

SAFETY AND HEALTH ASPECTS OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Among all the workers, agricultural workers are considered as high-risk and voiceless populations. Not many are aware that agrarian work is the most dangerous and hazardous one. Though farming activities fetch good revenue, the agricultural workers, who are primarily responsible for farming activities, are neglected. No sufficient research and studies have been done on the plight of agricultural workers. There is hardly anyone to voice their political will is lacking in ameliorating the condition of the workers. They are unorganized, ignorant, illiterate, divided, and poor. Efforts must be taken to improve the condition of workers and their children, including girl children. This study reveals the plight of the socially neglected section in society and recommendations to improve their condition.

Keywords: India, Safety, Health, Worker, Agriculture, Caste, Rural, Landowner, Poverty, Green Revolution, MGNREGA, AREDS

Introduction

India is at the threshold facing a major agrarian crisis. This time, it is not because of poor yield, but it could be because of the dearth of agricultural workers. Various factors led to the sorry state of affairs. The history of agriculture could be traced back to Indus Valley Civilization. For centuries, agriculture was a prime profession. Before the arrival of Britishers, the number of agricultural laborers was too less. According to the 1881 census, the total numbers of landless laborers were 0.75 crores, and in 1921 the number increased to 2.1 crores, which constituted nearly 17.4 percent of the entire working population.

The total working population was 48.3 crore, and of this, 26.3 crores were agricultural workers in 2011. Their population is expected to dip in the coming decades when compared to the total population. The country's population was 121 crore in 2011, 136.64 crores in 2019, 132.3 crores in 2020, and it is expected to touch 161.2 crores in 2050—however, the populations of agriculture workers are likely to take a nosedive in a few decades. The total number of agricultural workers in 2020 was 23 crore, and it is expected to decrease to 20.2 crores in 2050.

India is the second-largest producer of rice, wheat, cotton, sugarcane, sheep, goat, fruit, vegetable, and tea and the largest producer of milk, pulses, and spices. About 195 million hectares of land are under cultivation, and of this, more than 60 percent are rain-fed, 30 percent are irrigated. Agricultural workers are the most exploited unorganized people in the country. Over the centuries, they were abused and victimized by landlords, feudal and zamindars. The neglected lots remained less than slaves or bonded laborers and were forced to remain in the system generation after generation.

Factors responsible for the perilous status



Until the introduction of Green Revolution, the country was a pioneer in organic farming, which benefited not only human beings but also animals, birds, and ecology. Most villagers depended on farming activities as it offered a wide range of livelihood support systems. However, after the invasion of fertilizer, everyone, including farmers, agricultural workers, birds, animals, and the environment, have significantly been devastated. Even though the Green Revolution solved the food shortage crisis, it caused long-lasting adverse impacts, especially soil. Now the proponents of the Green Revolution recommend Organic Farming.

Even after decades of Independence, they live in wretched conditions and social alienation. They are socially, economically, educationally, politically, and

culturally alienated in society. In several parts, they are prevented from casting their votes freely and their votes polled by their masters, said K Packrisamy, State Secretary, All India Agricultural Workers Union.

The contribution of agriculture and allied sectors in national GDP is about 14%, and about 52% of the workforce depends on agriculture for its livelihood. The industry also plays a vital role in generating employment opportunities for the people's rural terrain. Even though the agricultural workers play an essential role in the Indian Economy, most of them remain oppressed more severely in Northern India.

Most of the agriculture workers are Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, victims of the social divisions. According to 2011 Census, the SCs constitute 16.63% (20,13,78,086) of the total population and 16.91% of them are in villages and STs comprise of 8.6 % (10,42,81,034) of the total population.

Social Status of Agricultural (Agri) workers

The peasant-laborer relationship is not conducive. Agricultural laborers are highly unorganized, ignorant, illiterate, divided, poor, and voiceless. They are not united under a single platform, even in block levels in districts. They lack the courage to bargain in securing a fair wage for the day-long hard work. Their habitation is located far away from other dwellings of other communities. They are even abused for entering residential pockets of other communities in most of the villages.

