CHAPTER II

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND PROBLEMS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN INDIA AND TAMIL NADU

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. Historically, they were the working class and the chief reason for the development of the society and economy. This chapter examines the growth and the status of the agricultural labourers and also their problems in Tamil Nadu and also in India and examines their problems.

ROLE OF AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

Agriculture in India is of crucial importance from different stand points. It accounts for a large part of the national income; it is the most important sector from the point of view of employment. Further, the agricultural sector has an important influence on industrialisation and its role in foreign trade is also significant. It must, however, be noted that the percentage contribution of agriculture to India's national income has been
declining over the period since 1901. For instance, the share of agriculture in India's national income was 65 percent in the period 1914-18. It declined to 57 percent in 1929-30. In 1960-61, agriculture accounted for 52 percent of our national income. Since then the share is falling and, as mentioned earlier, stood at 41.5 percent in 1981-82. Due to severe drought and the resultant set-back in agriculture thereafter its share had declined to 40.6 per cent in 1979-80.¹

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

It is one of the primary objects of the Five Year Plan to ensure fuller opportunities for work and better living to all the sections of the rural community and, in particular, to assist agricultural labourers to come to the level of the rest. One of the most distinguishing features of the rural India has been the growth in the number of agricultural workers, cultivators and agricultural labourers engaged in crop production. The phenomena of underemployment, under-development and surplus population are simultaneously manifested in the daily lives and living of the agricultural labourers. They usually get low wages, conditions of work put an excessive burden on them, and the employment which they

get is extremely irregular. Agricultural workers constitute the most neglected class in the Indian rural structure. Since, they possess no skill or training, they have no alternative employment opportunities either.²

Socially, a large number of agricultural workers belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Therefore, they are a suppressed class. They are not organised and they cannot fight for their rights. Because of all these reasons their economic lot has failed to improve even after Independence.

This can also be seen from the Prime Minister's speech made in Lok Sabha on August 4, 1966. The Prime minister emphasized, "We must give special consideration to the landless agricultural labour. Although there has been tremendous progress in India since Independence, this is one section, which has really a very hard time and which deserves very special consideration."³

Seasonal unemployment is a characteristic feature of the Agricultural sector and underemployment of man power is inherent in the system of family farming. According to first Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee (ALEC) (1950-51), adult male agricultural labourers were


employed on wages for 248 days in agricultural work and for 27 days in non-agricultural work i.e. 275 day in all. They were self-employed for 30 days. Casual male workers found employment for only 200 days, while attached workers were employed for 326 days in a year. Women workers employed for 134 days in a year.\(^4\)

Unlike industrial labour, agricultural labour is difficult to define. The reason is that unless capitalism develops fully in agriculture, a separate class of workers depending wholly on wages will not come up. Difficulties in defining agricultural labour are compounded by the fact that many small and marginal farmers also work partly on the farms of others to supplement their income. To what extent should they (or their family members) be considered agricultural labourers are not easy to answer.

However, it will be useful to refer some of the attempts made by experts in this connection. 1. The First Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee 1950-51 defined Agricultural Labourer as - "Those people who are engaged in raising crops on payment of wages" 2. The Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee enlarged the distribution to include - "Those who are engaged in other agricultural occupations like

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dairy, farming, horticulture, raising of live-stock, bees, poultry etc. "In
the context of Indian conditions the definition is not adequate, because it
is not possible to completely separate those working on wages from
others.\textsuperscript{5}

There are people who do not work on wages throughout the year
but only for a part of it. Therefore, the first ALEC used the concept of
agricultural labour household. If half or more members of household have
wage, employment in agriculture then those households should be termed
as agricultural labour household. This concept was based upon the
occupation of the worker.\textsuperscript{6}

The Second Committee submitted that to know whether a
household is an agricultural labour household, one must examine its main
source of income. If 50 per cent or more of its income is derived as wages
for work rendered in agriculture only, then it could be classed to
agricultural labour household. According to the National Commission on
Labour "an agricultural labourer is one who is basically unskilled and
unorganised and has little for its livelihood, other than personal labour."\textsuperscript{7}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
Labour in India, Issues and Concerns’. Sage Publications, New Delhi, pp.139-168.
\item[Govt. of India, Ministry of Labour (1976), New Delhi. RBI, ‘Co-operative Societies (Non- Credit)’
Part II, Mumbai, p. 45.]
\end{itemize}
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### Table – 2.1 Population of Rural and Agricultural Labourers in India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rural Population</th>
<th>Percentage to Total Population</th>
<th>Cultivators</th>
<th>Agricultural Labour</th>
<th>Other Workers</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>69.9</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>42.8</td>
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<td>(82.7)</td>
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<td>(49.9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>360.3</td>
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<td>31.5</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(82.0)</td>
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<td>(52.8)</td>
<td>(16.7)</td>
<td>(30.5)</td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>439.1</td>
<td>80.1</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>180.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(80.1)</td>
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<td>(43.4)</td>
<td>(26.3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>525.5</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>96.6(a)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(76.7)</td>
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<td>(37.8)</td>
<td>(22.7)</td>
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Note: Figures in Million and those in brackets are percentage to total.

Source: Population Tables, Census of India, Government of India, New Delhi, various reports

The increasing size of population in the country is also a reason for the rising number of agricultural labour. Table – 2.1 indicates that the size of rural population has gone up from 298.6 million in 1951 to 360.3 million 1961, then to 439.1 million in 1971 and further upto 525.5 million in 1981. However, the share of rural population in total population has come down consistently from 82.7 per cent in 1951 to 82 per cent in 1961, then to 80.1 per cent in 1971 and further down to 76.7 per cent to 1981, which indicates the growing pattern of urbanisation in the country.

The table also indicates that while the share of rural population has
declined over the years, the size as well as the share of agricultural labourers has gone up in the country. The size of agricultural labourers has moved up from 27.3 million in 1951 to 31.5 million in 1961, then to 47.5 million in 1971 and further up to 55.5 million as per the 1981 Census, while the share of agricultural labourers has increased from 19.5 per cent in the total workforce in 1951 to 22.7 per cent in 1981, though there have been some fluctuations over the period. This implies that the proportion of agricultural labourers has gone up considerably among the rural population, since the overall size of rural population has declined.

In the First Five Year Plan an account was given of the magnitude of the problem of agricultural workers as revealed by the population census of 1951 and the approach to the problem in relation to the rest of the plan was briefly explained. Reference was also made to certain measures which were contemplated in the interest of landless workers such as the fixation of minimum wages, the allotment of house sites, the formation of labour cooperatives and resettlement schemes for landless workers. At the same time, in implementing the proposals which were
made in the First Five Year Plan, the intrinsic difficulties of the problem have come to be perhaps better appreciated.\(^8\)

When the First Five Year Plan was presented the only data available were those provided by the population census in 1951. These showed that out of a total rural population of 298 million, 249 million were engaged in agriculture, and of these, about 20 per cent were returned as cultivating labourers and their dependents. Cultivating labourers represented a total population of about 70 million, which the states in the Eastern and Southern parts of the country that together have an agricultural population of 117 million, accounted for about 27 million or 55 per cent.\(^9\)

Agricultural Labour Enquiry revealed that about 30.4 per cent of rural families were agricultural labourers, half of them being without land, and the rest being in possession of some land. In some States, agricultural workers represent a serious problem, notably, in Bihar, Orissa, Madras, Mysore, Travancore-Cochin, Hyderabad, Madhya Bharat and Madhya Pradesh.

\(^8\) Ramaswamy, Uma (1967) ‘Organizing with Gender Perspective’ in Ruddar Dutt edited ‘Organizing the Unorganized Workers’, Vikash Publishing House Ltd., New Delhi, pp. 161-209.

As many as 85 per cent of agricultural labourers had only casual work, mostly in connection with harvesting, weeding, preparation of soil and ploughing. In 1950-81, the average annual income per family from all sources was Rs. 487 and the average income per capita was Rs. 104 compared to the national average in the same year of Rs. 265. The extent of employment varied under different conditions in various parts of the country, the average being 218 days in the year, 189 days in agricultural work and 29 days in non-agricultural work. Thus, it might be said that there was work for wages for about seven months in the year, total unemployment for rather more than three months and some kind of self-employment for less than 2 months. About 15 per cent of agricultural workers were "attached" to landowners and worked for them on the average for 326 days. Compared to "attached" agricultural workers, casual labourers had work only for 200 days in the year. "Want of work" was given by casual workers as the reason for being unemployed for more than 74 per cent of the days on which they had nothing to do. Some 16 per cent of agricultural workers had no wage earning employment at all during the year. In rural areas, there is no sharp distinction between

unemployment and under-employment. On the basis of data in the Agricultural Labour Enquiry, it was estimated that 2.8 million agricultural workers maybe totally unemployed in rural areas, during 1950-51.\textsuperscript{12}

The total working force of the agricultural labourers was expected to increase by 19 million between 1951 and 1961, and 23 million between 1961 and 1971, that is, by 42 million over a period of 20 years or by 33 million in the first three plan periods. If the economy develops at the anticipated rate, it is reckoned that the proportion of the labour force engaged in agricultural occupations 20 years hence may be about 60 per cent in place of the present proportion of 70 per cent.\textsuperscript{13}

A considerable proportion of the outlay under the second five year plan was on construction works, both large and small. It was recommended that to the greatest extent possible labour and construction cooperatives rather than contractors should be utilised. In the case of medium and large projects the block or taluka union should be assisted in obtaining assignments of work on standard terms and, in turn, it should


\textsuperscript{13} Bhalla, G.S., Sheila Bhalla and Peter Hazell (1979), ‘Rural Employment and Poverty’, Paper presented at IFPRI-IDC Workshop, Chandigarh, Nov.8-10.
mobilise local labour from the villages.\textsuperscript{14} For smaller schemes, village labour cooperatives could be given contracts directly and helped in executing them. The development of labour and construction cooperatives can be of material assistance in increasing work opportunities in rural areas and increasing the incomes of landless workers. Given the necessary organisation, there is no reason why in a fairly short period strong labour cooperative unions possessing their own tools, equipment and even transport cannot be brought into existence. In the initial stages, besides technical guidance and help in management, loans for acquiring tools and other essential equipment should be given to taluka or block labour cooperative unions. In this connection it may be mentioned that the experience gained in the working of forest labour cooperatives has been encouraging.\textsuperscript{15}

To bring about improvements in the economic conditions of agricultural labourers and to remove the social disabilities from which they have suffered in the past are among the major tasks of planned development. It was one of the primary objects of the Five Year Plans to ensure fuller opportunities for work and a better living to all sections of

the rural community and, in particular, to assist agricultural labourers and the backward classes to come up to the level of the rest. Their problems undoubtedly constituted a challenge, and the obligation rested upon the community as a whole to find satisfactory solutions for them.\footnote{Chandrasekhar, C.P. and J. Ghosh (2002), \textit{The Market that Failed}, Leftword, New Delhi, pp. 21-24.}

