



A GLANCE AT THE AGRICULTURE LABOUR IN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION: -

Agriculture, the backbone of Indian economy, contributes to the overall economic growth of the country and determines the standard of life for more than 50% of the Indian population. Agriculture contributes only about 14% to the overall GDP but its impact is felt in the manufacturing sector as well as the services sector as the rural population has become a significant consumer of goods and services in the last couple of decades.

There are various problems that are faced by the agricultural sector like Fragmented land holding, Irrigation problems, Seed problems, Sustainability problems, Supply channel bottlenecks and lack of market understanding, storage facilities etc. but the problems faced by the agricultural labourer are very different because they are the human capital of the country and many aspects of India like the economy, healthcare, social status, education etc. are directly related to the human capital of the country. **Sitra**, Akand. (2014).

DEFINITION: -

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 (in cash or kind or both) 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. The definition includes workers who are engaged in other agri-based occupation such as dairy farming, horticulture, poultry etc. It also includes the people who don't work throughout the year but only for part of the year. Agriculture labor Enquiry Committee defined agriculture labor household as the household whose main source of income is derived as wages for working on farms of others. Rajput, Anupama.(2017).

Classification of Agricultural Labourers :

Padhi, Kulamani. (2007). 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 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:

Padhi, Kulamani. (2007). Before any attempt is made to evolve a rational policy to improve the living conditions of agricultural labourers 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 populations, 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 from 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 near full 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.

Magnitude of Agricultural Laborers:

Rajput, Anupama.(2017). According to 1981 census, the agricultural workers constitute 22.7 percent of the total labour force which is increased to 26.1 percent in 1991. Further, of the total workforce engaged in the agriculture sector has increased dramatically. (Table 1). In 1951, the numbers of agriculture laborer were 27.3 million which rose to 106.8 millions in 2001.

Table 1: Population and Agricultural Workers (In Millions)

Year	Cultivators	Agricultural Labourers	Total
1951	69.9 (71.9)	27.3 (28.1)	97.2 (100.0)
1961	99.6 (76.0)	31.5 (24.0)	131.1 (100.0)
1971	78.2 (62.2)	47.5 (37.8)	125.7 (100.0)
1981	92.5 (62.5)	55.5 (37.5)	148.0 (100.0)
1991	110.7 (59.7)	74.6 (40.3)	185.3 (100.0)
2001	127.3 (54.4)	106.8 (45.6)	234.1 (100.0)

Source: Registrar General of India, New Delhi. Figures within parentheses are percentages to Total Agricultural Work force.

Causes for the Growth of Agricultural Laborers:

Rajput, Anupama.(2017). 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:



1. Increase in Rural Population: The increase in population is the major cause of subdivision 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.

2. 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.

3. Eviction of Small Farmers and Tenants from the Land: The large scale ejection took place through the device of fictitious surrenders to escape the clauses of laws relating to land reforms has caused an increase in the agriculture labor.

4. Uneconomic Land Holdings: The vast inequality in the distribution of land-holding has resulted in the need to search for the rural employment.

5. 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.

6. 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 Agriculture Labour:

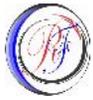
According to Singh, **Pratap Hemant. (2015)** the problems of Agriculture Labour are:

1) Marginalisation of Agricultural Workers: The workforce in agriculture (cultivators and agricultural labourers) was 97.2 million in 1951 and this rose to 185.2 million in 1991. As against this, the number of agricultural rose from 27.3 million in 1951 to 74.6 million in 1991. This implies that the number of agricultural labourers increased from 28 percent in 1951 to 40 percent 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 decline over the years from 55.3 percent in 1950-51 to 37.9 percent in 1980-81.

2) 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 per day under MGNREGA in rural areas.

3) 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 alternatives sources of employment do not exist.

4) Indebtedness: In the absence of banking system in the rural areas and trial process of sanctions by the commercial banks, farmers prefers to take loans from un-institutional



sources like Sahukars/Moneylenders, Landlords, at a very high rate. This exorbitant rate traps in the vicious circle of debt.

5) Low Wages for women in Agricultural Labour: Female agricultural workers are generally forced to work harder and paid less than their male counterparts.

6) 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.

7) 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-dry areas.

Government Measures: Rajput, Anupama.(2017) and Padhi, Kulamani. (2007).

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:

1. Legislative Measures: The central government has fixed minimum wages for workers on farm under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. 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.

2. Abolition of Bonded Laborers: 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.

3. 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.

4. 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).

6. Desert Development Programme

7. National Scheme of Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSM)

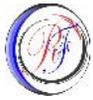
8. Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)

9. Integrated Rural Development Programme(IRDP)

These programmes help in providing supplementary employment to agricultural labourer.

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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