of wages. Therefore, even those people were included under the category of agricultural workers who possessed some land or were rural artisans but who worked 50 percent or more days on the land or others against payment of wages. The committee also defined an agricultural labour household. In the opinion of the committee, if the head of a household or 50 percent or more of the earners report agricultural labour as their main occupation, that family should be classified as an agricultural labour household. The Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee of 1956-57 took a broad view of agricultural activities to include those workers also who were engaged in allied activities like animal husbandry, dairy, poultry, piggery, etc. 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 percent or more its income is derived as wages for work rendered in agriculture, only then it could be classified as agricultural labour household. The changeover from 'work' to 'income' seems more scientific. However, even this is not without flaws. It often happens that the head of the household goes to a city to work in the unorganized sector on a temporary basis or finds job in some public construction programme, whereas other members of his family remain in the village and continue to work in agriculture against payment of wages. Properly speaking, this household should be classified as an agricultural labour household even if it derives a major portion of its income from other occupations in some particular years.

Accordingly to the National Labour Commission, a major portion of income of agricultural workers is in the form of wages obtained as a result of working on land. These workers have nothing except their labour to earn livelihood. They are generally unskilled and unorganized. In the Census of India 1961, all those workers were included in the category of agricultural workers who worked on the farms of others and received payment either in money or kind (or both). The 1971 Census excluded those people from agricultural laborers for whom working on the farms of others was a secondary occupation.

Growth of Agricultural Labour in India:

The number agricultural labour has continuously increased in India. There are various factors responsible. The more important ones are the followings

- a) Increase in Population.
- b) Decline of Cottage, Industries and Village handicrafts.
- c) Uneconomic holdings.
- d) Spread of the use of money and exchange system.
- e) Capitalist agriculture.
- f) Eviction of small farmers and tenants from land.

Table No 1
Growth of Agricultural Labour in India

Year	Number (in millions)
1951	28.0
1961	32.0
1971	48.0
1981	55.5
1991	74.7
2001	107.4
2011	144.3

The data provided in Table No 1 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.

Distribution of Agricultural in India:-

Economic development involves structural change in the overall economy of any country. According to Kaldor “one of the best known generalizations in economics is that development involves a continued fall in the share of the ‘primary’ sector of the ‘secondary’ and ‘tertiary’ sectors”.

In this section, the shares among the three major categories viz, total agricultural workers (cultivators + Agricultural labour) only cultivators and only agricultural labourers are considered for looking distribution of agricultural workforce in India, during period of 1961 to 2011. It can be seen from the Table No. 2

Table No 2
Distribution of Agricultural Workforce in India, During 1961-2011

Year	Total Population (in millions)	Total Agricultural Workers (in percent)	Total Cultivators (in percent)	Total Agricultural Labourers (in percent)
1961	439	72.36	52.80	19.56
1971	548	70.12	43.14	26.98
1981	683	68.35	42.33	26.02
1991	844	67.01	39.85	27.16
2001	1027	58.40	31.71	26.69
2011	1210	54.60	24.60	30.00

The Table No 2 shows that the Indian population is tremendously increasing since the period of 1961 to 2011. But the working population engaged in agricultural in 1961 was 72.36 percent, whereas, in 2011 it is only 54.60 percent. It shows that dependency of population on agricultural has declined and cultivator's percentage has also declined during the same period. But the agricultural labourers workforce has increased in during the period of 1961 to 1991, whereas, in 2011 it has slightly declined. However, the agricultural labourers workforce has increased in 2011. The percentage of cultivators has also declined during the periods of 1961 to 2011. The proportion of agricultural labourers was estimated at 19.56 percent, 26.98 percent, 26.02 percent, 27.16 percent, 26.69 percent and 30.00 percent in 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011 respectively. Form this it may be concluded that agricultural workforce is shifting from agricultural to other sectors.



