

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN INDIA – AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Agriculture plays a significant role in overall socio-economic development. Therefore, fostering rapid, sustained and broad-based growth in agriculture remains key priority for the country. With the decreasing labour force in agriculture, increasing yield or productivity is the key to growth, which has to be accelerated. Shortage of labour and finding solutions thereof should become a major focus. Agriculture provides employment to not only the adult males of a households but also to women on the households. Women work extensively in production of major grains and millets, in land preparation, seed selection and seedling production, sowing, applying manure, weeding, transplanting, threshing, winnowing and harvesting. In this paper examine to find the growth and prospects of agricultural labourers in India.

Keywords: Agriculture, Agriculture Labourers, wages, etc.

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.

Objectives of the Study:

- To study the growth of Agricultural Labourers in India.
- To understand the conceptual background of Agricultural Labourers in India.
- To study the problems of Agricultural Labourers in India.
- To recommend the measures to improve the conditions of Agricultural Labourers

Growth of Agricultural Labourers

Before the advent of the British, an outstanding feature of the Indian economy was “**the self-subsisting and self-perpetuating**” character of its villages. The village itself consumed most of the food stuffs and raw-materials produced within itself while its need for handicrafts was met by the local artisans. Each farmer carried on the cultivation of his farm with the help of his own family members. In such a society, there was little room for the existence of an independent and distinct class of landless labourers. That is why landless elements were very insignificant in Indian villages till about the middle of the 19th

century. Munro reported in 1842 that “there were no landless peasants in India” while a decade later, George Campbell found that “as a rule, farming was not carried on by hired labour.”

The establishment of British rule brought about certain fundamental changes in the self-sufficient village economy. The old production relations changed, separating the cultivators from the means of production. The peasants, dispossessed and pauperized, swelled the ranks of agricultural labourers. The number of agricultural workers rapidly grew from 12.5 million in 1881 to 42.2 million in 1931 and 49 million in 1951. The increase was particularly marked between 1921—31 when their number jumped from 28 million to 42 million.

The census commission (1931), surprised at the increase, tried to explain it away by pointing to the differences in the census methods. The reality is that the world depression and the consequent fall in agricultural prices compelled the small farmer to sell his land which was thus concentrated in the hands of the non-cultivating owners.

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 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.

However, this large population of agricultural workers was not equally distributed all over the country. Their proportion was the highest in Madras, Bombay and Central Provinces and the lowest in the Northern Provinces of the Punjab, the N.W.F.P. and the United Provinces. The eastern region occupied the middle position.

The explanation for this does not lie, as the census commission (1901) holds, in the proportion of the depressed classes. Rather, the nature of the land tenure system, the period of association with the British administration and the availability of alternative sources of employment were the Chief determinants of the proportion of agricultural labourers to the total agricultural population in any part of the country.

The most important feature of the evolution of the class of landless labourers was the dispossession of the peasants of their lands. Therefore, their proportion was the highest in the ryotwari areas of Madras, Bombay and the central provinces where, in contrast to the Zamindari or Mahalwari areas, land could be easily transferred by sale or mortgage. The disparity between the Mahalwari north and the Zamindari east can be explained by the fact that the British administration and its land settlements together with the disintegration of the traditional Indian village community started much earlier in the eastern Zone than in the North.

Problems of Agricultural Labourers in India

1. Excess Working Hours

The working hours of these laborer are not only irregular but also excessive. They have to work since morning to late night. His working hours change with harvest, season and work.

2. Seasonal Employment

The agricultural labor does not get work for the whole year. According to the Second Agricultural Labor Investigation Society, a Seasonal labor gets an average of 197 days of work in a year. Similarly, child labor gets 204 days and women get 141 days of employment. Thus, their average annual income is very lower.

3. Low Wages

The wage level of agricultural labors very low as compared to that of industrial labor. It has two reasons increase in landless laborers lack of non-agricultural areas of work in rural areas.

4. Agricultural Slavery

Majority of agricultural laborers are landless and of backward classes. Due to their lower social status they are treated as animals. Big land owners make them work as slaves. They are used as laborers and in return given minimum wages.

5. Indebtedness

Due to lower income, the indebtedness of agricultural farmers is increasing. They hesitate in negotiating their wages with the land owners in the fear that their services would be terminated. The laborers remain indebted even after working with the land owners for their whole life.

6. Not United

Since the agricultural laborers are spread in millions of village all over the country they lack unity. Thus, they are unable to negotiate their wages etc. with the land owners by uniting themselves.

7. Exploitation of Child and Women Laborers

Due to lower income the children and women of agricultural laborers are also forced to work for their livelihood. The child and women laborers are made to work more for livelihood. Thus, exploitation of child labor and woman labor is a major problem in the field of agriculture.

8. Lower Social Status

Most of the agricultural laborers are of backward classes who have been exploited since centuries. Due to this reason also their social status is lower.

9. Shortage of Other Jobs

There is shortage of other jobs in villages. Thus, if the crop is destroyed by floods, famines etc., it becomes difficult for the agricultural labor to survive.

10. Housing Problem

The landless laborers have no private house. They live in cottages, made on the useless land of the landowners with their permission and in its return they have to work without payment, for the landowners. When a number of people live under the same roof, the physical, social, moral and religious problem arises.

Recommendations to improve the conditions of Agricultural Labourer's in India

- To implement the Minimum Wage Act seriously and to revise the minimum wages periodically considering the changing price level.
- To improve their bargaining power, the agricultural workers should be organised through the formation of unions of farm labourers under the protection and support of the government.
- To abolish serfdom among the landless agricultural labourers totally.
- To rehabilitate the agricultural labourers on the acquired land declared surplus under ceiling laws and also on the newly reclaimed land.
- To create alternative sources of employment by developing small scale and cottage industries in the rural areas.
- To improve- the conditions of agriculture by adopting improved intensive methods and multiple cropping for raising the productivity of agricultural labourers.
- To improve the working conditions of agricultural labourers by enforcing fixed hours of work, banning child labour etc.
- To promote co-operative farming in the rural areas.
- To improve the standard of living of agricultural labourers by organising special programmes like Minimum Needs Programme.
- To introduce social security measures for the agricultural workers and also to introduce compulsory insurance on marginal contribution and also to institute old age pension schemes for the agricultural workers by the government.

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