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Agricultural Workers: A Comprehensive Overview of their Importance and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Agriculture is considered to be the backbone of our country and major source of GDP is from the agriculture sector. In India, the agricultural sector is the largest in terms of workforce employment. The condition of agricultural workers is very worsened in state. The workers in this sector is mainly classified into wage workers and farmers, the entire agricultural sector is unorganized workers they do not have any formal social security measures and not a regular working condition. Agricultural worker is a cornerstone of the global food system, yet it remains one of the most challenging and underappreciated sectors of the workforce. This paper explores the multifaceted dimensions of agricultural worker, focusing on issues such as employment conditions, wage disparities, and health and occupational hazards. The changing nature of agriculture production and increased use of chemicals and machinery is aggravating risk in agriculture sector. Agricultural workers are faced the challenges like seasonal employment which lead to an unemployment and underemployment in agriculture sector. Agricultural workers, who are predominantly landless and constitute a significant portion of rural society, primarily rely on daily wage employment within the sector. Due to their low income and irregular employment, they lead an insecure and underprivileged life, with minimal social security support provided by the government. The agriculture sector faces a significant problem of both unemployment and underemployment. To meet their subsistence level, they need to migrate other sectors and this will lead to the growth of labourers in non-agricultural sector. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how legal and social interventions can address the issues of agricultural workers.

Keywords: *Agricultural Workers, Unorganised, Occupational Hazards, Wages, Definitions.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Workers in India are mostly divided into two groups: the organized and unorganized sectors.

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The unorganised sector employs a large proportion of the workers in India. The majority of workers in the unorganised sector are employed in agriculture. India is predominantly an agricultural country, and the majority of the population still working in agriculture. India's economy heavily depends on agriculture, and the workers employed in agriculture sector is counted in the category of unorganized sectors. Agriculture plays a vital role in India's economy and 54.6% of the total workforce is engaged in agriculture and allied sector activities (census 2011). Agriculture and allied sector accounts for 18.4% of India's GVA at current prices during 2022-2023.³ Approximately 38% of the global workforce is employed in this industry, including in formal and informal capacities. Women account for about 25% of the worldwide agricultural workforce and 43% of the agricultural workers force in developing nations. Despite this, agricultural workers occupy the lowest layer in the ladder of society. The workers have suffered greatly as they belong to an economically and socially backward class of society. They are considered to be the most neglected class in Indian Rural structure. Despite the significant contribution made by the agriculture sector to National economy they are deprived from basic amenities of livelihood. They are easily vulnerable to exploitation on account of low level of literacy, possess no skill or training and lack of awareness. Agricultural workers, who are predominantly landless and constitute a significant portion of rural society, primarily rely on daily wage employment within the sector. Due to their low income and irregular employment, they lead an insecure and underprivileged life, with minimal social security support provided by the government. The agriculture sector faces a significant problem of both unemployment and underemployment. To meet their subsistence level, they need to migrate other sectors and this will lead to the growth of labourers in non-agricultural sector.

II. DEFINITIONS

Agricultural labourers⁴ means any person in the age group of 18 to 65 years, engaged to work in agricultural or allied agricultural operations for wages but who does not own any land.

Agriculture⁵ includes

- a) Horticulture
- b) Sericulture
- c) the raising of crops, grass or garden produce

³ Department of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, "Annual Report 2023-2024". Available at https://agriwelfare.gov.in/Documents/AR_English_2023_24.pdf.

⁴ Section-2(2) Tamilnadu Agricultural Labourers Farmers (Social Security and Welfare) Act, 2006.

⁵ Section 2(1) Tamilnadu Agricultural Labourers Farmers (Social Security and Welfare) Act, 2006.

- d) the use by an agriculturist of land held by him or part thereof for grazing
- e) the use of any land for the purpose of raising manure crops
- f) Dairy farming
- g) Poultry farming
- h) Livestock breeding
- i) Growing of trees

and 'agriculture' shall be construed accordingly.

Agriculture worker⁶ means a person who works as a labourer on being hired or works in exchange, whether in cash or kind or partly in cash and partly in kind, in any of the agricultural or related operations of an employer, farmer or other person, as the case may be.

According to **First Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee (1950-51)** agricultural labourer means, a person who engaged in raising crops for the payment of wages. It also used the concept of agricultural labour household.

Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee (1956-57) the committee enlarge the definition and to include those who engaged in agriculture occupation like dairy farming, poultry, livestock, Horticulture, bees etc comes under the definition of agricultural labourer.

