



## AGRICULTURAL LABOUR AND LIVELIHOODS - A STUDY IN NELLORE DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural labourers occupy the lowest place in the socio-economic structure of the rural setup. Mostly these persons belong to the SCs, STs and BCs. They have no resource base and are mostly landless. As a fact that small and marginal tenants cultivated 73 percent of the operational holdings as against 23 percent of work as agricultural labourers on the holdings of middle and upper class land holders. Tenants having large holdings mostly depend on agricultural labourers for cultivation. Since they are unorganized and have irregular employment potential for their livelihood, it is the duty of the State to provide opportunities for employment to them. Their livelihood is based on agricultural operations or activities which are incidental to the agricultural operations subsequent to harvesting and therefore in the absence of timely State help, they may become bonded or attached labourers.

### KEYWORDS

#### Introduction:

Agriculture is the chief occupation of the people of India since time immemorial. In the Vedic times fundamental principles of agriculture were known and followed by the Vedic Aryans but the information regarding agricultural labour is very scarce<sup>1</sup>. As a matter of fact, most of the heads of the households were farmers cultivating their family farm. They took pleasure in doing the farm operations with their own hands with very minimum support from others.

The agrarian society of pre-nineteenth century India consisted largely of self-sufficient and self-perpetuating village communities. In such a society, there was no room for the existence of an independent and distinct class of agricultural labourers whose main source of livelihood was work on the land of others for which they received compensation in kind or cash<sup>2</sup>. With the advent of Britishers, the traditional form of rural society began to disintegrate rapidly. This disintegration was reflected in the growth of an independent class of agricultural labourers and the increase in the strength of the agricultural labourers is a significant aspect noticed in the 20th century.

Prosperity of the Indian economy depends primarily on the development of agriculture. The man behind the plough is the most decisive factor in Indian rural economy. Development in the agricultural sector plays an important role in removing rural poverty as an over. Whelming majority of labour force derives its livelihood from agriculture. Of the rural work force, the category 'agricultural labour' is mainly dependent on wage earnings in agriculture and the number of these labourers was increasing over the years.

#### Growth of Agricultural Labour in India:

The number of agricultural labour has increased with the passage of time. Rapid growth of population accompanied by inadequate growth of non-agriculture sector has been one of the primary causes for the rapid growth of agricultural labourers. Owing to seasonality of operations and frequent recurrence of drought in large parts due to failure of monsoons, agricultural labourers are the worst affected lot consequent up

on widespread unemployment and underemployment resulting in low productivity of labour. Mostly these persons belong to the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Backward classes. The decennial censuses register a steady increase in the number of agricultural labourers over the years. In 1971, there were 47.49 million agricultural labourers in India, accounting for 26.31 percent of the total work force. This rose to 55.50 million in 1981, accounting for 25 percent of the labour force. The 1991 census puts the absolute and proportionate figures at 74.59 million and 26.09 percent, 2001 census accounting for 107.4 million and 26.69 percent and 144.3 million in 2011, accounting for 30 percent respectively.

The wages of agricultural labourers are low when compared to industrial labourers and they are comparatively less monetized than industrial wages and the wages are still paid in kind in different parts of the country and thus probably more pronounced during the harvesting season. Agricultural labourers are generally custom bound and inexorable economic necessity compels them to work even low wages. The low wages are responsible for their low standard of living which ultimately results in low efficiency of labour leading to low productivity of labour in agriculture.

#### The problem:

The agricultural labourers are the most exploited and oppressed class in rural hierarchy. Before, Independence, their position was nothing better than themselves. They were victims of not only economic exploitations but also social discrimination. If they failed to bow to the tunes of the masters, they were beaten up and tortured. By advancing small loans to them, the landlords often succeeded in tapping these poor people into their net and converted them into virtual slaves. The slavery continued from generation to generations and forced the agricultural workers to lead a wretched existence of deprivation and oppression.

Though the situation has improved to some extent during last 65 years of Independence, even now this class of agricultural workers is the poorest and resource starved class in rural area.

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### Concept of Agricultural Labour:

According to National Commission on Labour an agricultural labourer is one who is basically unskilled and unorganized and wholly depends for his livelihood on his personal labour. Thus persons whose main source of income is wage employment fall in this category<sup>3</sup>. Agricultural labourers in general can be classified into two sub-categories. (i) The landless agricultural labour and (ii) The small cultivators, whose main source of earnings are wage employment and not their small and sub-marginal holdings. Landless labourers in turn, can be classified into two broad categories (a) Permanent labour attached to a cultivating household and (b) Casual labour. The small cultivators can be divided into three sub-groups such as cultivators, share croppers and lease holders<sup>4</sup>. Since the agricultural labourers form a heterogeneous group of workers, more details can be worked out by classifying them into different sub-groups.

