ECONOMIC CONDITION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR
IN PUTTARPATHY TALUQ

INTRODUCTION:

The economic future of India depends primarily on the development of agriculture and the prosperity of its agricultural population. The farmer is the most decisive factor in the Indian economy. His joys and sorrows reflect themselves in production and consumption, in finance and trade, indeed in every aspect of the Indian economy. Hence the village community, is as it has always been, the red rock and the sheet anchor of India's social and economic system. And yet, the plight of the average Indian villager is the least calculated to encourage initiative or to inspire hope for a better economic future. The constant stress and strain attending upon them are spreading chain reactions in other spheres of the economy and thereby tilting the balance to everybody's discomfiture. Lately under the planned economy some measures have been taken to tune up the conditions of this class. But unless their problems are properly understood in the perspective of history and the country's social pattern one can not expect the measures to yield any result of permanent
beneficial nature. During the last 100 years two fundamentally different economics have functioned in India. Viz. a slowly expanding industrial economy and a stagnant, if not actually shrinking agricultural economy. In an underdeveloped economy where the rate of growth of non-agricultural sector is slow, millions in the rural side have no escape from agriculture.

Agriculture in India accounts for about half of the National Income and Agricultural Labour forms the largest single sector of the Indian labour force. Of the estimated number of 66.6 million rural households in 1970, the agricultural labour families numbered 16.3 million, which means 24.6 per cent of the total rural households. 57.1 per cent of them were landless while the remaining 42.9 per cent of them held some land either owned or taken on lease. This shows that the working force in agriculture has increased by almost identical amount from 73 million to 98 million, while working force in non-agricultural sector stands at about the same figure as at the beginning of the century.

Thus the general trend appears to be in the direction of increased dependence on agriculture. And yet, strangely enough, the problem of agricultural labour was not given attention it deserved, till the fifties of the present century. Even the two Royal Commissions, one on agriculture and the other on labour took little interest in this problem. The Royal Commission on Agriculture was prevented from even touching upon the problem. The Commission brushed aside the problem of agricultural labour in these words.

"The labour problem is therefore, from the agriculture point of view, a simple one, to lessen the pressure on land. The essential condition for relieving pressure on land is, therefore, in our opinion mobility."  

The census of 1931 was conducted only three years after the publication of the Royal Commission's report which revealed that the agricultural labour formed 38 per cent of the total agricultural population of the country.

Most of the Indian Economists followed the line adopted by the Royal Commission and paid minimum attention to the question of agricultural labour.

For example Sir M.B. Nanayati and J.J. Anjaria did not devote more than two and a half pages out of a total of about 400 pages in their classical work on "the Indian Royal problem". During all these years it was regarded that labour problem existed only in industries and the problem of agriculture labour was not worth giving much attention. Sir Atul C. Chaterjee long back deplored this state of affair. He wrote "We have seen how the state in India has acknowledged the need for providing suitable conditions of labour for Industrial and commercial workers. But as regards agricultural labourers, no effort has been made to provide suitable conditions of labour in ordinary times." Continuing he stated "nor must we forget that this class forms the pool from which the urban workers are recruited and to which they drift back. No substantial or effective rise can take place in the standard of living, if the wage earning classes in the

3. Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics, August 1952, Bombay, p.9
rural localities are left in their present condition.*4

Gilbert, Keating & Harold Mann and I.V. Lucas who conducted micro studies in Madras, Bombay and Punjab respectively although highlighted the socio-economic problems of this class of labour, had failed to suggest specific steps.

It was only in 1943 that the Tripartite Labour Conference while recommending an enquiry into the conditions of labour suggested that they should be extended to agricultural wage earners as well, the Labour Minister Conference held in October 1944 approved of such an enquiry but nothing was actually done.

Thus, though a few issues were raised from time to time in favour of agricultural workers, no concrete step was taken to help them till the year 1948. The main aim of the Act was to fix minimum wage for agricultural workers in various states. The main difficulty in the way of the Act was the lack of comprehensive data regarding the living conditions of

4. Ibid p.90
agricultural labourers. To obtain the required data, the Ministry of Labour conducted an All India Agricultural Labour Enquiry in close collaboration with the State Governments. This enquiry revealed for the first time that most of the 17.6 million non-agricultural labour families were leading a subhuman existence. Despite such eye-opening revelations, nothing more was done for the benefit of agricultural workers. The Second All India Labour enquiry which was conducted in 1955-56 after some years of operation of multipurpose community projects could have brought out the qualitative assessment of the condition of agriculture workers but it could only provide the mass of quantitative data. The second enquiry revealed that not only the number of agricultural workers was increasing but also that their economic conditions was deteriorating day by day. The Rural labour enquiry conducted in 1963-64 had a vast scope. This enquiry also highlighted the deteriorating condition of agricultural labour.

In 1966, the National Commission on Labour was appointed. The Commission itself conducted an
impressionistic survey covering 200 villages spread over 46 districts of the country. The findings of the commission were startling. Number of measures to ameliorate the rural poor were suggested and implemented under the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Plans and their impact needs to be assessed.

