

Research Article

Agricultural Laborers in India - A Review

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture is playing a major role in Indian economy. More than 65% of the Indians are based on agriculture. It generates employment opportunities to many unemployed people in India. Agriculture is a primary sector in India, and it is generating revenue to most of the Indians for their survival. Hence, the researchers identified the significance of the sector and made an attempt to portray the agricultural laborers in India.

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INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is the largest sector of economic activity in India, and it continues to be the main source of livelihood for the majority of its population. Indian economy, even after more than six decades of planned development, depends on agriculture. Around 75% of the Indian population is living in rural areas and they are depended on agriculture and allied occupations for their livelihood. Being the dominant sector the economic growth of the country depends on the performance of its agriculture. Indian agriculture is still a gamble o monsoon as three-fourths of the net area sown depends on rainfall which is very often uncertain, unevenly spread and deficient to meet the requirement of crop growth resulting in instability in agricultural production and mounting seasonal unemployment and under-employment. Due to the rapid growth of the population, the number of cultivators and small and marginal farmers and agricultural labourers have been increasing at an alarming rate.

There is an interdependence between the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. The demand for non-farm inputs of the industry stimulates industrial activity. The industrial growth in turn increases the demand for wage goods and raw material, which helps expand agricultural employment and income. Increase agricultural incomes create market demand for industrial consumer goods, thereby providing a stimulus to industrialization and market development.^[1] As commerce develops, the tertiary sector also expands. As development proceeds along these lines, opportunities for

diversified employment are opened up to reduce the excessive pressure of population on the agricultural sector. However, many developing economies are not so fortunately placed. Therefore, agriculture has a crucial role to play in the country's economic development.

Indian agriculture occupies a central place in the Indian economy at the current stage of the country's development. The rapid growth of population on the one hand and the inadequate growth of agriculture on the other hand have led to several unwelcome developments. The growth in the rural incomes has been sluggish, thereby increasing the disparity between the rural land urban incomes. Lack of adequate growth has increased the pressure on land, and this has led to the mounting rural underemployment and unemployment. Agricultural laborers constitute the largest segment of the labor, and they constitute one of the biggest slices of Indian population. The agricultural labor is provided mostly by backward lasses and other depressed who are economically poor and socially downtrodden since the days immemorial. Most of the scheduled cast population depends on the wage pad employment in agriculture to eke out their livelihood.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To show the growth of agricultural laborers in India.
2. To analyze the causes for the growth of agricultural laborers in India.



Table 1: Growth of agricultural laborers in India (in million)

Year	Total workers	Agricultural workers	Agricultural laborers	% of agricultural laborers to total workers	% of agricultural laborers to agricultural workers	Index number of growth of agricultural laborers base year
1901	110.71	69.21	17.26	15.59	24.94	1901=100 100.00
1911	121.30	82.53	24.06	19.84	29.15	139.40
1921	117.75	81.25	19.65	16.69	24.18	113.85
1931	120.67	79.78	22.11	18.33	27.72	128.10
1951	139.42	97.24	27.50	19.72	28.28	159.33
1961	188.68	113.14	31.52	16.71	24.04	182.39
1971	180.48	125.76	47.49	26.31	37.76	174.62
1981	222.52	148.02	55.50	24.94	37.49	321.49
1991	285.93	185.30	74.60	26.09	40.26	432.21
2001	402.05	N.A	107.44	45.62	58.20	NA

Source: (1) Main workers are considered in 1981 and 1991 censuses,^[2] (2) Indian labor year book, Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, p. 213, (3) census of 1991, series. 1. India, part-IIB (I), volume-I, primary census, abstract, general population, (4) planning commission, Government of India, Xth 5-year plan, 2002–2007, Vol.II, P.No. 229, New Delhi

