A STUDY ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN VIRUDHUNAGAR DISTRICT- TAMILNADU

Introduction

Agricultural labour is one of the most important segments of rural population in India as well as in TamilNadu. In numerical terms, they constitute about one fourth of the total work force. Their number has been rising faster than the rate of growth of rural population. Their contribution to rural economy is highly significant. According to 2001 Census, the total number of agricultural labourers in Srivilliputtur Taluk of Virudhunagar District, TamilNadu was 15.17 percent in absolute number it was 1, 05,392 out of which 14.91 percent were males and 15.43 percent were females. By the term agricultural labour we mean a person who sells his / her labour power to work to another person’s land for wages in money, kind or a share of the crop. According to the 1991 census definition “a person who works on another person’s land for wages in money, kind, or share is regarded as an agricultural labourer. He or she has no risk in cultivation, but merely works on another person’s land for wages. Agricultural labourers have no right of lease or contract on the land on which, he or she works” (Census of India, 1991, paper III of 1991, p. 76). Thus, the census definition clearly excludes tenants as well as marginal farmers and includes only landless labourers. The definition adopted by us would be broader in the sense that it would include all those for whom sale of labour power in the agricultural sector is a source of livelihood.

The living condition and the standard of living of agricultural labourers would mainly depend upon the income earned by them. It will also depend upon the number of employment
days available in a year. Moreover, it is influenced by their level of consumption and the degree of their indebtedness. Therefore, in order to judge the standard of living of agricultural labourers, it is absolutely essential to find out their total income, consumption and indebtedness.

In the early 1970s it was pointed out by a number of economists (Bardhan, 1984, 1986; Krishnaji, 1971; Jose, 1974) that in spite of the process of planned economic development having been in existence for quite some time, the agricultural labourers continued to face a grim situation in most parts of the country. The institutional reforms that were undertaken during the post – independence period largely ignored them (Joshi, 1975, 1987). Results of the various large scale surveys (e.g. Agricultural and Rural Labour Enquiries), on important economic variables relating to agricultural labourers, such as wages, employment etc. revealed that except in few pockets, there had been no perceptible improvement in their material condition. The performance of six to seven major states accounting for almost 75 percent of the agricultural labourers in the country had been particularly dismal in this respect (Bardhan 1984, 1986; Krishnaji, 1971; Jose, 1974; among others). Thus, the existing scenario did not seem to hold much promise for the majority of agricultural labourers. However, not every researcher shared the depressing view on the change in the economic condition of agricultural labourers (e.g. Lal, 1979). Given the nature of the evidence, based primarily on large scale data systems, there was lively discussion on the issue relating to the changing conditions of agricultural labourers.

Broadly speaking, the present study hopes to make a modest contribution to the large and growing literature on the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers during the
period since 1980s. However, the present study mainly focuses on the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers in contemporary Tamil Nadu, where agricultural labours constitute about one fourth of the total work force. From the survey of existing literature it appears that very few studies have been undertaken in Tamil Nadu on this problem, although there have been quite a good number of studies in other states of India. Since the eighties till the late nineties vast changes have taken in the rural socio-economic scenarios in Tamil Nadu also. A large area has come under the new agricultural strategy. Along with bio-technological change in agricultural there has been a perceptible increase in agricultural production and productivity. The new agricultural technology has two types of effect on employment of labour, viz, labour displacing and labour absorbing effects. Therefore, the pertinent central question that arises in this context is how the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers are changing under this socio-techno-economic milieu? To get answer to this question we would like to seek answer to another question. What has been the direction of change in agricultural wage rates and number of days of employment per agricultural labourer, which must have effect on income, consumption, and indebtedness of agricultural labourers in Tamil Nadu during 1990s and the 2000s? We focus on this question, as wage rate and employment availability are the most important quantitative factors that determine material condition of agricultural labourers. However, along with this question we shall also try to find answer to several other relevant questions for our purpose of findings answer to the central question.

