

UNIT I

Introduction to Agricultural Labour:

Farm labourers constituting about 23% of whole rural population have been existing in sub-human conditions for centuries. They have been exploited and ill-treated by the landlords. Till the dawn of Independence nothing was actually done to improve their lot. Under the Indian Constitution, everyone will have to be given equal opportunity in education, employment, etc.

Further the Constitution demands that the Government shall be helpful to those sections of the society which are weak and backward. The Government has special responsibility for improving the economic conditions of the farm labourers.

Further, in these days, increased farm production through better agricultural organisation and management has become a must. How can this be fully realised unless the farm workers are given a better treatment? It is in this context the improvement of the agricultural labour has assumed a special significance.

Agricultural labour may be divided into two categories:

(i) Landless labourers, working for others;

(ii) Small peasants with very little land but who devote much time working for others.

In category (i) of landless labourers, there are some who are attached permanently to some estates and when the latter are sold away, the labourers are passed on to the new owners. They do not normally receive wages in cash but are generally paid in kind. They have 10 labour for their masters and cannot shift from one to another.

They have to provide 'beggar' or forced labour. The Kamay in Bihar, the Pannaiyal in Tamil Nadu, the Colis in Maharashtra, the Shalkari in M.P., the Charkar in Orissa etc., are landless labourers of category no. (i) They are almost slaves. But this type is gradually declining. The most common type is

those landless workers who are independent permanently but work exclusively for them.

Some data are available regarding the number of farm labour. The second Agricultural Labour Enquiry conducted in 1960, stated that agricultural labour families constituted nearly 25% of all rural families. More than 85% of the rural workers are casual and independent serving any farmer who is willing to engage them and only 15% of agricultural labourers are attached to specific landlords.

The number of surplus manpower in the family is indeed very small. More than 50% of the farm workers do not possess any land. Even the rest of them own only very little of land and are landless labourers. Most farm workers belong to the depressed classes which have been neglected for centuries. The low castes and the depressed classes have been socially handicapped and they had never the courage to assert themselves and have been like dumb-driven cattle.

Growth of Agricultural Labour in Industries

Presently there are more than 112 million agricultural labour in India.

Causes of Agricultural Labour's Growth:

The causes operating to bring about the growth of the class may be broadly up as follows:

- (i) High net growth rate of the population in this country;
- (ii) Growth of indebtedness due to low income leading to transfer of land from the small owners to the creditors, resulting in the former into becoming agricultural labourers ;
- (iii) Displacement of means of subsidiary occupations whereby existence solely on an uneconomic unit of land becomes impossible;
- (iv) Growth of absentee landlordism; and

- (v) The extension of money economy to rural areas in replacement of payment in kinds;
- (vi) Disintegration of village communities of the pre-nineteenth century;
- (vii) Decline of domestic industries and handicrafts;
- (viii) Disintegration of the peasantry;
- (ix) a severe agricultural depression in the late twenties ; and
- (x) other social factors such as economic transition through which some of the criminal tribes and castes have been passing..... all these led to the emergence of a class of landless labourers in the country.

In this connection Dr. R. K. Mukherjee rightly observes: "Every circumstance which has weakened the position of the small holder has increased the number of agricultural labourers, viz., the loss of common rights in the rural economy, the misuses of collective enterprise, the sub-division of holdings, the multiplication of rent receivers free mortgaging and transfer of land followed by a decline in cottage industries."

Besides, change in proprietary rights, among the tribal people also brought about a change in the position and converted them from tenants to landless labourers. This has happened to the Gonds and Bhils of M. P.; the Korwas of U. P. and the Mundas of Chhota Nagpur.

Economic Conditions of Agricultural Labour:

The economic conditions of agricultural labour are indeed pitiable. They have been getting low wages and leading an extremely miserable life.

(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) **Unemployment and under-employment:** Unemployment and under-employment are two important factors responsible for low income and

consequently low economic position of the agricultural labour in our country. The farm workers do not have continuous work.

It has been estimated by the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry that on an average an agricultural labourer finds employment for about 197 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. Lack of continuous work is responsible for low income and consequently low living standard of farm workers.

(3) Paucity of Non-agricultural occupation:

Another important factor for the low wages and poor economic condition of the farm labourers is paucity of non-agricultural occupation in rural areas. For one thing, the growing population pressure is increasingly felt in rural areas and the number of landless labourers is steadily on increase.

For another, the absence of any other occupation in rural areas and lack of inter-regional mobility have been responsible for worsening the population pressure on land. It follows that the economic condition of the labouring classes can be bettered by the provision of supplementary jobs.

(4) Unorganised, Illiterate and Ignorant Workers:

Urban workers in industries are organised in trade unions and they have been able to secure high wages. Farm workers are illiterate and ignorant and live in scattered villages. Hence they could not be organised in trade unions.

In urban areas workers could organise themselves and it was convenient for political parties to take interest in trade union activity. This is almost difficult in case of Agricultural labour. Accordingly, it is difficult for them to bargain with the landowners and secure high wages.

(5) Indebtedness Farm workers are heavily indebted:

Normally, the agricultural labourers borrow from the landowners under whom they work. Naturally, they are forced to accept lower wages from them.

Sometimes, the workers may not have their own houses, or if they have their own houses, they may have constructed them on land contributed by the landlords. For this also, the workers feel obliged to the landlords. Thus heavy indebtedness is a basic factor of poor economic condition of agricultural labourers.

Thus the agricultural labourers have been getting very low wages and have to live in a miserable sub-human condition partly because of factors beyond their control and partly because of their inherent poor bargaining power.

Improvement of Agricultural Labour:

Many suggestions have been put forth for the improvement of farm workers which are as follows:

(1) Abolition of Agricultural Slavery:

According to our Constitution the practice of slavery in any form is not permissible. Agricultural slavery which exists in many parts of India will have to go. Agrarian serfdom which has been in vogue for centuries cannot go so easily.