3. To show the conditions of the agricultural laborers in India.

Table 1 shows that the total workers have increased from 110.71 million in 1901 to 402.05 million in 2001. According to the 1901 census, agricultural laborers account for 15.59% of the total workers and 24.94% of the agricultural workers.^[3] Their number has increased from 17.26 million in 1901 to 107.44 million in 2001. The percentage of agricultural labourers to total workers has increased from 15.59% in 1901 to 45.62% in 2001, while the percentage of agricultural laborers to agricultural workers has increased from 24.94% in 1901 to 58.20% in 2001. The index number of agricultural labor has increased from 100 in 1901 to 432.21 in 1991. The above data reveal that there has been a sharp increase in the number of agricultural laborers over time when compared to other categories of workers. This implies that (1) the number of agricultural laborers increased by all most 3 times over the period 1951–2001; and (2) as a proportion of workforce in agriculture, agricultural laborers increased from 28% in 1951 to 58.20% in 2001.^[4] This shows that every fourth person of the labor force is an agricultural worker in India.

Causes of growth of agricultural laborers

Increase in population

The population of India has increased at a very rapid pace after 1921. However, development has proceeded at a very slow rate, and it has not been possible to provide employment to the increasing population in areas other than agriculture. The technology mix in manufacturing industries, transport, and tertiary industries is such that the capital-labor ratio is practically not possible to provide increasing employment opportunities in these sectors. However, the situation in the agricultural sector is entirely different. Not only the capital-labor ratio but even the land-labor ratio is variable. Therefore, when population increases, people fall back on agriculture for their livelihood.^[5] Thus, increase in population is one of the major reasons for increase in the number of agricultural laborers.

Decline of cottage industries and village handicrafts

There was a rapid decline of cottage industries and village handicrafts during the British period, but modern industries were not set up to take their place. The Britishers had adopted various measures to destroy the traditional industries of India, and they were least interested in providing alternative employment opportunities to the skilled and unskilled workers engaged in these industries.

Uneconomic holdings

The process of subdivision and fragmentation of holdings (which is mainly a consequence of the law of inheritance and decline of joint family system) has continued unabated for a long period of time. This has rendered a large number of holdings uneconomic. As a consequence, farmers working on these holdings find it difficult to make both ends meet. Therefore, they are forced to work on the farms on Zamindars and big landlords as agricultural laborers to supplement their income from land.

Increase in indebtedness

The increasing indebtedness of small farmers in rural areas is also responsible for increasing the number of agricultural workers. The money lenders and mahajans often advance loans with the purpose of grabbing the land of small farmers. They adopt various malpractices such as charging exorbitant rates of interest and manipulating accounts, and once the small and marginal farmers fall into their trap, it becomes very difficult for them to get out. In an attempt to repay debts, these poor farmers are forced to work as agricultural workers. These are the main causes for the rise in the growth of agricultural laborers in India.

Problems of agricultural laborers

The class of agricultural laborers is the most exploited and oppressed class in the rural hierarchy. The situation has improved in these 70 years of independence. Although, even now, the class of agricultural workers is the poorest and resource-less class in rural areas, it is no longer a victim of extreme forms of oppression, yet economic exploitation

continues. Even now, their level of income is very low and highly insufficient to enable them to make both ends meet. In the absence of alternative sources of employment, they are forced to depend on landlords who consequently dictate terms.

Due to the low level of their incomes, agricultural workers have to seek debts on and off. However, because of their extreme poverty, they are not in a position to provide any security. Therefore, institutional agencies are reluctant to provide loans to them. Accordingly, they have to seek credit from non-institutional sources like private money lenders who charge a high rate of interest and exploit them in a number of other ways as well. In fact, the debt of agricultural laborers passes from generation to generation and is never fully paid up.

Causes of the poor economic conditions of agricultural laborers

The following important reasons explain the poor economic conditions of agricultural labor in India.

Low social status

Most agricultural workers belong to the depressed classes which have been neglected for ages. The low caste and the depressed classes have been socially handicapped, and they had never the courage to assert themselves. They have been like dumb-driven cattle.