III. CATEGORIES OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

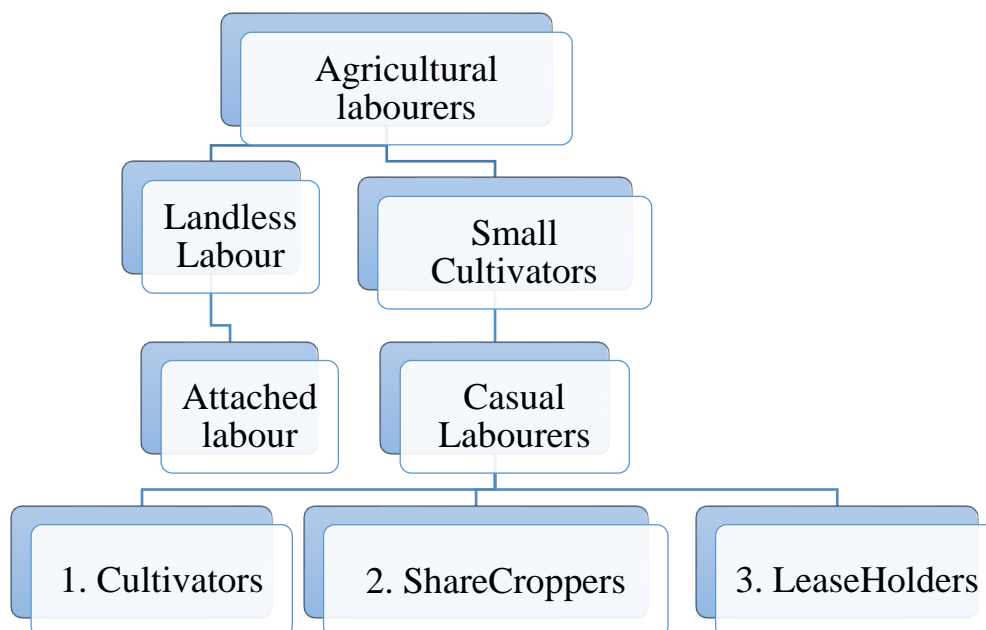
Generally Agricultural workers are defined as individuals who work in the agriculture sector, performing tasks related to the cultivation of crops, livestock management, and other farm-related activities. Their work may include planting, harvesting, tending to animals and maintaining farm equipment. Agricultural workers are often involved in manual or semi-skilled labour and may be employed on a seasonal or permanent basis, for the payment of wages depending upon the nature of agriculture operations.

National Commission on Labour(1969), includes cultivation of land, rearing and maintenance of livestock. Forest operations, fishing and hunting but it does not include fruit growing or plantations. Workers in agricultural sector are mainly categorized into 3 categories:

1. Cultivators
2. Agricultural Labour
3. Workers engaged in forestry, fishing and livestock etc.

⁶ Section 2(a) Agricultural and other Rural workers (Protection and Welfare) Bill, 2018.

Agricultural labour is one who is basically unskilled and unorganized and has little for its livelihood other than personal labour. Person whose main source of income is wage employment.



Flow chart explains as follows:⁷

Attached Labourers- They are generally attached to some cultivators on basis of either written or oral agreement. They employed for a certain period of time ie annual or seasonal or monthly basis. Employment is permanent and regular not free to seek employment in other place. They are treated as like a bonded labour.

Casual Labourers- They are not falling under the category of attached labourers, they are free to work on any farm or place and the payment is generally made on daily basis. Casual “workers being engaged either on time or on piece rates”.

Cultivators- Small farmers who possess very little land they spend most of their working time on the land others as labourers.

Share Croppers- Those who sharing the produce of the land for their work and also work as labourers.

Lease Holders- Tenants are workers who worked in leased land and also work as labourers.

Others:

Seasonal agricultural workers- Persons worked temporarily during peak seasons for performing task such as planting, harvesting and processing the crops etc.

⁷ Reports of the National Commission on Labour, 1969.

Migrant workers- Workers move from one place to another for seek an employment. They are often moving with seasonal demand for labour.

IV. CHALLENGES FACED BY AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

Low wages- Agricultural workers often receive low wages that are insufficient to cover basic needs such as food, shelter and healthcare. Before the state regulation the wages are determined by the employers and the workers had to work for those wages. Wages can be paid either on hourly basis or based on day, monthly or on a piece rate basis. In the agriculture sector wages in kind still co-exist with wages in cash. Wages in kind are the any supplements or food products give in return for the work done instead of cash. The Minimum Wages Act, 1948 is the only statutory legislation which ensures minimum wages to agricultural workers. In 2004-05 about 91% of the agricultural workers received below the National Minimum Wage rate and 64% below the National Commission for Rural Labour minimum wage norm in rural areas.⁸ In the year 2019-2020 the government made a detailed report on the wages relating to agricultural workers. The wage data has been compiled on the basis of data received from state government for different agricultural operations like ploughing, sowing, weeding and reaping, harvesting and also skilled rural workers such as blacksmith, carpenters and cobblers. Findings:⁹

- All India annual average daily wage rate for Field labour (Male) - Rs. 348/day.
- All India annual average daily wage rate for Field labour (Female) –Rs. 278/day.
- All India annual average daily wage rate for skilled labour is Rs.449/day.
- Difference between male and female annual average daily wage rate is 25%.
- In Tamil Nadu, annual average daily wage rate for field labour (Male) – Rs.392/day.
- In Tamil Nadu, annual average daily wage rate for field labour (Female) –Rs.195/day.
- In Tamil Nadu, annual average daily wage rate for skilled labour is Rs.502/day.