This is so because the workers are helpless, ignorant and illiterate. Education of the rural masses and better opportunities are some of the remedies for the removal of the system of agricultural slavery. When the lower classes are sufficiently educated and made conscious of their rights, they will fight certainly against slavery.

(2) Minimum Agricultural Wages:

Measures should be taken, to enhance the wages of farm workers. Unless this is done it is not possible to raise their economic condition. Farm workers have been getting very low wages except in Punjab. Minimum Wages Act has been passed in most of the States. There are limitations in properly enforcing them. Minimum legislation alone is not sufficient but steps should be taken to enforce it.

(3) Provision of Land:

The basic difficulty is that most of our agricultural labourers do not have any land of their own. To improve their condition, the landless workers should be provided with land. One way is to allot to them the newly reclaimed land. Another way is to redistribute the existing land among all people either on a voluntary basis or by using a certain amount of compulsion.

Ceiling of landholding serves this purpose. The Bhoodan movement is also one of the methods by which those who possess land, contribute voluntarily for those who do not possess any land. Another method is co-operative farming. The landless labourers can improve their lot only through acquiring land.

(4) Co-operative Farming:

The measures suggested above will help in promoting the economic conditions of farm workers but the ultimate solution probably lies in the creation of co-operative system in which all persons including the present working class, will have equal rights. The differences between the large and small farmers will have to go and similarly the landless labourers who are suffering from so many handicaps will have to be brought to the level of all others.

(5) More and Fuller Employment:

Because of seasonal characters of Indian agriculture, the farm labourer do not have full-time employment. Both intensive cultivation and extension of irrigation are very much required to increase agricultural work. There will be double cropping and employment will be available for the whole year.

There is much scope for the setting up of village and rural industries which will make use of the raw materials readily available in the villages and which will provide occupation for the rural population. Examples of such industries are sugarcane crushing, cotton finning, production of oils and soaps, brick-kilns, manufacture of paper, etc.

The setting up of small industrial units supported by rural electrification will help farm labour in many ways, as for example reduction of seasonal unemployment, diversion of surplus labour power to rural industries,

reduction of the pressure of population on agriculture, to raise agricultural productivity and also raise wages of farm labour, etc.

(6) Public Works Programmes:

The setting up of small industries and public works programmes have great importance in the mobilisation of manpower resources in villages and in raising the wages of the rural masses and, indirectly, the income of the country.

In this connection the usefulness of public works may be emphasized. The Government can plan its projects in the rural areas carefully, so that the workers who may be unemployed during the off-seasons may be gainfully employed. Such projects include the construction of roads, the digging and deepening of tanks and canals, afforestation etc.

Government Measures Pertaining to Agricultural Labour:

(1) Declaring Serfdom an Offence:

Our 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.

Since 1947, the Centre as well as the States have taken measures to increase the wages of farm labour and to improve their economic and social conditions. They include the passing of legislation to fix minimum wages for farm labour, the removal of disabilities, the ceiling on holdings and the redistribution of land among the landless labourers, etc.

(2) Passing of Minimum Wages Act, 1948:

An important step taken by (the Government is the passing of the Minimum Wages Act in 1948 under which farm workers will have to be paid a minimum wage. The minimum wages are fixed keeping, in view the local costs and standard of living, they vary between 66 paise to Rs. 150 per day.

Since conditions in various parts of the country are different and since even within a State the law allows different rates of wages, to be fixed, in practice, it

is very difficult to enforce minimum wages effectively. Fortunately, the inflationary situation has pushed up wages for farm workers.

(3) Land Reforms:

Various land reforms have been passed by the Government which aim at bettering the economic position of agricultural labourers. For instance, with the abolition of the zamindari system all the exploitation associated with the system has been removed. 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.

Every State has passed law fixing ceiling on agricultural holdings by which the maximum amount of land which a person can hold has been fixed by law, the surplus lands of rich landowners are to be distributed to the landless labourers, and small peasants.

(4) Labour Co-operatives:

After Independence, efforts have been made to encourage the formation of labour co-operatives. These co-operatives, whose members are workers, undertake the contract of govt. projects, such as, construction of roads, digging of canals and tanks, afforestation, etc.

They provide employment to farm workers during off-seasons and also eliminate that 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.

(5) Employment Guarantee Scheme:

The Govt. of Maharashtra has introduced 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 official and the latter will provide him employment within 5 kilometres 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 is a welcome step to provide employment to all persons and it is expected that all other states would introduce similar schemes.

(6) 20-Point Programme:

In July, 1975, soon after the Emergency was declared, the Government introduced the 20-point economic programme 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:

(i) Speedy implementation of ceiling legislation and distribution of surplus land among landless labourers and small peasants;

(ii) 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;

(iii) Abolition of bonded labour;

(iv) Liquidation of rural indebtedness and moratorium on recovery of debts from landless labourers, artisans and small peasants; and

(v) Review of the minimum wage legislation for agricultural labour and introduction of suitable enhancement of minimum wages wherever necessary.

The landless labourers who form 20 to 22% of the total population have been living a miserable existence, with highly inadequate food, clothing and housing. Their wages are low; they are forced to work for the same landlords for generations; and they do not own even the huts in which they live.

The landless labourers are indeed the worst exploited section of the community. The 20-point programme was the first concrete step to ameliorate their economic condition and promote their welfare and attempt was made to implement the programme vigorously. With the coming into power of the Janata Party at the Centre, the future of the 20-point programme

has become uncertain. Politics apart, the various points of the 20-point economic programme are worth implementing.

The Planning Commission have rightly felt that the benefits of many of the development programmes have not reached the landless farm labour. They, therefore, have suggested the formation of a board in each State to co-ordinate all measures proposed for the benefit of farm workers.