Since there is a large gap in literature providing answer to these very significant questions related to a vast section of the poor and depressed section of rural population in Tamil Nadu, we find this point of time, the beginning of the third millennium, very appropriate to make a socio-economic study on their income, consumption and indebtedness.
However, given the time and resource constraints of an individual researcher we would like to choose Virudhunagar district, a predominantly agricultural district of Tamil Nadu, for the purpose of an in-depth study. The proposed study would be an in-depth analysis at micro level of employment, wages and other factors that affect the income, consumption and indebtedness of agricultural labourers. However, we shall also use some macro-level data wherever necessary.

We would try to enquire into the above-mentioned questions at two levels. First, we shall do it at the level of the state, on the basis of the existing literature and the secondary data available to us. Secondly, by undertaking micro-studies in twelve villages from six-development blocks in Virudhunagar district of Tamil Nadu.

Socio-economic condition of agricultural labourers depends upon a number of factors, e.g., income, consumption, asset holding position, availability of farm and non-farm employment, wage rates indebtedness etc., are the obvious crucial quantitative factors which determine their socio-economic condition. In the case of micro study it is possible to take a look at many of these factors, so as to be able to present a relatively comprehensive picture with reasonable confidence. This is one of the objectives of the present study. Our study will make an effort to construct such a picture of the material condition of agricultural labourers, at about the middle of the first decade of the present century in the selected villages by focusing on different aspects related to their income, consumption and indebtedness.

**Objectives of the study**

The major objective of the present study is to analyse the levels of socio-economic conditions of the agricultural labourers. The aim is to study the sources, composition and pattern of income, consumption and indebtedness of the agricultural labourers. In addition, an attempt has been made to study the assets and liabilities of agricultural labourers. We have
classified agricultural labourers under two heads: (i) near landless agricultural labourers and (ii) marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers. More specifically the objectives of the study are:

- To study the influence of the selected socio-economic factors on labour union participation in the study area.
- To compare and contrast the relative share of different sources in the composition of the total income.
- To analyze the pattern of employment and income among the rural agricultural households in Srivilliputtur Taluk of Virudhunagar District.
- To document the extend of earning and indebtedness prevalent among these households in the study area.
- To study the composition of assets and liabilities of the agricultural labourers.

**Methodology**

The present study is partly based on aggregated data about the agricultural labourer of Srivilliputtur Taluk of Virudhunagar District of TamilNadu collected from government and semi-government sources. But this macro level data and the study based on it cannot provide proper insight into the real factors existing in Srivilliputtur Taluk. It is micro level study, i.e., village level studies that can properly describe the present state of affairs in the rural labour sector of Srivilliputtur Taluk. In our macro level studies we have given only origin and growth of agricultural labourer in Srivilliputtur Taluk of Virudhunagar District as well as TamilNadu. But it cannot answer satisfactorily the question such as – which factors are responsible for difference in income, consumption and indebtedness of the agricultural labourers in the Taluk. To obtain answer to such questions it is necessary to make a comparative analysis of the sources of income, pattern of consumption and indebtedness of
the agricultural labourers at the household level. This in turn calls for field study with individual household as unit of observation and accordingly a field survey was carried out as a part of the study in a few selected villages in the Taluk based on random sampling. The ultimate aim of the field survey is to find out the source, composition and pattern of income and consumption of the agricultural labourers.

The taluk of Srivilliputtur in Virudhunagar district of Tamil Nadu is purposively selected for the study in view of the strong agricultural labour unions existed in this district. This block was purposively selected based on the co-existence of union and non-union labourers. From the selected block was randomly selected. In each village a sample of 15 union labourers and 15 non-union labourers were contacted for collecting information pertaining to the study. Therefore totally 60 members of agricultural labour union were contacted thus making the sample size to 120. The study was conducted during the month of June-July and the reference year for the study was 2009-2010. Simple percentages and averages were worked out to analyse the general characteristics of the samples. Moreover, a Probit regression was run to understand the influence of socio-economic factors like age, education, consumption expenditure and income from non-agricultural activities had on agricultural labour union participation. In this study a probit model of the type

\[ I_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Age} + \beta_2 \text{Edu} + \beta_3 \text{Conexp} + \beta_4 \text{Inagr} + U_i \]

