



PRESENT POSITION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN INDIA

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

Abstract: *Agricultural Labor in India faces various problems. Agricultural labours means who works on the land and of others on wages. Agricultural works are agricultural workers constitute the most neglected class in Indian rural structure. Often they are not in a position to earn just enough to keep their body and soul together and are frequently exposed to the hazards of unemployment and irregular employment and have neither private nor social security. Being unorganized they do not have the most needed muscle to see better living and working condition. This paper includes problems are agricultural labours, Government policy measures and suggestion for improvement of the agricultural labour conditions.*

Key words: *Agricultural labours problems, classification, unorganized sector, government measures, minimum wage and Suggestions.*

Introduction

The distinguishing feature of rural economy of India has been the growth of agriculture labor in the crop production. The phenomena of under-employment, under-development and surplus population are visible amongst agricultural labourers. Agricultural labors constitute the most neglected class in Indian rural sector and are highly unorganized. The income level of these workers is quite low and employment is quite irregular. Further, these workers lack alternative employment due to lack of training and skills.

Definition of Agriculture Labor

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.

Agriculture laborers can be classified into two broad categories

1. Landless Agricultural Laborer: The laborers don't possess land and can be further sub-divided into:

(i) Permanent Laborers attached to cultivating households: Permanent or attached laborers generally work on some sort of contract. The wages are determined by custom or tradition.

(ii) Temporary or Casual Laborers: Casual laborers are engaged only during peak period for work. The employment is temporary and laborers are paid at the market rate. These laborers are not attached to any landlords.

2. 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.

Features of Agricultural Laborers

The main features, characterizing Indian agricultural labor are as follows

1. Agricultural Labourers are Scattered:

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

2. Unskilled and Lack Training:

Agricultural labourers, especially in smaller villages are generally unskilled workers carrying on agricultural operation at a very low wages. 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.

3. Unorganised:

Agricultural laborers are not organized like industrial laborers. These laborers are illiterate and ignorant. They live in villages scattered all over the country. Hence they could not be organized in unions. 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. 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.

5. Abundance of Labour:

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.

6. Low Bargaining Power:

Due to all the above mentioned factors, the bargaining power and position of agricultural laborers 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. The agricultural labor is the most exploited class of people of India. Thus partly because of factors beyond their control and partly because of their inherent bargaining weakness, the farm laborers have been getting very low wages and have therefore to live in a miserable sub-human life.

Magnitude of Agricultural Laborers:

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. (Table1). In 1951, the numbers of agriculture laborer were 27.3 millions which rose to 106.8 millions in 2001.

Table 1: Population and Agricultural Workers (In Millions)

Year	Cultivators	Agricultural Laborers	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:

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 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.

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.

Causes of the Poor Economic Condition of farm Labour

The following important reasons explain low wages and poor economic conditions of agricultural labour :

(1) **Low social status:** Most agricultural workers belong to the depressed classes which have been neglected for ages. The low caste and the depressed classes have been socially handicapped and they had never the courage to assert themselves. They have been like dumb- Driven cattle.

(2) **Unorganised:** Agricultural workers are illiterate and ignorant. They live in scattered villages. Hence, they cannot easily be organised in unions. In urban areas workers can generally organise themselves and it is convenient for political parties to take interest in trade union activity. This is extremely difficult in case of farm labour. Accordingly, it is difficult for farm workers to bargain with the land owners and secure good wages.

(3) **Seasonal employment:** The agricultural workers do not have continuous work. On an average a farm labourer finds employment for about 200 days in a year and for the rest of the year he is idle. Apart from under-employment there is also unemployment in rural areas. Unemployment and under-employment are two important factors responsible for low income and consequently low economic position of the agricultural workers in

India. But then the nature of work in agriculture is such that a farm labourer cannot get work continuously. In most cases, work on the farms is seasonal and intermittent. In many cases, there is single cropping which means work only for six to seven months in the year.

(4) **Paucity of non-agricultural Jobs:** Paucity of non-agricultural occupations in village areas is another important factor for the low wages and poor economic condition of the farm labourers. For one thing, the growing pressure of population is increasingly felt in rural areas and the number of landless labourers is steadily increasing. For another, the absence of another occupation in rural areas and lack of inter-regional mobility have been responsible for worsening the pressure of population on land.

(5) **Rural Indebtedness:** Agricultural labour is heavily indebted. Normally, the farm labourers borrow from the landowners under whom they work. Since they have no security to offer, they pledge themselves to the moneylenders and rich landlords and become bonded labourers in many areas. Naturally, they are forced to accept lower wages.

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 a miserable subhuman life.

Suggestion for Improving the condition of agricultural labour

(i) **Removal of serfdom:** Agricultural serfdom which exists in many parts of the country should go. In fact according to the Constitution of India, the practice of slavery in any form is prohibited. But agrarian serfdom which has been in vogue for centuries cannot disappear so easily. This is so because the labourers are helpless, ignorant and illiterate. Education of the rural masses and better opportunities are some of the remedies for the removal of the system of slavery. The of bonded labour and control of the activities of the moneylenders, provision of house sites for landless labourers, etc., under the 20-point economic

programme are desirable steps, if they are honestly implemented.