Agricultural Labourers: Growth, Types and Economic Conditions

Growth of Agricultural Labourers:

Before the advent of the British, an outstanding feature of the Indian economy was “the self-subsisting and self-perpetuating” character of its villages. The village itself consumed most of the food stuffs and raw-materials produced within itself while its need for handicrafts was met by the local artisans.

Each farmer carried on the cultivation of his farm with the help of his own family members. In such a society, there was little room for the existence of an independent and distinct class of landless labourers.

That is why landless elements were very insignificant in Indian villages till about the middle of the 19th century. Munro reported in 1842 that “there were no landless peasants in India” while a decade later, George Campbell found that “as a rule, farming was not carried on by hired labour.”

The establishment of British rule brought about certain fundamental changes in the self-sufficient village economy. The old production relations changed, separating the cultivators from the means of production. The peasants, dispossessed and pauperized, swelled the ranks of agricultural labourers.

The number of agricultural workers rapidly grew from 12.5 million in 1881 to 42.2 million in 1931 and 49 million in 1951. The increase was particularly marked between 1921—31 when their number jumped from 28 million to 42 million.

The census commission (1931), surprised at the increase, tried to explain it away by pointing to the differences in the census methods. The reality is that the world depression and the consequent fall in agricultural prices compelled

the small farmer to sell his land which was thus concentrated in the hands of the non-cultivating owners.

Notwithstanding the differences in the census procedure, there is no doubt that over the last half century, the proportion of agricultural labourers was on the increase. Even as late as 1891, this class formed 13% of the agricultural population of the country.

In the fifty years that followed, the process of growth was so quickened that, by 1951, agricultural labourers formed 30.4% of the agricultural population and 22.7% of the total population of the country.

Showing the number of agricultural labourer. However, this large population of agricultural workers was not equally distributed all over the country. Their proportion was the highest in Madras, Bombay and Central Provinces and the lowest in the Northern Provinces of the Punjab, the N.W.F.P. and the United Provinces. The eastern region occupied the middle position.

The explanation for this does not lie, as the census commission (1901) holds, in the proportion of the depressed classes. Rather, the nature of the land tenure system, the period of association with the British administration and the availability of alternative sources of employment were the chief determinants of the proportion of agricultural labourers to the total agricultural population in any part of the country.

The most important feature of the evolution of the class of landless labourers was the dispossession of the peasants of their lands. Therefore, their proportion was the highest in the ryotwari areas of Madras, Bombay and the central provinces where, in contrast to the Zamindari or Mahalwari areas, land could be easily transferred by sale or mortgage.

The disparity between the Mahalwari north and the Zamindari east can be explained by the fact that the British administration and its land settlements together with the disintegration of the traditional Indian village community started much earlier in the eastern Zone than in the North.

Causes of Growth:

Nanawati and Anjaria have advanced the view that it was brought about by the increase of population. Such a view, however, can not explain the regional differences in the proportion of agricultural workers. In reality, the growth of this class was primarily brought about by the decay of the village handicrafts, the increasing indebtedness of the peasantry, and land mortgages.

As Gadgil has explained, the import of manufactured goods led to the decline of Indian handicrafts and forced the cottage worker to turn to land..... the only available occupation. Most of the persons displaced from cottage industries had to work as agricultural labourers.

With the introduction of the new land settlements, the cultivator “who had never before handled a coin in his life, was required to pay to the govt. twice a year a fixed sum of money, crop or no crop.”

In the early days, when commercialisation of agriculture and circulation of money had just begun, the farmer, though not poor otherwise, was very poor in terms of money and had often to seek the help of the money-lender for paying his revenue instalment. Besides the heavy and rigid revenue demands of the govt., uncertainty of crops caused by natural calamities added to the farmer’s needs for borrowing. It is well to remember in this connection that between 1860—1908, famine or scarcity prevailed in one or the other part of the country in twenty out of forty nine years.

Yet another factor added to the farmer’s troubles. With the commercialisation of agriculture and the development of grain markets in the country side, the Indian farmer “entered the orbit of world prices.” Thus, to the uncertainties of rainfall for which he could curse his past misdeeds and pray to God, were added the fluctuations of world agricultural prices which brought about wide changes in his income.

His needs alone, whatever their intensity or urgency, could not have landed the farmer in debt had the govt. not placed, in his hands, a valuable asset against which credit could be easily raised. The Royal Commission on agriculture points out that in the pre British days, “land had been practically

unsalable..... it had no market price for no one would buy it or make advances upon it as security.”

The British made land transferable. This together with the establishment of law courts, which enforced such transfers, increased the value of land as security for monetary advances. Helped by these four factors..... heavy cash revenue demand, famines, world price fluctuations and the transferability of land....money lenders who were pre-viously “humble servants and accountants now turned into virtuosos in unscrupulous profiteering” and began to dominate the countryside.

As the Famine commission of 1901 puts it, “The rigidity of the revenue system forced them (farmers) into debt, while the valuable property which they held, made it easier to borrow.” The result was that the cultivators sank deeper and deeper into debt and their land passed out of their hands. It was through this process of the dispossession of the peasantry that the large and distinct class of landless labourers was born.

According to Dr. R.K. Mukerjee, another factor that contributed to the growth of landless labourers, was the economic transition through which some of the criminal tribes and castes of India passed. In most tribal areas, the original system was one of a village head-man and ryotwari tenure, the village lands being regarded as the property of the community rather than of individuals.

However, under the land revenue policy of the British Govt., only a limited number of persons were given proprietary rights which they gradually lost as traders and money-lenders exploited the ignorance and improvidence of these simple and primitive people. Most of them were converted from tenants into landless labourers. This happened to the Gonds and Bhils of the Central provinces, the Karwas in U.P. and Mundas in Chhota Nagpur.