In many places, they are not allowed to enter temples and eat the food of their choice. Over the decades, their food habit has been affected due to job nature and low economic status. For K Vasantha (63) of Konur village in Thanjavur district in Tamil Nadu, eating non-vegetarian food is a distant dream. She cooks non-veg during festival times. Similarly, they cannot afford fresh vegetables and groceries due to a steep rise in prices. People walk for long distances to get public transport. They should wait for the motorcycle man to bring vegetables and groceries. Though 3G and 4G connectivity reached their towns, we cannot get bus connectivity to our village, Sundaravel said, from the same village.



Pathetic Housing Infrastructure

The workers live in pathetic shelters. The Socio-Economic and Caste Census survey states that 30 % of the rural population does not have any land, and more than 2 crore households do not have houses. This explains the enormity of the problems they face. They live in houses worse than cow sheds in many places. Several housing schemes implemented by Central and State Governments had benefitted only a tiny fraction of their population as the schemes come with many riders.

The Central Government had constructed group houses for the SCs and ST in the 1970s. Since then, there has not been much improvement in their housing facilities. They live in government *poramboke* lands, including pond *poramboke*, water channel *poramboke*, river *poramboke*, and lake *poramboke*. As the Court prevented the authorities from distributing *pattas* for areas located in and around water bodies, they have not issued *patta*. In Tamil Nadu alone, 10 lakh agricultural workers do not have *patta* for the houses.

The toilets constructed under a Central Government sponsored scheme remained unused as they were under dilapidated conditions. The colonies (residential pockets are called colonies) do not have sanitation facilities, and houses lack individual toilets. Their colonies have been located in the middle of agricultural land. Therefore, they constantly face imminent threats from poisonous reptiles since they defecate in an open place in the dark. K Bhuvaneshwari of MGR Nagar, Melavenkudi, Thanjavur district said, “many of us live in houses that resemble ghost houses and are in dilapidated condition. People do not use the toilets since they are in worst condition”.

A committee chaired by PC Alexander, appointed by former President of India, KR Narayanan, said that the government owns enough land to provide a viable extent of agricultural land to every rural SC family. However, this report has not been implemented since 2008. Several governments have schemes to purchase housing plots for them. However, many lack the political will to implement the schemes.

Perennial indebtedness

Agriculture largely depends on monsoons; river and lake water, and during drought or the onslaught of natural disaster, employment opportunities come to a grinding halt. Hence, during drought, the farmers and workers are put to hardship. During the off-season, they land in dangerous alternate employment. Since they are illiterates, they cannot switch to other occupations.

Unlike the industrial worker, the agricultural laborers are neither well organized nor well paid. They are forced to carry out all sorts of work throughout the day. However, they are not offered various benefits, which are available to industrial workers. They cannot fight for coolie. They are forced to accept whatever coolie is given to them. As they get meager wages, they live under poor and unhygienic conditions and remain perpetual indebtedness. Poverty and indebtedness affect the workers and their families. Their meager wages force them to stay in vicious indebtedness.

Banks and primary agricultural cooperative banks do not extend helping hand to the agri workers. This makes them depend on local moneylenders, who often fleece them with hefty interests. They have pledged whatever little gold jewelry they have and valuable utensils with the moneylenders. For few years, in the garb of assisting the farmworkers, microfinance companies have entered into rural terrain targeting them. Instead of assisting them, the companies mount them with more burdens. The companies collect the principal amount with hefty interests and force them to repay every week irrespective of their condition. They force them to repay the repayment even if a person in the family died.

Former IAS officer from Karnataka, Sasikanth Senthil, praised as people's collector before he resigned from the coveted post, says "Debt is a significant debilitating burden amongst agricultural laborers. Often the vigor of the burden is manifested as suicides amongst them. Debt amongst the rural landless laborers is a special case. It is predominantly informal with a high social connotation. The percentage of informal debt is around 80 to 90% of all the outstanding debt amongst the agricultural laborers".

He said, "In the Indian context, debt also has a substantial social meaning. Social norms like caste and class hugely shape the availability of credit and credit worthiness. Debt is also used as an instrument to maintain caste and class hierarchies strongly resisting the socio-economic mobility of the agricultural laborers. Liberalization and consumerism have only exacerbated the problem. In India, debt is often the tool of choice to maintain permanent serfdom. It is the manifestation of modern-day day slavery".

