

## AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN INDIA

V. VETRIVEL

Research Scholar, Department of Business Administration, Annamalai University, Chidambaram

R. MANIGANDAN

Research Scholar, Department of Business Administration, Annamalai University, Chidambaram

### ABSTRACT

*In today's world the agricultural sector employs half of the world's labour force with an estimated 1.3 billion workers active in agricultural production worldwide. The majority of agricultural workers are found in developing countries. A great majority are small scale farmers. They have been more often victims rather than beneficiaries of the green revolution, the technological development and the globalization trends which characterized the 20th century.*

*Agriculture is one of the three most hazardous sectors of activity, both in industrialized and developing countries. According to estimates from the International Labour Office (ILO), some 170,000 agricultural workers are killed each year. This means that workers in agriculture run at least twice the risk of dying on the job as compared with workers in other sectors. Agricultural mortality rates have remained consistently high in the last decade as compared with other sectors, where fatal accident rates have decreased. Millions of agricultural workers are seriously injured in workplace accidents with agricultural machinery or poisoned by pesticides and other agrochemicals. Furthermore, due to the widespread under-reporting of deaths, injuries and occupational diseases in agriculture, the real picture of the occupational health and safety of farm workers is likely to be worse than what official statistics indicate.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Agricultural Labour

Unlike industrial labour, agricultural labour is difficult to define. The reason is that unless capitalism develops fully in agriculture, a separate class of workers depending wholly on wages does not come up. According to the National Commission on Labour "an agricultural labourer is one who is basically unskilled and unorganised and has little for its livelihood, other than personal labour." Thus, persons whose main source of income is wage, employment fall in this category. Mishra and Puri have stated that "All those persons who derive a major part of their income as payment for work performed on the farms of others can be designated as agricultural workers. For a major part of the year they should work on the land of the others on wages."

One of the most distinguishing features of the rural economy of India has been the growth in the number of agricultural workers, cultivators and agricultural labourers engaged in crop production. The phenomena of underemployment, under-development and surplus population are simultaneously manifested in the daily lives and living of the agricultural labourers. They usually get low wages, conditions of work put an excessive burden on them, and the employment which they get is extremely irregular. Agricultural workers constitute the most neglected class in Indian rural structure. Their income is low and employment irregular. Since, they possess no skill or training, they have no alternative employment opportunities either. Socially, a large number of agricultural workers belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Therefore, they are a suppressed class. They are not organised and they cannot fight for their rights. Because of all these reasons their economic lot has failed to improve even after four decades of planning.

In most countries only some categories of agricultural workers are covered by national legislation, employment injury benefits or insurance schemes. A large number of agricultural workers are thus deprived of any form of social protection. When national regulations exist, they are often sporadically

applied. Effective enforcement is poor due to insufficient labour inspection, lack of understanding and training on hazards and their prevention of both of employers and workers and low levels of organization among agricultural workers.

#### **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.

Agricultural labourers can also be divided in the following manner:

1. Landless agricultural labourers
2. Very small cultivators whose main source of earnings due to their small and sub-marginal holdings is wage employment. Landless labourers in turn can be classified into two broad categories:
  1. Permanent Labourers attached to cultivating households. **March- 2007**
  2. Casual Labourers. The second group can again be divided into three subgroups:
    - (i) Cultivators
    - (ii) Share croppers
    - (iii) Lease holders.

#### **CHARACTERISTICS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS**

##### **1. AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS ARE SCATTERED**

Agricultural labour in India is being widely scattered over 5.6 lakh villages, of which half have population of less than 500 each. And therefore, any question of building an effective organization, like that of industrial workers, poses insurmountable difficulties. Thus as the vast number of agricultural labour lies scattered all over India, there has been no successful attempt for long, to build their effective organization even at the state level not to speak of the national level.

##### **2. AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS ARE UNSKILLED AND LACK TRAINING**

Agricultural labourers, especially in smaller villages away from towns and cities, are generally unskilled workers carrying on agricultural operation in the centuries old traditional wages. Most of them, especially those in small isolated villages with around 500 populations, may not have even heard of modernization of agriculture. Majority of them are generally conservative, tradition bound, totalistic and resigned to the insufferable lot to which according to them fate has condemned them. There is hardly any motivation for change or improvement. Since, there is direct supervision by the landlord, there is hardly any escape form hard work and since there is no alternative employment. The agricultural labourer has to do all types of work-farm and domestic at the bidding of the landlord.

##### **3. UNORGANISED SECTOR**

Agricultural labourers are not organized like industrial labourers. They are illiterate and ignorant. They live in scattered villages. Hence they could not organize in unions. In urban areas workers could generally organize themselves in unions and it is convenient for political parties to take interest in trade union activities. This is almost difficult in case of farm labour. Accordingly, it is difficult for them to bargain with the land owners secure good wages.