The problem of agricultural labourers is part of the wider problem of unemployment and under-employment in rural areas. Even though with the development of agriculture and irrigation, there has been an increase in production and in the total volume of work, this is shared among much larger numbers. Those sections of the rural population who are landless and are not actual cultivators have benefited much less than others; in some areas their conditions may have actually worsened. It has, however, been always realised that the various programmes for the development of the rural economy, which are undertaken in the interest of the rural population as a whole must be supplemented in several directions by special measures for assisting agricultural labourers in improving their living conditions and obtaining a fair share of the wider opportunities which are now being developed in the villages through the community development and other programmes.\footnote{Sarma, J. S. (1982), \textit{Agricultural Policy in India: Growth with Equity}, Ottawa: IDRC. - 1989. "Status with Regard to Production and Availability in Agricultural Surpluses for Export." \textit{Indian Agro Exports}, edited by F. S. Jasol, 151-55. New Delhi.}
In a real sense, the problems of agricultural labour are to be traced to the long period of stagnation in the rural economy and the persistence of a rigid social structure largely based on caste. These basic deficiencies are being gradually removed, and the processes of social and technological change have to be hastened. In other words, in the structure of the rural economy which the Five Year Plans attempt to build up, agricultural labourers will participate fully and on equal terms with others, and will achieve effective economic and social equality with the rest of the rural population.\textsuperscript{18} A close watch on the progress actually achieved in these directions should be maintained through special studies and evaluation and review by the Central Advisory Committee on Agricultural Labour and similar bodies proposed to be set up in the States.

**WOMEN LABOUR IN AGRICULTURE**

"Women who constitute half of the world's population by virtue of an accident of birth, perform two-thirds of the world's work, receive one-tenth of its income and own less than one hundredth of its property." admits the Report of the Secretary General of the United Nations at the World's Conference on Women at Nairobi in 1985. According to an

I.L.O. estimation, women perform one-third of the world’s counted labour. Thus, it is a fact that their contribution to the economic growth of the society is quite substantial.\textsuperscript{19} In the Indian context, the economic role played by women cannot be isolated from the framework of development. The role of women and their contribution particularly in the rural areas need special emphasis.

It is evident from the statistical profile that around 77 per cent of total female population of the country lives in rural areas. Out of 45 million main women workers in the country, as many as 39.6 million (i.e., 88 per cent) live in rural areas and of the 18.6 million marginal female workers 17.8 million (i.e., 95.7 per cent) are rural workers as per 1981 Census. Economic classification of main workers based on data of 1981 Census indicates that 48.40 per cent women working as agricultural labourers as against 20.21 per cent of males. Percentage of women engaged as cultivators was 34.8 and in household industries 4.6 as against the male percentage of 45.14 and 3.2 working in the same sectors respectively. Most of the women in rural areas engaged for the major part of the day in household work and many of them make time to take part in various economic activities of the family. In rural areas women

\textsuperscript{19} Mehta Sushila, (1980), "Study of Rural Society in India", S. Chand and Co. Ltd., Delhi, p. 89.
perform a major part of agricultural operations like breaking clods of earth, manuring, weeding, transplanting, harvesting, threshing and winnowing. Women do most of the work of caring for the dairy animals and marketing of their products, etc. Thus, the burden shared by the women for the socio-economic development is two-fold, one on the domestic front and the other on the economic front.\textsuperscript{20}

In fact, Indian economy is correctly characterised as an underdeveloped economy. In his broad comparative study, Barrington More argued that "India belongs to two worlds, “economically, it remains in the pre-industrial age. It has not had an industrial revolution in either of the two capitalist variants, not according to the communist one. There has been no bourgeois revolution, no conservative revolution from above, and no peasant revolution. But as a political species, it does belong to the modern world”.

This backwardness can be attributed \textit{inter alia} to the unsatisfactory occupational distribution of the working population, which has virtually remained unchanged for a considerably long period. In 1951, 69.75 per cent of working population was employed in agricultural sector while

66.52 per cent workers were in 1981. This marginal decline is clearly an
evidence of the fact that the pace of progress is much tardy. One reason
for such dependence upon agriculture is that the bulk of the Indian
population resides in rural areas. As per 1981 Census, out of the total
population of 68.4 crore, 52.8 crore people, i.e., 77.8 per cent of Indian
population resided in the rural areas, as against 14 per cent in Australia,
22 per cent in England, 23 per cent in Sweden, 26 per cent in United
States and 28 per cent in Japan. The other main reason is slow rate of
economic development, which is unable to provide alternative
employment. It is reflected in the Draft Sixth Five Year Plan that out of 5
million annual addition to the labour force, only about 11 per cent can get
employment in the organised sector, the remaining 4.5 million being
thrown back to agriculture, continuously raising the number of
agricultural labourers.

Agriculture has been and continues to occupy the pride of place in
the economics of underdeveloped countries of Asia, Africa and Latin
America. The bulk of population in these countries depend on agriculture,
their dependence arises not by choice, but largely because of lack of
alternative avenues of employment. It is estimated that in Bangladesh,
Burma, India, Indonesia, Nepal and Pakistan, the percentage of total
agricultural workers to total national labour force is 77.1, 64.6, 65.5, 60.7, 89.9 and 53.9 respectively.\textsuperscript{21}

The agrarian society of India is marked by social inequality from time immemorial, ultimately resulting in inequalities of wealth, power and status. The most important material basis of inequality in agrarian society is the distribution of land as Myrdal has written: “Particularly in the South Asian rural setting, inequality is in fact mainly a question of land ownership, with which are associated leisure, employment of status and authority. Income differences are considered less significant.”

It is established that due to imbalance in between population explosion and economic growth, majority of Indian population dwells in villages, majority of working population depends on agricultural occupations and faces problems of poverty. It is also evident that due to socio-economic condition of rural labour households, majority of their women and children are bound to work as agricultural labourers. There is clear caste ridden societal misbalance in the rural society. From ancient village community system to the modern age, the majority of agricultural labourers belong to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The total

number of agricultural labourers belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the estimate of 1981 Census is more than 4.8 crores.\textsuperscript{22}

COMPOSITION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR CLASS

A very high proportion of agricultural labour throughout India belongs to socially and economically backward section of rural community and this constitutes the poorest section of the rural society. They are mostly drawn from Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Backward Classes (BCs). Even in most developed provinces of India, Punjab and Haryana, they constitute the majority. The various studies show that the working of the rural society is such that SCs and STs are pushed into areas of activity which are known to precarious attachment to labour force activity and relatively low earnings. It seems that the foundation of caste hierarchy lies in the fact that SCs and STs did not fully share the economic and political power with higher castes.

The SCs and STs occupied an ambiguous position in traditional society. But in present situation, it is quite clear that not only SCs and STs, but most of the agricultural labourers belong to the lowest strata of

\textsuperscript{22} Thorner, D., (1965), "The Agrarian Prospect in India", University of Delhi Press, New Delhi, p. 46.
caste hierarchy. The caste system provided the organizational basis of traditional Hindu society and in spite of many recent changes, it continues to play an important role in contemporary India.\textsuperscript{23}

The hereditary association of a caste with an occupation has been so striking that it has occasionally been argued that caste is nothing more than the systematization of occupational differentiation. It could be argued that in the context of growing population, the occupational aspect of the caste system would have broken down completely if the surplus in the artisan, trading and serving castes had not been either observed in agriculture or able to integrate to other areas. Whatever the position may be, but one thing is clear that the main constituents of agricultural labour class belong to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Backward Classes. And so they are having lowest position in caste hierarchy of Hindus and Muslims both. The institution of caste has changed in important respects in the last two hundred years, but even today the stronger and so-called higher class of society in pursuit of their own interest shifted the burden of labour again and again on the weaker section of society.\textsuperscript{24}

If one understands by the term 'occupation', a mode of livelihood, chosen willingly by the earners in that occupation, agricultural labour in this setting was hardly an occupation, it was merely one of the forms assumed by the destitution which overlook the erstwhile cultivators and artisans who had been deprived of their traditional occupations. That is why at the village level, a large proportion of SCs and STs work as agricultural labourers for landowners or tenants belonging to different castes. There is a close relationship between the status of a caste and its economic position. The higher caste tends to be landowners, tenants are mostly drawn from the middle castes and agricultural labourers come mostly from the untouchable castes.

There has been a considerable increase in occupational heterogeneity of the members of a caste, during last few decades. However, it is true that in the matter of occupational choice a certain linkage with the traditional social order may be discernible. Traditional values continue to play a part in the individual's acceptance and acquisition of new occupations which were traditionally restricted.  

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**Nature of Employment**

During 1974-75, there has been an all round decrease in the estimated number of days of wage employment. Whereas, in self-employment a definite trend in rural labour households taking up more and more self-employment is evident despite the fact that there has been less opportunities for the labourers to earn their wages from the non-agricultural operations. Men worked for more days as compared to women and children. However, the children remained engaged in wage paid employment for more days as compared to women labourers. The employment conditions of the agricultural and rural labourers at the all-India level during the period 1950-51 to 1974-75 are presented in Table – 2.2.

It is noted from the table that the number of days employed by the agricultural labourers under wage employment category has consistently declined among the male labourers from 275 in 1950-51 to 242 in 1954-55 to 231 in 1964-65 and further down to 224 days in 1974-75. The number of days engaged in the agricultural operations too has come down from 248 to 180 between 1950-51 and 1974-75. Thus, during 1974-75, agricultural labourers were getting only upto 180 full days of employment from the agricultural sector. This has forced them to depend more on
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Note: Employment indicates the number of full days in a year

Source: Agricultural Labour Enquiry, Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, various reports
the non-agricultural sector, which is showed in the increasing number of days of employment in this sector. On the other hand, the extent of self-employment has declined among the agricultural labourers from 30 days to 20 days between 1950-51 and 1974-75.

The declining pattern of number of days of employment among the agricultural labourers is also seen in the case of female labourers, while the number of days employed is less among them than that of male labourers. For instance, wage employment in agriculture has come down from 162 days in 1950-51 to 118 days in 1974-75, while it has gone up in the non-agricultural sector from 11 to 24 days in the same period. Similarly, dependence in the form of self-employment has decreased from 20 full days of employment to 10 days.

The extent of use of child labour in the agricultural labour households is quite high, as they could find 241 full days of employment in 1950-51, which has declined to 208 days in 1974-75 and in the case of child labourers, the level of employment in the non-agricultural sector too has come from 22 days in 1950-51 to 12 days in 1974-75.

