

C H A P T E R I

AGRICULTURE LABOUR - A PERSPECTIVE

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CHAPTER I

AGRICULTURE LABOUR - A PERSPECTIVE

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is the most important sector in the economy of India, upon which rests the future of the country. One of the most serious and depressing problem of the Indian rural economy is that of the agricultural worker. Their number is very large and rapidly growing, and they lead a life of abject poverty. They constitute the most backward, exploited and most neglected class of the rural economy. The phenomena of under employment and surplus population are simultaneously manifested in the daily life and habitats of the agricultural labourers. They get unusually low wages, the conditions at work places an excessive burden on them, and moreover, the employment that they get is also very irregular and they have to face intermittent periods of unemployment.

MEANING

To identify agricultural labourers, it is necessary to define them. The need for defining them separately also arises because the definition of industrial labour cannot be applied to them in toto.

(i) It is not possible to make distinction among agricultural labourers, such as, unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled workers. The type of work that an agricultural labourer is such that the worker

has to undertake more than one type of job, so that it is almost impossible to classify each worker under a separate category. Further, because of the predominance of small farms, there is little scope for specialisation of work as on big farms and non-agricultural industries.

(ii) There cannot exist in agriculture that type of relations between employers and employees as are found in manufacturing industries. This is particularly obvious in a backward economy where agriculture is not conducted as a business, but is only a means of subsistence and where the use of family labour is prevalent on a large scale.

In view of the special features of agriculture, it is not possible to define agricultural labour in precise terms. However, it will be useful to refer to some attempts made by experts in this connection to form a rough idea of what an agricultural worker means.¹

1.2 DEFINITION

The First Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee (1950 -51) defined agricultural labour as "All those who are engaged as hired labourers in agricultural operations for 50 percent or more of the total number of days worked by them during the previous year". The Committee based its definition on the basis of the nature of employment and its quantum.

The second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee (1956 - 57) adopting income as the basis, defined agricultural labourer as a person, if his or her major source of income during the previous year was agricultural wage.

The two Committees defined as one who was working on hire and was paid in cash or kind, was considered as agricultural labourer, further the following operations were defined as 'agricultural operations' : Farming including tilling, sowing, harvesting operations, cultivation of any horticultural commodity, dairy farming, live stock, bee-keeping and poultry, and operations incidental to farming such as delivery of harvested produce to markets, etc.²

According to the National Commission on Labour, an agricultural labourer is one "who is basically unskilled and unorganised and has little for his livelihood other than personal labour". Thus, persons whose main source of income is wage employment fall in this category. It consists of two sub categories : (i) landless agricultural labour, and (ii) very small cultivators whose main source of earnings, due to their small and submarginal holdings, is wage employment. Landless labour in turn can be classified into two broad categories as (a) Permanent labour, attached to a cultivating household, and (b) Casual labour. This group can be sub-divided into three subgroups, namely, cultivators, share croppers and 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 landlord.

Under the second group come small farmers who possess very little land and, therefore, have 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 leased land but also work as labourers.

The Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee differentiated between the "attached" and "casual" labourers. The former are those who are employed for a period of time i.e., on annual or seasonal basis by the assignment of lodging on the farm, who are under some sort of contract with the employers, and in whose case the mode of payment is determined by custom or tradition. They are to work for their employers and are not ordinarily free to seek employment elsewhere, while the latter, i.e., the casual labourers are engaged in the peak period and attend to rush work only. Such labourers are free to leave one job for another whenever they please and they are paid at the market rate. In most cases, the difference between the two classes is stated initially in terms of period for which a man is engaged and whether or not he receives daily wages.³

The most satisfactory definition (which includes small and marginal farmers whose condition is no better than landless

agricultural labourers) appears to be the one given by the Committee on Labour Welfare (1969), which defined agricultural labour as "One whose principal means of livelihood is wage income arising out of farm labour and other allied activities⁴".

1.3 AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN INDIA

The expression agricultural labourers' denotes those rural labourers who are employed on wages in agricultural occupations. According to the Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee, "The agricultural labour is a person who, for more than half of the total number of days on which he actually works during the year, is engaged in agricultural operations as hired labourer. Thus agricultural labourer is a person, who either has no land of his own or who has too little land to support his family from his income. The 1961 census defines agricultural labourer as follows, "An agricultural labour is one who works in other person's land only as a labourer (without exercising supervision or direction in cultivation) for wages in cash, kind, or share of produce. He should have been working as agricultural labourer in the last or current working season".

DATA REGARDING AGRICULTURAL LABOUR

ALL INDIA AGRICULTURAL LABOUR ENQUIRIES :- According to the two all India Agricultural Labour Enquiries undertaken in 1950-51 and in 1956-57, there are nearly 35 million and 33 million agricultural labourers respectively. It may be noted that in 1882 the number of















INDIA

A DESCENDING ORDER OF THE STATES AS PER NUMBER OF AGRICULTURE-
LABOUR (in absolute numbers)

100 0 100 200 300 400 500

SCALE



-  BIHAR
-  ANDRA PRADESH
-  MAHARASHTRA
-  TAMIL NADU
-  UTTAR PRADESH
-  MADHYA PRADESH
-  WEST BENGAL
-  KARNATAKA
-  GUJRAT
-  ORISSA
-  KERLA
-  RAJASTHAN
-  PANJAB
-  HARAYANA

agricultural labourers was estimated to be only 7.5 million, while according to 1951 census, the number was placed at 27.5 million.

CENSUS OF 1971 :- According to the 1971 census, agricultural labour in India numbered 4.75 crores representing 26.33 percent of the total work force in the country. The corresponding figures in 1961 were : 3.15 crore workers and 16.71 percent total workers. This increase in the number of agricultural labour has been accompanied by a decrease in number of cultivators from 9.95 crores in 1961 to 7.82 crores in 1971. Thus, there has been an immense increase in the number of agricultural labourers. Such a considerable rise has been encouraged by various factors. According to Dr. Radha Kamal Mukerjee, "Every circumstance which has weakened the economic position of small holders has increased the supply of agricultural labourers loss of common rights in the rural economy, the subdivision of holdings, the disuse of collective enterprise, the multiplication of rent receivers, free mortgaging transfer of land, and the decline of cottage industries." Further, the absolute increase in population, land reforms and resale of land by small holders are some of the other important factors which have contributed to the increase of agricultural labour.

