

The agricultural labourers are one of the most exploited and oppressed classes in rural hierarchy.

Problems of Agriculture Labour:

- 1. Marginalisation of Agricultural Workers.** The workforce in agriculture (cultivators plus agricultural labourers) was 97.2 million in 1951 and this rose to 185.2 million in 1991. As against this, the number of agricultural labourers rose from 27.3 million in 1951 to 74.6 million in 1991. This implies that (i) the number of agricultural labourers increased by

consistently declined over the years - from 55.3 per cent in 1950-51 to 37.9 per cent in 1980-81 (at 1999-2000 prices) and further to 14.0 per cent in 2011-12 (at 2004-05 prices).

2. Wages and Income. Agricultural wages and family incomes of agricultural workers are very low in India. With the advent of the Green Revolution, money wage rates started increasing. However, as prices also increased considerably, the real wage rates did not increase accordingly. Currently labours are getting around Rs. 150/day under the MGNREGA in rural areas.

3. Employment and Working

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Conditions. The agricultural labourers have to face the problems of unemployment and underemployment. For a substantial part of the year, they have to remain unemployed because there is no work on the farms and alternative sources of employment do not exist.

4. Indebtedness. In the absence of banking system in the rural areas and trial process of sanction by the commercial banks, farmers prefers to take loans from un institutional sources like Sahukars (moneylenders)

banking system in the rural areas and trial process of sanction by the commercial banks, farmers prefers to take loans from un institutional sources like Sahukars (moneylenders), landlords at the very high rate (in some cases at 40% to 50%) . This exorbitant rate traps in the vicious circle of debt.

5. Low Wages for women in

Agricultural Labour. Female agricultural workers are generally forced to work harder and paid less than their male counterparts.

6. High Incidence of Child Labour.

Incidence of child labour is high in India and the estimated number varies

forced to work harder and paid less than their male counterparts.

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Incidence of child labour is high in India and the estimated number varies from 17.5 million to 44 million. It is estimated that one-third of the child workers in Asia are in India.

7. Increase in Migrant Labour.

Green Revolution significantly increased remunerative wage employment opportunities in pockets of assured irrigation areas while employment opportunities nearly stagnated in the vast rain fed semi-arid areas.

As against this, the number of agricultural labourers rose from 27.3 million in 1951 to 74.6 million in 1991. This implies that (i) the number of agricultural labourers increased by almost three times over the period from 1951 to 1991; Agricultural labourers increased from 28 per cent in 1951 to 40 per cent in 1991. These facts indicate the fast pace of casualisation of workforce in agriculture in India. Moreover, the share of agriculture and allied activities in GDP at factor cost has consistently declined over the years - from 55.3 per cent in 1950-51 to 37.9 per cent in 1980-81 (at 1999-2000

Causes of the Poor Economic Condition of Farm Labour

The following important reasons explain low wages and poor economic conditions of agricultural labour :

(1) **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.

(2) **Unorganised.** Agricultural workers are illiterate and ignorant. They live in scattered villages. Hence, they cannot easily be organised in unions. In urban areas workers can generally organise themselves and it is convenient for political parties to take interest in trade union activity. This is extremely difficult in case of farm labour. Accordingly, it is difficult for farm workers to bargain with the land owners and secure good wages.

(3) **Seasonal Employment.** The agricultural workers do not have continuous work. On an average a farm labourer finds employment for about 200 days in a year and for the rest of the year he is idle. Apart from under-employment there is also unemployment in rural areas. Unemployment and under-employment are two important factors responsible for low income and consequently low economic position of the agricultural workers in India. But then the nature of work in agriculture is such that a farm labourer cannot get work continuously. In most cases, work on the farms is seasonal and intermittent. In many cases, there is single cropping which means work only for six to seven months in the year.

(4) **Paucity of Non-agricultural Jobs.** Paucity of non-agricultural occupations in village areas is another important factor for the low wages and poor economic condition of the farm labourers. For one thing, the growing pressure of population is increasingly felt in rural areas and the number of landless labourers is steadily increasing. For another, the absence of another occupation in rural areas and lack of inter-regional mobility have been responsible for worsening the pressure of population on land.

(5) **Rural Indebtedness.** Agricultural labour is heavily indebted. Normally, the farm labourers borrow from the landowners under whom they work. Since they have no security to offer, they pledge themselves to the moneylenders and rich landlords and become bonded labourers in many areas. Naturally, they are

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Government Measures Pertaining to Agricultural Labour

Since Independence, the Centre as well as the State Governments have taken some measures to improve the economic condition of agricultural labour. They include the passing of legislation to fix minimum wages for agricultural labour, the removal of disabilities, the ceilings on holdings and the redistribution of land among the landless labourers, etc.

(i) **Indian Constitution.** The Indian Constitution has declared the practice of serfdom an offence. It has abolished agrarian slavery including forced labour by law but it will take some time before it is removed in practice.

(ii) **Minimum Wages Act.** The Minimum Wages Act was passed in 1948, according to which every State Government was asked to fix minimum wages for agricultural labour within three years. The minimum wages are fixed keeping in view the total costs and standard of living. Since conditions in various parts of the country are different and even within a state the law allows different rates of wages to be fixed. In many states, the rates are fixed even below the current rates of wages. In practice, it has failed to increase the wages and earnings of agricultural labour.

(iii) **Other Legislative Measures.** The zamindari system has been abolished by law in all the States and with that all the exploitation associated with the system has been removed. Besides, tenancy laws have been passed in most of the states protecting the interests of the tenants and labourers, and enabling them to acquire the lands they cultivate. Many states have passed legislation fixing ceiling on agricultural holdings by which the maximum amount of land which a person can hold has been fixed by law. According to these laws, the surplus land of rich land-owners is to be distributed to the landless labourers.

(iv) **Organisation of Labour Co-operatives.** During the Second Five-Year Plan, efforts were made to encourage the formation of labour co-operatives. These cooperatives whose members are workers undertake the contract of government projects, such as, construction of roads, digging of canals and tanks, afforestation, etc. They provide employment to agricultural workers during off-season and also eliminate the possible exploitation of workers by the private contractors. The basic idea of the movement is commendable. The movement has yet to gain momentum in the rural areas.

(v) **Employment Guarantee Scheme.** The Government of Maharashtra introduced in 1977 the Employment Guarantee Scheme under which any able bodied person in rural areas can apply for a job to the Collector of his district or to his authorised subordinate officials and the latter will provide him employment within 5 kilometers of his place of residence. For this purpose, the Government has to prepare and keep in readiness various public works, such as irrigation works, road construction, etc. The rate of wages will not be such as to attract agricultural workers from their normal employment in agricultural operations. This was a pioneering scheme which the Government has been trying to improve upon with the experience gained. Under the scheme, the State assumes the responsibility to provide work on demand. If work is not provided in a fortnight from the date of demand, a payment in the form of a compensatory allowance has to be made. Following the scheme adopted by the Maharashtra Government, the Central Government has passed the National Rural Employment



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Central Government. The State Governments have been directed to implement this Act. The Central Government



gramme which included a number of measures to improve the economic condition of the landless workers and other weaker sections of the community in our villages. These measures were:

- (a) Speedy implementation of ceiling legislation and distribution of surplus land among landless labourers and small peasants
- (b) provision of house sites for landless labourers and conferment of ownership rights of the houses if they have been occupying them for a certain period
- (c) abolition of bonded labour
- (d) liquidation of rural indebtedness and moratorium on recovery of debts from landless labourers, artisans and small peasants