The table also provides data pertaining to the employment conditions of the rural labourers, who also include labourers and workers other than agricultural labourers in the rural areas. As noted in the case of
male, female and child labourers in the agricultural labour households, the same trend is noted among the male, female and child labourers in the rural labour households. However, the number of full days of employment that they could find in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors and also under the self-employment category is considerably higher than that of agricultural labourers. This clearly signifies the employment conditions of the agricultural labourers vis-a-vis the rural labourers, they the latter are only comparatively better.

The wage conditions of the agricultural and rural labourers in both agricultural and non-agricultural operations are presented in Table – 2.3.

The table reveals that the wage levels of the agricultural labourers have gone up sizeably for both agricultural and non-agricultural operations. In the case of male labourers, wage levels for agricultural operations has
Table – 2.3 Average Daily Earnings in Agricultural and Non-Agricultural Operations – All-India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Agricultural Labour</th>
<th>Rural Labour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. Agricultural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Non-Agricultural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Agricultural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Non-Agricultural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Agricultural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Non-Agricultural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures in Rupees.

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

moved up from Rs. 0.78 in 1950-51 to Rs. 1.02 in 1954-55, then to Rs. 1.43 in 1964-65 and further up to Rs. 3.24 in 1974-75. On the other hand, the wage levels of rural labourers for agricultural operations too have
gone up over the period, in more or less similar manner. In the case of non-agricultural operations, the wage level has moved up from Rs. 2.98 in 1950-51 to Rs. 10.23 in 1974-75 among the agricultural labourers, while in the case of the rural labourers, it has increased from Rs. 4.86 to Rs. 11 in the same period. This suggests that the wage levels of agricultural labourers and rural labourers have gone up between 1950-51 and 1974-75 for both agricultural and non-agricultural operations, though there was a huge gap between the two. Agricultural wage level was just around 25-30 per cent of non-agricultural wage level for both agricultural labourers and rural labourers.

The female wage rate for the agricultural and rural labourers was quite less than that of male wage rates for both agricultural and non-agricultural operations in all the time periods, though there has been continuous rise in the same. For instance, wage for agricultural operations has moved up from Rs. 0.32 in 1950-51 to Rs. 2.22 in 1974-75 in the case of the agricultural labourers and from Rs. 0.30 to Rs. 2.28 in the same period among the rural labourers. Among female labourers too, the non-agricultural wage rate was higher than that of their agricultural wage rate, though in both cases, it was less than that of their male counterparts.
The wage rate for child labour was obviously less than that of even the female wage rate in the case of both agricultural and non-agricultural operations, the wage rate has gone up over the period, nonetheless. In this case also, the non-agricultural wage rate was exceeding that of agricultural wage rate for both the agricultural and rural labourers. This implies the fact that the wage conditions of the agricultural labourers especially for their agricultural operations was quite less, though it has gone up over the time period.

**Indebtedness per household**

The extent of indebtedness is an important indicator in understanding the economic conditions of the agricultural labourers. Table – 2.4 presents the extent of indebtedness of the agricultural and rural households during the period 1950-51 to 1974-75.
Table – 2.4 Indebtedness among the Agricultural and Rural Households – All-India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Agricultural Households</th>
<th>Rural Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of households in debt</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>57.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average debt per household (Rs)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Debt Inherited</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Debt Contracted</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>91.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

The table indicates that the percentage of households in debt has moved up significantly among the agricultural households from 52.8 per cent in 1950-51 to 66.4 per cent in 1974-75, which has increased from 51.9 per cent to 65.4 per cent in the same period among the rural households. Thus, the extent of indebtedness has swelled among both agricultural and rural households, it is particularly true in the case of the former.
The average debt per household too has increased in the case of both categories of households. It has moved up from Rs. 69 in 1950-51 to Rs. 387 in 1974-75 in the case of the agricultural households, while it has gone up from Rs. 65 to Rs. 395 in the same period among the rural households. Hence, there was no much difference in the average size of debt among the two categories of households, though it has gone up in both the cases.

The table also shows the details pertaining to the nature of debt, that is whether the debt was inherited from their parents or was it contracted by them. It suggests that the percentage of agricultural households which had inherited their debts has come down from 10.5 per cent in 1950-51 to 3.2 per cent in 1974-75, implying the fact that the share of those who contracted their debts has moved up from 89.5 per cent to 96.8 per cent in the same period, signifying the fact that more and more agricultural households have started to become indebted over the years.

This is also the case among the rural households, though the proportion of inherited debt was higher than that of agricultural households, while it was declining nonetheless. For instance, the percentage of inherited debt has declined from 12.7 per cent in 1950-51
to 5.5 per cent in 1974-75 and hence, the proportion of contracted debt was increasing from 87.3 per cent to 94.5 per cent. Hence, the burden of debt was mounting among both the rural and agricultural households, in which it was harsher in the case of the latter.

STATUS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN TAMIL NADU

The status of agricultural 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 is 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 regulation of the wages of such labourers is assuming growing importance. The minimum daily wages in force today excluding parts of 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 women and at Rs. 3.70 for men in East Thanjavur and Rs.2.25 for women and Rs. 3.50 for men in West Thanjavur. The problem here is that a State-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 labour supply, prices of essential commodities and rise in the cost of 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 agricultural 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.

Agricultural 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.

The problem of estimating the size of the agricultural labour force is complicated by the conceptual difficulties 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 adopted 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 included only those as cultivators whose main occupation was cultivation. The 1961 census over estimated the category of cultivators, on the other hand, since those who were mainly agricultural labourers but spent a part of their time in cultivation were classified as cultivators; the category of agricultural labourers was obviously under estimated.

According to the 1981 census, a person who worked 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. Table – 2.5 presents the number of agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu on the basis of Agricultural Labour Enquiries and Census of India.
Table – 2.5 Number of Agricultural Labourers in Tamil Nadu

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

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

The census data indicate that the number of agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu has increased in absolute terms. It increased from 28.3 lakhs in 1961 to 59.5 lakhs in 1981. District-wise distribution of agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu during 1981 is furnished in Table – 2.6.

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.
Table – 2.6 District-wise Composition of Agricultural Labourers in Tamil Nadu, 1981

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

Source: Directorate of Census Operations, Chennai.
The average annual days of employment and earnings per day of the agricultural labourers of Tamil Nadu are presented in Table – 2.7.

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 wage 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
Table – 2.7 Average Annual Days of Employment and Earnings per Day of Agricultural Labourers, Tamil Nadu

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

Source: Agricultural 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 wage 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 agricultural 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.26

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 borrowing 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.  

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 had 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.

**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

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slack season. However, the trend towards reduction in under-employment has strengthened since 1961. The extent of improvement is not uniform. In areas where farmers have to take advantage of new agricultural labour has been provided with work more or less throughout the year.\textsuperscript{29}

**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.\textsuperscript{30}

**Hours of work**

The hours of work of agricultural labour are not regulated by legislation. Hours of work vary from place to place, crop to 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 labour 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.\textsuperscript{31}

**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 infectious in nature.\textsuperscript{32}

**CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT OF AGRICULTURAL AND RURAL LABOURERS IN TAMIL NADU**

The employment conditions of the agricultural and rural labourers in Tamil Nadu over the period 1950-51 to 1974-75 are shown in Table – 2.8.


Table – 2.8 Employment Conditions of Agricultural and Rural Labourers in Tamil Nadu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Agricultural Labour</th>
<th>Rural Labour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage Employment</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Agricultural</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Non-Agricultural</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Employment</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage Employment</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Agricultural</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Non-Agricultural</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Employment</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage Employment</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Agricultural</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Non-Agricultural</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Employment</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Perusal of the data presented in Table – 2.8 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 operations 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
operations 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 that 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 the 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 146 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.\(^{33}\)

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Wage Levels of the Agricultural and Rural Labourers in Tamil Nadu

The changes in the wage levels of the agricultural and rural labourers for their agricultural and non-agricultural operations are examined here with the help of the data presented in Table – 2.9.

Table – 2.9 Wage Levels of the Agricultural and Rural Labourers in Tamil Nadu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural Labour</td>
<td>Rural Labour</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Agricultural</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Non-Agricultural</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Agricultural</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Non-Agricultural</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Agricultural</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Non-Agricultural</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note : Figures in Rupees

Source: 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. 1.03 to Rs. 4.50 in the same period. This indicates that while the nominal wage has gone up in both cases, there 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 increased, though there was a difference in the wage levels between the agricultural and rural labourers. For instance, for agricultural operations, the male wage rate has increased from Rs. 1.26 in 1950-51 to Rs. 3.42 in 1974-75 and for non-agricultural operations, the same has moved up from Rs. 2.02 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 labourers 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 the national average. The female wage rate was quite low even among the agricultural labourers, which shows the extent of exploitation among them.\(^{34}\)

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 is shown in Table – 2.10.

**Table – 2.10 Extent of Indebtedness among the Agricultural and Rural Labourers in Tamil Nadu**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Agricultural Labour</th>
<th>Rural Labour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of households in debt</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average debt per household (Rs)</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Debt Inherited</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Debt Contracted</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>90.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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 1974-75 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.
The average size of debt per household too has gone up from Rs. 64 in 1950-51 to Rs. 341 in 1974-75 in the case of agricultural labour households and among the rural labour households, it has increased from Rs. 61 to Rs. 326 in the same period. Hence, the average size of debt among the agricultural labour and rural labour households has also increased, which indicates the growing nature of debt burden. The percentage of debt inherited among the agricultural labour households has continuously declined from 9.5 per cent in 1950-51 to 3.5 per cent in 1974-75 and hence the percentage of those who contracted debt has moved up from 90.5 per cent to 96.5 per cent in that period. In the case of the rural labour households, the proportion of contracted debt has moved from 85.5 per cent to 93.8 per cent in the same period, since the percentage of inherited debt has come down from 14.5 per cent to 6.2 per cent. This underlines the fact that more and more agricultural and rural labour households were falling into the debt trap, which was especially higher among the agricultural labour households than that of rural labour households.
PROBLEMS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN TAMIL NADU

In the beginning most of the countries of the world has similar occupational structure. With the advent of industrial revolution, the process of industrial development subsequently altered this pattern. However, the occupational structure was not affected substantially. This stagnant position has contributed to the increase in households living below poverty line. The failure of land reforms and other planning for the development of rural working force is the result of the reliance on legislative and administrative forces, rather than on social forces. The ultimate effect is that landlords still continue to rule over rural labour. The misfortune is that the agricultural workers are steeped in ignorance and those who impart knowledge are themselves exploiters. That is the reason why the rural poor still look upon land around with wistful eyes.

Factors Contributing to the Problems of Agricultural Labourers

In order to appreciate and eradicate the problems of agricultural labourers, the need is to evaluate the sociological factors which have resulted into failure of their economic development. These sociological factors may have negative as well as positive character. First group
of problems arise out of the persistence of old social institutions like caste, joint family, tribes, traditional, religious organisations and serfdom etc. They also emerged out of old forms of social control like supernatural sanctions, authoritarian norms complicated and intricate caste, family, tribal, religious and other customary sanctions penetrating almost every core of life of the community. They further emanate from large scale illiteracy, ill-health and unemployment etc.

