

STATUS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN TAMIL NADU FROM 1947 TO 1976 AD

Dr.G.Sheela Edward,

Assistant Professor of History,
T.B.M.L. College, Porayar.

India is essentially an agricultural country, as about seventy percent of the population live in villages. Majority of the Indian rural workers are agriculture dependent, in which the share of agricultural labourers is quite high. Agricultural labourers contribute enormously towards the rural economy and also to the national economy.

The status of agriculture labourers in the State has been the subject of legislation and executive decrees since 1949. The evidence presented in the monograph suggests that the number of the landless labourers in increasing in the State as a result of the increase in the rural population both relatively and in their absolute numbers on the one hand and as a result, on the other, of small tenants and small farmers being obliged to give up their lands due to a variety of reasons and become landless labour. The minimum daily wages in force today excluding parts the Thanjavur and Tiruchirapalli districts range from Rs. 1.80 for women to Rs. 3 for men. The Tamil Nadu Agricultural Labourers' Fair Wages Act of 1972 has fixed farm wages at Rs.2.25 for woman and at Rs.3.70 for men in East Thanjavur and Rs.2.25 and Rs.3.50 for men in West Thanjavur. The problem here is that a Sater-wide regulation of wages is needed and on this, a Commission is currently at work. Such a system will have to establish wages for each development district on the basis of the available supply, prices of essential commodities and rise in the cost living.

Homesteads for labourers are provided under the Tamil Nadu Kudiyiruppu Act, which is now in force in Thanjavur district, and under which 33,000 agriculture labourers had by 1972 been granted ownership, of their house sites. In brief, piecemeal legislation and measures whose scope is spatially restricted are the salient features of contemporary State efforts to improve the status of agricultural labourers.

Agriculture labour is one of the most important segments of labour force in Tamil Nadu. The 1981 Census reported that the agricultural labourers constituted nearly 31.7 per cent of the total main workers in Tamil Nadu. Agricultural labour forms the backbone of the rural economy since it has assumed an indispensable position due to the high dependence of the state on agriculture. Agricultural labour households constitute about 38 per cent of the rural households in the state. The Net State Domestic Product per agricultural worker at current prices in 1970-71 was Rs.994 in the state. This has increased to Rs.1512 in 1984-85.¹

The problem of estimation the size of the agricultural labour force is complicated by the conceptual involved in defining agricultural labour. While the Agricultural Labour Enquiry has included marginal land holders in the definition of agricultural labour, they have been excluded by the Census of India. The criteria for defining categories of agricultural labourers and cultivators have been different in different censuses.

In the 1961 census anyone cultivating a little land was considered as a cultivator, the 1971 census anyone cultivating a little land was considered as a cultivator, the 1971 census included only those as cultivators whose main occupation was cultivation. The 1961 census over estimated the category of cultivators, on the others hand, since those who were mainly agricultural labourers but spent a part of their time in cultivation were obviously under estimated.

According to the 1981 census, a person who worked in another in another person's land for wages in cash, kind or share of crop was recorded as agricultural labourer. Such a person had neither the risk of cultivation nor any right of lease or contract on the land on which he worked.

Number of Agricultural Labourers in Tamil Nadu

Source	Population (in Lakhs)
First Agricultural Labour Enquiry (1950-51)	54.1
a. Landless workers	22.2
b. Land-holding workers	31.9
Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry (1956-57)	38.1
a. Landless workers	24.2
b. Land-holding workers	13.9
Census of India – 1961	28.3
Census of India – 1971	43.9
Census of India – 1981	59.5

Source : Agricultural Labour Enquiry and Census of India, various reports.

The census data indicate that the number of agriculture labourers in Tamil Nadu has increased in absolute terms. It increased from 28.3 lakhs in 1961 to 59.5 lakhs in 1981.

It is understood from the table that among the districts in Tamil Nadu, Thanjavur comes first in the total number of agricultural labourers. South Arcot ranks second, followed by North Arcot and Madurai districts in the quantum of agricultural labourers.