Problems of Agricultural Labourers in India:-

The class of agricultural labourers is the most exploited and oppressed class in rural hierarchy. Before Independence, their position was nothing better than that of serfs. They were required to perform all sorts of beggar on the master's land and house, work as domestic servants from dawn to dusk and do anything and everything that the zamindars demanded of them. They were victims of social discrimination and economic exploitation. If they failed to tow the lines of the master, they were beaten up and tortured. By advancing small loans to them, the zamindars and landlords often succeeded in trapping these poor people in their net and converted them into virtual slaves. This slavery continued from generation to generation and forced the agricultural workers to lead a wretched existence of deprivation and oppression. The situation has improved in the 65 years of independence. Through even now the class of agricultural workers is the poorest and resource less class in rural areas, it is no longer a victim of extreme forms of oppression. But economic exploitation continues. Even now their level of income is very low and highly insufficient to enable them to make both ends meet. Even now their consumption standards are very low. In the absence of alternative sources of employment, they are forced to depend on landlords who consequently standards are very low. In the absence of alternative sources of employment, they are forced to depend on landlords who consequently dictate terms. The simple law of demand and supply operates. Since their supply is excessive in relation to the demand for them, they have to settle for extremely low wages. The alternative is worse unemployment. The following problems of agricultural labours in India.

Marginalization of agricultural workers:-

The workforce in agriculture (cultivators plus agricultural labourers) was 97.2 million in 1951 and this rose to 263.0 million in 2011. As against this, the number of agricultural labourers rose from 27.5 million in 1951 to 144.3 million in 2011. This implies that (i) the number of agricultural labourers increased by more than five times over the period 1951 to 2011; and (ii) as a proportion of workforce in agriculture, agricultural labourers increased from 28 percent in 1951 to 55 percent in 2011. **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 53.1 percent in 1950-51 to 13.9 percent in 2013-14 (at 2004-05 prices). The share of agriculture and allied activities in GVA (gross value added) at basic prices (2011-12 series) was 17.2 percent in 2013-14 and 16.1 percent in 2014-15. The implication is that the gap per worker GDP in agriculture and that in 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."¹

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. Since they are not organized, they cannot fight for minimum wages either. There is also no provision for fixation of hours of work. At the time of sowing and harvesting, the agricultural workers have to work on the farms from dawn to dusk. Since they are employed on a daily basis, there is no question of any leave or other benefits for them. Though bonded labour has been abolished in the country, yet news about the existence of this system in rural India keep pouring in from different parts of the country.

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. Accordingly, they have to seek credit from non-institutional sources like private moneylenders who charge a high rate well. In fact, the debt of agricultural labourers passes from generation to generation and is never fully paid up.

Feminisation of agricultural labour with low wages:-

Female agricultural workers are generally forced to work harder and are paid less than their male counterparts. Such bias against female workers exists in most of the dryland areas. At many places, wages paid to female workers are even less than the minimum wages.

High incidence of child labour:-

Incidence of child labour is high in India and the 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. The largest numbers of child workers are in agriculture. Child employment benefits the employer but adversely affects the poor as a class although it may supplement the income of the household supplying child labour. The poor are made worse-off as employment of children brings down the wage levels. Moreover, children employed as workers are deprived of education. As a result, their future potential income remains low.

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. Therefore, there has been a large flow of migrant labour from the latter to the former areas. The number of inter-State distress rural migrant workers is estimated to be around 10 million. Even in areas of abundant labour supply, employers prefer rural migrant workers because of the greater control that can be exercised on such labour without regard to any social responsibility. Sankaran draws a graphic sketch of the miserable plight of inter-State migrant labour in these words: “the time they spend in their own village is aimed at keeping them alive until the next recruiting season, often with the help of advances of money by the recruiting agents and while on migratory work the time is spent on keeping them alive until they return to their village.”⁷

The Landlord-Labourer Relationship:-

The relationship between the landlord and the labourer is not uniform throughout the country. There are substantial differences not only among different States but even among different villages of the same States but even among different villages of the same State as regards the period of employment, mode and time-period of payment, freedom of movement, bargaining power vis-avis landlords, beggar etc. Broadly speaking, the relationship between landlords and agricultural labourers who are free. Therefore they can, if they so wish, refuse to work for a particular landlord or zamindar at the prevailing wage rate. They can leave their village and go to some other places for work. In the second category are included those agricultural labourers who work as attached labour. They have to work on the field of their masters and have to accept whatever wages are offered to them. They have been deprived of their freedom in a number of ways. Social customs, oppression and forcible subjugation, burden of indebtedness, etc. have all contributed to strengthen the chains of their serfdom.