The second group of problems arise from the very nature of the economic development which has been inaugurated by the Government since independence. They arise out of industrialisation, commercialisation, introduction of money economy in every corner of the country. They also arise out of its agrarian policy and from the very character of the economic order which it wishes to establish. For example, commercialisation brings out a shift in power and authority in the village. Not the farmers and producers, but the owners and administrators are becoming the ruling groups.35

One of the major sociological factors deciding the fate of agricultural labourers was the belief that low castes are born to labour with hands and high castes were to enjoy the fruits of their labour. The

social stratification in the village is linked with land and caste which
govern the status, economic power and political influence as much as the
level of living which is their consequence.

Though the institution of caste system was affected during the
British rule, it has been abolished theoretically and judicially by the
Constitution of free India. Its significance in real life and its influence
on economic development and property relations and its impression
upon the configurations and proper structure in the economic, political,
social and cultural fields can be properly comprehended and gravely
underestimated. The existence of caste and casteism is an important
element which keeps the standard of living of the agricultural labourers
at a level more depressed than other rural families. Caste prevents
mobility of the people which is essential for dynamic development. The
monopoly of certain castes and groups of certain linguistic zones has
generated a peculiar unrest in modem competitive social setting.36

Majority of the agricultural labourers belong to Scheduled Castes,
Scheduled Tribes and backward classes. These stigmatized people are
depressed since their birth. The various kinds of social sanctions
precluded them from taking to more productive occupations.

In a predominantly agricultural economy, the relative position of a community depends upon its relative spare in ownership of cultivable land. The implementation of the Zamindari abolition and land reform and land ceiling legislations, has not been sufficiently effective so as to improve the economic position of depressed class in the rural areas. The trend of ownership remained same upto major extent as it was before independence. However, an important result of land reform measures has been that ex-zamindars have been forced into a new way of life, and are on their way towards changing their character as a class. But the bulk of the land was retained by them for self-cultivation. This process of conversion of erstwhile intermediaries into the capitalist farmers has developed unevenly and at varying speed in different regions of the country. With such extreme concentration of total cultivated land, consisting mainly of ex-intermediaries and big peasants and plentiful supply of cheap labour, the exploitation continued. The marginal farmers with uneconomic holdings were compelled to work as agricultural labourers.\(^{37}\)

It is easy to identity now the major aggravating factors that are likely to worsen the problems of agricultural labourers. Firstly, the

demographic addition of labour force since 1947 are estimated to be very substantial, since the effect of population control measures on labour force would make itself felt with a lag only much later. Secondly, the expansion of non-agricultural avenue of employment is unlikely to provide adequate relief to the agricultural labourers from the pressure of population for many decades ahead. Thirdly, in the absence of basic institutional reforms and effective controls to promote selective mechanisation, technological change in agriculture can easily prove to be a bane rather than a boon to the agricultural labourers. Some specific problems of agricultural labourers need a closer look to understand their real position and to analyse their coverage under existing legal set-up and to formulate appropriate measures for the upliftment.\textsuperscript{38}

**UNEMPLOYMENT AND UNDEREMPLOYMENT**

Employment is essential to human happiness. An unemployed person even if he does not seek employment because of affluence, sometimes becomes a liability to society. Idleness and indolence are the causes of misery. The problem of unemployment is comparatively more acute and chronic in agricultural sector. A man in rural Tamil Nadu may be unemployed, underemployed or partially employed. The problem of

rural unemployment may be classified under three heads:

(i) Unemployment

(ii) Underemployment

(iii) Disguised unemployment

Under the first category, bulk of the people are the poor landless labourers who have been deprived of their profession due to reasons like exploitation of the Mahajans, negligence of the Zamindars, hereditary rural indebtedness and, above all, colossal ignorance or incompetence about any professional efficiency. Under the second category are the members of the gradually dying out joint family system. The land which can hardly accommodate tillers of the soil is perhaps engaging double the quantity. This excess labour force could have got job opportunities in other sections of rural economy. This is a case of underemployment. The third, i.e., the case of disguised unemployment is very much similar to the second one, with the only added proviso that there are sometimes cases of voluntary unemployment. In this category will also fall the feudal classes living in rural Tamil Nadu who by aptitude and attitude refuse to work at all. They have been living in luxury for generations and in abundance.

The members of the feudal family, the village money lenders and the middlemen who hardly refer any concrete productive service to society fall under this category. For a long time no regular census has been undertaken on the magnitude of unemployment problem in rural India. The Government of India, Ministry of Labour conducted four enquiries. The first two, i.e., Agricultural Labour Enquiries were conducted in 1950-51 and 1956-57. The subsequent two enquiries, i.e., Rural Labour Enquiries, for which the coverage was widened to include all rural labourers (including agricultural labourers), were carried out in 1963-65 and 1974-75. There have been some differences in the concept of employment in these Enquiries. During the first Agricultural Labour Enquiry, no meticulous attempt was made to measure the varied economic activities in quantitative terms. Wage employment for half the day or more was counted as full day employment and that for less than half a day was ignored. A person who worked for even a single day in a month was taken to have been gainfully employed. On the other hand, unemployment data were collected only for those adult workers who reported wage employment in each month. In the case of workers who

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did not report wage employment they accounted for about 16 per cent of the total adult male workers, it was assumed that they were self-employed for half the period and remained unemployed for the other half. Data on self-employment were not collected independently in the First Agricultural Labour Enquiry, but were only of an inferential nature, being the residual number of days, deducting days of wage employment and unemployment from 365 days.41

The NSS data for 1972-73 and 1977-78 showed an increase in chronic unemployment for males and females both in the rural and urban areas. As regards current day status unemployment for rural Tamil Nadu, the incidence of unemployment among males did not suggest a decline. But, in as many as nine out of 16 major states, there was a rise in the incidence of unemployment. Tamil Nadu showed the most perceptible rise in the unemployment rate. The other states which showed relatively high levels of incidence of unemployment were Jammu & Kashmir, Kerala and West Bengal. The incidence of male unemployment had fallen in some of the states with very high incidence of poverty such as Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Bihar. Yet, it should also be recognised that in these States poverty was found to be related more to low wage rates and to low

labour productivity. In fact in these states, between 1972-73 and 1977-78 growth rates of labour productivity had been either negative or low.⁴²

The National Commission on Labour (1969) observed, "A recognised feature of rural employment is its seasonality. Intensity of employment varies according to seasons, shortage of labour is actually felt during peak agricultural seasons in several areas and a large portion of labour remains unemployed or underemployed during the slack season. The seasonal aspect affects both wage paid and self-employed person; both work below capacity or less than what they are capable of doing or are willing to do."⁴³

Due to lack of adequate irrigational facilities and dependence of cultivation upon uncertainty of monsoon, two or more crops can be grown only on 14 per cent of land and on remaining 86 per cent of land the farmers can have only seasonal agricultural operations. In certain parts of the year there is heavy work, while during rest of the year, work is quite less. For example around sowing, weeding and harvesting, there is such an amount of work to be done that agriculturists may have an acute need of labour. Contrary to this, the period between the post-

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⁴² Ibid., pp. 184-189.
harvest and before the next sowing is almost workless, rendering many agricultural labourers without work. During the off season period, there is lack of alternative employment. It is evident from report produced by Rural Labour Enquiry that the unemployment situation of casual labourers/landless agricultural labourers ranges in between four to five months in a year. The marginal farmers and joint family cultivators are facing the situation of 'disguised unemployment'.

According to economist Arthur Lewis, on such family farms, when the number of workers employed increases, the marginal productivity of labour shows a tendency to decline and sometimes it becomes nil. This state of affairs is not felt because in agriculture reward for farmer's work is to be determined in the same manner as it is determined for a worker's labour in some industry. On a family farm, all members of the household participate in farm operations collectively and work-decisions are not taken in terms of equalising marginal productivity with monetary remuneration. The marginal labour force employed virtually makes no contribution to agricultural production.

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Some of the workers may be completely redundant and their removal from the farm may not have any adverse effect on the productivity of the farm. The contribution of such labourers to production is thus, zero. This course, therefore, involves a considerable waste of human resources. The assessment of the incidence of disguised unemployment is a difficult task due to conceptual and practical difficulties. Where all members of a household engage themselves in agricultural operations obliterating the distinction between persons who perform economic activities and those who do not do so, it is difficult to draw a line of demarcation between employed and unemployed persons and seasonally employed persons, more particularly when the situation of disguised unemployment causes more confusion.\(^{46}\)

According to Shakuntala Mehra this waste of labour force in the early sixties was 17.1 per cent of the total labour force employed in agriculture, while Uppal has estimated this loss as high as 20 per cent on relatively smaller farms. In the estimation of Ashok Rudra, 27 per cent of the adult members of the agricultural families are surplus.\(^{47}\)


The technological changes in agriculture in the process of 'Green Revolution' could not generate sufficient employment in the agricultural sector. It has been labour-saving. The combined effect of labour saving technological change for individual crops plus the increase in area under relatively labour-intensive crops has been that total labour absorption has either been stagnant or may even have fallen in absolute terms in several of the most technologically dynamic states. In December 1986, Vaidyanathan indicated the possibility that in six states, though output rose, labour use in agriculture in 1977-78 was less than in 1972-73. The six states were: Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.48

The programmes specifically designed for the development of small and marginal farmers and agricultural workers were for the first time included in the Fourth Five Year Plan (1969-74), namely, the Small Farmers Development Agency, the Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labour Agency, Food for Work Programme and the Drought Prone Area Programme. Then, the Crash Scheme for Rural Employment and Minimum Needs Programmes were initiated during the period of the Fifth Five Year Plan. This change in the policy of employment, i.e., adoption

of comprehensive programmes of rural development and reduction of labour force pressure upon agriculture, was greatly due to the influence of the report of International Labour Organisation (ILO) on the World Employment Programme. These schemes suffer from a number of bottlenecks. They are not much helpful in solving the problem of unemployment in the rural areas.\footnote{Mathur A.D., (1982), "Disguised Unemployment: Diagnosis and Prognosis", Faculty of Law, University of Jodhpur, Jodhpur, pp. 66-74.}

According to late President V. V. Giri, "Agrarian unrest, arising out of exploitation by land grabbers, money lenders and contractors dominating the rural scene, at all levels, in Panchayat Raj bodies is manifestation of the feeling of helplessness among the unemployed. An extensive programme of absorbing the unemployed, therefore, becomes an urgent necessity and must be taken up in right earnest. Unless a conscious, nationwide integrated programme is put into effect with the object of optimum utilization of surplus manpower, for a ten year period, it is very likely that we shall repeat our failure of performance as in earlier Plans."\footnote{Giri, V.V., (1982), "Jobs for our Millions", quoted by Bhattacharya V.R., "New Face of Rural India", Metropolitan Book Company, New Delhi, p. 352.}
DISPARITY IN WAGES

The most important and probably the most complicated problem in the sphere of employer-employee relations, is that of wages. Before state regulation, the wage rates were usually determined by the employers and in the absence of collective bargaining, workers had to work for those wages. It is only towards the end of the nineteenth century that the industries were forced to discard the commodity concept of labour governed by the law of demand and supply and subject their wage decision to labour output and collective bargaining. But that could be made possible merely to those who were organised. The labourers of unorganised sector in general and agricultural sector in particular, due to their peculiar situations are bound to accept wages, as are fixed by their employers.\(^5^1\)

Wage payments in agriculture have their own characteristic features as compared with industry. The wage pattern in traditional sector of agriculture is governed to a considerable degree by local practices and customs, after without much regard to economic considerations and is influenced by local system of reciprocal relations and services. Mode of payment widely varies. Wages are paid wholly in cash or wholly in

kind or partly in cash and partly in kind. The mode of payment in kind is due to the fact that agriculturists, who are primary producers, have meagre cash resources which they can obtain only after marketing of their produce and they naturally wait for favourable prices for sale of disposable surplus.