(ii) **Better implementation of minimum wages in agriculture:** Agricultural workers have been getting very low wages except in Punjab and Kerala. Measures should be taken to raise the wages of farm workers. Unless this is done it is impossible to raise the economic condition of the agricultural workers. Minimum wage legislation alone is not sufficient but steps should be taken to enforce it. In the Indian context with unchecked growth of population, it is almost impossible to enforce such legislation.

(iii) **Rehabilitation of landless agricultural workers:** In order to improve the conditions of agricultural labour, the landless workers should be provided with land. This can be done in many ways. One way is that the new reclaimed land may be allotted only to them. The Bhoodan movement is another method through which those who have land contribute voluntarily for those who have not.

(iv) **Improvements in agriculture:** The agricultural labourers do not have full-time employment because of seasonal character of Indian agriculture. Both intensive cultivation and extension of irrigation are very much needed to increase agricultural work. By these methods, there will be double/multiple cropping and employment will be available for the whole year round. Besides, there will be increase in the productivity of labour which will also increase the wage of workers. There is very great scope for the setting up of village and agro-processing industries which will use the raw materials readily available in the villages. There can be small size industries employing modern techniques which can be easily set up now-a-days because of the extension of electricity to rural areas. The setting up of such industries will help agricultural labour in many ways, as for instance: (a) seasonal unemployment will be reduced; (b) surplus labour power will be diverted to these industries; (c) the pressure of population on agriculture will be reduced and this will help to raise agricultural productivity and also raise wages of agricultural labour; and (d) those unable to find employment in agriculture maybe readily employed

and thus help to supplement the income of the family.

(v) **Peasant Unions for Agricultural Labour:** Wherever labour unions have been organised for agricultural workers, their wages have been protected and their exploitation by powerful landlords and moneylenders can be eliminated. Hence, greatest emphasis should be placed on the formation of unions of farm labourers and the Government should help actively in the formation of such unions.

(vi) **Public works program me:** One very good method of providing employment to rural labour and of utilizing it fully is the construction of public works by the government. The government can plan its projects in the rural areas carefully, so that the workers who may be unemployed during the off-seasons may be gainfully employed. Such projects include the construction of roads, the digging and deepening of tanks and canals, afforestation, etc. The setting up of small industries and public works programmes have great importance in the mobilisation of manpower resources in villages and in raising the wages of the rural masses and, indirectly the income of the country.

Government Measures pertaining to agricultural labour

Since Independence, the Centre 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.

(1) **Indian Constitution:** The Indian Constitution has declared the practice of serfdom an offence. It has abolished agrarian slavery including forced labour by law but it will take some time before it is removed in practice.

(2) **Minimum Wages Act:** 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. Since conditions in various parts of the country are different and even within a state the law allows different rates of wages to be fixed. In many states, the rates are fixed even below the current rates of wages. In practice, it has failed to increase the wages and earnings of agricultural labour.

(3) **Other legislative measures:** 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 cultivate. Many states have passed legislation fixing ceiling on agricultural holdings by which the maximum amount of land which a person can hold has been fixed by law. According to these laws, the surplus land of rich land-owners is to be distributed to the landless labourers.

(4) **Organization of labour co-operatives:** During the Second Five-Year Plan, efforts were made to encourage the formation of labour co-operatives. These cooperatives whose members are workers undertake the contract of government projects, such as, construction of roads, digging of canals and tanks, afforestation, 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.

(5) **Employment Guarantee Scheme:** The Government of Maharashtra introduced in 1977 the Employment Guarantee Scheme under which any able bodied person in rural areas can apply for a job to the Collector of his district or to his authorised subordinate officials and the latter will provide him employment within 5 kilometers of his place of residence. For this purpose, the Government has to prepare and keep in readiness various public works, such as irrigation works, road construction, etc. The rate of wages will not be such as to attract agricultural workers from their normal employment

in agricultural operations. This was a pioneering scheme which the Government has been trying to improve upon with the experience gained. Under the scheme, the State assumes the responsibility to provide work on demand. If work is not provided in a fortnight from the date of demand, a payment in the form of a compensator allowance has to be made. Following the scheme adopted by the Maharashtra Government, the Central Government has passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005) which makes it mandatory for the Government to provide 100 days of employment per rural household. This is the first Act of its kind adopted by the Central Government. The State Governments have been directed to implement this Act. The Central Government would provide 90 percent funds for the purpose. However, the success of this unprecedented Act will depend upon the quality of implementation by the State Governments.

(6) **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 weaker sections of the community in our villages. These measures were

- (a) Speedy implementation of ceiling legislation and distribution of surplus land among landless labourers and small peasants.
- (b) Provision of house sites for landless labourers and conferment of ownership rights of the houses if they have been occupying them for a certain period.
- (c) Abolition of bonded labour.
- (d) Liquidation of rural indebtedness and moratorium on recovery of debts from landless labourers, artisans and small peasants.

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