Of course, the dispossession of the peasantry and the growth of the agricultural proletariat did not proceed without a fight. The peasants waged many bitter and bloody struggles against the policies which uprooted them.

In this connection, mention may be made of the Santhal Rebellion (1854); the great support given by the U.P. Peasantry to the war of Independence in 1857; the Indigo Rebellion (1860); the Deccan Riots (1874); Rampa Rebellion on the Godavri Hills in 1835; Pabna and the Bogra outbreaks in Bengal in 1871.

Types of Agricultural Labourers:

Agricultural Labourers may be classified into the following four broad categories:

1. Bonded or Semi-Free Labourers:

This class, described by Wadia and Merchant as 'Agrarian Serfs' consisted of those who worked under-conditions of virtual slavery. According to the Royal Commission on Labour, the cause of their bondage was the need on their part to secure advances of money.

Being unable to offer any security, "he agrees to serve the man from whom he has borrowed." The money is not repaid, nor is it intended to be repaid; but the borrower remains a life long bond slave of his creditor. For his work, he merely receives an inadequate dole of food and, to all intents and purposes, is in the position of a medieval serf. These bonded slaves could be purchased, sold or even mortgaged.

The worst feature of this bondage was that the debt was never repaid and sometimes even the next generation was also bonded. Besides, the labourer was not allowed to migrate a long distance from employment when the master himself could not provide him with work.

This kind of bonded labour could not have existed in an essentially non-monetary traditional economy of India. In the ancient economy, the village menials and domestic servants were guaranteed subsistence either by allotting them small piece of land or by giving them the claim to a certain portion of the produce of each cultivator.

However, the disintegration of the village community destroyed the traditional arrangements and forced the village menials to accept the worst conditions of work for securing a living. In the words of Dr. Patel, "it was this

compulsion that forced the menials to accept bondage.” Thus, the traditional slaves were liberated only to be re-enslaved.

The bonded labourer was known by different names in different parts of the country. He was called Izhava in Kerala, Bhagela in Hyderabad, Kamiya and Janour in Bihar and Gobri in U.P. Region-wise, they were mostly to be found in Madras, Bombay, Madhya Pradesh, Chhota Nagpur and Bihar—precisely the areas where, due to a much larger proportion of landless labourers, opportunities of securing a livelihood were more scarce. According to Dr. Patel, in 1931, there were between 2—3 million bonded labourers in India.

2. Dwarf-Holding Labourers:

This class included small landowners, tenants, sharecroppers and part-time farmers. They differed from other agricultural workers in that they did ‘not depend upon farm work alone’. The small income from their main occupation compelled them to seek farm work.

Instances were there where the head of the family continued in the main family occupation while other members, including women, took to agricultural work. According to Dr. Patel, there were about 32 million dwarf-holding cultivators in India in 1931. They were mostly found in Bengal, Bihar, U.P. and the Punjab.

The characteristic feature of dwarf-holding labourers was that they mostly suffered from disguised unemployment. They kept themselves self-employed on their tiny holdings but without adequate earnings from cultivation.

On the other hand, they could not migrate to far off places for any long period as their personal holdings required timely operation. The women and children of such families sometimes got agricultural work in the neighbourhood during peak seasons but such employment was for short periods only.

3. Under-Employed Landless Labourers:

Bonded labourers were attached to landowners while the dwarf-holding labourers were tied to land. The most important cause in both cases was the lack of alternative means of employment.

However, when their ties with the landowners or land were broken, they were pushed into a type which may be called the under-employed landless labourers. These labourers were liberated but as Thomas and Ramakrishnan point out, their independence was of little value; it was insufficient compensation for the loss of a sheltered existence.

These labourers formed a large floating reserve of man power who migrated from place to place in search of some sort of work, industrial, agricultural or even unskilled casual work. Some workers followed one crop from one area to another over long distances for a comparatively lengthy period of employment; others followed any crop in the same area or different areas.

Generally, these labourers travelled in family groups or in gangs. It was found that the landless labourers of Bihar and U.P. migrated to different districts of Bengal during the jute harvesting season.

In Madras, landless labourers migrated for groundnut picking, or for harvesting paddy or for work on the plantations 40—80 miles away. Wages were paid in kind or cash though there was a definite tendency to replace grain wages by cash.

The cause of the under-employment of this kind of labour is not difficult to understand. As most of the cultivators in the country were small cultivators, they did not generally need hired-help except at the time of harvesting.

That is why most of such labourers were employed only during the harvesting season. For the rest of the year, they were under-employed or completely unemployed. The under-employed landless labourers predominated in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Central provinces.

4. Full Time Land-Less Labourers:

This class comprised Plantation labour and employees of capitalistic and well-to-do farmers. Since most of the plantations are situated in very thinly-populated areas, it was, at first, very difficult to attract sufficient labour. This

led the planters to adopt a system of recruitment before which even the horrors of the slave-trade paled into insignificance.

The virtual absence of contact with the world outside, the lack of a strong labour union and the existence of complete unity and understanding among the Plantation owners combined to reduce the Plantation labour almost to the status of bonded or semi-free labourers. No wonder R.P. Dutt describes them as 'Plantation-slaves.'

The second category included agricultural workers who were employed by well-to-do capitalist farmers whose aim was to secure profits rather than live on rents from land. They were employed on a more or less long term basis in those areas which supplied dairy products, fruits, vegetables and such other products to cities and big towns or where modern methods of irrigation had been developed.

According to the second Agricultural Labour Enquiry (1956—57) there were 16.2 million agricultural labour families of which 57% or 9.2 million families were landless.

Mention may also be made of 'BEGAR' or forced labour. Although the constitution of India guarantees protection against forced labour, The Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee found that forced labour in some form or other was being exacted in many parts of the country. This kind of labour generally prevailed among attached workers.

