
LABOUR AGRICULTURE IN INDIA–SOME ISSUES

Dr.T.Ramanathan

Assistant Professors, Department of Environmental Economics, School of Economics, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

R.Sathiyaseelan

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Environmental Economics, School of Economics, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

M.Swarnalatha

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of Environmental Economics, School of Economics, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

Abstract

In a developing economy the change in the pattern of employment indicated by a fall in the number at agricultural labourers and labour households should be welcome unless the erstwhile agricultural labourers shifted to less productive jobs or were rendered unemployed. It is possible that among agricultural labourers those who were comparatively better off readily took the opportunity to shift to better occupations. But the supply of agricultural labour being still far in excess of demand, the wage rate failed to rise as a result of the reduction in the total number of agricultural labourers, Further, increase in the number (and proportion) of child labourers, the decrease in the extent of self-employment and the comparatively higher net income of the non-landholding households all this may be construed to confirm the assumption that the comparatively better off among agricultural labourers have shifted to other occupations.

Introduction

It is widely known to everybody that the agricultural workers are the most neglected class in the Indian masses. Growth in the number of agricultural workers-including the cultivators and agricultural labourers engaged in crop production, has been the most disquieting features of the rural economy of India. The phenomena of underemployment, under-development, feeling of want, poverty etc. are simultaneously lives of agricultural labourers. They get unusually low wages for the work done under the worst conditions put in excessively burdens on hard work. The opportunity to work is extremely irregular; hence their income is also low. Since, they possess no skill or training, they have no alternative employment opportunities either. Socially, a large number of agricultural labourers belong to schedule castes and schedule tribes. Hence, they are an oppressed class. They are not organized and cannot fight for their rights. Because of all these reasons, their economic lot has failed to improve even after four decades of developmental efforts.

Hence, the problems of agricultural labour are manifold and are mainly centered round the basic problems of rural economy which include low income, low productivity and lack of continuous employment. There is a need to tackle these problems successfully through the more intensive programmes of development in order to improve the socio-economic conditions and prospects of agricultural labourers. India has the second largest manpower in the world, all sectors of the economy have been affected by the scarcity of labour, and the impact being felt more in the agricultural sector. Labourers constitute a vital input in agricultural production, but they are migrating to different parts of the country for earning a better livelihood, adding to the existing imbalance between labour demand and supply of labourers (Deshingkar, 2003).

LABOUR AGRICULTURE IN INDIA—SOME ISSUES

The 2001 Census of India defined agricultural labour as any person who worked on another person's land only as labourer, without exercising any supervision in cultivation, for wage in cash or share such as share of produce (GoI, 2001). The portion of agricultural workers to the total workers has been declining over the years, while the corresponding ratio in the secondary and tertiary sectors is on the rise.

Pursuant to this, following impacts have been predominantly noticed in agriculture in recent years: reduction in crop yield, reduction in cropping intensity and changes in traditional cropping pattern. Though agricultural research has evolved in many crop specific, labour saving implements and technologies, the problem has not been addressed fully. Another matter of concern is that in the sociological perspective, the vocation of casual agricultural labour is considered to be the last resort and hence preferred only by people who have no other means of livelihood.

Agricultural Labour

Agricultural labour households (ALH) are defined according to Rural Labour Enquiries as those that derive over 50 percent of their total household income from wage paid manual labour in agricultural activities. Overall, there was a significant increase in the proportion of such households over the two decades '73-74 to '93-94 in the 11 major states. Less than half the rural labour households have land, and of those who do, only 13 percent own above one hectare.

In states like Punjab and Haryana where the green revolution has taken place and the areas most likely to go global, the proportion of rural labour owning land is as low as 6 and 12 percent respectively, as compared to so called backwards states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and UP, where over 50% own land. (Sowmya Siva Kumar, Proportion of agricultural labour households on the rise. Economic Times. 8/9/01 [C.H10.08092001ET] (Enclosure 34). This clearly shows that modernization has resulted in alienation of land from the marginal rural labour households. Consider the experience of West Bengal: The state's remarkable rise in agricultural production is a common knowledge: total food grains production has increased steadily since the beginning of the eighties and has continued to do so in the nineties as well.

But despite such bountiful agricultural production, the agricultural labourers in the state are fighting a grim battle for survival where wages are concerned. The left front claims this achievement in agriculture as the result of successful implementation of the land reform policy. Land reform might have acted as the catalyst for higher agricultural production, but it has not succeeded in changing the distribution pattern of such gains in favour of the rural poor.

Present Position of Agricultural Labour in India

Agricultural labour is provided mostly by economically and socially backward sections; poor sections from the tribes also fall in this rank.