Where,

\( I_i \)-The unobservable utility index which determines the presence or absence of labour union participation

\( \text{AGE} \)- Age of the labourer (years)

\( \text{EDU} \)- Educational status of the labourer (No. of years)

\( \text{CONEXP} \)-Consumption expenditure of the labour household (Rupees)
INAGR - Income from non-agricultural activities (Rupees)

$\beta_0$ - Intercept and $\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4$ are the respective coefficients.

**Selection of Area for Field Study**

There are five blocks have been chosen randomly for the study and each block there were 100 households questionnaire collected from the respondents in Srivilliputtur Taluk of Virudhunagar district. We classified the blocks in three strata according to their level of development. These strata represented highly developed, moderately developed and less developed blocks respectively. After then two blocks were selected randomly from each strata i.e., altogether five blocks have been chosen which we believe, mostly represent the entire taluk.

From each block one revenue villages and from each village 100 households have been selected for field study, i.e., 50 households for near landless agricultural labourer and 50 households for marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers. Altogether we selected 500 households from the categories of near landless agricultural labourers, marginal farmer-cum-agricultural – labours.

**Tools and Techniques of Data Collection**

Data have been collected by the researcher through questionnaire by personal interview with the relevant respondents. Data on farm and non-farm employment and wages, other sources of income, consumption level and pattern, indebtedness, asset holding position, education, health etc. have been collected. Various books, journals, bulletins, articles, reports, documents etc. have been consulted together for relevant data and information.

Well structured questionnaire is used which contains production, productivity, income, labour employment and wages, mode of cultivation etc. Replies to questions of this
cultivator questionnaire have helped us to compare and tally the replies to some of the questions given by agricultural labourers. This schedule of questionnaire was finalized after a number of tests and checks in the field.

**A Brief introduction about the Evolution of Agricultural Labourers**

Historically, socio-economic power was concentrated in the hands of powerful persons in slaveholding age in the hands of feudal lords in feudal period and in the hands of capitalists in the age of capitalism. Mencher (1983) quotes N. Sastri to trace casual references in the inscriptions we can dimly perceive the existence of a class of hired day-labourers who assisted in agriculture operation on the estates of other people and received a daily wage, usually in grain. There was no clear line of division between the absolutely landless agrarian labourers and the small peasant hiring himself out in his spare time..... In several instances a gift of land for same public purpose.....Is found to include some proportion set apart for the residences of the families of labourers engaged in its cultivation, such labourers were not peasant proprietors by any means, and were nearer the class of hired labourers than tenants; they were entitled to the use of house-site near enough to the place of their work and to get wages fixed in advance, the proceeds of their labour on land on which they worked.”

The ‘varna’ system of earlier times was a mechanism of social differentiation among the masses. The socio-economically advantaged and subjugated groups also denote primitive process of class differentiation. In many places, the working people have been identified by various names. For example, as Raj mentions; at the bottom of the hierarchy were the communities at the periphery of Hindu caste structure such as Pulays, who generally supplied labour for the more arduous-operation involved in cultivation (like ploughing, weeding and harvesting of land under paddy) and were in effect aggressive slaves.
Saradamoni (1980) has also talked about the slow Pulays; “Pulays in the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century did not have a life of their own. They never worked or earned a living for themselves. Their entire life was dependent on the master. They did not even own their children. They begetted children so that the master could have a continuous supply of workers. Naturally they did not make decisions or plans either for themselves or for their children. Their time was wholly their master’s and they had no particular hours, which them either for rest or for prayer.”