In order to retain them in service for a long time, the landholders usually advanced loans or allotted plots of land free of interest or rent. "The inability of the workers to repay the advances led to certain practices of exacting labour either at nominal wages or even without them."

Economic Conditions of Agricultural Labourers:

Agricultural workers as a class were extremely poor, perhaps the poorest in the Indian society. Living on the margin of subsistence and with a low vitality, these long suffering serfs were the first victims of disease, pestilence and

famine. The fact of their poverty is borne out by the extent of unemployment amongst them.

Although no reliable estimates are available of the regional and crop to crop unemployment in the country but there is no doubt that labourers remained un-employed for a substantial part of the year.

According to Dr. Lorenzo, the cultivator of the sub-montane districts of U.P. had 177 days full employment and 188 days complete leisure. For the eastern Deccan, Keatinge ascertained that a family with four hands to work on its 30—40 acres of dry crop land was occupied for only half the year. In Madras, the number of days when the agricultural labourer was not able to find work was between 120—200 days, while in the Punjab, an ordinary peasant with 3—4 acres of land found work for 157 days in the year.

What was true of the regions was true of the country as a whole. The survey conducted in 1956—57 found that all agricultural workers, on an average, found wage-paid employment for about 7 months in a year, some kind of self-employment for less than two months and total un-employment for more than three months.

It should not, however, be thought that all the workers were employed for all the days during which employment was available on land. Rather, it was found that, on an average, 16% of the farm workers were employed in a month and every worker was un-employed for seven days per month.

The fact of the extreme poverty of agricultural labourers is further brought out by their extremely low wages. Though small variations were to be found from district to district, the most common rate of wages, as furnished to the Famine commission of 1880, were 12—18 paise for men, 9—12 paise for women and 6 paise for children between 12—15 years of age.

So long as food-grains were cheap, this pitifully small wage was sufficient to meet the requirements of bare subsistence for the labourer and his family. But when prices rose, this wage was hardly sufficient to buy food for two persons in a family of four or five.

In the circumstances, the wage earner was placed in a desperate situation, the only escape from which was for other members of the family to work with him and supplement the family income. But this meant an increase in the labour force and forcing down the rate of wages of male workers. This, together with the seasonal nature of agricultural, employment, led the agricultural workers to engage themselves in such occupations as cutting, transport and sale of grass and firewood, and repairs of huts and houses.

The next three decades saw a rise in both nominal and real wages; nominal wages almost doubled between 1891—1911 while real wages rose by 1½ times during the same period. This led B.M. Bhatia” to conclude that the economic condition of the rural labourer had greatly improved. Such an optimistic conclusion, however, is unwarranted because these wages relate only to the well organised sector of economy where payment was made in cash and not to the vast majority who received wages in kind. Besides, these wage-rates were paid to ‘free labourers’ excluding bonded labourers and other socially depressed classes. Above all, these wages make no allowance for the fact that agricultural labourer was not employed continuously throughout the year. Therefore, there is no basis for the conclusion that agricultural labourers, as a class, gained during this period.

Conditions were no better in the inter-war period. Prof. N.G. Ranga’s investigations in south Indian villages, undertaken in 1926, indicated that 5 out of nine families among Panchamas suffered from under-consumption of cereals. Thomas and Krishanan’s Resurvey of South Indian villages suggested that only 2/3 of the income necessary for subsistence was earned by the landless labourer.

Worst, however, was the condition of bonded labour. The ‘Gobri’ of Gorakhpur and Deoria districts of U.P. was allowed, as part of his wages, to collect the undigested grains contained in the cow-dung. He thus got 20 seers or at the most a maund of grain from 5—6 heads of cattle during the season. The second world war substantially increased the wages of agricultural labourers but the increase in the cost of living was still greater.

According to the congress Agrarian Reforms Committee, during 1939—47, the rise in agricultural wages varied between 260—360% but it was more than offset by the greater increase in the cost of living ranging from 356—764% in different parts of the country, leading to a further deterioration in the condition of agricultural workers.

The lot of this long-suffering class saw no improvement even in the post-Independence period. If anything, the position further worsened. This can be seen from the fact that in 1950-51, 45% of the families of agricultural workers were in debt; in 1956—57, the proportion had risen to 64%. While the average debt per family per annum was only Rs. 47/- in 1950—51, it had increased to Rs. 88/- in 1956—57.

The standard of living of agricultural workers compared most unfavourably with that of other rural families as well as industrial workers. The per capita annual expenditure of the rural families in general was Rs. 204/- while that of the families of agricultural workers was only Rs. 107/-.

In the case of rural families, 74% of their total expenditure went to food and 26% for other requirements but 85% of the expenditure of agricultural worker's families went to food and only 15% for other amenities.

That the industrial worker is exploited is universally recognised, but the income of the agricultural workers was much less than even the wages of the industrial workers. It varied between 24% in Bombay to 59% in Bengal of the industrial wages.

It is clear that the agricultural worker was worse off not only than the industrial worker but also than other sections of the rural population. Dr. Sitaramya aptly sums up the position of the agricultural worker when he observes:

“A series of intermediaries has come into being between the govt. and the ultimate cultivator who spends the day between slush and mud, who works now with a starving stomach and now with half appeased appetite, who knows no rest in storm or sunshine, who often has no dwelling site which he can call his own. He grows our paddy but starves. He feeds our milch cows but

never knows anything beyond Canjee and water; he fills our granaries but has to beg each day's ration for the rest of the year. He digs our wells but can't touch them for his use. He clears our tanks but must keep off them when they are full. He is a perpetual hewer of wood and drawer of water for those who fatten on his labour and rise to wealth and plenty on his skeleton."

Against this gloomy background, the only ameliorative measure that the govt. could think of was that "at the centre, as well as in the states, there should be special cells for watching closely the progress of development programmes which have particular bearing on the welfare and development of agricultural workers and studying the special problems which confront them-in different parts of the country." Thus, a 'weeping wound' in the agrarian system of India was left unattended.

