



Labour Issues in Agriculture

(* Ashish Yadav)

PhD Scholar, Division of Economics, Statistics and Management, ICAR-NDRI, Karnal

*Corresponding Author's email: ashishjnvalwar@gmail.com

Agricultural laborers are individuals who primarily earn their livelihood by working on the farms and fields owned by others, receiving wages in return. Their tasks encompass activities like tilling the soil, cultivating crops, harvesting agricultural produce, and tending to livestock such as cows, goats, and bees. These laborers play a crucial role in uplifting disadvantaged and marginalized communities, providing them with a means of livelihood. They address common issues like underemployment, lack of development, and a surplus labour force. Moreover, they contribute to increased production of goods and promote traditional farming methods. In earlier times, when land was abundant, individuals without alternative employment opportunities turned to farming as a means of sustenance. In this discussion, we will explore the contemporary challenges faced by agricultural laborers, supported by recent data, and consider potential solutions that could pave the way for a more equitable and sustainable future.

CLASSIFICATION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

Agricultural labourers can be divided into four categories –

1. Landless Labourers, who are attached to the land lords;
2. Landless labourers, who are personally independent, but who work exclusively for others;
3. Petty farmers with tiny bits of land who devote most of their time working for others and
4. Farmers who have economic holdings but who have one or more of their sons and dependants working for other prosperous farmers. The first group of labourers have been more or less in the position of serfs or slaves; they are also known as bonded labourers.

Problems faced by Agricultural labours in India

- ❖ **Variable and Excessive Work Hours:** Agricultural laborers face irregular and extended working hours, spanning from early morning to late at night. Their work schedules fluctuate with the demands of planting and harvesting seasons. Seasonal Employment: Agricultural laborers do not have year-round employment. They work only for a limited number of days each year, leaving them idle for extended periods. According to the Agricultural Labour Investigation Society, on average, seasonal laborers work for 197 days annually, while women laborers work for 141 days, resulting in low overall income.
- ❖ **Lack of Organization:** Agricultural laborers are part of an unorganized sector. They often lack education and live in dispersed rural communities. This makes it challenging for them to form unions akin to trade unions, thereby limiting their ability to negotiate wages and advocate for their rights against landowners.
- ❖ **Conditions Resembling Agricultural Slavery:** A significant portion of agricultural laborers, who predominantly belong to lower social strata, often endure treatment akin to slavery. Large landowners exploit them, compelling them to work for meagre wages in return.

- ❖ **Lack of Skills and Training:** Agricultural laborers, particularly in smaller villages distant from urban centres, typically lack specialized skills and adhere to centuries-old traditional farming methods. Many in isolated villages with approximately 500 inhabitants may not even be aware of modern agricultural practices. They often resist change and improvement due to a sense of resignation and the absence of viable alternatives.
- ❖ **Low Social Standing:** Most agricultural workers come from marginalized communities that have historically faced neglect. These lower caste and marginalized groups have endured social disadvantage and lacked the empowerment to assert themselves. They have been treated as passive and subordinate individuals. **Marginalization of Agricultural Laborers:** The number of cultivators and agricultural laborers in India increased significantly from 1951 to 1991, indicating a substantial growth in this workforce. This shift underscores the trend toward casualization of labour, with diminishing returns from land and agricultural activities. **Need for Reorganization of Agricultural Labor:** Agricultural laborers in India lack organization and are dispersed, often lacking education and awareness. Consequently, they struggle to advocate for fair compensation and working conditions.
- ❖ **Challenges with Wages and Income:** Despite a nominal increase in wage rates, the actual income of laborers has not significantly improved. Presently, laborers earn a meagre Rs. 150 per day, which is insufficient to support a family.
- ❖ **Employment and Working Conditions:** Agricultural laborers face challenges of underemployment and unemployment, working for only part of the year. The lack of consistent work on farms or alternative opportunities leaves them idle for extended periods.
- ❖ **Debt Burden:** In rural areas where banking services are limited, farmers and agricultural laborers often resort to borrowing from landlords at exorbitant interest rates, leading to crippling debt.
- ❖ **Gender Disparities in Wages:** Despite their significant contributions, female agricultural laborers receive lower wages compared to their male counterparts, reflecting persisting gender biases.
- ❖ **Pervasive Child Labor:** India experiences a high prevalence of child labour, with estimates ranging from 17.5 million to 44 million. This alarming figure highlights the urgent need to address this issue.
- ❖ **Rise in Migrant Labor:** Laborers in regions with irrigation facilities receive lower wages compared to those in rain-fed areas. This discrepancy has led to a surge in labour migration from dry regions to areas with more favourable conditions.

Steps Taken by the Government of India

- ❖ **Abolition of Bonded Labor:** Several attempts have been made to wipe out the bonded labour as it is exploitive, inhuman, and violative. Legislative attempts have also been made to remove bonded labour. The Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act was passed in 1976. According to this act, around 2.51 lakhs of bonded labourers were identified and freed in different parts of the country.
- ❖ **Minimum Wages Act:** The Minimum Wages Act, 1948 is a Central legislation aimed at statutory fixation of minimum rates of wages in the employments where sweated labour is prevalent with possibility for exploitation of unorganized labour. The provisions of the Act are intended to achieve the object of doing social justice to workmen employed in the scheduled employments by prescribing minimum rates of wages for them. The Act aims at statutory fixation of minimum wages with a view to prevent exploitation of labour.

- ❖ Life and disability cover is provided through Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana (PMJJBY) and Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY).
- ❖ The health and maternity benefits are provided through Ayushman Bharat- Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) which is a universal health scheme.
- ❖ In order to provide old age protection to the unorganised sector workers including agricultural labourers, the Government of India launched Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-Dhan Yojana (PM-SYM) in 2019. It provides a monthly minimum assured pension of Rs. 3000/- after attaining the age of 60 years.
- ❖ Apart from above, other schemes such as Public Distribution System through One Nation One Ration Card scheme under National Food Security Act, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Deen Dayal Upadhyay Gramin Kaushal Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Gareeb Kalyan Rojgar Yojana, Deen Dayal Anthodia Yojana, Sannidhi, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana etc. are also available for the unorganised workers including rural and agricultural labourers depending upon their eligibility criteria.

Constitution of India

Article 14; State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or equal protection of the law within the territory of India.

Article 21; “Protection of Life and Personal Liberty: No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law.”

Article 41; Right to work, to education and to public assistance in certain cases The State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want.

Article 42; seeks to ensure humane work conditions and provide for maternity relief. It states that “The State shall make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief”. It is a principle of socialistic nature and dedicated to achieve social and economic welfare of the people with the objective to establish India as a Welfare State.

Article 47; which directs the State to raise the level of nutrition and the standard of living and to improve public health as among its primary duties and, in particular, the State shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of intoxicating drinks and drugs which are injurious to health

Conclusion

In the fields that stretch to the horizon, there lies a resilient workforce that sustains us all. By acknowledging and addressing the labour issues within agriculture, we embark on a journey towards a fairer, more sustainable future. Through informed policy decisions, technological innovation, and a collective commitment to fair labour practices, we have the power to cultivate a brighter tomorrow for those who sow the seeds of our sustenance.