Unorganized

Agricultural workers are illiterate and ignorant. They live in scattered villages. Hence, they cannot be organized as unions. In urban areas, workers can generally organize themselves, and it is convenient for political parties to take interest in trade union activity. This is almost difficult in case of farm labor. Accordingly, it is difficult for them to bargain with the landowners and secure good wages.

Seasonal employment

The agricultural workers do not have continuous work. On an average, a farm laborer finds employment for about 197 days in a year, and for the rest of the year, he is idle. Apart from underemployment, there is also unemployment in rural areas. Unemployment and underemployment are two important factors responsible for the low income and consequently the low economic position of the agricultural workers in India. In most cases, work on the farm is seasonal. In many cases, there is single cropping which means work only for 6–7 months in the year.

Rural indebtedness

Agricultural labor is heavily indebted. Normally, the farm laborers borrow from the landowners under whom they work. Since they have no security to offer, they pledge themselves to the money lenders and rich landlords and become bonded laborers in many areas. Naturally, they are forced to accept lower wages.

Wage differentials

There is no uniformity in wage rate for agricultural laborers. There are considerable disparities in wages between regions, between different crops, as well as between male

labor and female labor. The differentials between the wages of men and those of women are much more than what they are in an industry. This is due to the fact that wage differentials in agriculture are based not only merely on the demand and supply position but also on social considerations. Disparities in wages between different regions arise on account of diverse socioeconomic conditions and differences related to traditions. Generally, more wages are offered in the peak season and low wages are offered in the slack season. Wages also in turn depend on the hours of work. The agricultural laborers get higher income when work is available throughout the year.^[6]

Present position of agricultural labor in India

Agricultural labor in India may be classified into four groups:

- a. Landless laborers who are attached to the landlords.
- b. Landless laborers who are personally independent but who work exclusively for others.
- c. Petty farmers with tiny bits of land who devote most of their time working for others, and
- d. Farmers who have economic holdings but who have one or more of their sons and dependents working for other prosperous farmers.

The first groups of agricultural workers have been more or less in the position of serfs or slaves, and they are also known as bonded labor. They do not normally receive wages in cash but are generally paid in kind. They have to work for their master and cannot shift from one master to another. They have to provide beggar or forced labor. In some cases, they have to offer cash and also supply fowls and goats to their master. Among the other groups mentioned above, the second and the third are quite important. The problem of landless laborers is the most serious problem in the rural sector. More than half of the workers do not possess any land, and even the rest of the own only very little land. Agricultural laborers predominantly belong to the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other backward classes. According to one estimate, between 75 and 80% of all agricultural laborers belong to the scheduled castes. The number of agricultural laborers increased by almost three times over the period of 1951–2001, and agricultural laborers increased from 28% in 1951 to 58.20% in 2001.

The agricultural laborers have to work in cold and hot weather from sunrise to sunset. Their wages are low when compared to industrial laborers. They are generally custom bound, they suffer from many social handicaps, and a majority of these handicaps are interconnected with economic problems which outweigh other problems. The low incomes only enable them to have low levels of living. The low standard of living further causes social disabilities and malnutrition. This ultimately results in low efficiency of labor leading to low labor productivity in agriculture. These agricultural laborers are suffering due to unemployment and low wages.^[7] Due to low employment potential in other sectors, most of the population is forced to be dependent on agriculture. Employment in agriculture is mostly seasonal and intermittent in character. The low wages are responsible for their subhuman standard of living. In certain occupations, women workers are paid lower rates than men. The inevitable result is that they are

mostly semi-starved, not having sufficient physical strength to perform all agricultural operations in a proper manner. The productivity of Indian agriculture is marginally lower than many countries in the world.

Suggestions

The following suggestions have been made for the improvement of agricultural labor.

Removal of serfdom

Agricultural serfdom which exists in many parts of the country should go. In fact, according to the constitution of India, the practice of slavery is prohibited, but agrarian serfdom which has been in vogue for centuries cannot disappear so easily. This is so, because the labourers are helpless, ignorant and illiterate. Education of the rural masses and better opportunities are some of the remedies for the removal of the system of slavery.

