



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 8.4
IJAR 2022; 8(6): 108-112
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 13-02-2022
Accepted: 06-04-2022

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Socio-economic condition of agriculture labour in India

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Abstract

Agricultural labourers are socially and economically poorest section of the society. Agricultural labourer households constitute the historically deprived social groups, displaced handicraftsmen and dispossessed peasantry. They are the poorest of the poor in rural India. Their growth reflects the colonial legacy of under development and the inadequacies of planning intervention in the past. Overcrowding and growth of agricultural labourer continued unabated, given poor labour absorption in the non- agricultural sector and also inadequacies of reforms in the agrarian structure. The poverty syndrome among agricultural labourers needs to be read against such a background of prolonged rural under development, assetlessness, unemployment, low wages, under-nutrition, illiteracy and social backwardness constitute the poverty syndrome among agricultural labourers. These reinforce each other so as to constitute a vicious circle of poverty. There is little inter-generational upward mobility among agricultural labourer households. Human factor is of supreme importance in any pattern of economic development. More so are the agricultural labourers of India, the country's largest unorganized section comprising the poorest workers, toiling on the sunny fields of India. Most of them hail from the socially disadvantaged sections of our society and a large number of them continue to live under the poverty condition.

Keywords: Agricultural, labour, income, households, poverty and economic

Introduction

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 underemployment, 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 five decades of planning. Labour is the most important input in increasing production in traditional agriculture. In the early stage of development, since land was available in plenty increase in labour supply led to the clearing of more land for bringing it under cultivation. At this stage of development the increase in labour supply was a boon to the society. It made positive contribution and helped in increasing agricultural introduction of new technology.

Agricultural labourers are socially and economically poorest section of the society. Agricultural labourer households constitute the historically deprived social groups, displaced handicraftsmen and dispossessed peasantry. They are the poorest of the poor in rural India. Their growth reflects the colonial legacy of under development and the inadequacies of planning intervention in the past. Overcrowding and growth of agricultural labourer continued unabated, given poor labour absorption in the non-agricultural sector and also inadequacies of reforms in the agrarian structure. The poverty syndrome among agricultural labourers needs to be read against such a background of prolonged rural under development, assetlessness, unemployment, low wages, under-nutrition, illiteracy and social backwardness constitute the poverty syndrome among agricultural labourers.

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These reinforce each other so as to constitute a vicious circle of poverty. There is little inter-generational upward mobility among agricultural labourer households. Human factor is of supreme importance in any pattern of economic development. More so are the agricultural labourers of India, the country's largest unorganized section comprising the poorest workers, toiling on the sunny fields of India. Most of them hail from the socially disadvantaged sections of our society and a large number of them continue to live under the poverty condition.

Agricultural labour are those persons who work on the land of others on wages, for the major part of the year and can earn major portion of their income as a payment in the form of wages for works performed on the agricultural farms owned by others. They working both in the house and farms of their masters but faces various problems in india. The increase the number of agricultural labour has causes as increasing size of population, decline of cottage and village industries, evictions of small farmers, uneconomic holdings, growing indebtedness, deforestation, river erosion growth of capitalist farming etc are the main causes of agricultural labour problems of India. The living conditions and the standard of living of agricultural labourers would largely depend upon the income earned by them. It also depends upon the number of employment days available in a year. Moreover, it is influenced by their level of consumption and the degree of their loan. Therefore, in order to judge the socio-economic picture of agricultural labourers, it is absolutely essential to find out their total income, spending, loan. Socio-economic condition of agricultural labourers depends upon a number of factors, e.g., source of income, expenses, asset holding position, land holding position, availability of farm and non-farm employment, size of family etc., are the obvious crucial quantitative factors which determine their socio-economic condition.