District –wise Composition of Agricultural Labourers in Tamil Nadu, 1981

District	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Madras	958	0.03	208	0.01	1166	0.02
Chengalpet	235268	7.40	181529	6.35	416797	6.90
North Arcot	263428	8.29	293801	10.28	557229	9.23
South Arcot	338059	10.63	291872	10.21	629931	10.43
Dharmapuri	115488	3.63	117616	4.11	233104	3.86
Salem	235222	7.40	236716	8.28	471938	7.82
Periyar	199994	6.29	188569	6.60	388563	6.44
Coimbatore	215119	6.77	211442	7.40	426561	7.07
Nilgiris	8612	0.27	5933	0.21	14545	0.24
Madurai	240321	7.56	231728	8.11	472049	7.82
Anna	139186	4.38	142365	4.98	281551	4.66
Tiruchy	222805	7.01	242249	8.48	465054	7.70
Thanjavur	422014	13.27	259811	9.09	681825	11.29
Padukkottai	44324	1.39	43316	1.52	87640	1.45
Ramanathapuram	29910	0.94	31626	1.11	61536	1.02
Pasumpon	36876	1.16	34600	1.21	71476	1.18
Kamarajar	88371	2.78	114137	3.99	202508	3.35
Tirunelveli	111136	3.50	139793	4.89	250929	4.16
Chidambaranar	71560	2.25	77130	2.70	148690	2.46
Kanjakumari	130593	4.11	13916	0.49	144509	2.39

Source : Directorate of Census Operations, Chennai.

It is observed from the table that there is a wide gap between agricultural wages and non-agricultural wages in Tamil Nadu despite the fact that the Government of Tamil Nadu has fixed minimum wages rates to different kinds of workers employed in agriculture through the Minimum Wages Act. Moreover, the mandays worked by the male labourers in the agricultural operations has gone up from 168 in 1950-51 to 171 in 1974 – 75, while that of female labourers has declined from 148 to 126 in the same period. However, the number of days employed in the non – agricultural

Average Annual Days of Employment and Earnings per Day of Agricultural Labourers, Tamil Nadu

Year	Workers	Agricultural Employment		Non - Agricultural Employment		Total
		No. Of Mandays Worked in a Year	Average Earning per Day (Rs.)	No. Of Mandays Worked in a Year	Average Earning per Day (Rs.)	
1950-51	Male	168	0.97	17	1.03	185
	Female	148	0.59	7	0.44	155
1956-57	Male	193	0.84	20	0.91	193
	Female	135	0.44	7	0.48	142
1964-65	Male	194	1.39	14	1.53	208
	Female	146	0.85	3	1.18	149
1970-71	Male	147	2.38	48	3.52	195
	Female	131	1.50	14	2.02	95
1974-75	Male	171	3.64	24	4.50	195
	Female	126	2.30	14	2.40	140

Source : Agriculture Labour Enquiry and National Sample Survey, Various reports.

Operations has gone up among both male and female labourers. It has moved up from 17 to 24 in the case of male labourers and from 7 to 14 in the case of female labourers.

Adult male agricultural labourers get wages employment only for 148 days and adult female only for 118 days a year. Male labourers received average daily money wage rate of Rs.8.83 and female labourers got average daily money wage of Rs.5.05. the growth rate of real wage of male agriculture labourers in Tamil Nadu for the period 1970-71 to 1984-85 was 1.23 per cent.

All through alien rule and for some years after the national Government took over, the case of agricultural labourers was either not surveyed or taken cognizance of or it was ignored. The land systems were such that they helped the rich to become richer. The remnants of the systems survived into Independence, with the result that the labourers had to work harder with little increase in their wages. They even had to fight to be paid their wages. Agricultural labour had no interest in increasing production at the ruling levels of wages.²

The average daily wage in Tamil Nadu was low-one rupee twenty paise. Only in a few districts were the wages a little higher than the state average. If these were the levels of wages seven years after Independence, the even lower levels obtaining under alien rule in earlier times must clearly have been a cause for serious unrest. Again, better wages had to be fought for collectively. The low economic status coupled with appallingly low incomes drove them inevitably to resort to borrowings for survival. Invariably, the lenders have been the owners of the land. This made the rural poor to plunge increasingly into indebtedness in Tamil Nadu too, as in the case of the country.³