Better implementation of minimum wages in agriculture

Agricultural workers have been getting very low wages except in Punjab and Kerala. Measures should be taken to raise the wages of farm workers. Unless this is done, it is impossible to raise the economic condition of the agricultural workers. Minimum wage legislation alone is not sufficient but should be taken to enforce it.

Improvement in agriculture

The agricultural laborers do not have full-time employment because of the seasonal character of Indian agriculture. Both intensive cultivation and extension of irrigation are very much needed to increase agricultural work. By these methods, there will be double cropping and employment will be available for the whole year round. Besides, there will be increase in the productivity of labor which will also increase the wages of workers. There is very great scope for the setting up of village and rural industries which will use the raw materials readily available in the villages and which will provide occupation for the rural population. There is no need for setting up of big industrial units. There may be small size industries employing modern techniques which can be easily set up nowadays because of the extension of electricity to rural areas. The setting up of such industries will help agricultural labor in many ways, as for instance: (a) Seasonal unemployment will be reduced, (b) surplus labor power will be diverted to these industries, and (c) the pressure of population on agriculture will be reduced, and this will help to raise agricultural productivity and also raise wage of agricultural labour.

Public work program

One very good method of providing employment to rural labor and of utilizing it fully is the construction of public works by the government. The government can implement its projects in the rural areas carefully so that the workers who may be unemployed during the off seasons may be gainfully employed. Such projects include the construction of roads, the digging and deepening of tanks and canals, and afforestation. The setting up of small industries and public works program has a great importance in the mobilization of workforce resources in villages and raising the wages of the rural masses, and indirectly, the income of the country.

The Central Government introduced an employment program for the rural poor known as "Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Program" for the benefit of agricultural laborers and landless laborers. Such types of programs are necessary for the growing labor force in India.

CONCLUSION

Since the agricultural sector experiences excessive dependence of population eking out their livelihood, in the absence of alternative work, they join the ranks of agricultural labor. Their low standard of living permits them to be satisfied with subsistence and low wages. Inadequate employment opportunities further aggravate the problem. The slow pace of industrialization is not able to absorb the surplus workforce in agriculture. Until, this pressure is wiped out from transforming surplus labor available in agriculture to industrial workforce and no sustained growth in the economy may be possible. The first possible solution to free the rural economy from this undesirable situation is to improve villages and small-scale industries which can absorb most of the rural workforce. If the rural economy is industrialized with the type of industries which are more labor intensive, they can generate rural employment. Seasonal unemployment is the serious problem faced by the agricultural labour. The seasonal unemployed labor can be utilized for the productive works like the development of rural infrastructure. This will help increase income of the labor household and reduce their intensity of poverty. Agricultural development will be the best possible solution to improve the conditions of these laborers. Higher yield will enable the farmers to increase the wage rates which raise the standard of living of laborers. Most of the farmers are now trying to use high yielding varieties of seeds and email fertilizers. Some of them are using tractors for cultivation purposes. Low economic standards of the agricultural laborers are the primary cause for their low social status. Credit facilities should be extended to the agricultural labor to have dairy farming, poultry, and such other activities which will help these laborers to enhance their standard of living and social status. As most of the agricultural laborers in the interior regions are not aware of the facilities, they need to be educated in this matter. Improvement in the agricultural marketing facilities and ensuring remunerative prices for the agricultural produce will enable the farming community to get reasonable income. The fluctuations in the prices of agricultural commodities are adversely affecting the income of the farmers which lead to changes in the cultivated area and cropping pattern. Assured reasonable prices can help to increase the farmer's capacity to pay for the labour. The Government has to take certain measures to improve the living conditions of the agricultural labour. The measures are the welfare programmes implemented such as Cash Scheme of Rural Employment, Pilot Intensive Rural Employment Project, Food for Work Program, National Rural Employment Guarantee Program (NREGP), national scheme of Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment, Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas and Integrated Rural Development Program, Swarnajayanthi Gram Swarajog Yojana Programme, and Mahatma Gandhi NREGP.

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