Problems of Agricultural Labourers (With Measures)

Problems of Agricultural Labourers:

Agricultural labourers who are mostly landless and form a significant section of rural society mainly depend on wage employment in agriculture. Majority of them belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and among the worst exploited section of society.

Unlike the industrial worker who are well organised agricultural labourers are neither well organised nor well paid. Their income has always been meagre, resulting in poor living heavy indebtedness. Before independence, their position was nothing better than serfs. They were required to do all sort of work from dawn to dusk. They were victim of social discrimination and economic exploitation.

The situation has shown some signs of improvement during the last four decades. Though even now they are the poorest and resource less class in rural areas yet they are no longer a victim of extreme form of oppression. But their economic exploitation cannot be ruled out even today. Even now their level of income is extremely low and not sufficient enough to make both ends meet.

Agricultural wages and family incomes of agricultural workers are very low in India. The average annual income of household was Rs. 477 during 1950-51 which declined to Rs. 437 in 1955-56 according to the agricultural Labour Enquiry Reports. In the seventies there was an interesting discussion on whether the conditions of agricultural labourers in terms of real wage rates had improved or deteriorated with the advent of the green revolution.

Using ALE data Bardhan argued that male real wage rate in Punjab and western U.P. declined while it had risen in Kerala Krishnaji and Jose used Agricultural wages in India (AWI) data to make inter-state comparisons and concluded that agricultural wages are poorly adjusted to and long behind the rise in the cost of living.

A. V. Jose (1978) argued that real wage rates alone do not tell us about the real earnings of agricultural labourers which are dependent upon:

- (1) The agricultural wage rates.
- (2) The quantum of employment per year available per worker and
- (3) The prices of wage goods consumed by the members of households.

He provided indirect evidence on the decline in employment opportunities to agricultural labourers after 1964-65. There was an increase in real wage rates but per capita income of agricultural labourers had fallen between 1964-65 and 1970-71 in most states.

More recently, Bardhan (1984) attempted another assessment of the so called 'trickle down' effects of growth on poverty of agricultural labourers using RLE data. He noted a decline in real daily wages earnings of agricultural labourers in all states except Uttar Pradesh during 1964-65 to 1974-75. In a nutshell the living condition of agricultural labourers are truly pathetic.

The agricultural labourers have to face the problems of unemployment and underemployment. Labour participation alone is not a very efficient measure of the employment available to labour households since it only indicates the proportion of persons who were working during an agricultural year.

Days of agricultural employment per agricultural labourer in a particular year would be the net result of changes in the demand and supply of labour. In a year of low agricultural output the demand for labour would be such less, thus reducing the total available days of agricultural employment. On the other hand the supply of labour, in terms of earner's population ratio, increased, in India during agricultural Scarcity. The days of employment per agricultural would be expected to fall.

Though bonded labour has been abolished in the country, yet news about the existence of this system in rural India keep appearing in daily from various parts of the country. According to the NSS (32nd round) there are still 3.5 lakh bonded labourers in the country. There is no provision fixation of hours of work. During the peak seasons, they have to work on the farms from dawn to dusk. There is no question of any leave as they are employed on daily basis.

Unlike the industrial worker the agricultural labour is not organised, His employment is mere a matter of personal whim or the employer. The situation is frequently exploited by the employer. The relationship between the landlord and the labourer is not uniform throughout the country. There are substantial differences not only among different state but even among different villages of same state as regards the period of employment mode of time period of payment freedom of movement, bargaining power vis-a-vis landlords.

Government Measures of Assistance:

Agricultural labour constitutes a significant proportion of total agrarian work force. Minimum wages of agricultural labourers are below.

(i) Fixation of Minimum Wages:

Minimum wage Act of 1948 which provide for the fixation of minimum wages of agricultural workers under the Act, the minimum wage are to be fixed by the state governments and are to be reviewed periodically at intervals not exceeding five years. However, because of number of difficulties was not found possible to fix minimum wages for agricultural labour almost of the states up to 1974. The main difficulties were small size holdings low

productivity of agricultural labour back of organization a rural workers excessive labour supply in many areas act. With increase in the agricultural, production in most of the states the labourers have been demanding Like in wages.

Moreover changes accompanying reforms; increased the aspirations of workers. At present all states have passed legislation of fixation of minimum wages barring Jammu and Kashmir Nagaland and Sikkim.

(ii) Abolition of Bonded Labour:

After independence there have been serious attempts to abolish the bonded labour as it is inhuman and exploitative in nature. A notification abolishing this practice was issued in October 1976. As a consequence of this Act, 2,35,670 bonded labourers were identified and freed in various parts of the country upto March 31, 1988.

(iii) Providing Land to Landless Labourers:

The land obtained through the application of ceiling on land ceilings and other land reform measures is being distributed among landless labourers. Labourers Priority in the distribution of land is accorded to the labourers belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribe proximately 70 lakh hectares of land has been distributed to landless labourers so far.

(iv) Provision of House Sites:

A number of steps were undertaken during the second Plan to provide house sites free or on subsidy basis. During fourth plan a scheme is introduced under which financial assistance was given to the states for provision of house sites with an area of 91 sq. meters to cover the Seventh Plan proposed to provide assistance to the extent of Rs. 500 per family provision of developed house sites of 90 sq, meters each and assistance of Rs. 200 per family towards construction cost.

The twenty point programme introduced during the Emergency period was described as a direct assault on poverty. It gave highest priority to rapid implementation or land costing or provision of house-sites for labourers

abolition of bonded labour a moratorium on the recovery of debt from landless labourers small farmers and rural artisans liquidation of rural indebtedness, legislation for higher minimum wages for agricultural labourers.