The first group of agricultural workers has been more or less in the position of serfs or slaves; they are also known as bonded labour. They do not normally receive wages in cash but are generally paid in kind. They have to work for their masters and cannot shift from one to another. They have to provide beggar or forced labour. In some cases, they have to offer cash and also supply fowls and goats to their masters.

LABOUR AGRICULTURE IN INDIA–SOME ISSUES

Review of Literature

Prabakar et al (2011) argues that labour scarcity being felt as a major impediment in agriculture, this study has probed into its magnitude, impacts, causes and possible solutions in the Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu. The study has revealed that prevalence of acute labour scarcity in the district has affected the productivity levels of almost all crops and is even leading towards the permanent changes in the cropping pattern.

Mukesh Eswaran (2009) examines the evolution of poverty in India through the prism of agricultural wages and employment. It links the movement in wages (and hence poverty) to the fundamental process of sectoral labour flow that underlies economic development. It finds that despite the rapid growth of the non-farm sector, its success in drawing labour from land has been limited. Yet agricultural earnings have increased, demonstrating the pivotal role of agricultural productivity. The stock of the labour force already locked into agriculture is large and the best way to improve living standards would be to boost farm productivity.

Statement of the Problems

The statement of the problems are discussed about the working poor and their families face. The working poor hold the lowest-paying, most unstable jobs. The working poor lack full-year employment. The working poor 'have health constraints. The working poor are less likely to be in two parent families. The working poor have less access to health care. The working poor do not participate in welfare programs to the extent that they qualify, even though they need this assistance. The working poor face many hurdles in lifting themselves out of poverty.

Scope of the Study

Collection of employment market information on a more extensive basis for use in manpower planning, Establishment of a youth employment service to deal with young persons as a special group of employment seekers. Briefly, the functions of the proposed, service will be to give expert advice to young persons on problems relating to employment and training;

Methodology

The study is mainly based on the analysis of secondary data collected through field visits to NGOs, government institution report, Magazine's, Articles, Reports, Books, etc.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To explain about wage rates in rural India
- ii. To study the agricultural labour market and its changing nature

Wage Rates in Rural India

As a part of Rural Labour Enquiry, Labour Bureau has been compiling and maintaining average daily wage rates in respect of eleven agricultural and seven non-agricultural occupations on the basis of the wage rate data collected by the National Sample Survey Organisation from a fixed set of 600 sample villages spread over 20 States of Indian Union.

LABOUR AGRICULTURE IN INDIA–SOME ISSUES

Though these wage rate data are collected since 1986-87, their compilation and publication were effected from April, 1998 on regular basis.

The average wage rates are worked out at State level and also at All-India level. To arrive at the State level average wage rates, the daily wage rate data received from the different villages are first normalized for eight hours working day and then the simple arithmetic average of these normalized daily wage rates is worked out. State-wise averages are restricted only to those occupations where the number of quotations is five or more in order to avoid inconsistency in wages paid to different categories of workers on account of difference in number of quotations. The average wage rates at all-India level are derived by dividing the sum total of wages of all the 20 states by the number of quotations. At all-India level also, the number of quotations for working out occupation-wise averages are restricted to five or more.

Table 1 Average Daily Wage Rates for Agricultural Occupations in Rural India. During August, 2013(By States and Sex)

SI.No	States	Ploughing			Sowing		
		Men	Women	Children	Men	Women	Children
1	Andhra Pradesh	261.30	@	-	201.45	151.39	-
2	Assam	196.87	@	-	191.57	181.90	-
3	Bihar	197.58	-	-	180.46	150.98	@
4	Gujarat	162.41	-	-	141.17	118.13	-
5	Haryana	408.00	-	-	301.67	@	-
6	Himachal Pradesh	311.67	-	-	270.00	@	-
7	Jammu & Kashmir	280.56	-	-	280.56	-	-
8	Karnataka	249.35	@	-	203.89	137.04	@
9	Kerala	592.67	-	-	511.60	@	-
10	Madhya Pradesh	143.39	@	-	132.45	108.75	-
11	Maharashtra	220.00	130.00	-	202.39	124.29	-
12	Manipur	240.00	@	-	228.33	@	-
13	Meghalaya	170.00	@	-	144.00	118.00	-
14	Orissa	165.13	-	-	144.67	@	-
15	Punjab	@	-	-	@	-	-
16	Rajasthan	236.50	-	-	190.56	156.67	-
17	Tamil Nadu	349.21	-	-	242.95	184.62	-
18	Tripura	168.89	-	-	168.89	-	-
19	Uttar Pradesh	189.06	@	-	185.17	142.63	-
20	West Bengal	252.26	@	-	186.53	179.72	@
	All India	223.08	138.58	-	192.65	150.06	@