CENSUS OF 1981 :- According to the 1981 census the number of agricultural workers in the country was about 5.54 crore as against 4.74 crore in 1971.

FIRST AND SECOND AGRICULTURAL LABOUR ENQUIRY (ALE) :- According to the two Agricultural Labour Enquiries conducted in 1950-51 and 1956-57 respectively the figures of rural house-holds and agricultural labourers were as follows :

(in million)			
SR.NO.	ITEM	1950-51	1956-57
(1)	Total number of rural households	58.9	6.66
(2)	Male Agricultural labourers	17.9	16.3
(3)	Female Agricultural labourers	14.0	1.20
(4)	Child labour	1.8	2.5

In the table below the total population, total number of agricultural workers including agricultural labourers for the Census Years 1951 and 1961 are given :

(in million)				
YEAR	TOTAL POPULATION	TOTAL NUMBER OF WORKERS	AGRICULTURAL WORKERS	
			AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS	CULTIVATORS
1951	361.13	139.42	27.50	69.74
1961	439.23	188.68	31.52	99.62

In the following table the distribution of workers as cultivators, agricultural labourers and other workers, according to the 1971 census is given.

TYPE OF WORKERS	MALES	FEMALES	TOTAL
Cultivators ('000)	69,910	9,267	78,177
Cultivators as percent to total workers	46.23	29.61	43.34
Agricultural labourers	31,695	15,974	47,489
Agricultural as percent to total workers	21.26	50.56	26.33
Other workers	48,470	6,237	54,707
Other workers as percent to total workers	32.51	19.93	30.33
TOTAL	149,075	81,298	180,373

DISTRIBUTION AND PERCENTAGE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR :- The following table gives the data regarding total workers, agricultural labourers and agricultural labourers as the percentage to total workers in States and Union territories, according to the 1971 census.⁵

STATE / UNION TERRITORY	TOTAL WORKERS ('000)	AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS ('000)	AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS AS % TO TOTAL WORKERS
1	2	3	4
Andhra Pradesh	18,006	6,829	37.92
Assam & Mizoram	4,240	406	9.58
Bihar	17,489	6,806	38.92
Gujarat	8,395	1,888	22.48
Haryana	2,654	430	16.21
Himachal Pradesh	1,278	53	4.17
Jammu & Kashmir	1,374	42	3.05
Karnataka	10,179	2,718	26.70
Kerala	6,216	1,908	30.69
Madhya Pradesh	15,296	4,062	26.56
Maharashtra	18,390	5,394	29.33
Manipur	371	13	3.65
Meghalaya	447	44	9.88
Nagaland	262	4	1.45
Orissa	6,851	1,938	28.28
Punjab	3,913	787	20.11
Rajasthan	8,049	749	9.31
Tamil Nadu	14,742	4,490	30.46
Tripura	432	86	19.96
Uttar Pradesh	27,334	5,454	19.95
West Bengal	12,369	3,272	26.45

....Contd.

UNION TERRITORY			
1	2	3	4
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	46	2	4.69
Arunachal Pradesh	270	5	1.96
Chandigarh	85	1	1.48
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	85	6	16.96
Delhi	1,229	15	1.24
Goa, Daman & Diu	972	41	15.01
Lakshdweep	8	-	-
Pondicherry	41	46	32.81

The number of agricultural workers has been increasing at a very rapid rate for a long time. It is estimated that the number of agricultural labourers in 1981 was 75 lakhs, which had increased in 1931 to 2.2 crores, in 1951 to 2.8 crores, in 1961 to 3.2 crores, in 1971 to about 4.8 crores and in 1981 to 5.5 crores. The proportion of agricultural labourers to the total labour force in the country was 16.9 percent in 1901, 17.4 percent in 1921, 19.7 percent in 1951, 26.3 percent in 1971, and 22.4 percent in 1981. In view of differences in assumptions, definitions, etc., adopted in various censuses, these estimates are not strictly comparable. But the figure do indicate the largeness of their number, and the rapidity with which the class of agricultutral workers has grown in numbers.⁶

GROWTH OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

For appropriate solution, it is necessary that we understand the origin of agricultural labourers, and the causes which have contributed to their rapid multiplication.

Origin :- The origin of agricultural labourers can be traced back to the ascendancy of the British rule when, because of the Government policy, native traditional industries began declining. As no modern industries grew to replace the traditional disappearing industries, craftsmen and artisans living in the villages were left with no alternative but to fall back on agriculture as labourers.

Though the British Government adopted a policy of ruralism of the country, it did not modernise agriculture, except plantations like tea and jute where the British had vested interests. The backwardness of agriculture forced even the small farmers to join the ranks of workers. Thus, the destruction of native industries and primitive character of agriculture led to the rise of the class of agricultural labourers in the country. Besides the poverty of the agriculturists, such factors as the Great Depression of 1929 - 33, when prices of agricultural products fell sharply, made many small owners of land sell their property and swell the ranks of agricultural labourers.

Causes :- There are many factors that explain the fast growth in the number of agricultural labourers. The major ones among these are listed below.

(i) LACK OF INDUSTRIAL EMPLOYMENT: While the native cottage industries and handicrafts declined before independence, there was no growth of modern industries in the country. In the case of present day developed countries, side by side with the disappearance of old traditional industries, new industries took their place. But the same did not happen in India because of the British Government policy. The British rulers were interested only in increasing ruralisation with the objectives of sucking the country of its agricultural raw materials and food for export to England and at the same time converting it into a vast market of manufactured goods produced in their home country. Thus the people working in the native industries were compelled to become labourers in agriculture. As more and more traditional industries were destroyed, a large number of people found themselves pushed into the ranks of landless agricultural labourers.