### Importance of Micro Study:

Economic development also requires a growing labour force. In an agricultural country, most of the workers needed must come from the rural population. Agriculture may also be a source of the capital and labour needed for industrial development. For these, to give a significant priority to agriculture. Majority of the Indian districts are basically agricultural in nature and the development of agriculture demands major share in the districts development as a whole. Development of agriculture implies the development of people who depend on agriculture for livelihood. Agricultural labourers contribute major share of the development and yet are neglected by the planners. In order to include these as a component in the mainstream of economic progress, it is essential to know that exactly where they need help and where they could contribute more than their present share to the country's development.

The study is important in the sense that majority of the rural population constitute the rural work force, if they prosper the rural industries will prosper. Once they are on move, the household moves, the village moves and the community moves.

### Present Study:

Nellore district of Andhra Pradesh State has been selected for the purpose of this micro level study. Nellore District where the present study has been carried out is one among nine districts of Coastal Region in Andhra Pradesh State. The district covers an extent of 13,076 sq.kms. The total population of the district as per 2011 census is 29,63,557 lakhs, out of which 71.06 per cent live in rural areas and 28.94 per cent of total population reside in the urban areas. Agricultural labourers constitute 2.86 per cent. Paddy is the most predominant crop grown in the district, followed of mica and therefore there is good scope for the development of agro-based industries and mineral based industries. The main objective of the present study was to analyse the levels of living of the agricultural labourers in the district. The aim was to study the level of employment and wages, composition of income and expenditure of the agricultural labourers in the selected villages. The study covered three mandals in the district. Indukurpet mandal as developed, Naidupeta mandal as developing and Duttalur mandal as less developed categories are selected. For the selection of villages, all the villages in the sample mandals have been grouped into five categories. Accordingly 5 villages were selected at random from each village. Thus in all 15 villages were picked up from the three mandals.

All the agricultural labour households of each village have been classified on the basis of castes viz., Other Castes, Backward Castes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. From each sample mandal, 100 agricultural labour households have been selected as a sample representing in proportion of each category in each of the selected village. Thus the samples of 300 agricultural labour households have been covered for the purpose of study. On the basis of proportions 61 households

belong to Other Castes, 133 to Backward Castes, 69 Scheduled Castes and 37 Schedule Tribes. The data from sample agricultural labourers have been collected through personal interviews with the respondents with the schedule. The analysis was carried out across three mandals and four categories of agricultural labourers. The study relates to the agricultural year 2011 -12.

### Socio-Economic Profile of the Sample Households:

The agricultural labourers generally enter into their career at an early age and this is true in the case of present study. 58.67 percent of agricultural labourers are illiterates. All the caste categories are concentrated in the family size groups of 3and4, 5and6 persons in a household. About 66.62 percent of males in the age group of 14-60 years and 60.60 percent females in the sample population is in the age group of 14 – 45 years were in active economic participation. It is observed that 57.78 percent of workers are engaged as agricultural labourers. It is only 7.78 percent of them that are engaged in cultivation while 14.10 percent in allied activities. Over 20.34 percent of the workers are engaged in non-agricultural work.

### Employment and Wages:

Employment refers to the participation of labour force in economic activity. The employment pattern of agricultural labourers is influenced by several factors. It depends on the size of land holdings of the cultivators in the sample villages. The sample agricultural labour worked for 56,332 days of which they have engaged in agricultural work. It revealed that on an average employment of sample agricultural labour have worked for 189.23 days in Indukurpet mandal, followed by 187.47 days in Naidupeta and 185.61 days in Dattalur mandal. On an average the employment of sample agricultural labour in all operations worked out to 187.44 days. There is no significant difference among castes of employment of sample agricultural labour.

The total non-agricultural work accounts for 5899 days, of which 2,096 days in Dattalur followed by 1,918 days in Naidupeta and 1,885 days in Indukurpet mandal. The average employment of sample agriculture sector. In Indukurpet mandal they worked for 18.85 days, 19.18 days in Naidupeta and 20.96 days in Dattalur mandal. There is significant difference between the various castes of agricultural labour households based on non-agricultural average wage employment.