In India and other parts of the world the social origin of agricultural workers as a proletariat class is an outcome of the process of property differentiation, which had its roots in the class domination by the ruling class. Thus, the social origin is an economic issue, which could be seen, in various socio-economics structure. This point is highlighted in the following quote of Mencher. “There were those who were absolutely indigent in the fullest sense, the landless labourers, members of the depressed castes not only undertook work considered abhorrent by the caste peasants, such as tannery, scavenging, etc. but were also in a large measure agricultural workers. Thus Chamars and Dhanuks who had their own prescribed occupations, worked as agricultural labourers ..... The caste system seems to be have worked in its inexorable way to create a fixed labour reserve force for agricultural production. Members of the low caste, assigned to the most menial and contemptible occupations, could never aspire to the status of peasants holding or cultivating land on their own”. From the above delineation we get a glimpse of the origin of agricultural workers in India.

**Justification of the Study**

The fundamental issues of the study deal with the income, consumption pattern and indebtedness of agricultural labourers of TamilNadu which has full justification due to
several reasons. Prior to this nobody has done any research work on the subject or akin to
this. In fact this will, perhaps, be the first attempt to deal with and explore in to the various
aspects of the agricultural labourers of Virudhunagar district of TamilNadu.

Moreover, the present study will provide ample scope to realize the real position of
the agricultural labourers in respect of the pattern of their income, consumption and
indebtedness. This will lead us to justify whether their income levels are sufficient enough to
meet the basic expenditure. Generally, there is always a deficit in their income compared to
the required level of consumptions. Therefore, in the present study, suggestions will be made
to make the income and expenditure commensurate by increasing their wages and other
means of income, so that their living standard may be improved. In this way, the present
study appears to be quite justified.

Limitations of the Study

Every investigation and study has certain limitations. Similarly the present study
about the income, consumption and indebtedness of agricultural labourers has certain
limitations of time, study area, sample and other investigation facilities. The present
investigation was conducted in a limited geographical area consisting of particular agro-
climatic and socio-economic conditions of Virudhunagar district of TamilNadu. Therefore,
the finding emanating from the study may not be applicable in all types of socio-economic
conditions of our country. Of course the findings of the present study would be applicable in
Srivilliputtur taluk of Virudhunagar district of TamilNadu and elsewhere having similar
socio-economic conditions while the general conclusions arrived at may be of value of other
spheres subject to adjustment.
Profile of the District

Virudhunagar District is landlocked on all sides with no direct access to the sea. It is bound on the north by Madurai, on the north-east by Sivaganga, on the east by Ramanathapuram and on the south by Tirunelveli and Tuticorin districts. Physiographically it consists of two distinct regions. The eastern slopes of the Western Ghats in Srivilliputtur and Rajapalayam taluks and the black soil plains of Sivakasi, Virudhunagar, Sattur, Aruppukkottai, Tiruchili and Kariapatti. Virudhunagar does not have any perennial rivers. The Vaippar, Arjuna nadi, and Gundar constitute the river network of the District. Numerous streams and rivulets, activated by the monsoon, feed these rivers. The Mandiri odai and Girudhamal nadi flow into the Gundar, which irrigates the northeastern region of the District. The Sengundrapuram odai, Kausika manadi, Uppodai and Mannarkottaiyar are feeder streams of the Arjuna nadi, which flows through the central portion of the District. The Kayalkudiyar and Nichepa nadi join the Vaippar, which runs through the southern part of the District. According to the 2001 census the percentage of literate population in the District is 62.91. The percentage of male literacy is 75.67% and female literacy is 50.17. The total population of this district is 17,51,548 out of which 8,70,820 are male and 8,80,728 are females.