To pay back their debts, many cultivated their creditors' land as tenants. The owner appropriated 60 per cent of the produce as the owner's share, collected rent besides and demanded a third towards a usurious rate of interest leaving a less than subsistence wage for the poor peasant. He had to borrow to cope with seasonal calamities and to meet the demands of ritual social status enjoined upon him. The peasant has to produce more to pay back his loans, but his method of cultivation was such that he could not produce this surplus and was always at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the moneylender to whom he eventually forfeited his little tract of land.⁴

Seasonality in Employment

National Commission on Labour has pointed out that intensity of employment varies according to seasons. Shortage of labour is actually felt during peak agricultural seasons in several areas and a large proportion of labour remains unemployed or under-employed during the slack season. However, the trend towards reduction in under-employment has strengthened since 1961. The extent improvement is not uniform. In areas where farmers have to take advantages of new agricultural labour has been provided with work more or less throughout the year.⁵

Distribution of additional labour force by sector of activity

National Commission on Labour pointed out that in the 15 years between 1961 and 1976, increase in the non-agricultural working force was 102 percent against a corresponding increase of only about 36 percent between 1951 and 1961. This means that the rate of absorption of labour outside agriculture between 1961 and 1976 was roughly double of that witnessed in the year 1951-1961. The commission further pointed out that the number of workers depending on agriculture for their livelihood has increased substantially from 116.5 million in 1961 to 138.6 millions in 1976, that is by 22 millions.⁶

Hours of work

The hours of work of agricultural labour are not regulated by legislation. Hours of work vary from place, crop and season to season. It should be noted that the working hours of agricultural labourers are not very long. Generally, agricultural labourers work for about 8 hours a day with a break of two hours. There are few occasions when an agricultural labourer has to work for longer hours, that is, during harvest season; but during this time he is also paid well. It has also been found that piece workers often work for lesser number of hours while they earn more.⁷

Housing conditions

The housing conditions of agricultural labourers are miserable and deplorable. Their houses are generally situated at places where insanitary conditions of highest order are found. They are not well built and worst of its kinds. Thus, because of insanitary conditions, lack of accommodation and poor standard of living, the agricultural workers are subjected to diseases which are infections in nature.⁸

The employment conditions of the agricultural and rural labourers in Tamil Nadu over the period 1950-51 to 1974-75 are shown in this table

Category	Agricultural Labour				Rural Labour			
	1950-51	1954-55	1964-65	1974-75	1950-51	1954-55	1964-65	1974-75
Women								
Wage Employment	217	246	236	220	274	250	241	232
i. Agricultural	168	193	194	171	238	211	197	184
ii. Non-Agricultural	17	20	14	24	36	39	44	48
Self-Employment	32	33	28	25	38	39	37	41
Women								
i. Agricultural	176	160	166	154	178	164	155	143
ii. Non-Agricultural	148	135	146	126	156	136	123	108
Self-Employment	21	18	17	14	24	22	23	20
Children								
Wage Employment	153	143	159	170	221	212	207	189
i. Agricultural	131	125	138	146	207	197	195	179
ii. Non-Agricultural	12	10	12	16	14	15	12	10
Self-Employment	10	8	9	8	22	20	18	18

Source: Agricultural Labour Enquiry, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India.

This table indicates that male wage employment among the agricultural labourers has gone up from 217 days in 1950-51 to 246 days in 1954-55, but has declined to 236 days in 1964-65 and further down to 220 days in 1974-75; in which the number of days engaged in agricultural operations has increased from 168 to 171 between 1950-51 and 1974-75, while that of non – agricultural operations has moved up from 17 days to 24 days in the same period.