(ii) RAPID GROWTH OF POPULATION : The present century has seen a tremendous rise in the population of the country. Since more than three-fourths of the people live in villages, most of the population growth has taken place in the rural areas. In the rural sector, agriculture is the main occupation. There has been virtually no expansion in non-agricultural industries. As a result, a considerable part of the increase in rural population has been swelling the number of agricultural labourers.

(iii) INCREASE IN INDEBTEDNESS : A large number of small farmers is heavily indebted. Not being able to pay interest and pay back the principal, many of them have lost their land. These people have no

alternative but to work as labourers to pay for interest and the return of the loan.

(iv) UNECONOMIC HOLDINGS : The process of sub-division and fragmentation of holdings, which has been taking place over a long time, has led to the emergence of a vast number of uneconomic holdings. Such holdings ceased to be viable propositions, making it difficult for the farmer and their families to subsist on mere cultivation of land. Disappearance of non-agricultural occupations made the position of small holders of land all the more difficult. As such these farmers joined the ranks of agricultural labourers in increasing numbers.

(v) SPREAD OF THE USE OF MONEY : As the use of money is spreading in the tradition-bound agriculture, the old method of payment through goods is giving place to the practice of payment in money. As a result, it has become convenient for landlords to engage the labourers and pay them in money. In view of the cash payment of wages, labourers too are no longer attached to land in the same way as they were when they were compensated for their work through payment in kind. Thus the land owners have found it easier to get their land cultivated by labourers. Workers in agriculture are thus taking on the form of wage-labourers in the true sense.⁷

1.4 CLASSIFICATION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN INDIA

Agricultural labourers, unlike industrial labourers, cannot be divided into unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled workers. They have to be categorised in terms of their special features and the conditions prevailing in Indian agriculture. Keeping these considerations in view, the National Commission of Labour has divided agricultural workers into two main groups : (i) Landless labourers, and (ii) Very small farmers whose main source of income, in view of very small holdings, is wage-employment. The first group of landless labourers has been divided into two main categories, (a) Permanent labourers, who are attached to agricultural households, and (b) Temporary or casual labourers. Permanent or attached labourers generally work on annual or seasonal basis. Their relations with the landowner are based on some sort of contract. Their wages are determined by custom or tradition. Generally, they are not free to work elsewhere⁸.

ATTACHED WORKERS :- Although women and children are engaged in some States as regular workers, but the permanent labour force is mainly composed of men. Women workers are mostly employed in South India. The period of contract and the conditions of employment are settled between the workers and employers. Therefore, attached workers are employed on yearly basis. However, in some instances, there is quarterly, half yearly or monthly employment in some States such as Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Punjab. The attached workers in some zones of Uttar Pradesh, are employed for a period of five months. In Assam, attached workers are not free to

leave their employers during the period of contract. Perquisites such as meals, clothes and lodging and sometimes small plots of land are allowed. In some States e.g. Punjab, the attached workers are crop-sharers. The average monthly earnings of the attached workers in different States generally range from Rs. 38 to Rs. 50, from Rs. 25 to Rs. 44, and from Rs. 15 to Rs. 60, respectively.⁹

As against this, temporary or casual labourers are engaged only during the period of heavy work. The employment is temporary and they are paid at the market rate. They are not attached to any landlord, and are free to leave the job any time they like.¹⁰

CASUAL WORKERS

The casual workers, according to the first Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee, form the bulk of the agricultural labour force. They are employed in the busy periods when seasonal exigencies require the performance of agricultural operations in time.

Their wages are paid according to time or piece rates. Various modes of wage payments have been noticed, viz., in cash and in kind or partly in cash and partly in kind. The daily wage is occasionally supplemented by perquisites such as breakfast, a daily meal or two, tobacco, gur, etc. Payment in kind is usually made in the form of the grain produced in the tract, e.g. paddy in rice tracts, wheat and gram in wheat tracts and jawar or bajra in areas where kharif crops other than rice were important.

Men, women and children are all engaged as casual workers, but the employment of women is rare in the State of Jammu & Kashmir, the Patiala and East Punjab States Union and Tripura. Women and children are mostly employed in weeding, transplanting, harvesting and threshing. Women are employed even for ploughing in some villages in Assam, Orissa, Hyderabad, Mysore, Kutch and Vindhya Pradesh. The employment of children in ploughing is relatively more prevalent than that of women in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Madras, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Kutch and Tripura, etc.

Migration of workers from one tract to another within a State, or from one State to another has been noticed in a few instances. The employment of agricultural labourers is quite a common feature in villages where there is scarcity of labour. Casual workers are employed in groups or gangs consisting usually of workers belonging to neighbouring areas. These gangs are generally employed on piece rates for harvesting.

According to the Agricultural Labour Enquiry, during harvesting and threshing, the casual workers are engaged for 10 to 12 hours a day, with a suitable rest intervals. It is also common to employ a worker on different agricultural operation on the same day specially when he is engaged on preparatory work for three to four hours. The working day usually consists of 8 hours but it lasts for about 6 hours when a worker is employed on a strenuous operations such as ploughing or harrowing.

As regards wages, the methods of wage payment to casual agricultural workers revealed considerable diversity, being influenced by factors such as the force of tradition and custom, lack of adequate cash resources with the employers and the preference by agricultural workers for a special mode of wage payment. The wage rates of ploughing, preparatory operations, sowing, harvesting and threshing are generally higher than those for other agricultural operations.¹¹

The second group of labourers is divided into three categories :

- (a) those small farmers who possess very little land, consequently have to devote most of their time working on the lands of others as labourers,
- (b) Share-croppers, who while sharing the produce of the land for their work, also work as labourers, and
- (c) tenants who, besides working on leased land, also work as labourers¹².

ANOTHER CLASSIFICATION ON THE BASIS OF MODE OF WORK & PAYMENT

[1] FAMILY LABOUR :- The labour put in put the farmer's family and for which no direct payment is made is known as family labour. Under this type of labour, only those family members are considered, who devote their time for farming purpose. Depending upon the availability of time and the type of work they do there may be some family members, who work full time on the farm and whose labour is available through out the year. Some other family members may be able to devote rather limited time on the farm because they may be

doing some part time job off the farm or may be pursuing their studies. Further, some of the family members, generally the head of the family or the most literate male in the family may be doing only organisational work such as, making arrangements for hired labour, arranging for seeds and fertilizer, attending to work in the bank or co-operative society, etc. While other family members may be participating in various operations on the farm.