Classification of agricultural labourers

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 process 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:

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was made in 2005. The aim of the scheme is to enhance livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed employment in every financial year of every household whose adult members volunteer to do the unskilled workers. It aimed at providing livelihood security by guaranteeing 100 days in a year of unskilled manual work to every rural household. It had provisions of unemployment allowances in case the work is not provided within 15 days. The achievements of a decade are a cause of national pride and celebration. Since the start of the programme, the expenditure on the programme has amounted to Rs. 3,13,844.55 crore and out of this 71% has been spent on wage payments to workers. Of the workers, the percentage of Scheduled Caste workers has consistently been about 20% and Scheduled Tribe workers has been about 17%. A total of 1,980.01 crore person days have been generated, out of which the percentage worked by women has steadily increased much above the statutory minimum of 33%.

The share of agriculture in total employment slightly declined to 68 percent. In absolute terms, agriculture provided employment to 256 million persons in 1997, thus bringing percentage of economically active population in agriculture to 61 per cent. It was increased in 2011 census to 263.02 million (72.57% of total main workers i.e. 362.45 millions). It is really disturbing that the proportion of agricultural labourers has increased and the cultivators have indicated a decline. One of the most distinguished 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 underemployment, 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 organized and they cannot fight for their rights. Because of all these reasons their economic lot has failed to improve even after six decades of planning.

Review of Literature

The present study is concerned with the 'dynamics of occupational change of agricultural labour in India. The review of literature has given here relevant studies related to the field selected for study.

Venu B. N, Umesh K.B. and Gaddi G.M (2016) ^[1] reveals that migration of labours from their ative place to small distance and within the district is high in rainy season but in other season agriculture labourers' migration to other district was relatively high in Karnataka.

Sawant T.R (2017) ^[3] Agricultural labours condition is not good in India and government should twice its budgetary allocation to improve the condition of agricultural labours.

Venkateshwarlu & M. Ramakrishna Reddy (2017) ^[4] argued that agriculture labour is counted in the category of unorganized sector so the income is not fixed they are not covered any secure and full uncertainty in their earnings.

Methodology

The method used in this paper is descriptive-evaluative method. The study is mainly review based. It is purely supported by secondary source of data, i.e. books, journals, papers and articles.

Objectives of the study

- To examine the problems faced by the landless agriculture labourers.
- To find out the structure of income and expenditure patterns of the landless agriculture labourers.
- To analyze the levels of assets and liabilities of landless agriculture labourers.

Results and Discussion

Causes of the Poor Economic Condition of Agriculture Labour

- **Unorganised:** Agricultural labourers in India is totally unrecognised as they are ignorant illiterate and widely scattered. Thus the farm workers have no capacity to bargain for securing a fair wage level.
- **Low social status:** Farm workers mostly belong to depressed classes and thus they are lacking the courage to assert there basic rights.
- **Seasonal unemployment:** As the agricultural operations are seasonal thus the farm worker are often facing the problem of seasonal unemployment and under-employment. Farm workers on average get about 200 days in a year.
- **Absence of alternative occupation:** In the rural areas the farm workers are not getting alternative job when they suffer seasonal unemployment.
- **Growing indebtedness:** Agricultural labours in India is highly indebted. As the lend of wages are very poor thus the farm workers have been borrowing from land lords and become bonded labourers ultimately it can be said that the agricultural labours in indies living in inhuman conditions and in the absence of organized status. They are deprived of all the basic amenities of their life.
- **Low wage rate:** The main problem is wage in this sector. Though agricultural wages have been revised

upward several times since independence, the legislations are poorly implemented.

- **Large sized families:** The number of members increased in the families is other problems of landless agricultural labours. Their income earning available sources only in the field of agriculture land.
- **Low social status:** The incomes of agricultural labourers are very low. Hence their standard of living is not improved way social status of the labourers are very low level compare with other income group of people.
- **No social security:** Agriculture workers in the country do not have any social security. The existing legislations are also not enforced permanently by concerned authorities.