Source: Labour Bureau Government of India

Table 1 show that it has been explained about the wage rates are described during the on august 2013.overall Indian states for ploughing and sowing to find regarding the men, women, children. An Indian state has highest percentage, lowest percentage and not shown (i) it will

LABOUR AGRICULTURE IN INDIA–SOME ISSUES

see about ploughing from men, women and children. Kerala state has compare than other states at men 592.67 percentage. Madhya Pradesh has lowest than other states at men 143.39 percentage .From women only one state has percentage of Maharashtra at 130.00 percentage and lastly children are not shown percentage (ii)here see about sowing from men, women and children. Kerala state has compare than other states at men 511.60 percentage. Madhya Pradesh has lowest than other states at men 132.45 percentage. From women Assam state has highest percentage at 181.90 percentages. Lowest percentage of Madhya Pradesh at 108.75 percentages. Some states are not shown percentage. Lastly children have no shown percentage.

Table 2 All-India Consumer Price Index Numbers for Agricultural and Rural Labourers During August 2013

Month	CPI-AL	CPI-RL
January	694	695
February	700	701
March	704	705
April	711	711
May	719	720
June	729	730
July	740	741
August	754	753

Source: Labour Bureau Government of India

Table .2 shows that All-India Consumer Price Index Numbers for Agricultural Labourers and Rural Labourers (Base: 1986-87=100) for August, 2013 increased by 14 points and 12 points respectively to stand at 754 (Seven hundred and fifty four) points for Agricultural Labourers and 753 points (Seven hundred and fifty three) for Rural Labourers. The rise in index varied from State to State. In case of Agricultural Labourers, it recorded an increase which varied between 5 to 21 points in all the 20 States. Karnataka with 838 points topped the index table whereas Himachal Pradesh with the index level of 591 points stood at the bottom. In case of Rural Labourers, it recorded an increase between 5 to 20 points in all the 20 States. Karnataka with 831 points topped the index table whereas Tripura State with the index level of 624 points stood at the bottom. Punjab State registered the maximum increase of 21 points for Agricultural Labourers and Gujarat State registered the maximum increase of 20 points for Rural Labourers mainly due to increase in the prices of rice, jowar, pulses, onion, vegetables & fruits, gur, firewood and shirting cloth cotton mill. Point to point rate of inflation based on the CPI-AL and CPI-RL increased from 12.80% and 12.61% in July, 2013 to 13.21% and 12.89 in August, 2013. Inflation based on food index of CPI-AL and CPI-RL are 14.22% and 14.02 % respectively during August, 2013.

Social Security

Agricultural labour has no social security, no earned leave, no sick leave and no pension or gratuity. Substantial efforts should be directed in this field. Since, these labourers are not

LABOUR AGRICULTURE IN INDIA–SOME ISSUES

permanently attached to any employer; the task of providing social security is indeed a complex one. Thus, this responsibility has to be borne by the State.

These measures can go along way in solving most of the problems of agricultural workers. As stated earlier, the basic task is to distribute surplus land amongst agricultural workers and provide additional employment opportunities in villages through the development of small and cottage industries. General improvement in the working conditions, enforcement of legislative measures, provision of social security, etc. are all secondary to the above two measures.

Table.3. Population and Agricultural Workers (in Millions)

Year	Rural Population	Cultivators	Agricultural labourers	Other workers	Total Rural
1951	298.6 (82.7)	69.9 (49.9)	27.3 (19.5)	42.8 (30.6)	140 (100.0)
1961	360.3 (82.0)	99.6 (52.8)	31.5 (16.7)	56.6 (30.5)	188.7 (100.0)
1981	523.9 (76.7)	92.5 (37.8)	55.5 (22.7)	96.6(a) (39.5)	244.6 (100.0)
1991	628.7 (74.3)	110.7 (35.2)	74.6 (23.8)	128.8(a) (41.0)	314.1 (100.0)
2001	741.7 (72.22)	127.6 (31.7)	107.5 (26.7)	167.4 (41.6)	402.5 (100.0)

Source: Registrar General of India, New Delhi, 2001.

Table 3. in other words, pure agricultural workers constitute nearly 58.4 per cent of the total rural workers, of which 31.7 percent are owner cultivators and 26.7 percent are mainly agricultural wage earners (Agriculture Statistics at a Glance, sourced from Registrar General of India, New Delhi 2001). The latest available agricultural census data (Govt. of India, Agricultural Census Division, and Ministry of Agriculture 2002) also reveal that about 78 percent of operational holdings in the country are marginal and small, having less than 2 hectares. About 13 percent holdings have 2 to 4 hectares and 7.1 per cent have 4 to 10 hectares of land. (Haque 2003) The relatively large holdings above 10 hectares number only about 1.6 percent of the total operational holdings. However, these 1.6 per cent of the large holdings occupy about 17.3 per cent of the total area, while 78 percent of holdings which are less than 2 hectares, operate only about 32.4 percent of the total area.