The hours of work of agricultural labourers not regulated by legislation. Hours of work vary from place to place, crop to crop and season to season, the working hours generally commence from sunrise to sunset. An agricultural labourer has to work for larger hours during the harvest season, for which they would be paid, more than usual wages. The average wages earned by the sample agricultural labour are worked out at Rs.15,700.00 per annum, it include both wages in cash and kind for all operations.

The highest average wages earned for harvesting and processing by the sample agricultural labour are worked out at Rs.5,210.58 followed by ploughing/plantation/sowing, transplantation and weeding operation. The average agricultural wages of the sample agricultural labour accounted for Rs.15,952.64, Rs.1 5,636.91 and 15,512.58 which include wages in cash and kind for all operations in Indukurpet, Naidupeta and Dattalur mandals respectively.

### Income and Expenditure:

The income determines the level of living of a household. Income is the function of total employment in a year and the wage rate for wage paid labour. There is much similarity in the income categories and the mandals. By virtue of their being agricultural labourers, the main source of their income is agricultural wages. They boost their income by resorting to subsidiary occupations like dairying, fire wood collection, stone work, construction work and road work. However, there is a quantitative difference in the form of income earned as wage workers in agriculture.

An analysis of the per capita income of the agricultural labourers worked out to Rs.5,832.57. However, the variations have been observed in this regard in the mandals selected for the study. The per capita income of the sample agricultural labour households in Indukurpet mandal is worked out to Rs.5,644.66, While in the case of Naidupeta and Dattalur it is Rs. 5,572.94 and Rs.6,340.25 respectively. As much as 31.94 percent of the total income is earned through agricultural wages. But, the per capita annual income among the Other Castes and Backward Castes is lower than of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Consumption is a function of income of the family which is determined by its socio-economic status. In general, there is much similarity in the consumption pattern of agricultural labour households in the rural areas. They spend the major part of their income on food grains, provisions, education, clothing and others. It is observed that overall expenditure of Other Caste households is higher than of Backward Casts, Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes on the most of the items in all three mandals in the district. The average expenditure of Other Castes, Backward Castes, Scheduled Castes and Schedule Tribes households accounted for Rs. 7,126.19, Rs. 6,210.49, Rs. 4,732.98 and Rs.5,520.95 respectively.

The per capita consumption expenditure pattern of the agricultural labourers is closely associated with households' consumption expenditure pattern across the income categories. The level of per capita consumption expenditure is positively correlated with the income level in the mandals. By virtue of being agricultural labourers, the main source of their income is agricultural wages. They enhance their income by resorting to subsidiary occupations like crop production, dairying, live-stock and trade on a very small scale. However, the level of per household and per capita income and agricultural development are not very closely related in the case of agricultural labour households.

#### **Steps to Improve the Conditions of Agricultural Labour:**

On the basis of the above data, we suggest that the State Governments and the Government of India should take following steps to improve the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers who are mostly landless or marginal tenants and whose livelihood is based on agriculture.

- I. The Government would make a sea-change in the tenancy system, the land of neo-rich class, non-agriculturists and immigrants would pass from their hands to the landless persons who reside in the villages and who actually cultivate such land.
- II. To prevent fragmentation of holdings, each successor on the land be prevented from dividing the holding for succession purposed so as to create divided holding less than the minimum size of the holding. Small fragments are always uneconomical. The tenant would not be able to save even for himself. The possibility of growing large operational holdings with small ownership holdings should first be explored.
- III. Separate rules under the title "Andhra Pradesh Land Revenue (Allotment of Waste land for Cultivation and Tree Plantation) Rules", be framed under which the allottee be given a right to cultivate the wasteland for growing agricultural crops and planting trees on the border of the holding and other places. The financial institutions should

be permitted to give loan to the allottees by simple mortgage.

- IV. The rural financial institutions should cater to the need of consumption as well as production expenditure of agricultural labourers so that they may come out of the vicious circle of indebtedness.

In conclusion one would have noted that amount of available land is limited and the number of agricultural labourers is increasing every year. The result is migration during the period when there is no crop on the land. If water and electricity could be provided to the one crop area, the migration will stop and the number of farm labourers would decrease. If the arable wasteland is allotted to the farm labourers with financial support to improve that land, they would not migrate and would work on the land. By doing so, the State will be doing social justice to the agricultural labourers and will fulfill its constitutional obligations.

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