Employment- Agriculture workers does not get job for whole year, most of the agricultural works are seasonal occupation, which will lead to unemployment and underemployment in agriculture sector. The temporary nature of seasonal work, workers often faces job instability and uncertain future employment. This will lead an agriculture worker migrate into the other sector. To mitigate the subsistence and financial needs workers are in a situation to move into

⁸ National Commission for Enterprise in the Unorganised Sector (2007), “*Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector*”.

⁹ Directorate of Economics & Statistics, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare made statistics on “Agricultural Wages in India: 2019-2020”

non-agriculture sector. Seasonal employment is the main reason for increase the migrant labourers in agriculture sector and the growth of employment in non-agriculture sector. Agriculture workers have high rate of unemployment and underemployment due to irregularity and non-availability of employment. This makes the group even more vulnerable and creates insecurity in regular flow of income. This reflects the intermittency of employment and uncertainty in availability of employment.¹⁰ Agriculture workers may be vulnerable to exploitation due to their unstable employment status and limited bargaining power.

Health and occupational hazards- Agriculture workers are exposed to serious health hazards due to extensive use of fertilizers, insecticides, pesticides and mechanization. Long term exposure may lead to chronic health issues. The increasing use of chemicals and biological agents with hazard potential and use of agro-chemicals, agriculture machineries and equipment pose serious safety and health risks for agriculture workers. The use of machinery and tools increase the risk of accidents and injuries. The sprayer operators experience fatigue mainly due to carrying the sprayer load and the vibration arising from the sprayer causes irritation to the workers. Improper handling of pesticides such as mixing the pesticide solution with bare hands and spraying without wearing proper safety gadgets leads to many health-related risks and injuries. Low income level, low nutritional intake and constant physical labour, low education and low awareness are subject to greater health and occupational hazards of agriculture workers.

V. LEGISLATIVE MEASURES FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008- This Act seeks to address the vulnerabilities of workers in the unorganized sector and enhance their social and economic security. It aims to improve the living and working conditions of unorganized workers and extends social security and welfare benefits to wide range workers such as those in agriculture, construction and domestic workers. It consists of agriculture and related activities such as forestry, livestock and fishing as well as non-agriculture. It provides health care, maternity benefits and health related insurance and provide pension schemes and old age benefits to the workers. This act also establishes grievance redressal mechanisms to seek redressal regarding the implementation and enforcement of benefits.

Agricultural and other Rural workers (Protection and Welfare) Bill, 2018- This Bill provide protective measures to the agriculture and other rural workers against exploitation. It establishes welfare authority and welfare fund for agricultural and other rural workers. This Bill

¹⁰ National Commission for Enterprise in the Unorganised Sector (2007), *“Report on Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector”*.

also provides pension, provident fund and other financial compensation in case of accidents, and other medical related issues. It provides maternity and creche facilities to the women workers and ensure education of children.

The Agriculture Workers Welfare Fund Bill, 2018- To establish a agricultural workers welfare fund for the purpose of welfare and development of agriculture workers and other matters connected to agricultural workers. This Bill provides provision for the constitution of welfare fund in Centre level and both central and state government should contribute the fund. That funds shall be utilized for the purpose of payment of

- unemployment or sustenance allowance during off season period
- free healthcare facilities to the agricultural workers and their families
- payment of compensation to the workers who sustains injuries and death compensation to their heirs
- free educational facilities to the children of the agricultural workers
- payment of premium group life insurance cover and disability allowance to workers
- payment of old age pension to workers who attained 65 years of age and payment of bonus
- payment of maternity benefit, and made suitable facilities of canteen, health and water at workplace.

VI. ILO CONVENTIONS REALTING TO AGRICULTURAL WORKERS

- Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention, 2001(No.184)
- Right of Association (Agriculture) Convention, 1921 (No.11)
- Minimum Wage Fixing Machinery (Agriculture) Convention, 1951(No.99)
- Holidays with Pay (Agriculture) Convention, 1952(No,101)
- Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969(No.129)
- Minimum Age (Agriculture) Convention, 1921(No.10)
- Workmen Compensation (Agriculture) Convention, 1921(No.12)

VII. CONCLUSION

Agricultural workers in unorganised sector face serious problems like inadequate employment, low earnings and low health facilities. While there is a long way to go for establishing a

satisfactory quality of life for those workers, it is sad to say that even the basic measures required to achieve the goal have not been adequately implemented. Strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing enforcement mechanisms, in worker welfare can contribute to a more just and equitable agricultural sector. Moreover, enhancing awareness is essential for driving policy reforms and ensuring fair treatment of agricultural workers. Ultimately, ensuring the well-being of agricultural workers not only supports their rights and dignity but also enhances the sustainability and productivity of the agricultural sector as a whole. It is imperative for policymakers, employers, and stakeholders to collaborate in creating and sustaining an environment where agricultural worker is recognized, respected, and rewarded appropriately.

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