Government Policy for Improve the Conditions of Agriculture labours

- **Abolition of Bonded Labour:** The Indian constitution declared the practice of serf demand offence. It has also abolished agrarian slavery including forced labour by law but it will take some time before it is removed in practice.
- The minimum wage act passed in 1948 by state government were advised to fix minimum wages for labour within three years. The minimum wages are fixed keeping in view the total costs and standard of living. But due to some practical difficulties most of the state could not fix the minimum wages till 1974.
- In India various state have passed necessary legislation for providing housing sites to agricultural labourers. Again under minimum needs programme and 20 point programme high priority is being attached to rural housing site cum-house construction scheme.
- **Employment Guarantee Scheme:** For providing alternative source of employment among the agricultural labourers various scheme have already been launched by both the central & the state governments.

Finding

60 per cent of rural households are comprised of marginal farmers and small farmers who do not generate sufficient income from their land. Even small farmers with up to five acres supplement their agriculture without side jobs or wage employment. The evidence relating to rural labour households and agricultural labour households shows an explicit overall decline in employment both for male and female labour. There is also a decline in the average number of earning members per household. Clearly, the rural labour households and agricultural labour households in this India is characterized by low earning, decline in income, low consumption and high debt, and remedies will have to be found to generate more employment and income. Since independence, there is a significant improvement in India's economic and social development. The land concentrated few big farmers and landless agricultural labour are unorganized, bounded and low social status and having their indebtedness, illiteracy poverty absence of alternative occupation and seasonal unemployment are found in many states in India. So there creates agricultural labour problems in India. Investment and savings rates were quite high 32 to 36%. However, exclusion continued in terms of low agricultural growth, low quality employment growth, low human development, rural-urban divides, gender and social inequalities, and regional disparities etc. In spite of all,

several efforts have been made by both governments in order to promote livelihoods of the agricultural labourers across in India.

Suggestions

- **Implementation of minimum wage act:** To implement the minimum wage act seriously and to revise the minimum wages periodically considering the changing price level of the country.
- **Alternative Sources of employment:** to create alternative sources of employment by developing small scale and cottage industries in rural areas.
- **Social Security Measures:** To introduce social security measures for the agricultural labours and also to introduce compulsory insurance on marginal contribution and also to institute old age pension scheme for the agricultural workers by the government.
- **Fixing working hours:** to improve the working conditions of agricultural labour by enforcing fixed hours of work banning child labour etc and internet.
- **Economic Measures:** To make agriculture move remunerative active economic measures must be introduced. Subsidiary agro-based industries must set up in rural areas. So that surplus labour in agriculture sector can be utilised in these industries. Proper steps must be taken to break the vicious circle of poverty.
- **Human Development:** For the improvement of agricultural productivity in the state the quality of farmer must be improved through education, both general and technical. To save the agricultural labour from epidemics and other diseases, adequate public health measures must be undertaken.
- Credit at cheaper rates of interest on easy terms of payment for undertaking subsidiary occupation.
- Better implementation of legislative measures.

Conclusion

In the conclusion we can conclude that the condition of agricultural workers is not so good in many parts of India, their living standard and income is very low. For the improve the conditions government should take proper steps for various aspect for agricultural labours, like wage reforms, new methods for agriculture, hours of works, improve the living conditions and over coming the natural factors like flood and erosion etc. After conducting the study we come to the conclusion that there is an urgent need for the development of rural areas and rural agricultural labours. Government must take more effective steps for their upliftment and betterment. One of the 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 Government of India conducted agricultural Labour Enquiry and Rural Labour Enquiries. The main objectives of these Enquiries have been to collect vital information on the Socio- Economic conditions of Rural Agricultural Landless Labourers. These enquiries formulate the policy measures to uplift the economic life of population in rural areas. In order to guarantee sustainable agricultural development in the new millennium, rural workers and their families should have access to adequate working and living conditions, health and welf the wage employment programs and employment guarantee scheme of MGNREGS regulates the right direction to ensure livelihood security to the agricultural

labourers. This Scheme Safeguard the agricultural landless labours sources of income earnings and improve standard of living. A technology which best suit and fulfill the requirement of agricultural labours should be promoted in the direction of sustainable agricultural without affecting livelihood security of agricultural labour in India. A balanced approach towards capital intensive technology without affecting the interest of manual labour is the need of the hour in the Indian context.

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