Wage period in agriculture has its own characteristics. Payments are made by the day, week, month or on a piece rate basis and with or without supplements and prerequisites. Casual workers are employed and paid for on a daily basis. Wage period for attached workers shows considerable diversity and is dependent upon local practices. It may be a month, a quarter, half year or year. There may be wide disparity in wage levels between regions, seasons and crops. Wage level has the influence of peak and slack periods. Permanent employees may in some cases earn a share of the production or be given some land for their own cultivation.52

Another characteristic of agricultural wages is prevalence of gender disparities. It is often described as a customary feature of all agrarian economies arising from gender-based specialisation of specific farm operations. Agricultural operations like ploughing and post-harvest

operations which carry higher rewards are generally performed by male workers. On the other hand, operations such as sowing, transplanting and weeding with relatively lower wages are predominantly performed by women workers.

The data on agricultural wages according to the nature of employment (casual and attached) of agricultural labourers are not available on uniform basis from different states. However, a study of agricultural labourers conducted by the Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations shows that the average daily wages of permanently attached, seasonally attached and casual workers tend to be significantly different. The casual and free labourers reported the highest wages followed by seasonally attached and permanently attached labourers. The low wages of attached labourers appeared to be due to their assured and longer duration of employment and advances given their employers, before the start of the season.  

Large scale privatisation of common property resources has taken place during 1947-76. It has been done with an intention to help the poor, but there is an evidence of declining access for agricultural labourers to common property resources. Furthermore, most of the land received by

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the poor households was also given up by them as they do not have complementary resources to develop and use the newly received lands. When trends of hired labour and unemployment show a mixed picture, daily wages an increasing trend but low purchasing capacity and declining access to common property resources to landless agricultural labourers or marginal farmers, how can one expect higher trend in wage income.\textsuperscript{54}

**DEGREE OF INDEBTEDNESS**

The problem of agricultural indebtedness is more or less a universal one, which has reached up to alarming situation in developing countries. The old dictum that workers in the country are born in debt, live in debt and die in debt is still true, particularly in agricultural sector, despite several remedial measures initiated by the Government of Tamil Nadu. There cannot be a more severe indictment of the planned development than what is reflected from one of the most authentic official documents- the Draft Sixth Five Year Plan. It reads that the most cherished goals of full employment and eradication of poverty, "seem to be as distant today as when we set out on the road to planned development." The major beneficiaries of economic growth including the

expansion of banking, insurance and commerce, as well as of the produce of economic development, e.g., consumer goods have been the wealthier part of the population both in rural and urban areas and the vast majority have barely been touched.\textsuperscript{55} According to Dubey, the plans had an elite bias. There persists a concentration of assets in a few hands in the rural sector even after passing of so many years of independence with various land reforms measures, the majority population of rural Tamil Nadu having nil or marginal assets in their hands. In absence of sufficient margin of income over-expenditure, the possibility of incurring debt by the labour households becomes stronger. The bank nationalisation has opened new windows for agricultural sector. According to an expert body report there is great shift in the mood of rural credit from individual money lender to constitutional credit bodies. These bodies are gaining popularity gradually. In this connection former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's statement is worth quoting. She said, "Nationalisation is an opportunity and a challenge to the banker to cast himself in a dynamic and innovating role. Rural banking, in particular, will require new techniques and methods of work. The attitudes of conventional and conservative banking will not be enough, if banks are to foster and

enlarge the oncoming agricultural revolution, as well as benefit from the substantial incomes which it is generating in the rural areas. To mobilise rural savings, one has to work hard to develop new services which will suit our farmers and make them save more." Strangely, even after the initiation of institutional financing, the agricultural labourers suffered a callous neglect. The magnitude of the problem has been showing an upward trend in Agricultural Labour Enquiries and Rural Labour Enquiries. The final report on Indebtedness among Rural Labour Households of Rural Labour Enquiry (1977-78) revealed the grim condition of rural indebtedness in the State.

The problem of indebtedness which forms the agricultural labourers poorest of the poor is age-old with special characteristics. These loans are not economically productive in that they do not help in the creation of agitational incomes, but are used for household requirements. It is in gradual process; so it becomes difficult to repay them and the amount goes on mounting up from generation to generation. Like purposes of the loan, the sources of the loan are also traditional. Both these maladies continue to persist despite several measures initiated by

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the Government during the post-independence period to ameliorate the conditions of the weaker sections.\textsuperscript{58}

Among the agricultural labour households, 66.4 per cent were reported to be under debt during 1977-78 in Tamil Nadu as against 52.3 per cent during 1974-75. There were many states like Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Kerala, Punjab and Rajasthan where the proportion of indebted households was higher than that at the All India level. Among these, Kerala reported the highest degree of indebtedness to the extent of almost 81 per cent.\textsuperscript{59} For the purpose of R.L.E. the nature of outstanding debt was classified in two broad categories viz.: (1) hereditary, and (ii) contracted. Hereditary loan assumes importance more so in the case of agricultural labour households as often agricultural labour remains attached or bonded to the farm in which they work and are at the beck and call of the employer in view of certain facilities, perquisites and loans in cash. The repayment of such loans takes time and often their burden is transferred from one generation to another. The liability for the clearance of such loans naturally adds to the problems of indebted households. The second category of loans, i.e., contracted loan is normally incurred: (i) in cash, (ii) in kind, and (iii) partly in cash and

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., Tables 4.1 (a) (1) and (a) (2), pp. 82-90.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., Tables 5.1 (a) (1) and (a) (2), pp. 102-104.
partly, in kind. There was an increase of about 13 per cent in 1977-78 over 1974-75 in the average amount of debt per indebted household. Though the quantum of hereditary loan increased by about 7 per cent, its proportion to the total outstanding loan was roughly 5 per cent in both 1974-75 and 1977-78. Total contracted loan during 1977-78 was on an average Rs. 627 per household as against Rs. 553 during 1974-75.\textsuperscript{60}

Loans are classified according to the purpose to which they are put into two broad categories: (1) productive loans, and (ii) unproductive loans. In the former, loans are basically production-oriented and utilised for production related activities, e.g., for buying seeds, fertilizers, agricultural implements or for land improvements, viz., digging of wells, fencing, etc., or for setting up small business. These utilisations increase the income of the borrower. However, unproductive loans cannot be justified on economic grounds in that they are utilised mainly to fulfil consumption needs, e.g., for meeting expenses incurred in religious functions, marriage, etc. This traditional form of loan is resorted by a vast majority of rural population. According to the Report of R.L.E. 1977-78, only 21 per cent of the total average loan per indebted agricultural household was utilised for production purposes and 79 per cent being

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.,
unproductively utilised. The increase in former and decrease in latter may be noted from 1974-75 to 1977-78 Enquiry.\textsuperscript{61}

The sources of debt can be divided into two categories, (i) institutional - consisting mainly of loans from co-operative societies and banks, (ii) private - comprising of moneylenders, employers, shopkeepers, friends and relatives. Of the above, private sources of debt, moneylenders form the important segment accounting for above 37 per cent of the total average loan in 1977-78. Their popularity can easily be explained. For one, they are readily approachable and have a good knowledge of local customs and conditions as they generally belong to the same village as the borrower. Secondly, informality marks their transactions in that there are no fixed rules and regulations, so that it is possible for him to adjust to individual requirements. Thirdly, he is not particular about securities prior to the grant of loans and is not solicitous about the purpose to which the loan would be put. However, the main drawback in such transactions is the stupendous rate of interest charged by the moneylenders on loans.\textsuperscript{62} This together with the fact that the borrower generally utilizes the loan for consumption purposes ensures


that the moneylender has a stranglehold over the borrowers. On the other hand, institutional credit deliberately discriminates between productive and unproductive loans. Co-operative societies, for example, supply credit to meet agricultural needs. Similarly, Land Development Banks and Commercial Banks mainly provide loan for productive purposes.

**PROBLEM OF BONDED LABOUR SYSTEM**

An extreme manifestation of the sorry plight of agricultural labourers is the bonded labour system. In India, this sort of exploitation remained prevalent in the name of 'Begar' and 'Ryot' for years. The term 'Bandhua Mazdoor' or bonded labour is of recent origin. But for all practical purposes, the connotations remained the same as that of slave or serf. Despite scrapping of the Zamindari system, land reforms, Bhoodan Movement and the enactment of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, it still remains in various parts of the country.\(^6^3\)

The problem of bonded labour in agriculture has many tenacious, sociological, cultural and institutional roots. The prominent forms in which 'Begar' or forced labour has prevailed in the country are: (a) peonage; and (b) serfdom. The term peonage denotes a day labourer in former Spanish speaking America, particularly in Mexico, one working

off a debt by bondage. This was a kind of agricultural servitude. In
peonage, the basic fact is indebtedness of the peon to the master and
compulsory service in payment of that debt.

It is clear from the various studies that the system of peonage is
rampant in the agricultural sector. It thrives under different names in
different states. The patronage approach of money lender often leads the
credit seeker into the temptation of incurring more debts and that too, for
unproductive domestic purpose. As the debtor has nothing to offer as a
security, the creditor demands that he pledge his person and work for the
creditor in lieu of the redemption of the debt and interest.\textsuperscript{64} Left with no
other alternative, the debtor is compelled to enter into unequal deal with
the money lender, who determines the rate of interest, wages, the period
of bondage, the working conditions and the debtor's right to seek other
employment.