IMPORTANCE OF THE PROBLEM:

A study of this problem is important not merely because it involves a largest single group of the Indian population, but it is one which brings us face to face with the problems of the millions of the silent and down trodden masses of humanity. India is proverbially one of the poorest countries in the world; among Indian poor, the agriculture labourers are the poorest. The problem of agriculture labour is a problem of humanity as a whole and due importance must be given to it. It is true that with the growing pace of development per capita income is increasing, but in the light of this increase in per capita income and absence of any improvement in the conditions of agricultural workers, the basic objective
of planning and development vis. improvement in the levels of living of the lowest category of working class can never be achieved. A great majority of agricultural labourers belong to the Scheduled Caste and Tribes therefore, the upliftment of the farm workers means the upliftment of the depressed classes. The problem of agriculture labourers directly influences the problem of poverty, of agricultural production, of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Any improvement in the life and living of agricultural workers would have a direct bearing on all the aforesaid problems.

During the past ten years all out efforts are being made under the several schemes vigorously launched with the sole purpose of improving the miserable conditions of the rural poor, specially the agricultural labourers. Their impact needs to be carefully assessed but from what is clearly seen it may be said that all our efforts are like a drop in the ocean. Several micro studies, official and non-official have already revealed that the benefits of these schemes have not been able to reach the real
poor. The case of the poorest segment of rural sector viz, the agricultural labourers deserves to be properly presented, studied and analysed to that suitable measures, could be adopted for their amelioration and betterment.

IMPORTANCE OF MICRO STUDIES:

India is a large country with an area of about 1.3 million sq. miles. In such a country diversities and regional differences are found to be great. There are differences even within a district, taluk and block. These differences are usually associated with the differences in physical features, such as size of a village, the availability of communication facilities, administrative setup etc. may account for such differences.

The Sathya Sai taluk was set up in 1981 with a view to achieving administrative effectiveness in the implementation of planned schemes. The taluk comprises of fifty one villages.
A study of this type is the urgent need even for those who are in the charge of implementation of various developmental schemes.

**OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND METHOD OF STUDY:**

Problems of rural labour are economic and social. The first has its origin in the chronic lack of gainful employment opportunities in rural areas, low and uncertain wages, lack of initiative and entrepreneurial skill and also the age old problem of indebtedness. While, the second has its origin in the low status of agriculture labour in the rural hierarchy, the caste system, the exploitation of the poor by the rich and illiteracy. It is however largely felt that if the economic problem is effectively tackled, some of the social disabilities will lose their edge.

This endeavour therefore is devoted to the study of the position of Agricultural labour in the total population structure of the taluk with regard to
| (1) their family size     | (6) state of indebtedness |
| (2) caste structure       | (7) state of health       |
| (3) employment            | (8) pattern of housing    |
| (4) wages and earnings    | (9) literacy              |
| (5) levels of living      | (10) general living       |

This is therefore a study of the agricultural villages in the taluq and the agricultural workers living in the villages. The objective of the study of family composition is to know firstly the average size of family, secondly to know the number of earners and dependents in a family. The general hypothesis is that poorer a family, larger is the number of earners and lesser is the number of dependents.

It is believed that the level of literacy under various educational programmes is gradually improving. The data on literacy has been collected to study this aspect. It is also believed that under the various schemes launched by the Government, the opportunities for non-agricultural employment and self-employment have appreciably increased. The study therefore covers the data on employment, unemployment,
seasonal employment and under-employment. Wages all over have increased. The wage rate data in agricultural work and non-agricultural work and the earnings of the agricultural workers from agricultural and non-agricultural work and self-employment work will examine this hypothesis. Similarly with the tremendous expansion in the commercial bank branches, setting up of rural banks and liquidation of the traditional money lenders. It is but natural to assume that the level of indebtedness has decreased and there are better opportunities for getting cheaper credit for productive work, the data on the state of indebtedness will reveal the position of agricultural labour in this regard. The fruits of economic development and planning, it is urged have not reached the poor section of the society. The state of health of the agricultural workers, their housing and living conditions have also been studied to get the factual picture of the situation.

Scope:

The study covers a period of one year only, i.e., the year 1982-83 but wherever necessary depending
on the availability of information data concerning past 3 to 5 years may be made use of. The study is limited to Satya Sai taluq only.

**Method of Study:**

This enquiry into the social conditions of agricultural labour spread over 51 villages comprising the recently set up Satya Sai taluk, has been conducted with the help of the available secondary data and the primary data which is collected though pre-tested standard questionnaires. Secondary data was collected from the 1981 population census and the revenue records available in the taluk office. The data published by the fourth agricultural labour enquiry, N.S.S. and other institutions and individuals, has been made use of. For the collection of primary data three different types of questionnaires were prepared. Questionaire 'A' was meant for the Panchayats and the village level workers. The information about the agricultural labour family, collected from the head of the family was secured with the help of questionaire 'B'. Questionaire 'C' was drafted specifically for the cultivator, to
Illicit information about the pattern of landownership, crops, raised, cropping pattern, coping season, terms and conditions of employment of attached and casual workers and the man days required for different agricultural operations. The questionnaires are given in Appendix II.

For the purpose of study the villages were divided into three categories viz., large villages with a population of 1,827 and above, the medium size villages with a population of above 1,300 and below 1,827, and the small villages below the population of 1300. The table given below describes the method of selection of villages and the selection of the sample.

Table 1.1
Selection of villages and Samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Large villages</th>
<th>Medium villages</th>
<th>Small villages</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Total number of villages</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Total number of Agricultural labour families</td>
<td>13,240</td>
<td>2,525</td>
<td>1,420</td>
<td>17,185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Sample of Agricultural labour families</td>
<td>1,324</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>1,719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Percent of sample families to total families</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the selection of the sample agricultural workers from each of the three categories of villages, a random sample of 10 per cent of the total agricultural workers was selected, for the purpose of the study of employment, wages and earnings, family expenditure, indebtedness and living conditions.