The case is quite similar in the case of the rural labourers too, with the exception that the total number of days of wage employment and that of agricultural and non – agricultural operations were higher than that of agricultural labourers. The total days of wage employment has declined from 274 days in 1950 -51 to 232 days in 1974-75; employment in agricultural operation has come down from 238 days to 184 days in the same period, while that of non – agricultural operations has increased from 36 days to 48 days in the same period.

The employment conditions of the women labourers in Tamil Nadu were worse than that of their male counterparts, since the number of days of their wage employment was quite less and it was decreasing too. It has declined from 176 days in 1950-51 to 154 days in 1974-75; employment in agricultural operations has come down from 148 days to 126 days in that period, while that of non – agricultural operations have gone up from 7 to 14 days between 1950-51 and 1974-75. This declining trend of wage employment and that of agricultural operations is repeated in the case of rural labourers too, though the number of days of employment was higher compared to that of agricultural labourers. Employment in agricultural operation has declined from 156 days in 1950-51 to 108 days in 1974-75, while employment in non – agricultural operations has gone up from 22 days to 35 days in the same period. This indicates that employment conditions of the female agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu was worse than that of the male labourers as in the case of All – India, though the number of days of employment in the case of the former was marginally better than of the latter.

In Tamil Nadu too, child labour was present in both agricultural and non – agricultural operations and they could also find considerable days of employment.

The wage employment among agricultural labourers has moved up from 153 in 1950-51 to 170 days in 1974-75; employment in agricultural operations among the children has increased from 131 days to 147 days in that period, while that of non – agricultural operations has decreased from 12 days to 16 days in the same period. In the case of rural labourers too, the declining employment conditions could, be seen and the extent of employment was mostly similar to that of agricultural labourers. Hence, the employment conditions of the agricultural labourers show declining trend among all three categories in Tamil Nadu ⁹

Wage Levels of the Agricultural and Rural Labourers in Tamil Nadu.

The changes in the wages levels of the agricultural and rural labourers for their agricultural and non – agricultural operations are examined

Wage Levels of the Agricultural and Rural Labourers in Tamil Nadu

Category	Agricultural Labour				Rural Labour			
	1950-51	1954-55	1964-65	1974-75	1950-51	1954-55	1964-65	1974-75
Women								
i. Agricultural	0.97	0.84	1.39	3.64	1.26	1.49	2.01	3.42
ii. Non- Agricultural	1.03	0.91	1.53	4.50	2.02	6.75	8.00	5.75
men								
i. Agricultural	0.59	0.44	0.85	2.30	0.38	0.75	1.15	2.68
ii. Non- Agricultural	0.44	0.48	1.18	2.40	0.92	2.22	3.95	3.85
Children								
i. Agricultural	0.22	0.35	0.50	1.90	0.24	0.60	0.80	2.0
ii. Non- Agricultural	0.40	0.38	0.90	2.00	0.70	1.90	2.35	2.25

Note: Figures in Rupees

Sources : Agricultural Labour Enquiry, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, Various reports

It is noted from the table that the wage levels for agricultural operations among the male agricultural labourers has increased from Rs. 0.97 in 1950-51 to Rs. 3.64 in 1974-75 and for non – agricultural operations, it has gone up from Rs. to Rs. in the same period. This indicates that while the nominal wage has gone up in both case, there a was a perceptible difference between the two, Similarly, in the case of rural labourers too, wage levels for the agricultural and non- agricultural operations have increase, though there was a difference and non – agricultural operation have increased, though there was a difference in the wage levels between the agricultural and rural labourers. For instance, fro agricultural operations, the male wage rate has increased from Rs. in 1.26 in 1950-51 to Rs. 3.42 in 1974-75 and for non agricultural operations, the same has moved up from Rs. 2.025 to Rs. 5.75 in the same period. This indicates the presence of wage differentials between the agricultural and non – agricultural operations and also between agricultural and rural labourers

The female wage rate was typically low in the case of both agricultural and non – agricultural operations among both agricultural and rural labourers, even though the wage rate has moved up over the period. For agricultural operations. The wage rate has increased from Rs.0.59 in 1950-51 to Rs. 2.30 in 1974-75 and for non – agricultural operations, the wage rate has gone up from Rs. 0.44 to Rs. 2.40 in that period. This is also the case among the rural labourers, while there was no much difference in the wage levels. For agricultural operations, the wage level has moved up from Rs. 0.38 in 1950-51 to Rs. 2.68 in 1974-75 and in the case of non – agricultural operations, the wage rate has increased from Rs.0.92 to Rs. 3.85 in that period.