Serfdom has its origin in feudalism. It is a socio-economic
institution evolved out of an imperious concern in a closed system of
village economy. It includes personal services required to be performed
as labour dues or in accordance with covenants arising out of tenure of
land, etc., the penalty for failure to perform these services being the

forfeiture of land which amounts to loss of home and the only means of livelihood. Forced labour in agriculture has been interwoven in the complex pattern of land tenure and tenancy system. The attached labourer or the share-cropper is bound to his master either by a debt or through a tie-in-allotment. Such labourers are known by different names in the different states.

There are other forms of forced labour which have their origin in purely social customs, viz. child bondage, loyalty bondage and widow bondage. In gradual process, the system took shape of intergenerational bondage. The bonded labour system took deep roots in the regions where scheduled castes, adivasis and other alike depressed classes abound. Table – 2.11 presents the estimates of bonded labour among the major states of India based on three different estimates, viz., the respective state Governments, by the National Sample Survey Organisation and by the Gandhi Peace Foundation.

## Table – 2.11 Estimates of Bonded Labour in Tamil Nadu and Other Major States in India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>As identified by State Govt. as on 30-11-76</th>
<th>As estimated by N.S.S.O.</th>
<th>As estimated by Gandhi Peace Foundation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>24788</td>
<td>7300</td>
<td>325000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4400</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>11729</td>
<td>102400</td>
<td>111000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarat</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>4,200</td>
<td>171000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>12900</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karnataka</td>
<td>62689</td>
<td>14100</td>
<td>193000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>823</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madhya Pradesh</td>
<td>5627</td>
<td>116200</td>
<td>500000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maharashtra</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>4300</td>
<td>100000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>43947</td>
<td>5400</td>
<td>350000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punjab</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4300</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>6890</td>
<td>2400</td>
<td>67000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
<td>33180</td>
<td>12500</td>
<td>250000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>2269</td>
<td>31700</td>
<td>550000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Bengal</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>21600</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All-India</td>
<td>213465</td>
<td>345000</td>
<td>2617000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: NA – Not Available

The table indicates that the number of bonded labourers differ among the different estimations. It is understood that as far as the State Government’s estimates are concerned, the highest number of bonded labourers were found in Karnataka (62689), which itself accounted for more than 25 per cent of the total, which was followed by Orissa (43947) and Tamil Nadu (33180).

Based on the estimates of NSSO, the highest number of bonded labourers was found in Madhya Pradesh (116200), which formed more than one third of the total and it was followed by Bihar (102400). But, in the case of the estimates made by Gandhi Peace Foundation, the highest number of bonded labourers was seen in Uttar Pradesh (550000), which was more than 20 per cent of the total. This underlines the fact that there were wide variations in the estimations made by the different organisations regarding the number of bonded labourers in India.

Identification of bonded labour in its true sense and ultimate analysis is discovery of a non-being, who though a human being has been reduced to a non-entity on account of years of unchecked social discrimination and economic exploitation tolerated due to an inexplicable social resilience. This difficult task is entrusted on District Administration under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976.
In practice, this task has been left to be performed mostly by the lower echelons of the bureaucracy according to their expediency. Since they constitute an integral part of the rural elite, it is futile to expect that they can do much justice to their difficult and sensitive job.

**Migration**

Migration is a necessary condition for economic development. People will have to move away from the dwindling opportunities in villages to the expanding and expected opportunities at prosperous rural or urban centres. But the migration of agricultural labourers is a negation to the common meaning of migration for economic prosperity. Their migration by and large being the last alternative, exposes them to various kinds of exploitation and proves to be a bane rather than a boon.

Driven by acute poverty, unemployment, underemployment and low wages, the agricultural labourers leave their villages dwelling in a world of fond dreams seldom to be realized. As to their society, they are uprooted from their erstwhile niche and transplanted into one yet in the process of formation. Living in an environment of anonymity, isolation and individualism, they are virtually bereft of the sort of cohesive social ties and social control that exist in their villages. In this process the joint family breaks, intergenerational relationships crack and conjugal life
tends to be reduced to wreckages. The family life now is often not only one of perpetual pangs of poverty, almost as much as before, but also of the strains and stinks of unhappiness.66

The flow of the migration of agricultural labourers is both ways, rural to urban and rural to rural, sometimes inter-state and sometimes intra-state. It can be permanent, temporary or seasonal. Seasonal migration is not possible unless work is available during off-seasons at their destinations. The migration is common in young and adult agricultural labourers which are productive labour force in real sense. The rest of the labour force is unproductive including child, old and women agricultural labourers.

The two factors, the expanding employment opportunities and higher wages in urban areas and prosperous rural areas (Punjab and Haryana etc.), and the shrinking employment and comparatively lower wages in the stagnating villages, complement and reinforce each other causing the so-called pull and push that result in migration of wage earners. This differential in income potential is basically the most potent force operation in the economic environment that provides a constant

stimulus to the mobility of potential migrants among the rural poor, which in Gandhiji’s terms drain "the blood of the village."  

Looking at the flow of migration, of the 46.4 million male intra-state migrants (movement within the same state) in 1981, 52.4 per cent were rural to rural migrants, 13.9 per cent urban to urban, 26.5 per cent rural to urban and 7.2 per cent urban to rural. The 125.9 million female intra-state migrants comprised 76.9 per cent rural to rural migrants, 6.7 urban to urban, 11.0 rural to urban and 5.4 urban to rural. The comparative figures for male and female inter-state migrants (movement between two states) in 1981 were 11.5 million male and 12.5 million female, 20.7/37.6 per cent rural to rural, 30.5/ 28.1 per cent urban to urban, 42.0/26.0 per cent rural to urban and 6.80/7.8 per cent urban to rural.  

The reasons for migration to urban centres ascertained for the first time in 1981 census have been categorised under employment, education, family move, marriage and others. From the data available, it becomes apparent that more male migrants (43.1 per cent) move into cities or towns than female migrants (4.2 per cent) for employment; more  

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females (32.5 per cent) move into urban centres than male migrants (27.3 per cent) because their family is moved into them or because of marriage (females 46.6 per cent, males 1.1 per cent), and more males (6.0 per cent) migrate to cities than females (2.4 per cent) for education.69

The causes of and motivations for migration of the rural poor to the city are: (a) expanding employment opportunities in the growing cities in contrast to the income constraints in villages, (b) encouragement or inducement by relations in the cities, (c) offer of employment by the professional labour contractors from the cities, (d) the age-old social injustice suffered by the so-called backward castes in the rural community, (e) the hope and dream of a better life in any crisis situation and lastly (f) occasional cases of adventurism.

Urbanisation and industrialisation are the synonyms of the economic development of the country. Both of them generate avenues for employment directly and indirectly. The majority of the workers involved in the process of nation-building are immigrants from the rural sector. The small and medium sized industrial sectors depend upon the surrounding rural areas for the supply of labour. The big industrial centres like Bombay, Calcutta and Chennai draw their labour from a much wider

area, that too mainly from agricultural sector. The number of fortunate rural migrants who could be absorbed in industrial sector is very low. The reason is quite obvious, the rate of industrial growth is too little to absorb proportionate population of the country. Furthermore, the migrants absorbed in industrial sector even temporarily take colour of industrial labour and are no more poor agricultural labour.\footnote{Majumdar P.S., and Majumdar I., (1978), op.cit., pp. 78-87.}

The industrial sector provides least employment to the unemployed, surplus or underemployed agricultural labourers. In the process of urbanisation, the city experiences a constant need for physical expansion. This expansion implies an endless demand for a variety of amenities - the construction and reconstruction of buildings, roads, bridges, water supply, drainage, telephones, electricity and so forth. The growth of population and increase in income accompanying the growth of economic activities in the city calls for more and more investments in residence and housing, education and health services, parks and recreation centres, hotels and restaurants, shops and community centres. All these again involve an increase in the tempo of construction. It requires a large army of both skilled and unskilled labourers and thus acts as a major absorber of migrant rural labour. With possible exceptions,
majority of migrants in urban areas, first start with hard manual labour in the construction sector.

The growing population in the city in itself also provides employment to a large number of petty traders and vendors, many of whom are from amongst the migrant poor. Jobs are available in the ever expanding field of transportation of men and material. Apart from the unskilled and semi-skilled jobs in modern transport sector, there is access for the migrant poor to the traditional modes of transport like animal drawn or manual carts, cycles and rickshaws, etc. According to a study, the total number of urban workers in different economic activities, migrants from the rural areas constituted 42.1 per cent in construction, 38.7 per cent in manufacturing, 37.6 per cent in transport and communications and 38.3 per cent in services.71

In the organised sector, the wages and working conditions are by and large determined by collective bargaining which is not so elsewhere. There are, however, some signs of organised behaviour and professional ethics even in informal sector. At least the wages in construction work are by and large standardised like organised sector, not due to collective bargaining, but due to patronage of labour contractors. In absence of

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organised behaviour or collective bargaining the working and living conditions are at the verge of exploitation. The irregularity in employment is a common feature for construction workers. The employer is having right to "hire and fire". Sometimes the employer and sometimes the nature intervene in the course of their employment. Monsoon brings distress to those engaged in construction work or in petty trade. The large size of the family, the high cost of living, unemployment and underemployment push them under heavy debt. Most of the families have all the members earning to meet the challenge of migration but find it difficult even to mitigate hunger. To redeem themselves from the burden of debt becomes a dream. The perpetual miseries, sometimes, compel the old members of the family even for begging. The legislative enactments and governmental measures to protect these migrants against several exploitations arc neither known to them nor easily available due to lack of political will.\textsuperscript{72}

The pattern of migration of labourers is characterised by short distance movement, a high proportion of females and children, preponderance of rural-rural migration and a significant component comprising return migration. The trend of highest rate of migration is

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., pp. 49-51.
featured in adult landless agricultural labourers and marginal farmers. In comparison of rural-urban, rural-rural migration is much higher. The push and pull factors responsible for rural-rural migration are almost the same. A survey study of five villages of Ludhiana about the migrant labourers revealed that the multiple factors that forced the migrant labourers to Punjab were to earn their living including extreme poverty, unemployment and non-availability of regular paid work in their native places, low wages, social discrimination and persecution by caste-Hindus and frequent floods and droughts. The semi-feudal conditions with labour bondage still in vogue in states like Bihar accelerate labour migration. These are push factors. The pull factors are the expanding employment opportunities and higher wages in states like Punjab and Haryana. The phenomenal success of Green Revolution due to better irrigation facilities, optimum use of fertilizers, fertile land, multiple cropping advanced degree of mechanisation and commercialisation of agriculture has resulted into more employment opportunities and better paying capacity. It has accelerated the influx of farm labourers from outside these states. The minimum wages fixed and actually paid in these states is much higher than migrants' own states. In spite of this fact, it is also true that the uprooted innocent poor migrants are continuously being exploited

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by the landowners of these states. Discriminatory wage rates, unregulated working-hours, payment of less than minimum wages fixed and wrong calculation, etc. are the common malpractices. The safety, health and welfare or insurance against occupational injuries are far from their reach. In spite of the risk of exploitation the migration of agricultural labourers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan to Haryana and Punjab is common scenario.\footnote{Randhva M.S., (1983), “Tractors and Farm Size”, The Tribune, December 18, p. 5.}

**PROBLEM OF ORGANIZATION**

In India more than 90 per cent of the total work-force are engaged in unorganised sector, of which majority are in agriculture. The economic backwardness of agricultural labourers at present is not due to this that they have remained neglected by social workers, political leaders or the government, or their wages are not revised regularly. The actual cause for such a sorry state is non-implementation of governmental measures due to lack of proper implementing machinery on the one hand and absence of organised pressure from these workers on the other. Gunnar Myrdal’s pertinent observations concretise this aptly: “No society has ever substantially reformed itself by a movement from above: by a simple voluntary decision of an upper class springing from its social
conscience, to become equal with lower classes and to give them free entrance to class monopolies. Ideals and social conscience do play their very considerable role which should not be forgotten. But they are weak as self-propelled forces, for originating reforms on a large scale they need the bulk of demands being raised and pressed for. When power has been assembled by those who have grievances, then is time when ideals and social conscience can become effective.”