##### **4. LOW SOCIAL STATUS**

Most agricultural workers belong to the depressed classes, which have been neglected for 26 ages. The low caste and depressed classes have been socially handicapped and they had never the courage to

assert themselves. They have been like dump-driven cattle. In some parts of India, agricultural labourers are migratory, moving in search of jobs at the time of harvesting. Government measures to improve their lot by legislation have proved ineffective so far due to powerful hold of the rural elite classes in the rural economy.

#### **5. DEMAND AND SUPPLY OF LABOUR**

The number of agricultural labourers being very large and skills they possess being meager, there are generally more than abundant supply of agricultural labourer in relation to demand for them. It is only during the sowing and harvesting seasons that there appears to be nearfull employment in the case of agricultural labourers. But, once the harvesting season is over, majority of agricultural workers will be jobless especially in areas, where there is single cropping pattern.

#### **6. LESS BARGAINING POWER**

Due to all the above mentioned 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, landlords and commission agents, often the same person functioning in all the three capacities. No wonder, the agricultural labour is the most exploited class of people of India.

#### **7. AT THE BIDDING OF THE LANDLORD**

There is generally direct and day to day 'contact between agricultural labourers and the landlords' on whose farm they are working. Unlike industrial workers, this direct contact between the employer and employees is a distinct feature of agriculture labourer. The above mentioned few important characteristics distinguish agricultural labourers in India from industrial workers. Thus partly because of factors beyond their control and partly because of their inherent bargaining weakness, the farm labourers have been getting very low wages and have therefore to live in a miserable sub-human life.

#### **8. AGRICULTURAL SERFS OR BONDED LABOURERS**

At the bottom of the agricultural cadre in India are those labourers whose conditions are not very different from those of serfs. Agricultural serfdom has been most prevalent in those parts of India where the lower and the depressed classes and most in numerous. The ethnic composition of villages which governs the social stratification is responsible for the survival of the slavish conditions. In Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, a large aboriginal population live and the condition of this agricultural labours is very much like that of slaves. These are called in different names in different States.

#### **HOW IMPORTANT ARE WOMEN TO AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION?**

Economic integration has been strongly associated with increased employment of women in the paid, non-agricultural labour. Nevertheless, today, more than half of all women contribute to food production both for household production and sale. Women account for almost half of the world's agricultural workforce. They represent 47% in Africa, 17% in Latin America and the Caribbean and 44% of the regional agricultural workforce in Asia. However, women's role in agricultural production has been traditionally under-estimated and gender inequalities are pronounced in this sector. In developing countries, the great majority of women workers in agriculture are in subsistence farming, self-employed or working as unpaid family members.

#### **OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS IN AGRICULTURE**

Official data on the incidence of occupational accidents and diseases are imprecise and notoriously underestimated, due to inadequate and heterogeneous recording and notifications systems. Furthermore, as only relatively few accidents are fatal and their notification mandatory, available information on workplace accidents does not reflect the very many nonfatal and minor injuries which fail to be reported. Even when an occupational injury is a cause of death, this fact is often missing from the death certificate. In the case of the agricultural sector under-reporting is even more evident. In many countries the reporting and compensation systems may exclude the agricultural sector or certain categories of agricultural

workers. Many countries group agriculture together with other sectors such as hunting, forestry and fishing in their global estimates.

Problems in diagnosis also lead to under-reporting in the vast majority of countries. Chronic conditions due to noise, vibration, and low exposure to dusts or pesticides are more difficult to evaluate due to their long-term effects and uncertain symptoms. Workers are thus deprived of proper treatment and appropriated preventive measures. This situation is becoming particularly serious with rapid technological changes in agricultural production and with an increasing use of hazardous substances. It is also amplified by the poor control that workers have over the rhythm, content and organization of their work and the weak enforcement of safety and health regulations in agricultural settings.

#### **Characteristics of countries where agriculture contributed positively to poverty reduction**

Agricultural progress contributes strongly to poverty reduction. Now we want to see if there are common characteristics of the agricultural economies of those countries where agriculture contributed positively to reducing poverty that might help us better understand what features of agricultural performance government's might wish to emphasize in their development efforts. Table 4 shows that agricultural GDP/worker grew, and thus contributed positively to poverty reduction, in twenty out of the twenty five countries.

#### **AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY AND POVERTY**

The payoff from investments in agricultural research, development, extension and education comes in the form of sustained increase in agricultural productivity. Comparisons of agricultural performance among countries and over time are frequently made using partial productivity indicators such as output, *e.g.* per unit of land, or head of livestock or agricultural worker. However these indicate only the trends in output relative to one input and can be misleading in cases where the input mix is changing or, especially, where there are technical advances allowing increases in output for a given level of input use.