[2] CONTRACT LABOUR :- These labourers generally, move in groups and do certain specific operations on contract basis. The contract rate is settled according to the volume of work and availability and demand for labour and therefore, it is subject to wide variations over different area and time periods. The contract wages are paid either in cash fixed per acre or per quintal of produce, or in kind as part of produce obtained. The contract rate may be fixed as one bundle after every 20 bundles of produce for harvesting of wheat. The rate for harvesting sugarcane is generally fixed on per quintal basis while that for transplanting paddy is generally fixed in Rupees per hectare.

[3] CULTIVATING OWNERS :- The cultivating owners of land have their own land, tools, and cattle and with the help of family hands, they cultivate their land. Hired help is also employed. If the holding is too big, it is subject to landless labourers on produce rents, in which case the cultivating owner becomes a rent receiver. Cultivating owners are the cultivators of 'Sir' land and 'Khudkasht'.

[4] TENANT CULTIVATORS :- Tenant cultivators are either statutory occupancy, or non-occupancy, and cultivate rented holdings of land belonging to hereditary landlords. They work with their own cattle and tools, and depend on their family hands with casual hired help. This class forms the bulk of the actual fillers of the soil, but excludes those occupancy tenants whose entire holiday is subject in small plots to under tenants, and who depend on the differential rent obtained by such subletting.

[5] LANDLESS FARM LABOURERS :- Landless farm agricultural labourers include those workers who have no land (owned or rented) and no capital but hire out their labour to well-to-do tenants and landlords. They return themselves as agriculturists whose principal and in many cases, hereditary occupation, is cultivation of non-cultivating owners land. Their labour is skillful and is always in demand for such operations as ploughing, sowing, irrigating, marketing, etc. All family hands contribute their share to the family budget and therefore, most of the female and child labour for various agricultural operations, is drawn from this class under usual employment they receive cash wages, but in present employments their daily wages are supplemented by a customary grain allowance at harvests. Often they have to move from farm to farm in different cropping seasons but they are seldom forced to leave the village for lack of employment.

[6] FIELD WORKERS (UNSPECIFIED) :- The last group represents the miscellaneous labour which requires no special skill or experience

beyond what a coolie may be expected to acquire in the ordinary course of his career. This class is always mobile because its demand or supply is closely regulated by agricultural and industrial season. In Bihar and the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh, unspecified labourers migrate in vast numbers from the fields to the mines, and those to public works and industrial centres in different periods in the year. They have no land, no capital and their labour is not specialised. Therefore, during agricultural season they lie at the mercy of well to do cultivators and in the off season depend upon the urban factories for their livelihood. Their labour is always undefined and their wages unregulated. Though for tasks of unskilled nature, they are of great importance in agriculture and they are not absolutely necessary and indispensably precious. Thus, the mode of payment to contract labour varies from place to place and operation to operation.

CLASSIFICATION BASED ON SEX

[1] MALE AGRICULTURAL LABOUR :- Labour can be divided into male and female on the basis of sex. But, it is very difficult to fix the ratio of their working ability, as the difference is not always the same. According to the first Agricultural Labour Enquiry of the Ministry of Labour, the number of male agricultural workers came to about 3 million (6.9 percent) of the total in 1950-51. According to the second enquiry the number came to be around 4 million (9.7 percent) in 1956-57. According to the report of the Registrar General in 1981, the number of male agricultural labour engaged in field occupation and as agricultural labour was 125 million.

Secondly, considerable variation is found in working efficiency within each group depending upon the attitude, nature, health and age of the labourer. Some norms are however, used to convert woman and child labour into equivalent units of man labour in order to work out volume of work for the productive man-work units on the farm.

As far as wage rates for this type of labour are concerned, the difference in these depends upon the labour availability and its demand in a locality. If the supply of labour is enough in some area, the farmers will preferably engage adult males and think of engaging women or children at lower wages. But, in the area with shortage of labour, farmers will have to engage women and children too at higher wages due to non-availability of men.

[2] FEMALE AGRICULTURAL LABOUR :- In agriculture, according to the Agricultural Labour Enquiry the number of women labour was 20 million in 1980-81 census. Broadly the number of female workers remained more or less stationary between 1951 and 1981, total female workers increased significantly over this period. The census of 1970-71 gave a different picture altogether. It recorded a considerable increase in the number of female workers to the tune of 8.94 crores. A large part of these female workers was engaged in agriculture, either as cultivators (4.31 crores) helping the male members, or as agricultural labourers (2.42 crores).

The distribution of female workers was as follows :
Cultivators - 0.93 crores (29.61 percent). Where as in the agricultural

TABLE 1.1 TOTAL PERCENTAGE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURS WITH TOTAL LABOUR IN INDIA

YEAR	TOTAL POPULATION	TOTAL WORKERS	LABOURERS	AGRICULTURAL WORKER CULTIVATORS	TOTAL	% OF TOTAL	TOTAL WORKERS	AGRI. WORKERS
1901	236.28	110.71	17.26	51.95	69.21 (29.3)	62.52 3)	15.59	24.94
1911	252.12	121.30	24.06	58.47	82.53 (32.7)	68.04	19.84	29.15
1921	251.35	117.75	19.65	61.60	81.25 (32.30)	69.00	16.69	24.18
1931	279.02	120.67	22.11	57.67	79.78 (28.60)	66.12	18.33	27.72
1951	361.13	139.42	27.50	69.74	97.74 (26.90)	69.75	19.72	28.28
1961	439.23	188.68	31.52	99.62	131.14 (29.90)	69.50	16.17	24.04
1971	547.95	180.37	47.48	78.17	125.65 (22.50)	68.39	26.33	37.79
1981	650.70	190.50	61.37	80.19	126.10 (23.50)	70.40	28.15	40.55

(Figures in parentheses in column 6 are percentage to those in column 2)

TABLE 1.2 CLASSIFICATION OF WORKERS IN RURAL INDIA (1961-81)