The organisation of the rural poor can play a crucial role in transforming this situation and providing a new power base. The political influence and the economic hegemony of the rural elite are often so inextricably interlocked that they tend to become a closed, almost monolithic power structure. It does not encourage, in fact it generally abhors, any meaningful dialogue or effective cooperation with those who live in the periphery of the rural community. For example, the land reform policy could not achieve the desired results as it was resisted by the rural elite and its urban political lobby and due to lack of organised rural poor as an articulate socio-political force which could have created a social climate in favour of land reform and related structural changes. Thus, critical for the success of all redistributive laws, policies and

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programmes is that the poor be organised and made of the benefits intended for them.

The peasant movement initially represented all the three: rich, middle and poor peasantry along with landless labourers. Their movement largely succeeded where there was a convergence of class interest with mass interest as in anti-Zamindari and anti-Inamdari movements during pre-independence period. But the post-independence peasant movements have represented merely the rich and middle peasants. The growth of peasant organisations witnessed this gradual shift since 1930's, the shift got intensified since 1950's.  

The differentiation of peasants by classes does not automatically lead to the segregation and to class struggles. Caste is a factor that needs to be reckoned with. The majority of rich and middle peasants are drawn almost from advanced caste groups. As against this, the bulk of the small peasants and landless agricultural labourers are drawn from backward class groups, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Both are having age-old class and caste conflict.

The observations of the National Commission on Agriculture which are quoted below will testify as to how the interests of the

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poor and less knowledgeable farmers are not protected becomes clear. The Commission observes: "It will also be noticed that among the existing organisations there is hardly any which has got clear-cut objectives to help the small and marginal farmers and landless labourers through the implementation of land reforms, tenancy legislation etc." The Commission further continues: "The activities of the organisations, enumerated above, remain confined mostly to headquarters where they are located due to the absence of proper publicity as to their aims and objectives, functioning and membership. Hence, their activities also remain more or less confined to those who somehow get to know the existence of these organisations and a vast majority of the rural population not at all aware of them.\textsuperscript{77}

The organised strength of the rich and middle peasants and their entry into the positions of power in co-operatives, panchayats and in state legislature virtually closed the prospects of the success of implementation programmes. Agriculture is a very wide sector not merely in the sense of generating large employment and output but also in the sense of including in it several other sub-sectors:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{77} Government of India, (1976), \textit{"Report on National Commission on Agriculture"}, Part XIV, New Delhi, p. 262.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
plantation, animal husbandry and crop cultivation enterprises etc. In spite of inherent problems, the workers in plantation are highly organised. The employer-employee relationships are distinct. From top there are legislations and governmental measures and at the bottom organised labour as powerful base. In the animal husbandry sector which is now expanding by leaps and hounds, a large number of workers are employed but they are not organised. In the most important area, i.e., crop cultivation enterprises, there is concentration of majority of agricultural labourers who are by and large unorganised. The R.L.E. of 1974-75 has estimated that only about 1 per cent of the agricultural labourers are covered by trade union activity and that too is not evenly spread over the country. They are found mostly in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. In South, Kerala is leading so far as organisations of the agricultural labourers is concerned. Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh have not achieved much success.

The political commitments and their achievement by the State Government are the most important factor contributing to the social transformation and progress in Kerala. Under sponsorship of Communist Party of India, the first organisation of agricultural labourers in Thanjavur
Tanjore), Tamil Nadu was formed in 1939 but it could not spread to other parts of Tamil Nadu.⁷⁸

Karaikal (Union Territory of Pondicherry) is another area in South India which has heavy concentration of agricultural labourers. Since 1948, the Communist Party of India is trying to organise agricultural labourers which could have taken a shape only after 1969. The agricultural labourer union at Karaikal is more in the nature of a movement rather than formalised institution (no registration for maintenance of membership records and accounts).⁷⁹

The social and economic conditions of the agricultural labourers in tribal areas are altogether different from those in non-tribal areas. In tribal areas, whole tribal communities were exploited by the non-tribal money-lenders, traders and landlords who had penetrated into tribal areas and acquired large extent of lands from tribals often reducing the latter to landlessness. The majority of their population has been converted into landless labourers, share-croppers and contract workers in construction work and brick kilns etc.

The complex nature of socio-economic realities at the national

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level does not lend itself easily to generalisations. The variations in one factor or set of factors could be discerned in different parts of the country, which leads to the role of historical conjunctures enabling the organisation of rural workers in a given situation. Individual factor taken in isolation cannot explain the organisation of rural proletariat. This is evident from the limited experience or mobilisation and organisation in certain parts of India, e.g., literacy has been an important factor responsible for organisation in Kerala, but the early movements of labourers in Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu shows the possibility of organisation without high rate of literacy. This can also be applied to the recent emergence of organisations among the tribal labourers in Maharashtra. The lesson to be drawn from Kerala experience is the importance of a holistic framework within which to understand process of mobilization and organisation rather than partial explanations.\(^{80}\) Thus, the existence of landless labour, higher population density, increasing literacy, caste oppression and political will, all need to be seen within the overall historical process of rural proletarianisation and the response of these rural proletarians to organisation through radical political mobilisation.

The factors impeding organisation throughout India are rural social institutions, poverty, illiteracy, unequal distribution of land and other resources, nature of employment, dependence on landlord, lack of self-reliance, lack of group cohesion and lack of consciousness etc. The rural workers organisation is not merely the agricultural counterpart of the industrial trade unions. The difference lies not only in the diverse socio-economic environments (like nature of employment, legal set up etc.) in which they operate, but also in composition and what is more fundamental, in the objectives which each of them pursue. A trade union is generally restricted to the employees of a particular organisation, whereas rural workers organisation is likely to have within its fold not only employees but the self-employed and unemployed as well, the level of aggregation probably being the village or a group of villages. Further, the inclusion of an individual in a rural organisation often implies the inclusion of his family, a phenomenon neither relevant nor present in a typical trade union. As regards objectives, a trade union is primarily interested in the question of its members, general working conditions, but this is indeed too narrow an objective for rural workers' organisations whose primary concern should be overall improvement of the

living conditions of its members. The question of general working conditions is important, but it can neither retain its supremacy over nor become inseparable from other objectives of the organisation. The contradictions inherent in agricultural employment, lack of consciousness, lack of political motivation and honest leadership are impeding organisation of agricultural workers on pattern of industrial workers. To have necessary zeal and bargaining strength, the number of workers should constitute a substantially large group which is not feasible in dispersed agricultural employment. The rural sector of India has a large number of employers than employees. All this discourages them to unite together in a group. The seasonal and uncertain employment, population pressure on agriculture and migratory nature of agricultural labourers deprive any permanent work status, ultimately impeding proper growth of unionism.\textsuperscript{82}

A substantial number of agricultural workers are constituted by women and children who are in a worse position with regard to the issue of organisation. Their inherent constraints seldom permit them even to think of "trade unionism". Like their menfolk, they

depend upon their daily wages earned in agriculture without holding any type of assets to their credit. Due to seasonality or employment and absence of special skills, they resort to make wide shifts in occupation and place of work. Women as workers are relatively more exploited socially and economically. They live in bondage-mental and physical, within the family and in the course of employment. The tasks like age-old household drudgery, bringing up children, cooking, washing and cleaning are uncounted works to be performed by a female worker which multiply their hardships. In present context, the women workforce in agricultural sector has nominal representation in so-called organisations of agricultural labourers.  

**PROBLEM OF ILLITERACY**

The effects of education on development and *vice versa* become clearly discernible in the estimations of illiterates on world plane. The vast majority of illiterates, amounting to almost three quarters of the total are to be found in Asia. Africa has one-fifth of the total, while the remaining is in Latin America.

The problem of illiteracy is a social product and not a natural

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phenomenon. It is socially generated and sustained. It is a by product of extreme social inequality resulting from differential access to economic potential and social bases of power of different sections of population. It may be argued whether or not the education system is captured by those that wield power and influence in society.84

Joshi, analyzing the causes of poor educational achievements has stated that it is extremely unrealistic to think of children in the aggregate or in the abstract as an undifferentiated and homogeneous category. In actual life, at the ground level, in the rural areas there are children of surplus producing rich farmers or of self- employed peasants or of poor cultivators. There are children of rural artisan and agricultural labourers having different cast backgrounds. The education is interlinked with the social structure and economic status even today. This has disastrous consequences for children of poor families.85

Mahatma Gandhi had an unerring insight into the basic problems of the masses both in the economic and educational spheres. Mahatma Gandhi states: "Whatever may be true to other

countries, in India at any rate where more than eighty per cent or
the population is agricultural and another ten per cent industrial, it
is crime to make education merely literary and to unfit boys and
girls for manual work in after life. Indeed I hold that as the larger
part of our time is devoted to labour for earning our bread, our
children from infancy be taught the dignity of such labour. There is
no reason why a peasant's son after having gone to school should
become useless, as he does become as an agricultural labourer. It is
a sad thing that our school boys look upon manual labour with
disfavour, if not contempt. Education in this sense will not mean
alienation from one's natural environment and cultural tradition. It
will involve creative re-integration with environment and positive
utilization of learning potential of tradition. Children of the artisans
and peasants have an enormous initial advantage which must be
tapped for the transformation into modern agricultural and
industrial workers.”

It is unrealistic to think about any educational plan for
children of marginal farmers, rural artisans and agricultural
labourers without considering their work. Their involvement in

86 Quoted in Joshi P.C., Ibid., pp. 6-7.
work is not merely due to natural environment and cultural tradition but more due to economic reasons. It is mainly to supplement the meagre income of chronically poverty stricken households. Khandekar and Naik have found that "a fairly large number of children below what is considered to be the working age are called upon to supplement the economic activity of their elders." Initiation of children in work from the early stage deprive them of opportunities for acquiring various abilities and skills through education and training which are necessary for getting important position in the contemporary competitive society. At least these working children who have to devote most of the time to work, are hardly left with any time for their studies, i.e., formal education.

