



AGRICULTURE LABOUR IN INDIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Unlike industrial labour, agriculture 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. According to the National Commission on Labour "an agriculture labourer is one who is basically unskilled and unorganized 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 agriculture workers. For a major part of the year they should work on the land of the others on wages." One of the most distinguishing features of the rural economy of India has been the growth in the number of agriculture workers, cultivators and agriculture labourers engaged in crop production. The phenomena of underemployment, underdevelopment and surplus population are simultaneously manifested in the daily lives and living of the agriculture labourers. They usually get low wages, conditions of work put an excessive burden on them, and the employment which they get is extremely irregular. Agriculture 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 agriculture 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

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the growth of Agriculture Labour in India.
2. To study the Distribution of Agriculture Workforce in India.
3. To study the problems of Agriculture Labour in India.
4. To study the measures taken over by government for improving condition of Agriculture Labour in India.

3. GROWTH OF AGRICULTURE 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 agriculture 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 agriculture labour continued to be increased.

Growth of Agriculture 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

Source: Population Census Reports, 1951-2011

The data provided in Table 4.1 shows that the proportion of agriculture 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.

4. DISTRIBUTION OF AGRICULTURE WORKFORCE 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 in total output and employment and continued rise in the share of the 'secondary' and 'tertiary' sectors". In this section, the shares among the three major categories viz., total agriculture workers (cultivators +Agriculture labour) only cultivators and only agriculture labourers are considered for looking distribution of agriculture workforce in India, during period of 1961 to 2011.

Distribution of Agriculture Workforce in India

Year	Total Population (in millions)	Total Agriculture Workers (in percent)	Total Cultivators (in percent)	Total Agriculture 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

Source: Population Census Reports, 1951-2011

5. PROBLEMS OF AGRICULTURE LABOUR

I. AGRICULTURE LABOURERS ARE SCATTERED

Agriculture 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 agriculture 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. AGRICULTURE LABOURERS ARE UNSKILLED AND LACK TRAINING

Agriculture labourers, especially in smaller villages away from towns and cities, are generally unskilled workers carrying on agriculture 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 form hard work and since there is no alternative employment. The agriculture labourer has to do all types of work-farm and domestic at the bidding of the landlord.

III. UNORGANISED SECTOR

Agriculture 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 secure good wages.

IV. LOW SOCIAL STATUS

Most agriculture workers belong to the depressed classes, which have been neglected for 26 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, agriculture 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.

V. DEMAND AND SUPPLY OF LABOUR

The number of agriculture labourers being very large and skills they possess being meager, there are generally more than abundant supply of agriculture 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 agriculture labourers. But, once the harvesting season is over, majority of agriculture workers will be jobless especially in areas, where there is single cropping pattern.

VI. LESS BARGAINING POWER

Due to all the above mentioned factors, the bargaining power and position of agriculture 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 agriculture labour is the most exploited class of people of India.

VII. AT THE BIDDING OF THE LANDLORD

There is generally direct and day to day 'contact between agriculture 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 agriculture 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.

VIII. AGRICULTURE SERFS OR BONDED LABOURERS

At the bottom of the agriculture cadre in India are those labourers whose conditions are not very different from those of serfs. Agriculture 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 agriculture labours is very much like that of slaves. These are called in different names in different States.

6. MEASURES TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT TO IMPROVE THE CONDITIONS OF AGRICULTURE LABOURERS

The Government has shown awareness of the problems of agriculture 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 Agriculture labourers are:-

1. Passing of minimum wage Act.
2. Abolition of Bonded Labourers Journal of Exclusive Management Science
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
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)

7. CONCLUSION

It has been observed that the human factor is of supreme importance in any pattern of economic development. More so are the agriculture labourers of India, the country's largest unorganized section comprising the poorest workers, toiling on the sunny fields of India. Agriculture 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 are among the worst exploited section of the society. Their income has always been meagre, resulting in poor living and heavy indebtedness.

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