WORKERS/CULTIVATORS	1961	1971	1981	VARIATION BETWEEN	
				1961-71	1971-81
Persons	93.85 (59.9)	73.49 (51.2)	89.00 (51.0)	- 20.36	+ 15.51
Male	62.46 (60.7)	64.44 (55.6)	64.10 (55.3)	+ 22.38	+ 9.65
Female	31.39 (68.5)	9.05 (32.8)	64.10 (36.9)	- 1.98	+ 5.85
Agricultural labourers		14-	14-90		
Persons	30.42 (19.5)	45.14 (31.4)	52.57 (30.1)	+ 14.72	+ 7.43
Male	16.67 (16.2)	29.95 (25.8)	32.53 (24.2)	+ 13.28	+ 2.58
Female	13.75 (25.6)	15.19 (55.0)	20.04 (49.6)	+ 1.44	+ 4.85
OTHER WORKERS					
Persons	32.31 (20.6)	25.00 (17.4)	32.95 (18.9)	- 7.31	+ 7.95
Male	23.82 (23.1)	21.62 (18.6)	27.47 (20.5)	- 2.20	+ 5.85
Female	8.49 (15.9)	3.38 (12.2)	5.48 (13.5)	- 5.11	+ 2.10
TOTAL PERSONS	156.58	143.63	174.52	- 12.95	+ 30.82

labourers, one can find small children in the age group of 7 to 9, working in most of the rural areas.

The 1981 census have highlighted one of the most interesting aspects of the changing proportion of India's rural working population.

The main categories of working population are cultivators, agricultural labourers and other workers engaged in the activities of agriculture, rural industries and trade. The relevant data is represented in Table 1.2. In fact, between 1961-81, the percentage of the persons depending upon agriculture in India has marginally increased from 19.5 to 30.1 of the total working population. The highlights are a decline of cultivators particularly female cultivators from 68.5 percent to 36.9 percent during the same period. The total number of cultivators declined from 93.85 million to 89 million. In contrast, the number of agricultural labourers rose sharply from 30.42 million in 1961 to 52.57 million in 1981. While the number of male agricultural labourers increased almost two fold from 16.67 million to 32.52 million and that of female labourers increased from 13.75 million to 20.04 million during the same period. The number of other workers however, increased marginally by 0.64 million by 1981. The census clearly indicated a definite trend of decline in the number of cultivators particularly of marginal cultivators and an increase in the agricultural labourers.¹⁴

1.5 CHARACTERISTICS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN INDIA

The main features characterising Indian agricultural labour (even at present) are as follows :

(i) Agricultural labour in India is very widely scattered over 5.6 lakh villages, of which half have population of less than 500 each. Therefore, any question of building an effective organisation (like that of industrial workers who are generally concentrated in factories in towns and cities) poses insurmountable difficulties. Thus, as the vast number of agricultural labour lies scattered all over India, there has been no successful attempt for a long time to build their effective organisation even at the state level.

(ii) Agricultural labourers, especially in smaller villages away from town and cities are generally 'unskilled' carrying on their agricultural occupation in the centuries old traditional ways. Most of them, especially those in small isolated villages with around 500 population, may not have even heard of modernisation of agriculture. Majority of them are generally conservative, tradition-bound, fatalistic and resigned to the insufferable lot to which, according to them, fate has condemned them. There is hardly any motivation for change or improvement.

(iii) The number of agricultural labourers being very large and the skills that they possess being meagre, there is generally more than abundant supply of agricultural labourers in relations to the demand for them. It is only in the sowing and the harvesting season

that there appears to be near-full employment in the case of agricultural workers. But once the harvesting season is over, majority of agricultural workers are job-less especially, in areas where there is single cropping pattern. Their position is slightly better in irrigated tracts (around 25 percent of the total cultivated land in the country). But their position in dry-farming areas is deplorable.

(iv) Due to all the above 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, landlord, and wholesale traders often the same person functioning all the three capacities. No wonder, the agricultural labour is the most exploited class of people in India.

(v) There is generally direct and day-to-day contact between the agricultural labor and the landlord on whose farm he is working. Unlike as in the case of industrial workers, this direct contact between employer and employee is absent. 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 type of work, i.e. farm as well as domestic at the bidding of the landlord.

(vi) In some parts of India, agricultural labour is found to be migratory, moving in search of jobs especially, in the time of sowing and harvesting.

(vii) All attempts by the Govt. to improve their lot by Legislation such as Minimum Agricultural Wages Act have proved ineffective so far due to the powerful hold of the rural elite classes on the rural economy.

The above characteristics should help distinguish agricultural labour in India from industrial workers, their number is vast; they lie scattered over wide areas all over the country; they are generally unskilled; they are not organised; their bargaining position vis-a-vis the village money lender-cum-landlord-cum-wholesaler is very weak; and therefore, they are open to grave exploitation¹⁵.

1.6 PRESENT CONDITIONS & PROBLEMS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURS

The conditions of agricultural labour in India are simply appalling. They are very poor and their level of living is very low. They just subsist in life always face to face with dire poverty, unemployment, exploitation, misery and uncertainty. They have no special status. At places they lead the life of serf or bonded labourers¹⁶. Lot of agricultural workers is extremely miserable in the country. Their appalling condition is too well known. They lack sustained employment, frequently suffer from social handicaps and are a source of serious weakness and even of instability in the present agrarian system. Shri Jagjivan Ram gives a pathetic picture of these unfortunate toiling millions. These workers still live mostly on a semi-starvation level eke out a living which hardly permits them even a hand to mouth existence, let alone a few small comforts and

decencies. The tenements and hovels they live in are hardly fit for human habitation. They are the weakest section in the economy of the country and have all along suffered great hardships and privations. They are the first victims of high prices and scarcity. The Famine Enquiry Commission 1945, revealed that the largest number of starvation deaths during the Bengal Famine were those of the agricultural workers. No amount of implements in agriculture can increase food production unless the primary producer, i.e tillers of the soil are at least assured of income security and are reasonably looked after. Some idea of the horrible conditions of their existence can be formed from a few facts listed below¹⁷.