Prospects of Agricultural Labours:-

Better Implementation of Legislative Measures:-

Though the minimum wages Act was passed as far back as in 1948, yet its implementation leaves much to be desired. Because of the excessive supply of agricultural workers and lack of organization they are offered very low wages. There is no administrative machinery worth the name to implement effectively the provisions of the Minimum Wages Act. Even otherwise, fixation of minimum wages in an era of continuous and exorbitant rise in prices carries no consolation for the starved masses of agricultural workers. Therefore, it is



necessary to provide for periodical revision of minimum wages keeping the changing price trends in view.

Improving the Bargaining Position:-

Special efforts should be directed towards organizing agricultural workers. It is only such organization that can improve their bargaining power and ensure better wages and better conditions of work for them. This is not easy because the large farmers and big landlords are economically and socially very powerful. Because of their unlimited power, they have succeeded in pinning down whatever little attempts were made by agricultural workers to organize themselves in some parts of the country. They have not refrained from the use of force and violent methods to accomplish this end. Therefore, organization of agricultural workers is possible only under the protection of and support from the government.

Resettlement of Agricultural Workers:-

The surplus land obtained as a consequence of the implementation of land ceiling laws should be distributed amongst agricultural workers. Similarly, newly reclaimed land should be allotted only agricultural workers. However, there are physical limitations to this programme. The supply of land is very much limited in relation to the supply of agricultural workers. To cope with this problem, steps should be taken where employment at fair wages can be provided to the agricultural labourers.

Creating Alternative Sources of Employment:-

From a long-term point of view perhaps, the best policy is to create ample employment opportunities outside the field of agriculture. Because of pressure on land and increasing population it is becoming more and more difficult to absorb additional labour on farms and unless other sectors of the economy create ample employment opportunities it will not be possible to solve the problems of agricultural workers. Perhaps the best strategy is to promote labour-intensive industries, especially small and cottage industries, in rural areas. For this purpose, facilities of power, finance and training of rural youth (especially those belonging to agricultural labour households) should be provided in the villages. This will reduce the dependence of agricultural workers on land and increase their incomes.

Improving the working conditions:-

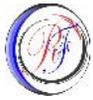
It is necessary to improve the working conditions of agricultural workers. Their hours of work should be statutorily fixed and strictly enforced. In case of work beyond the stipulated hours, overtime payments should be made. Child labour should be totally banned.

Public Works Programmes:-

A major problem of many agricultural workers is that they are employed only for a part of the year, for example, during sowing and harvesting. For the remaining part of the year, they remain unemployed. The period of inactivity may vary from three months to six months. During this period, it is necessary to organize rural works programmes like construction of roads, school buildings, digging of canals, wells, etc., so that employment can be provided to agricultural workers all the year round. Of course, the ultimate solution is the creation of employment opportunities in sectors other than agriculture but still such opportunities are created in an ample measure, public works programmes can be entrusted with the task of providing employment.

Raising the Standards of Living :-

The State can, if it wishes, organize special programmes to improve the standard of living of agricultural workers. Since a large proportion of such workers belong to Scheduled Castes, they are not allowed to take water from village wells. State can arrange for drinking water for them. State can also provide housing sites to agricultural workers so that they do not remain houseless. State can organize fair price shops in rural areas to save agricultural workers from the exploitation of village traders who generally sell goods at high prices. To improve the socio-economic environment in which agricultural labourers work, State can



provide amenities of rural life like health centers, maternity wards, youth clubs, sport facilities, etc. Special programmes for vocational and technical training of agricultural workers can also be arranged.

Social Security:-

Unlike industrial labour, agricultural labour has no social security, no earned leave, no sick leave and no pension or gratuity. Substantial efforts should be directed in this field. Since these labourers are not permanently attached to any employer, the task of providing social security is indeed a complex one. Therefore, this responsibility has to be borne by the State. The State must provide compulsory insurance on marginal contribution or no contribution and institute old age pension schemes so that the agricultural workers do not have to starve or depend on others in their old age.

CONCLUSION:-

Agricultural labour is provided mostly by economically and socially backward sections, poor sections from the tribes also swell ranks. Agricultural labour constitutes the most neglected class in India. Their income is low and employment irregular. Since they possess no skill or training, they have no alternative employment opportunities either. Agricultural labours are not organized and cannot fight for their rights.

Since Independence, the centres as well as the State Governments have taken some measures to improve the economic condition of agricultural labour. They include the passing of legislation to fix minimum wages for agricultural labour. The removal of disabilities, the ceilings on holdings and the redistribution of land among the landless labourers etc

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