A superior measure, frequently used to overcome these problems is total factor productivity (TFP). Thirtle, Lin and Piesse (2003) examine the impact of total factor productivity growth on the incidence of poverty in the LDCs, as measured by the percentage of the population living on less than USD 1.00 per day. Employing regression analysis their empirical analysis shows that agricultural productivity growth has a substantial impact on poverty reduction, whereas productivity growth in industry and services does not. They use their empirical findings to show that investment in agricultural R&D has had a substantial impact on poverty reduction in Africa and Asia, as well as paying for itself by being an extremely profitable investment. We should expect therefore that our selection of countries where agriculture contributed to extraordinary progress in poverty reduction might also have posted strong productivity gains. Fuglie (2008) reports findings from a comprehensive study of trends in total factor productivity covering 173 countries from 1961 to 2006. Figure 6 uses estimates taken from that analysis to compare performance of our selected countries and their respective regions. Notice that TFP growth rates were positive in all twenty of our chosen countries, with most averaging well above 1.6% per year which was the global average estimated by Fuglie for the range 1991-2006. Furthermore, more countries scored at or above their respective regional average than did not. Moreover, consistent with findings from Thirtle, Lin, and Piesse (2003) there is a strong correlation between rates of progress in TFP and in poverty reduction, *i.e.* those countries posting the fastest progress in TFP were generally those posting the fastest progress in reducing poverty. On the whole then it seems safe to conclude that agricultural TFP growth was a shared characteristic of the selected countries, undoubtedly contributing to poverty reduction

#### **Measures taken by the Government to improve the Conditions of Agricultural Labourers :**

The Government has shown awareness of the problems of agricultural workers and all plan documents have suggested ways and means to ameliorate the lot of these people. Measures adopted by the Government for ameliorating the economic conditions of Agricultural labourers are

1. Passing of minimum wage Act.
2. Abolition of Bonded Labourers

3. Providing land to landless labourers
4. Provision of Housing cities to houseless
5. Special schemes for providing employment
  - i) Crash Scheme for Rural Employment (CSRE)
  - ii) Pilot Intensive Rural Employment Project (PIREP)
  - iii) Food for works programme (FWP)
  - iv) National Rural Employment Programme (NREP)
  - v) Rural Landless Employment Programme (RLEP)
  - vi) Drought Prone Area Programme (It was known as Rural Works Programme)
6. Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (which come in with the merger of NREP and RLEGP)
7. Desert Development Programme
8. National Scheme of Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSM)
9. Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)
10. Abolition of Bonded Labourer Act
11. Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP)

#### **Suggestions for the Improvement of Agricultural Labours :**

The following suggestions can be made for the improvement of the socio-economic position of the agricultural labourers :

1. Better implementation of legislative measures.
2. Improvement the bargaining position.
3. Resettlement of agricultural workers
4. Creating alternative sources of employment
5. Protection of women and child labourers
6. Public works programmes should be for longer period in year
7. Improving the working conditions
8. Regulation of hours of work
9. Improvements in Agricultural sector
10. Credit at cheaper rates of interest on easy terms of payment for undertaking subsidiary occupation.
11. Proper training for improving the skill of farm labourers
12. Cooperative farming

#### **CONCLUSION**

In order to guarantee sustainable agricultural development in the new millennium, rural workers and their families should have access to adequate working and living conditions, health and welfare. An adequate balance between agricultural growth and the protection of the environment is also crucial for the future of the world's food production and for its sustainability. Occupational health in agriculture must be integrated into a rural development policy with a well-defined strategy. It should place an emphasis on prevention and environmental protection to be consistent with current trends and should be addressed both at national and international levels.

## REFERENCES

1. Karl A. Fox (1987). "agricultural economics," The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics,
2. B.L. Gardner (2001), "Agriculture, Economics of," International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences, v. 1, pp. 337-344. Abstract & outline.
3. C. Ford Runge (2008). "Agricultural economics," The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics, 2nd Ed., Abstract.
4. Shaars, Marvin A. (1972). "The Story of The Department of Agricultural Economics: 1909-1972" (PDF). Retrieved 2009-09-17.
5. Schultz, Theodore (1968). Economic Growth and Agriculture. New York: McGraw-Hill.
6. Schultz, Theodore W. (1956). "Reflections on Agricultural Production, Output and Supply". Journal of Farm Economics **38** (3): 748-762. JSTOR 1234459.
7. Ford Runge, "Agricultural Economics: A Brief Intellectual History," page 1 (abstract), University of Minnesota Working Paper WP06-1, June 2006,