EMPLOYMENT

Agricultural labourers do not get work upon regular basis. To a large extent, they remain unemployed and underemployed. Contract labourers, who are attached to particular landowners, do get work on permanent basis and for a longer period. But the number of such labourers is comparatively small and they too have their own difficulties and problems. For example, they are much exploited by landowners. They have to render bonded labour. Their wages are low. They are not even free to work under any other landowners. From the view point of employment, the position of casual workers is perhaps the worst. And it is these workers whose number is very large. According to the Rural Labour Enquiry (1964-65), main agricultural labour got employment for 208 days in a year, women for 138 days and children for 16 days. The position in earlier years was no better. As

per the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry, during 1956-57 casual male workers got wage employment for 197 days and worked on their own for another 40 days. For the remaining 128 days of the year, these labourers remain unemployed. Female workers remained unemployed for a longer period of about 197 days. Thus, casual agricultural labour remain without work for 4 to 5 months in a year.

Not only they are not adequately employed, their working conditions too are very bad. They work under the most tiring circumstances. They have to do very hard labour in sun and rain. And their working hours are not fixed. There is no provision for holiday or other facilities to which industrial workers are accustomed. All these affect very adversely their efficiency, health and life¹⁸.

HOURS OF WORK

The hours of work of agricultural labour are not regulated by Legislation. Hours of work vary from place to place, season to season and from crop to crop. The working hours are generally from sunrise to sunset, unlike the factory workers, where artificial light permits work at any time; but in certain operations like ploughing, irrigation and reaping, the hours may be different. Sometimes, the early cool hours of the morning and occasionally the moon light nights are utilised for lift irrigation, thrashing, etc. Ploughmen work either at a stretch with rest interval or work in two shifts, one in the morning and one in the evening with a break of 4 to 6 hours. Labourers employed in lift irrigation work in shifts of one or two hours at a time. It is usual to employ two sets of labourers for this work, one

for lifting the water and the other for canalising it through the channels to the fields. The small holder and his wife often work longer hours than labourers, and they have little sympathy with hired labour demanding reduction of hours or increase of wages. Labourers themselves do not mind working longer hours if they are paid piece wages or according to their outcome. Indeed they are prone to over-work themselves in the harvest season when they are so paid, but, that is only for a small number of days in a year. On the whole hours of work in agriculture are not very long considering the nature of work which is not so tedious as the factory work. Labourers on daily wages, generally work for about 8 hours a day with a break of two hours during mid-day. Generally on account of the casual nature of work, the workers during certain days in a year have to work for very long hours, while during other days they remain practically idle. Piece-workers often work for lesser number of hours than other workers, while they earn more.

Any regulation of hours of work is difficult to enforce in the condition obtaining in India where farms are small and fragmented. Even the ILO has not been able to pass any convention on hours of work for agricultural labour. Some countries have taken legislation on the subject fixing the hours of work over the year and over the day, but in these also rooms have been left for adaptation to local conditions. The labourer is only given some sort of protection against over-work.

WAGES AND INCOME OF THE AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

It is not only that the agricultural workers are not gainfully employed all through the year but the wages which they get for agricultural work, when employed, are very much lower than what are paid to industrial workers or to workers engaged in more or less similar non-agricultural occupations in the areas which they are employed. There is little uniformity with regard to agricultural wages and methods of payment, and those vary not only from State to State, but from district to district and even sub-division to sub-division in the same State. In certain occupations women workers are employed and they are paid lower rates of wages than men, although they are distinctly more efficient.

The methods of wage payments also differ considerably. While in some States payment may be made in cash in some villages, in others it may be in kind only, and yet in some others it may be partly in cash and partly in kind. Again, for some agricultural operations e.g. harvesting and thrashing, payments may be made by piece rate. The remunerations of the agricultural workers are also sometimes fixed in different ways, like allotting of land, giving grains and clothing, paying cash, giving boarding and lodging, etc. It is not easy to assess their money worth. Though wages in cash are becoming more prevalent, yet payment of wages in kind is still quite common, especially for farm servants.

The estimate of rates paid to the agricultural workers in different states varies. In Bombay, in 1949-50, the rates of wages for field labour were estimated at about Rs. 1|2|- to Rs. 1|8|5; for unskilled workers they were estimated to be between Rs. 1|6|1 to Rs. 1|9|1 and for skilled labour between Rs. 2|-|7 and Rs. 3|6|6 per day. In Bihar, the payment of wages in kind is still the rule, though cash wages also prevail in certain places. In August 1951, the wages of field workers were between Rs. 1|2|6 and Rs. 1|10|- in case of man and between Rs. 12 and Rs. 1|8|4 in case of women. In North Bihar, the wages were lower than in South Bihar. The 'attached' labourers were generally paid 1½ seers of paddy and 6 chattaks of fried rice per day, the cost of which comes to Rs. -|11|6 per day. In many districts low wages prevailed. In West Bengal, in many villages the daily cash wages varied between Rs. 1|8|- and Rs. 2|12|- in different places.¹⁹

The income of agricultural labourers is very low. For a considerable part of the year, they are out of work and earn nothing. During the time they are employed they get meagre income or wages. A large part of their income is derived from wages. According to the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry wages formed 73 percent of their total income during 1956-57. They are paid wages partly in cash and partly in kind. About 49 percent of their wages are paid in cash, 40 percent in kind and the remaining 11 percent in a mixed form.

As far as the wage rate is concerned, the 25th round of the National Sample Survey has revealed a gloomy picture. During the

period July 1970 to June 1971, the average earnings as wages per man-day for the country as a whole were Rs. 2.03 for the landless worker and Rs. 1.90 for the small cultivator. Equally low is the absolute level of average daily earnings of an agricultural labour. For example in 1971 the per capita daily earnings were as low as Rs. 4.28. These were Rs. 12.3 in 1981, and Rs. 15.96 in 1985. Considering the rise in the price level since 1971, the real earnings have not increased much. These infact remained very low.