This speaks of inequality in the distribution of operational holdings. Also there is inequality of income between agricultural and non-agricultural workers, which is evident from the fact that percentage share of agriculture in current total GDP is only 24.2, while the percentage share of agricultural work force to total work force comes to about 60 percent. The agricultural Census data clearly bear out the fact that Indian agriculture is dominated by small and marginal farms, which are basically subsistence farmers. They provide mainly for self-consumption. However, some of these farmers have to sell their produce immediately after harvest at low prices and buy the same products later at high prices.

LABOUR AGRICULTURE IN INDIA–SOME ISSUES

The Agricultural Labour Market and its Changing Nature

Labour markets play a key role in determining employment and income levels in rural areas. While agriculture cannot be expected to absorb all of the rural labour force, its direct contribution to the generation of employment, including wage employment, and its indirect contribution through greater diversification of the economy, are critical. Access to labour markets is particularly important for many of the rural poor as hiring out their labour power may be their sole source of income. Often, the only asset possessed by waged agricultural workers is their labour. Hence the importance of improving the functioning of rural labour markets as this is the only effective way of improving the productivity of their main asset, and therefore livelihoods of the rural poor.

Suggestions for Improvement

The following suggestions can be made for improving the position of agricultural workers.

(i) Better implementation of legislative measures

Though the Minimum Wages Act was passed as far back as in 1948, yet its implementation leaves much to be desired. There is no administrative machinery worth the name to implement effectively the provisions of the Minimum Wage Act. Even otherwise, fixation of minimum wages in an era of continuous and exorbitant rise in prices carries no consolation for the starved masses of agricultural workers. Hence, it is necessary to provide for periodical revision of minimum wages keeping the changing price trends in view.

(ii) Improving the bargaining position

Special efforts should be directed towards organizing agricultural workers. It is only such organisation that can improve their bargaining power and ensure better wages and better conditions of work for them. This is not easy because the large farmers and big landlords are economically and socially very powerful. Because of their unlimited power they have succeeded in pinning down whatever little attempts were made by agricultural workers to organize themselves in some parts of the country.

(iii) Resettlement of agricultural workers

The surplus land and newly reclaimed land should be allotted only to agricultural workers. However, there are physical limitations to this programme. The supply of land is very much limited in relation to the number of agricultural workers. To cope with this problem, steps can be taken to set up cooperative farms or state farms where employment at fair wages can be provided to the agricultural labourers.

(iv) Creating alternative sources of employment

The best policy is to create ample employment opportunities outside the field of agriculture. Because of the pressure on land of increasing population it is becoming more and more difficult to absorb additional labour on farms and unless other sectors of the economy create ample employment opportunities it will not be possible to solve the problems of agricultural workers. Perhaps, the best strategy would be to promote labour intensive industries in rural areas. For this purpose facilities of power, finance and training rural youth should be provided in the villages. This will reduce the dependence of agricultural workers on land and increase their incomes.

(v) Improving the working conditions

LABOUR AGRICULTURE IN INDIA–SOME ISSUES

It is necessary to improve the working conditions of agricultural workers. Their hours of work should be statutorily fixed and strictly enforced. In case of work beyond the stipulated hours, overtime payments should be made. Child labour should be totally banned.

(vi) Public work programmes

A major problem of many agricultural workers is that they are employed only for a part of the year, for example, during sowing and harvesting. For the remaining part of the year they remain unemployed. The period of inactivity may vary from three months to six months. During this period, it is necessary to organize rural works programme like construction of roads, school buildings, digging of canals, wells, etc. so that employment can be provided to agricultural workers all the year round.

(vii) Raising the standard of living

The state can, if it wishes, organize special programmes to improve the standard of living of agricultural workers. Since a large proportion of such workers belong to scheduled castes, they are not allowed to take water from village wells. State can arrange for drinking water for them. State can also provide housing sites to agricultural workers so that they do not remain houseless. State can organize fair price shops in rural areas to save agricultural workers who generally sell goods at high prices. To improve the socio-economic environment in which agricultural labourers work, State can provide amenities of rural life like health centres, maternity wards, sports facilities, clubs, etc. special programmes for vocational and technical training of agricultural workers can also be arranged.

Conclusion

A common finding that emerged from various studies was that tractorisation displaced mainly bullock labour up to about 60% in some situations, but its impact on man-power was much less, the displacement being less than 15%. Various studies concluded that owing to this relatively low displacement of man power that was unavoidable, mechanization should not be viewed in isolation. Indeed, mechanization opened up new avenues for human employment such as managerial and supervisory jobs on the one hand and driving, servicing, maintenance and repair of the machines on the other.

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