Like children of agricultural households, the women join agricultural employment as a natural phenomenon without keeping in mind the concept of wage employment that too with their normal household responsibility under their rural set up. The female children in Indian rural set up are bound to face discriminatory treatment by their parents, especially on the issue of their education. Their marriage is the only objective for their parents.

After their marriage, they share the responsibilities of their family within and outside their houses. Bearing dual responsibility, majority or female agricultural labourers remain illiterate and only a small percentage of them attend school for a short period. Perhaps female literacy is more important than male literacy. It is the mother who moulds the family unless she gets the light of knowledge, the society stands nowhere.\(^88\)

Kothari suggested a production-based adult literacy programme. The aim should be to make a better farmer or craftsmen or the adult learner. There is greater scope for spreading adult literacy in rural India. The Central Board for Workers’ Education established for literacy of workers in factories extended its activities to the unorganised sector from 1977. Under the programme seven pilot projects were started in 1977-78 at selected regional centres. The categories of workers covered are: landless labourers, agricultural workers, rural artisans, forest and fisheries labourers, marginal peasants and educated unemployed in rural areas. But this is still in its rudimentary form.\(^89\)

Education is by and large a state subject, so the problem of rural illiteracy is primarily the responsibility of state government. The objective of Article 45 of the Constitution or National Policy on Education needs a new approach in the course of its implementation in villages. The problem of illiteracy of agricultural labourers is no less important than that of their problems like unemployment and underemployment, low wages and indebtedness etc.

**WORKING CONDITIONS AND CONDITIONS OF WORK**

"Labour is not a commodity", declares the constitution of I.L.O. This implies that the nature of man's work and the conditions under which it is performed are not to be determined by economic forces alone but also by consideration of human values and social justice. From this point, it is but a short step to the view that man's work and the conditions under which it is done should preserve human dignity and also give him power to influence the nature of his life and work and to ensure that it does not impair his life as a citizen and as a person.\(^9\)

"Humanisation of work" as conveyed by the I.L.O. in its conventions and recommendations is merely a gimmick for agricultural employments in India. As the President or the 1975 International

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Conference put it, "Precisely because mass unemployment tends to leave the employer all powerful and the worker defenceless, there must be stronger safeguards against the exploitation of labour."\(^\text{91}\) Nor should it be forgotten that the neglect of these vital human and social issues might easily lead to disorder and disruption in social systems on a scale quite out of proportion to the economic cost or any effective measure to make work more human now.

Given the ever increasing health hazard arising from the fast changing production processes and the use of new substances, official support, both direct and indirect, to systematic and coordinated research has become imperative. As far as the working situation of agricultural labourers or the incidence of occupational hazards is concerned, no comprehensive statistics are available, but there can be no doubt that a wide variety of exploitations and occupational hazards are eating into the vitals of millions of workers and the pity is that the damage remains undetected till the situation becomes almost irreparable. Although nearly 50 per cent to 60 per cent of India's labour force are engaged in this sector and despite the wide prevalence of occupational ailments among them which are so often closely interwoven with malnutrition and poverty,

little, indeed very little, attention has been given to them. The exact nature and magnitude of the problem thus, remains largely unknown, ruling out any remedial or preventive action. It is really astonishing that the picture relating to employment of agricultural labourers men, women and children, depicted by the Royal Commission on Labour has not shown any significant improvement even upto the recent appointment of National Commission on Rural Labour, despite the commitment in the constitution to ensure just and humane conditions of work and to protect them from abuse and exploitations.\textsuperscript{92}

**HOURS OF WORK**

The work force is still unorganised, uncohesive, heterogeneous, socio-economically utterly backward, unskilled and for the most part of the year underemployed. The work is not normally conceived in terms of hours and the wages are not paid on a per hour basis. The working day may be from dawn to dusk and its length depends on the vagaries of weather, the urgency of work or the amount of work available per worker. The busy season characterised by the activities of the nature of ploughing, sowing,

transplanting, weeding, hoeing and harvesting etc., which are due in the months of May, June, July, November and December require longer duration of work: ten, twelve or fourteen hours every day. The slack months by nature of employment, January, February, March, August and September are noteworthy for underemployment and unemployment. It is possible that in a unit of scheduled employment the wages may be more than the notified wages, but the long hours of work, absence of rest periods, weekly rest day and other conditions of sweated labour prevail in it.  

In the context of existing rural situation, it is doubtful whether the above notifications are capable of being enforced particularly in agricultural employment. By and large, the working hours of agricultural labourers in majority of the states are unregulated except in Kerala. The most striking feature of the working situation in Kerala is the acceptance of definite hours and regulated mode of wage payment, which is not available in other states.

The strenuous work they do for long hours do not fetch them any good return. The agricultural labourers carry out work for days

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together and this affects their health, especially the women who have infants or who are carrying, are the most affected labourers. Working in the rain and sun renders them vulnerable to different ailments. Their breast-fed children also fall victims of these ailments. Especially the health of the women who come back to work soon after the confinement period is badly affected. Their under-nutrition and long working hours make them feeble and disabled. The child labourers are the other sufferers of unregulated working pattern. Addressing Agricultural Labourers' Conference in 1946, late Pattabi Sitararnmaya expressed his deep concern on the plight of farm labourers. He said, "The cultivator who spends the day between slush and mud, who works now with a starving stomach and now with a half appeased appetite, who knows no rest in storm or sunshine, who often times has no dwelling site which can be called his own, grows our paddy but starves. His condition is appalling and heart rending.”

OCCUPATIONAL RISKS

Agriculture is one of the hazardous occupations from the stand point of physical health and safety of workers. Performance of various

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agricultural operations on vast open fields leading to exposure of agricultural worker to inclement weather (scorching heat of the sun in the summer, chilly and biting cold in winter and lashing and dazzling showers accompanied by lightning and thunder storm in rainy season), use of machines running at a fast speed and making use of high energy technology, use of pesticides, insecticides and chemical fertilizers, demanding and taxing nature of agricultural work etc., are the factors which considerably add to the hazardous nature of agricultural occupation.\textsuperscript{95}

From sowing to harvesting and threshing, different mechanized implements are used by the big and middle level landlords, particularly in states like Punjab and Haryana. With increased mechanisation of farming, farm work has become dangerous and highly accident-prone. The agricultural labourers have to operate farm machines like power thresher, powered cane-crusher, power-driven chaff-cutter and tractors or tillers, and that too without any training. According to an estimate, "thresher mishaps are a recurring feature on the country's agriculture scene. About ten thousand farm labourers have been incapacitated in twelve years (1964-76), and the number of accidents has been increasing. Nearly 400

farm labourers in Punjab and Haryana, the two predominantly agricultural states, lost one of their limbs during 1972-73. Thresher accidents are not a new phenomenon. However, the problem attracted public attention only recently when powered-threshers started replacing the traditional manually operated machines in the late 1950s and the incidence of thresher accidents started registering a steep rise. The ever increasing farm accidents in Haryana and Punjab depict the ugly side of Green Revolution, which cannot be controlled even after passing of the Dangerous Machines (Regulation) Act, 1983.96

The hazards due to pesticides and other dangerous chemicals used in agriculture seem to be ever increasing. Popularisation of plant protection measures dates back to 1930s and follows a pattern similar to other chemicals effecting increased production was systematically promoted by extension agencies. Use of pesticides initially was adopted for cash crops only. State Governments arranged for their purchase and made the pesticides and appliances available to them free of cost or on small price or even on nominal rent.

With the advent of the Green Revolution in the beginning of the sixties, the government supply system could not reach every village. It necessitated a shift in the policy. States’ efforts were then directed towards subsidizing the cost. In Second and Third Five Year Plans such subsidy for plant protection appliances was 50 per cent, which was reduced to 25 per cent during 4th and 5th Plans. The pattern of popularity suggests the plant protection measures were adopted largely because of their effect on productivity.97

The illiterate users of these pesticides could see the impact of insecticides and pesticides on insects/pests but seldom they are aware of the hazards caused to human beings due to careless handling. The situation is further aggravated because of the general lack of scientific orientation and also economic inability to practise precautions requiring additional resources. The sellers of these chemicals and pesticides, due to their wide market to sell their goods easily, hardly care for the educational, training and promotional efforts. Combined effect of all these lead to the increased volume of health hazards to agriculturists and agricultural workers. These unskilled workers are manually operating highly

toxic chemicals such as Endrin, Parathion, Pherate and Phosdrin etc. The situation might have been still worse since many cases are not responded. The usual signs and symptoms reported by various workers are headache, blurring of vision, nausea, vomiting, nervousness, weakness and discomfort in chest etc.\textsuperscript{98}

This chapter examined the historical developments in the size and share of the agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu and also in India along with their economic conditions and problems. This underlines the fact that while the proportion of rural population has come down continuously over the period, the size of agricultural labourers has gone up, indicating the fact that this segment of the population remained in the rural areas, as they were not able to seek employment elsewhere. The employment and wage conditions of the agricultural labourers suggest that the number of days of employment in the agricultural sector has been declining even in 1974-75 underscoring the appalling living conditions of them. Hence, they were forced to seek employment in the non-agricultural sector, but only to a lesser extent. The female segment of the agricultural labourers was the worst hit, since the number of days employed and also the wage levels were abysmally low among them, as they were paid only around

\textsuperscript{98} Mehta S., (1980), \textit{“A Study of Rural Society in India”}, S. Chand and Co. Ltd., New Delhi, pp. 12-17.
40-60 per cent of the male wage rates. The wage rates of the male and female labourers showed rising pattern, but only in nominal terms, since the impact of rising price levels is not captured. The conditions of the agricultural labour households were even worse than that of the rural labour households in both Tamil Nadu and at the all-India level.

The seasonal nature of agricultural employment and abundant supply of labourers creates the situation of underemployment and unemployment. The important factors responsible for a high degree of ethnic-economic inequilibrium in the composition of agrarian labour market are their perpetual state of hereditary indebtedness, less demand and more supply and low wages and income. These factors generate the problem of migration and bonded labour system. The reason for their exploitation is associated with total lack of bargaining capacity on account of their unorganised form and illiteracy.

From the above account it is clear that the feudal agrarian structure has survived and the benefits in the growth of agricultural sector have not percolated to a vast majority of agricultural labourers. The position of SCs and STs agricultural labourers, child labourers and women agricultural labourers is worse than others. They do occupy a subordinate position. The roots of the subordinate status of SCs and STs lie in their
initial socio-economic position and their experience of age-old oppression. The problems of survival of agricultural labour households are shared, to a greater degree by the women and children. It is a crucial fact that the majority of women agricultural labourers have no grievance for their problems.