CONSUMPTION AND STANDARD OF LIVING

The low level living of these poverty-stricken people can easily be imagined. An idea, however, can be formed from the consumption-pattern of agricultural labourers. Because of small incomes, they are able to meet their consumption needs only to a limited extent. In fact, the incomes are so meagre that they can provide for only a part of the minimumsubsistence living and are forced to incur debt to meet a part of their consumption expenditure. According to the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry, the average income in that year was only Rs.437. Thus, on an average, the deficit per household in 1956-57 was Rs. 180. When we consider their pattern of consumption expenditure, we find that the bulk of expenditure is on foodgrains. This is indicative of the low level of the standard of living. According to the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry, 77 percent of the total consumption expenditure was on foodgrains. Expenditure on other items of consumption was as follows : clothing 6 percent, fuel and light 8 percent, and services and miscellaneous, 9 percent.

It is clear from this that the level of living of agricultural workers in the country is very low. Generally they eat jowar, bajra, maize and other inferior cereals. Such items like fruits, vegetables, milk and other nutritive foods do not at all figure in their diet. The position regarding other essentials is no better. They do not even get minimum clothing; education and health facilities are non-existent for them; and their 'houses' are no more than the places for animals which they share with them. A substantial number do not even have such houses. In these grim conditions many take to gambling, drinking and such like evil activities. They also suffer from many horrible diseases. To meet these expenditures they take loans and get driven into the clutches of money-lenders.²⁰

These low wages of the agricultural labour are responsible for their sub-human standard of living. It is impossible for an agricultural worker to make both ends meet with these small wages earned from agricultural work in about six months during the year with no other employment for the rest of the period. The inevitable result is that they are mostly semi-starved, not having enough physical strength to perform in a proper manner all the agricultural operations. There is always a deficit in their family budgets.

An analysis of the family budgets of agricultural workers also shows that the diet of these workers is poor both in quantity and quality. The expenditure on food is the highest - varying from 70 percent to 84 percent of the total income of the agricultural workers family. Sugar and vegetables account for 1.5 percent, while spices

and salt take 2.4 percent of the total expenditure. Other essential articles as milk and ghee are seldom consumed and meat is taken only on ceremonial occasions. 22 percent is spent annually on fuel, lighting and rent. 'Pan-supari', tobacco, alcohol and other miscellaneous items accounts for the 8.3 percent. The findings of Agricultural and Rural Labour Enquiries regarding consumption expenditure are mentioned in the following paras.

The worker is, thus, hardly left with any margin to spend on any comfort or luxury, and cannot also save anything, with the result that in case of emergency or on occasions of social ceremonies and religious festivals, etc., he is forced to borrow money. Since the diet is poor the workers also generally fall an easy prey to many kinds of diseases and their health and efficiency are adversely affected. Even a small epidemic sometimes carries away a high toll of human lives from the agricultural class.

The rates of wages alone cannot give us an idea of the standard of living of the agricultural workers and we have also to take into account the seasonal character of their employment. As Mrs. Howard says in her book 'Labour in Agriculture' : "The outstanding problem of agricultural workers is not so much of the rates of wages, as possibility of work, not so much what to earn but whether to earn at all". In India in non-irrigated tracts, agriculture is mostly a gamble with the rains. When the monsoon fails, the labourer has to go without employment, and in order to make out his living offers himself for a very low wage. The amount of employment

therefore, depends upon whether the tract is irrigated or not, the number of crops raised, and the amount of family labour employed.²¹

SOCIAL STATUS

A substantial part of the agricultural workers is constituted of backward classes like Harijans, tribal people, etc. They lead a life of social outcastes and are exploited in numerous ways. Placed as they are on the lowest rank of the social hierarchy, they are doomed to live like animals.

Thus, it is clear that the economic living and social life of agricultural labourers are very deplorable indeed. They are also so poor that they have to undergo debt for sheer physical existence. Poverty and indebtedness make them work as bonded labour who live as serfs. In many cases indebtedness persists for generations and along with it exists serfdom. A majority of these people live below the poverty line. Their life is shorn of any hope. Human existence is just snuffed out of them. We may quote from a distinguished agrarian expert, Harsh Deo Malaviya; "Unemployment, underemployment, very low wages, combined with social oppression make the life of the agricultural worker miserable."

INDEBTEDNESS

Low incomes of agricultural labourers have led to heavy indebtedness. According to one estimate, 44.5 percent of agricultural labour households were under debt in 1950-51 and the percentage of

such households was 63.9 in 1956-57. Taking indebted households, the debt on an average per household was Rs. 105 in 1950-51 and Rs. 138 in 1956-57. The total debt in 1950-51 was estimated to be Rs. 88 crores which had increased to Rs. 143 crores in 1956-57. Thus, these poverty stricken workers are not only under debt, but the burden of debt has been on the increase. According to the All India Debt and Investment Survey (1971-72) agricultural rural labour household was on an average under debt to the extent of about Rs. 162.²²

Once in debt, they are never able to extricate themselves from indebtedness. Rural debt has engaged the attention of the various State Governments from time to time and various estimates have been given of the extent of agricultural indebtedness in the country. According to the Deccan Ryots Commission of 1875, one third of the occupants of Government lands were indebted to the extent of about 18 times the land revenue assessment. The Finance Commission of 1880, concluded that one third of the landholding classes in India were heavily in debt. The Famine Commission 1901, concluded that due to debt, 25 percent of the Bombay cultivators had lost possession of their lands. In 1911, Sir Edward Maclagan estimated the total rural debt in British India at Rs. 300 crores. Mr. M. L. Darling estimated it at Rs. 600 crores in 1918. The Indian Central Banking Enquiry Committee in 1930, put it at Rs. 900 crores. The UP Debt Relief Committee, and the Bengal Board of Economic Enquiry also pointed out the heavy indebtedness of agricultural classes. During the war, according to the Famine Commission of 1945, the amount of rural debt was considerably

reduced due to rise in prices and profits in agriculture. The Reserve Bank of India Report also indicated that most of the rural debt was paid off during the war.

As far as the agricultural labourers are concerned, indications are that they still suffer from the evil of heavy indebtedness. The findings of Agricultural and Rural Labour Enquiries regarding indebtedness among agricultural labour households are mentioned in the following pages. The agricultural workers are not benefited so much from the rising prices, because their wages have not gone up to the same extent, and they have not been able to share the profits of agriculture while the cost of living has increased.