Provision like abolition of bonded labour enforcement of minimum liquidation of debt had only a partial success in the absence of infrastructure like grassroots organisation of unions of agricultural labourers or bonded labour.

(v) Sp Schemes for Providing Employment:

A number of schemes have been initiated in the planning period for providing employment to rural poor. In 1978 the small farmers and marginal farmers and agricultural labour agency programme as well as other programmes of rural development like Drought Prone Area Programme were started into what is called the Integrated Rural Development programme. Initially the programme was introduced in 2,400 selected block.

On 2 Oct. 1980 it was extended to all the 5011 blocks in the country. This involves identification of thousands of families within the target group each block preparation of plans for assisting these families, arranging support for financing these plans, monitoring the implementation follow up that action to ensure that the beneficiaries lasting derive benefit they cross the poverty line.

Supplementing IRDP are programmes like Training Rural youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM), the Minimum Needs programme (MNP) and the Special Area Development Programme. Integration Rural Development is a multi-sector, multi-sectional concept encompass developing various sectors of the rural economy like agriculture and transportation and various sections of the rural population landless labourers, artisans small farmers, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

A new programme called Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP) was launched 5th August, 1983, to provide employment opportunities to the landless for at least 100 days in year.

Other Measures:

Various other measures adopted by the government from time to time whether directly or indirectly sought to improve the conditions of agricultural workers. For example, Promotion of small and cottage industries and villages handicrafts and development of industrial estates in rural areas have created job opportunities for agricultural workers.

MEASURES ADOPTED BY GOVERNMENT FOR IMPROVEMENT:

During the last one century Government has taken various steps to solve its problems. In fact the solution of this problem could solve the many other problems. The late prime minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi had made a vital contribution towards the solution of the problem of rural indebtedness. As a result of this programme the Harijans have been by law released of their credits and not body can realise the loans advanced to them.

It is these members of the weaker section who are mainly prey of the money lenders and users. In spite of this that the Government was attracted towards the problem of rural indebtedness. The farmers had been so much frustrated that they took the violence, and killed many money lenders and burnt their registers and other documents. This awakened the Government to the seriousness of the problem. This was done in Poona and Ahmad Nagar districts and to the Government was forced to take certain legislative measures.

1) Deccan agriculturists Act of 1879:

It was in 1879, that the Government passed Deccan Agriculturists act, through which certain reliefs were granted to the farmers. The agricultural implements and the animals such as bullocks etc, of the farmers could not be sold for non repayment of loans. A farmer could not be imprisoned for his inability to pay loans. He was given facility to repay the loans in installments. He also gets the facility to repay the loans in installment. He also gets the facility to declare himself as a bankrupt. These measures gave a good deal of relief to the farmers who were under the debt of the money lenders.

2) Punjab land alienation Act of 1900:

Registration of Document Act of 1864 and the transfer of property Act 1882 gave an opportunity to the money lenders to exploit the poor farmers with the half of the provisions of these Acts, the money lenders took away the land of thousands poor farmers. This exploitation would be created further complications and even affected adversely on the agricultural production and so Punjab land Alienation Act was passed. After this several other such Acts were passed.

According to the provisions of the Punjab Land Alienation Act the money lender could not take away the land mortgaged with think. He has to return this land after 20 years. Similar Acts were passed in 1993 in U.P and on 1904 in North Western Frontier provinces and in 1996 in the central provinces.

Apart from these Acts, several legislations were passed to regulate the business of the money lenders. These measures were passed in Punjab and other places.

3) Law for minimising the amount of loan:

The Government had to come in between the money lenders and the debtors. As a result of legislative measures a 'Conciliation Board' was set up by law the Government minimised the amount of loan and also made provision for the realisation of the money in installments. According to these legislations, in no case would the amount of the interest to beyond the capital all these things put restrictions on the exploitation of the debtors by the money lenders.

4) Measure for regulating the money lending:

The Government by this time realised with the bad conditions of the farmers was very much due to indebtedness. They therefore introduced measures for improving the conditions of the farmers and also for putting restriction on the loans. In 1883 land improvement loan Act was passed through which loan was advanced to the farmers for making the land more fertile and also for making arrangements for irrigation facilities. The legislative measures to a very great extent helped the farmers.

Agricultural Loans Act 1884:

This Act was passed in 1884. It provided for loans to the farmers for a short time in low rate of interest for certain things necessary for their agriculture. Then in 1904 the Co-operative Credit Societies Act was passed as a result of which Co-operative Credit Societies were set up in various parts of the country. In 1912 this law was amended and Land Mortgage Banks were also started to provide loans to the farmers for improving their agriculture and the fertility of land.

Laws regarding control on moneylender:

After 1930 several states passed several Acts through which they put various restrictions on the money lenders in regard to the loans to the farmers. It was made binding for them to have a license and set themselves registered as money lenders. They were also required to keep their accounts properly. The rate of interest was also regulated and the maximum rate of interest was prescribed.

Co-operative movement:

The co-operative movement was launched with the object of improving the lot of the farmers. It has worked for about three quarters of a century, but it has not fulfilled the object for which it was started. As a result of co-operative Marketing Societies, Multipurpose Co-operative Societies etc, were set up. Through the effort is being made to improve the lot of the farmers.

Savings Bank Accounts:

The government launched a movement for education of the farmers in regard to economy and savings. In order to encourage the farmers to save money various savings banks were set up. The societies have helped to some extent in the improvement of the economic conditions of the farmers.

Measures for improvements of agriculture:

Several laws were passed and various measures taken for improving the agriculture. It was done in order to make the farmer self dependent. More vigorous efforts were made in this respect after freedom of India under various Five Year Plans. As a result of the improved conditions of the farmers

the problem of indebtedness of these farmers and the rural people shall automatically be solved. It has also worked in many respects.