The wage rate for child labour in the case of both agricultural and non – agricultural operations also portray similar trend, though the rate was less than that of female wage rate among both agricultural and rural labourers. This clearly suggests that male, female and Children wage rates have gone up in Tamil Nadu between 1950-51 and 1974-75 as per the data taken from the Agricultural Labour Enquiry reports among both agricultural and rural labourers. However, the wage rate for agricultural operations was quite low when compared to that of non – agricultural operations and moreover, the rural labourers were getting higher wage rate than that of agricultural labourers, albeit marginally. It is also discernible that the wage rate in Tamil Nadu was higher than then national average. The female wage rate was quite low even among the agricultural labourers, which shows the extent of exploitation among them¹⁰.

Such a low level of earnings among the agricultural labourers invariable pushes them to borrow and the extent of indebtedness among the agricultural and rural labourers in Tamil Nadu.

Extent of Indebtedness among the Agricultural and Rural Labourers in Tamil Nadu

Category	Agricultural Labour				Rural Labour			
	1950-51	1954-55	1964-65	1974-75	1950-51	1954-55	1964-65	1974-75
Percentage of households in debt	51.4	55.3	58.9	62.3	51.0	55.1	58.6	61.7
Average debt per household (Rs.)	64	84	138	341	61	85	134	326
Percentage of Debt Inherited	9.5	9.2	8.4	3.5	14.5	12.7	10.1	6.2
Percentage of Debt Contracted	90.5	90.8	91.6	96.5	85.5	87.3	89.9	93.8

Source : Agricultural Labour Enquiry, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India various reports.

The extent of indebtedness among the agricultural labourers suggests that the proportion of indebted households has increased from 51.4 per cent in 1950-51 to 62.3 per cent in 1947-75 and among the rural- labourers, it has increased from 51 per cent to 61.7 per cent in the same period. Thus, the degree of indebtedness has gone up among both the agricultural and rural labourers in mostly similar fashion.

References

1. Jha, Praveen K., (1997), *Agricultural Labour in India*, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, pp.67-71.
2. Athreya, V.B., Gustav Boklin (1987), "Identification of Agrarian Classes: A Methodological Essay with Empirical Material from South India", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol.14, No.2, pp.147-180.
3. Baker, John Christopher (1984), "An Indian Rural Economy, 1880-1955: The Tamil Nadu Countryside", Oxford University Press, New Delhi, pp.67-81.
4. Bhalla, Shiela, (1977), "Changes in Acreage and Tenure Structure of Land Holdings in Haryana, 1962-72," *Economic Political Weekly*, Vol.12, No.13, pp. A2-A15.
5. Patnaik, Utsa, (1980), "Empirical Identification of Peasant Classes Revisited," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.15, No.9, pp.483-488.
6. Khusro, A.M., (1968), "Returns to Scale in Indian Agriculture," *Readings in Agricultural Development*, ed., A.M.Kushro, Allied Publishers, Delhi, pp.46-56.
7. Myrdal, Gunnar, (1968), "Asian Drama : An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations," Pantheon Books, New York, pp.88-92.
8. Mencher, John p., (1978), "Agriculture and Social change in Tamil Nadu: Past Origins, Present Transformations and Future Scholars," Vol.12, No.1, pp.2-14.
9. Harriss, John, (1982), "Rural Development : Theories of Peasant Economy and Agrarian Change", Hutchinson, London, pp.124-141.
10. Guhan, S., (1983), "Palakuruchi : A Resurvey", Madras Institute of Development Studies, Working Paper No.Madras, pp.27-34.