Malnutrition/ Health Condition

Hunger, food scarcity, and poverty affect their health. Spending on food in rural went down for years. Food inflation averaged 5,6 percent from 2012 till 2019. The agricultural workers and their family members consume fewer calories, proteins, and micronutrients. The women and children are severely malnourished and require nutritious food and a large number of women face difficulties during childbirth due to lack of nutrition.

Despite hard physical work, they cannot consume adequate calories due to the nature of work and poverty. According to Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), India has the highest number of undernourished people globally (19.46 crore or 15 percent of India's total population in 2014-16). As per National Family Health Survey data for 2015-16, 36 percent (urban: 29 percent, rural: 38 percent) are underweight, and 58 percent of children aged between 6 and 59 months (urban: 56 percent, rural: 59 percent) are anemic. Primary Health Centres or nurses must be roped in to issue nutritional supplements to the agricultural workers and their families.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act / Public Distribution System

Despite anomalies in MGNREGA/PDS, the schemes have helped the farmworkers fight against poverty and hunger, said K Packrisamy, a Central Committee member of All India Agricultural Workers Union. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was launched in 2006 to give a flip to the rural economy by providing the rural poor with 100 days of guaranteed public employment and rising rural wages. The scheme was introduced in 200 districts in 2006, and now it is implemented in 7,145 blocks in 715 districts.

The Centre allocated Rs 73,000 crore to the MGNREGA for 2021-'22, which was lower than the actual expenditure of Rs 1.11 lakh crore in 2020-'21. However, the number of people registering for jobs under MGNREGS has increased to 4 crores in April from 3.6 crores in March 2021. This rise in demand for rural jobs can be attributed to the second wave of covid-19, which has hit India badly and resulted in reverse migration.

“They are at the mercy of local *panchayat* and local revenue officials to get the job under the scheme. In many villages, the job is allotted to the workers in various wards on a rotation basis. Wages are kept pending for long”, he said.

The Public Distribution System (PDS), the largest distribution network in the world, plays a vital role in ensuring food security to the poor and vulnerable section of society. It distributes food grains, including rice, wheat, sugar, edible oils, kerosene, at a subsidized rate to below and above the poverty line. In 2011 there were 5,05,879 fair price shops/PDS across India. Over the years, the PDS has excluded several crores of most deserving agricultural workers, he said. Some states give 20 kg of rice to the Below-Poverty-Line families, and some lesser. “As a result of successful implementation of these two projects, the workers able to fight against poverty and able to bargain for wages,” he added.

Child Labor/ Child Marriage

According to the 2011 census, 82.2 lakh children are employed in illegal labor. Dr.P. Bala Murugan, Advisor, Tamil Nadu Alliance, says every three seconds, one child gets married across the world. However, they are not reported by the governments. There is a direct correlation between child education and poverty, mostly in agricultural families. Rates of child marriage are higher in the North-West and lower in the South-East of the country.



Because of poor economic conditions and low social status, the agricultural workers marry off their sons/ daughters before attaining legal age to marry. Not all child marriages go on record. However, one can witness an increase in pregnancy among teenage girls.

The pandemic lockdown made things worse a total of 790 child marriages were prevented during the pandemic across Maharashtra, and 58 cases were registered. Similarly, cops prevented child marriages, and 18 cases were registered under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, in Chennai alone in June 2021. The accused and family members, who harbored them, were also arrested.

Migration/Alternate employment

Various factors lead to the migration of workers from rural to urban areas. Among others, low productivity in agricultural activities, social negligence, mechanization of the agriculture sector, stark poverty, and atrocities against SCs and STs are the major reasons for the migration of agricultural workers. As farmers do not treat the agriculture workers with dignity, their sons and daughters do not prefer the job and migrate to towns and urban areas for various kinds of employment. According to Census 2011, over 45.58 crore people migrated for various reasons, and it was 31.45 crores in 2001.

During off-seasons, they land in hazardous employment. When farm work was unavailable, the agricultural workers in Kurungudi, near Kattumannarkovil, in Cuddalore district, Tamil Nadu, had opted for a firecracker manufacturing unit on September 4, 2020. In a gory incident, seven women were killed, and two others sustained severe injuries in an explosion at the unit. Recalling the incident, A. Radhika, 21, said, "I lost my mother Rukumani, 46, in the blast. She opted for the job since the farm work was not available".