Nationalisation of banks and facilities for loans through banks:

After the nationalisation of banks, there has been a definite effort to advance loans to the farmers for improving their agriculture. Nationalised banks have opened their branches in various villages and more branches are being opened. These banks are providing special facilities to the weaker sections and there who do not have any capital these things have solved the problem of rural indebtedness to a very great extent.

Other measures:

The Government has taken measures for relieving the village people of indebtedness. Apart from making provisions for loans through nationalised banks, the government has also set up various institutions like. Land Mortgage Banks, Land, development Banks etc. For providing facilities and loans to the farmers for their agriculture, once the agriculture improved and the production goes up the problem of indebtedness shall automatically be solved.

Are these measures working satisfactorily?

Recently the Government had added the measure of putting a moratorium on the loans advanced to the Harijans. These Harijans are the weaker section of the Rural Society and they are more indebted than other sections. The government has also taken steps to provide these people with land and those who have been given land for the first time shall not be changed revenue, for three years to come. All these measures are definitely intended at improving the lot of the farmers, once there economic lot improves the problem of indebtedness shall automatically be solved.

But in spite of this sincerity of the Government to provided relief to the farmers, these measures are not working to the full satisfaction of the parties really concerned. The responsibility for implementation of these measures has been entrusted to the governmental machinery which is still not alive to

the needs of the society. Then red tapism of the Government departments hinders many of the progressive measures.

Co operative movements are not working satisfactorily rested interests have developed in all these places. Even in the banks certain corrupt practices have cropped in which the farmers and the rural people had a disadvantage position. In spirit of these weakness efforts are being made to solve the problem of rural indebtedness and with the climate that has been created the day is not far when the problem would be completely solved.

AGRICULTURAL MINIMAL WAGES:

An Ordinance to provide for fixation of minimum rates of wages for agricultural labourers. WHEREAS it is expedient to provide for fixation of minimum rates of wages for agricultural labourers and for matters ancillary thereto;

NOW, THEREFORE, in pursuance of the Proclamation of the 24th March, 1982, and in exercise of all powers enabling him in that behalf, the President is pleased to make and promulgate the following Ordinance:-

1. This Ordinance may be called the Agricultural Labour (Minimum Wages) Ordinance 1984.

Definitions

2. In this Ordinance, unless there is anything repugnant in the subject or context,-

(a) “agricultural labourer” means any person employed in agricultural crop production, but does not include-

(i) a person employed by the Government;

(ii) a person employed in a plantation as defined in clause (iii) of section 2 of the Payment of Wages Act, 1936 (IV of 1936);

(iii) a person who works as a family labourer on monthly wages;

(iv) a person employed by a company registered under the Companies Act, 1913 (VII of 1913), engaged in production and sale of fish or livestock of any kind;

(v) a bargadar as defined in the Land Reforms Ordinance 1984 (X of 1984);

(b) “wages” means all remuneration which would, if the terms of contract of employment, express or implied, were fulfilled, be payable to a person in respect of his employment or work done in such employment, but does not include any sum paid to such person to defray special expenses incurred by him in respect of his employment.

Minimum wages for agricultural labour

3. (1) The minimum rate of wages for agricultural labour per day shall be 3.27 kilograms of rice or such amount of money as is equal to the price of this quantity of rice in the local market.

(2) The Government may, by notification in the official Gazette, review from time to time the minimum rate of wages fixed under sub-section (1), on the recommendation of the Council of Minimum Wages and Prices for Agricultural Labour constituted under section 4.

(3) The Government may, on review of the minimum rate of wages under sub-section (2), fix different rates of minimum wages for different areas, for different classes of agricultural labourer or different kinds of agricultural labourer.

(4) Notwithstanding anything contained in this section, no rate of minimum wages shall be reviewed earlier than three years from the date on which it was fixed, unless special circumstances so require.

Constitution of Council of Minimum Wages and Prices for Agricultural Labour

4. (1) The Government may, by notification in the official Gazette, constitute a Council to be called the Council of Minimum Wages and Prices for Agricultural Labour for the purposes of this Ordinance.

(2) The Council shall consist of a Chairman and such number of other members as the Government may deem fit to appoint.

(3) The Council shall, upon a reference made to it by the Government, recommend to the Government, after such enquiry as the Council thinks fit and after consideration of the economic conditions, costs of living and other relevant factors, the minimum rates of wages for agricultural labour.

(4) The Council may, if the circumstances so demand, recommend different rates of minimum wages for different areas, for different classes of agricultural labourer or for different kinds of agricultural labour.

(5) In making its recommendations, the Council shall take into consideration the views of the Upazila Parishads, if any.

Payment of minimum wages

5. (1) No person shall pay any agricultural labourer wages at a rate lower than the rate fixed by or under this Ordinance to be the minimum wages for such labourer.

(2) Nothing in sub-section (1) shall be deemed to affect, in any way, the right of an agricultural labourer to continue to receive wages at a rate higher than the minimum rate fixed by or under this Ordinance, if under any agreement or contract or otherwise, he is entitled to receive wages at such higher rate, or to continue to enjoy such amenities and other advantages as are customary for such labourer to enjoy.

Compensation and recovery procedure

6. (1) Any person who contravenes the provision of section 5 shall be liable to pay to the aggrieved person compensation of an amount not exceeding two times the amount which would have been paid to him had there been no such contravention.

(2) Notwithstanding anything contained in any other law for the time being in force, a suit for recovery of the wages and compensation payable to an agricultural labourer shall lie to a Village Court.

Protection of minimum wage

7. The minimum rates of wages fixed by or under this Ordinance shall not be called in question in or before any Court or authority.

Amendment of Ordinance LXI of 1976

8. In the Village Courts Ordinance, 1976 (LXI of 1976), in the Schedule, in Part II, after item 5, the following new item shall be added, namely:-

“6. Suit for recovery of wages and compensation payable to agricultural labourers.”