The Conceptual Framework

Our motivation for understanding village studies is primarily due to our interest in some issue, related to the socio-economic conditions of income, consumption and indebtedness of agricultural labourers, for which large scale data systems may not be particularly useful. While providing the possibility of appropriate contextualisation of quantitative information, the village-studies approach is likely to yield better results when one is attempting to understand the various economic processes influencing the material
conditions of agricultural labour households, such as the evolution of labour market, the process of wage formation, the strategies of control used by the employer and the labourers’ responses to it, or more generally the relational attributes underlying a host of economic variables. We choose to undertake village studies with the hope that such studies would facilitate a better understanding of some of these critical issues, compared to what the large scale surveys permit. However, to get a comprehensive and a more complete picture of the different issues of the phenomenon under study we shall also use state, district, block and even village level data (to be obtained through Gaon Panchayats). Secondary data will be collected to compare and tally with the collected primary data.

**Outcome of the Research**

The increasing vulnerability among the agricultural labourers is inevitable due to feckless schemes of the governments. This research is a module for attempting the whole issues of agricultural labourers was done primarily based on both primary and secondary data, the research analyses the employment generation, income of different categories of labour and the extend of indebtedness and earning prevalent among rural landless labourers and agricultural households in Srivilliputtur Taluk of Virudhunagar District of TamilNadu with a view to understanding their livelihood patterns. In this Taluk—where more than 85 per cent of the population is rural—a third of rural households constitute landless labour households which depend completely on wage employment. Another 60 per cent of rural households are comprised of marginal farmers and small farmers who do not generate sufficient income from their land. Even small farmers with up to five acres supplement their agriculture with outside jobs or wage employment. The evidence relating to rural labour households and agricultural labour households shows an explicit overall decline in employment both for male and female labour. There is also a decline in the average number of earning members per
Clearly, the rural labour households and agricultural labour households in this state are characterised by low earning, decline in income, low consumption and high debt, and remedies will have to be found to generate more employment and income. Since independence, there is a significant improvement in India’s economic and social development. In the post-reform (since 1991) period, India has done well in some indicators such as balance of payments, resilience to external shocks, service sector growth, significant accumulation of foreign exchange, Information Technology (IT) and stock market, improvements in telecommunications etc. GDP growth was around 8 to 9% per annum in the period of 2004-05 to 2007-08. Investment and savings rates were quite high 32 to 36%. However, exclusion continued in terms of low agricultural growth, low quality employment growth, low human development, rural-urban divides, gender and social inequalities, and regional disparities etc. In spite of all, several efforts have been made by both governments in order to promote livelihoods of the agricultural labourers across in India. Eventually, the TamilNadu has made remarkable progress in certain sectors of its economy but this had led to no perceptible improvement in the living conditions of agricultural labourers. There are some acute poverty persist in the agricultural sector. However, in Srivilliputtur Taluk of Virudunagar district is having acute poverty among agricultural labourers due to indiscrimination of wage paid to the labourers, using mechanized practices, cultivation of single crop due to failure of irrigation facilities and other social factors are highly vulnerable.
References


STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

FIRST CHAPTER deals with an introduction of agricultural labourers in general, statement of the problem, justification of the study, objectives of the study, research methodology, research questions and hypotheses, and outcome of the research.

SECOND CHAPTER portrays all relevant Literature with regard to agricultural labourers.

THIRD CHAPTER reveals that the Origin and Growth of Agricultural Labourers in TamilNadu since 1961. It discusses the delineated trends of growth of agricultural labourers in TamilNadu since independence along with an analysis of the trends in their level of income, consumption and indebtedness since 1980s. The chapter is based on secondary data.

FOURTH CHAPTER exhibits the levels and pattern of Income of Agricultural Labourers. An attempt has been made to estimate the total and per capita income; analyse the composition of income of different income groups and to compare and contract the differences across the villages, and to estimate the extent of poverty among the agricultural labourers.

FIFTH CHAPTER deals the consumption pattern of Agricultural Labourers in Srivilliputtur Taluk of Virudhunagar District of TamilNadu. It discusses the influence of the selected socio-economic factors on labour union participation in the study area.

SIXTH CHAPTER deals the Indebtedness of Agricultural Labourers in the study area.

SEVENTH CHAPTER deals concluding remarks based on the whole summary of the entire chapters and suggested policy issues.