Hazardous nature of work:

Not many are aware that agricultural work is the most dangerous and hazardous one. Among all the workers, agricultural workers are considered a high-risk population. They perform long, backbreaking labor under the hot sun for long hours. They lack public transport from their place to the field. The barefoot soldiers have no protective gear and toil in the area containing broken bottles. They are also open to the attack of insects, reptiles, and rodents, causing injuries and death at times. They also face health threats from natural disasters and pesticides.

They are prone to heat-related illnesses, and pesticide exposure is linked to all kinds of medical and health issues, including but certainly not limited to reproductive problems, congenital disabilities, Alzheimer's, diabetes, cancer, autism, and memory loss. Their work can be categorized as dangerous.

Workers have become victims of lightning across the country. Before coming out from his hut, Thiagarajan offer prayers to the portrait of his wife, Padmavathi, 56, who was burnt to death when lightning struck the farmers when engaged in the work in Radhampur in Cuddalore district more than a year ago. He said, "After her death, I have become an orphan."



Similarly, agri workers also become

victims of snake bites across the country. An ex-serviceman, Balakannan of Radhampur, was bitten by a poisonous snake when clearing garbage in a water channel in November 2019. When rushed to the hospital about 25 km away from his village, doctors had not provided him with treatment for a snake bite. It was too late when the doctors in the other hospital realized it was a snake bite and began anti-venomous treatment. "I spent nearly Rs 50 lakh so far and still not recovered. He thanked the friends and relatives for assisting him with the money required for the medical expense.

On 16th July 2021, a seven-year-old boy from Poosivakkam village in Kancheepuram was fishing in a pond when a venomous snake bit him. He killed the snake and carried it to the hospital to help the doctors identify it and select the anti-venom to treat him. In the majority of the cases, it is not possible to carry the snake, causing delay and reluctance in treatment.

Recommendations

These are some recommendations to improve the safety and health of agricultural workers in India:

- A well-designed minimum wage system exclusively for agricultural workers can reduce inequalities and alleviate poverty.
- All the employees in the agricultural department, agricultural primary cooperative banks must be made aware of the plight of agricultural workers.
- Awareness about the adverse impact of the inhuman caste system must be raised among the farmers and landlords.
- Agri women must be protected from sexual abuse.
- To end child marriage in India, we need to focus on the poorest and most vulnerable girls and their families.
- Snake bite/anti-venom treatment protocol must be changed to suit the prevailing condition.
- They must be covered under public insurance with the active participation of farm laborers, Central and State Governments.

- The village *panchayat* must be strengthened with more participation of women and agricultural workers.
- They are vulnerable to heat-related illnesses when their employers do not provide them with potable water.
- Public transportation and healthcare facilities must be made easily available to them.
- They deserve stronger workplace protections, such as water and shade breaks, protection from reptiles, pesticides, and disasters.
- Houses with sanitation facilities should be built for the agri workers.
- Rope in volunteers should be employed to raise awareness about their rights among the workers.
- All-round care must be given to children of agri workers.
- Free education must be given to girl children up to college.
- The functions of PHCs must be improved to cover agri workers and their families. Doctors in PHCs must attend to the emergency health care need of workers before the 'Golden Hour'
- The functions of MGNREGA must be enhanced and the Government should allocate more funds.
- Food grain allocation to the agri workers must be increased under PDS.
- Legislation to safeguard workers must be enacted from usury.
- Steps must be taken to prevent injuries from machinery.
- The workers must be protected with first aid facilities and potable drinking water at the workplace.
- Life-saving drugs and medicine for snakebite and rabies must be kept at all the PHCs.

Glossary:

- *Poramboke* is common land that belongs to the government
- *Patta* is a legal document issued by the Government in the name of the actual owner of a particular plot of land
- The Green Revolution in India refers to a period when Indian Agriculture was converted into an industrial system due to the adoption of modern technology, such as the use of fertilizer and pesticides
- Scheduled Caste (also known as Dalits) is the official name given in India to the lowest caste
- Scheduled Tribe is an indigenous people officially regarded as socially disadvantaged
- Zamindar is a landowner, especially one who leases his land to tenant farmers
- Lakh: 10 lakhs is equal to 1million.
- Crore: 10 million.
- 'Colony' is a name given to a place where Dalits reside -habitation