The agricultural worker is forced to borrow money for consumption purposes mostly and for social ceremonies. The debt is also permanent, and some times passes on from father to son. The system of money lending has been very defective and a high rate of interest is generally charged for such debts. The agricultural labour has not even got the security of land to offer. Besides, he generally borrows money from landholders for whom he works. The result is that the indebtedness is exploited and he is compelled to work at low wages, lower than what he would have earned if he had not obtained loan for meeting his day-to-day expenses. As already pointed out, this indebtedness has also led to serf-labour, i.e. the worker has to bind himself to work for the creditor till the debt is repaid.



HOUSING OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURS

It will be no exaggeration to state that the housing conditions of agricultural workers are deplorable. They occupy the worst quarters or the worst houses or huts in the villages. Generally, they did not possess any land of their own with the result that they are dependent on the tender mercy of land owners for small house sites. If the house site is provided, the worker has to pay heavily for it in the shape of forced labour service on depressed wages. There is complete lack of sanitation in their houses. As a matter of fact, men and beasts sleep under the same roof in most cases. No wonder then, that the incidence of disease is the highest in this class. During the rainy season and winter months, the workers suffer a lot on account of bad housing conditions.

Something must be done to improve the housing conditions of agricultural workers. We have so much about urban housing; it is time that rural housing, particularly for the landless agricultural workers, is also given greater attention. If house sites are made available and arrangements for the supply of materials on cheap rates are made, they can be persuaded to construct mud houses of sanitary type with their own labour. The Government of India formulated a village housing project scheme in October 1957. Under it, financial assistance in the form of loans to the extent of 80 percent of the cost of construction of a house, subject to the maximum of Rs. 4,000 is being given for housing projects in about 5,000 villages in suitable community development blocks and also for laying the streets and

drains to improve the environmental hygiene of the village. Upto the end of 1973, loans to the extent of Rs. 16.56 crores for construction of about 84,938 houses had been sanctioned and about 52,820 houses have been completed.

During the Fourth Five Year Plan, from 1972-73 onwards a scheme for provision of house sites to landless workers was introduced which provides for 100 percent financial assistance to the State Governments for meeting the expenditure on development of house sites and aquisition of land, wherever necessary. Normally, the maximum size of a house site to be allotted to a landless family is not to exceed 100 sq. yards. The National Commission on Labour had recommended that landless workers should be put in ownership of the house site where their huts stand and colonies of agricultural labour, away from their present insanitary and unhygienic conditions should be established, keeping in view the integrated character of the rural community and the need for promoting social equality²³.

Female agricultural workers constitute a large majority of the women workforce in India. For example, in the year 1971, of the total 31.3 million women workers in India, nearly 78 percent were engaged in agricultural occupations in rural areas only (Census of India, 1971). Due to definitional changes one cannot compare these figures with those of earlier censuses. However, there is no denying fact that the percentage of women in agricultural occupations has always been quite high²⁴.

The female population has been growing fast after the "great divide" and the rate of growth has marked 2.5 percent in the recent decade. Today, women constitute 48 percent (331 million) of our total population. In the Indian context, the explosion of population is bad, but still worse is the chronical decline in sex ratio.

WORK PARTICIPATION

Table 1.3 presents the work participation rate of women and the proportion of working women in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. The proportion of female workers in total workforce has also been given.

TABLE 1.3

FEMALE WORK PARTICIPATION RATE & PROPORTION IN TOTAL WORKFORCE

YEAR	FEMALE WORK PARTICIPATION	PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE WORKERS		PROPORTION OF FEMALE WORKERS TO ALL WORKERS
		AGRICULTURE & ALLIED PURSUITS	NON-AGRI. ACTIVITIES	
1911	31.80	73.66	26.34	33.56
1911	33.70	76.91	23.09	34.49
1921	32.60	78.54	21.46	34.05
1931	29.80	77.71	22.29	31.77
1951	23.30	82.18	17.82	28.89
1961	28.00	85.68	14.32	31.53
1971	12.06	82.61	17.39	17.41
1981	13.99	81.23	18.77	28.40

It is evident from above table that female work participation rate has been around 32 percent till 1921 but it declined to 23.3 percent in 1951. A significant improvement has been there in 1961 pushing the rate up to 28 percent. The 1971-81 decade shows further improvement of about 2 percent in the proportion of females in work force.

It is important to note that over a period, female employment remained largely confined to industries such as agriculture which are relatively stagnant. Moreover, in the agricultural sector, the percentage of female workers has been rising steadily. It has increased from 74 percent in 1901 to 81 percent in 1981. The proportion outside agriculture recorded a striking fall from 26 percent in 1901 to 14 percent in 1961.

The male-female workers ratio also reveals a strong sex bias in favour of males. After the independence, the participation of female has remained around 30 percent only or some times even lower. It was particularly unspecified workers of years upto 1961 have been merged in agricultural and non-agricultural categories in proportion.

CHANGING OCCUPATIONAL PATTERN

Both 1961 and 1981 censuses reveal that not only female workers are much less than male workers, but also that their occupational pattern is very different and less paying. The most unwanted development was the increase in the proportion of female agricultural labour at the cost of their proportion as cultivators. It

is assumed that a large number of female cultivators have been converted into agricultural labourers during this short span of twenty years. This is largely due to incessant fall in per capita land holding. The only positive change in female employment in primary sector is the growth in employment in livestock, forestry, fishing and mining activities and that too is marginal.

India has a low rate of growth and growth has declined in commodity sector indicating a serious threat to the wellbeing of poor and illiterate women of the country. Stagnant agriculture, the drastic fall in the share of female cultivators and steep increase in the proportion of female agricultural labourers are matters of concern²⁵.

After reviewing the nature of the employment pattern of the rural agricultural females, it may be concluded that females tend to work inspite of their deplorable conditions. In view of this background, it was decided to conduct a study among the female agricultural labourers in some selected villages of Ankola Taluka in Karnataka.

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