



PROBLEMS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN INDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT-----

Agricultural laborers are the socially and economically poorest section of the society. Agricultural laborers are those who work on the land of others on wages. They constitute the historically deprived social groups, displaced handicraftsmen, and dispossessed peasantry. They are the poorest of the poor in rural India. Overcrowding and growth of agricultural laborers continued unabated, given poor labor absorption in the non-agricultural sector and also inadequacies of reforms in the agrarian structure. They are facing a multitude of challenges, including low wages, seasonal employment, irregular working hours, lack of job security, high debt levels, exploitation of child and women labor, etc.

The present labor force survey report stated the percentage of workers in the agriculture sector increased marginally from 45.5 percent in 2021-22 to 45.8 percent in 2022-23 and 46.1 percent in 2023-24. The wages of agriculture varied state to state, ranging between Rs. 200 and 300. In the same way, they do not get a regular basis of work, and to a large extent, they remain unemployed and underemployed. This chapter attempts to critically examine the agricultural laborers in India who face a variety of problems and challenges. Still, the government enacted many policies and schemes for resolving labor problems in India but failed to stop migration to other sectors and unemployment.

KEY WORDS: *Agricultural Labours, Problems, Causes, Schemes, Polices, -----*

I. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is known as a fundamental instrument for sustainable development, and it helps in poverty reduction as it is the main source of food, income, and employment for the rural population of the world. However, the share of the agricultural population in the total populace is 67%. Agriculture accounts for 39.4% of the GDP, and 43% of all exports consist of agricultural goods.¹ Indian agriculture was marked by a plentiful supply of farm labor till recent years. The available labor force remained underutilized due to the residuary nature of work in the agriculture sector. One of the apparent reasons for the over-supply of labor was low levels of productivity and wages in farming, which encouraged more labor inclusion to earn a subsistence level of income from the non-farm activities. This may give rise to a negative association between labor productivity and absorption in the farming sector.² However, the overcrowding and growth of agricultural laborers continued unabated, given poor labor absorption in the non-agricultural sector and also inadequacies of reforms in the agrarian structure. The poverty syndrome among agricultural laborers needs to be read against such a background of prolonged rural underdevelopment, assetlessness, unemployment, low wages, under nutrition, illiteracy, and social backwardness that constitutes the poverty syndrome among agricultural laborers.³ They counted in the category of the unorganized sector, so their income is not fixed. Hence, they are living an insecure and underprivileged life and earning just Rs. 150/day with full uncertainty. Further,

¹ Neela Multani and Sanghvi A.N. Women Workers in Agricultural Sector: A Literature Review, IRA-International Journal of Management & Social Sciences, Vol.06, No.01, 2017, Pp.25-26.

² Venu B.N. et al., Agricultural Labour Migration And Remittances in Karnataka State of India, International Journal of Agriculture Sciences, Vol.8, No.8, November 30th 2016, P,3227.

³ Manasa A, Socio-economic condition of agriculture Labor in India, International Journal of Applied Research, Vol.08, No.06, 2022, P.108.



agricultural laborers, who are mainly landless and form a major part of rural society, mainly depend on wage employment in the agriculture sector. They were the victim of social and economic exploitation.⁴

The latest data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) shows that the total percentage of agricultural laborers in India for 2023-24 is 46.1%. This is a slight increase from 45.8% in 2022-23 and 45.5% in 2021-22.⁵ However they were facing a multitude of challenges, including low wages, seasonal employment, irregular working hours, lack of job security, high debt levels, exploitation of child and women labor, inadequate access to social security benefits, and a low social status due to their dependence on landowning farmers, often leading to underemployment and vulnerability to exploitation during harvest seasons. The chapter includes problems of agricultural laborers, government policy measures, and suggestions for improvement of the agricultural labor. The chapter explains that agricultural laborers condition is not good in India, and the government should take some proper action to improve the conditions of agricultural labor.

II. OBJECTIVES OF CHAPTER

1. To identify the problems of agricultural labours in India
2. To study measures taken by government for agricultural labours in India

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present chapter is to assess the problems being faced by agricultural labor and measures taken by the government for them. The study of the agricultural labour problem of India is based on a secondary method of data collection from various books, newspapers, government publication reports etc.,

IV. AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN INDIA:

Agricultural laborers in India are considered one of the most neglected and marginalized groups in rural society, facing issues like low income, irregular employment, lack of skills, social backwardness, and often belonging to scheduled castes and tribes, resulting in a poor quality of life with limited opportunities for improvement; this is largely due to their landless status and dependence on others for work on farms, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and low wages.⁶ They are provided mostly by economically and socially backward sections; poor sections from the tribes also fall in this rank. The first group of agricultural workers was more or less in the position of serfs or slaves; they are also known as bonded labour. They do not normally receive wages in cash but are generally paid in kind. They have to work for their masters and cannot shift from one to another. They have to provide for beggars or forced labour. In some cases, they have to offer cash and also supply fowls and goats to their masters.⁷

A. GROWTH OF AGRICULTURE LABOURS IN INDIA

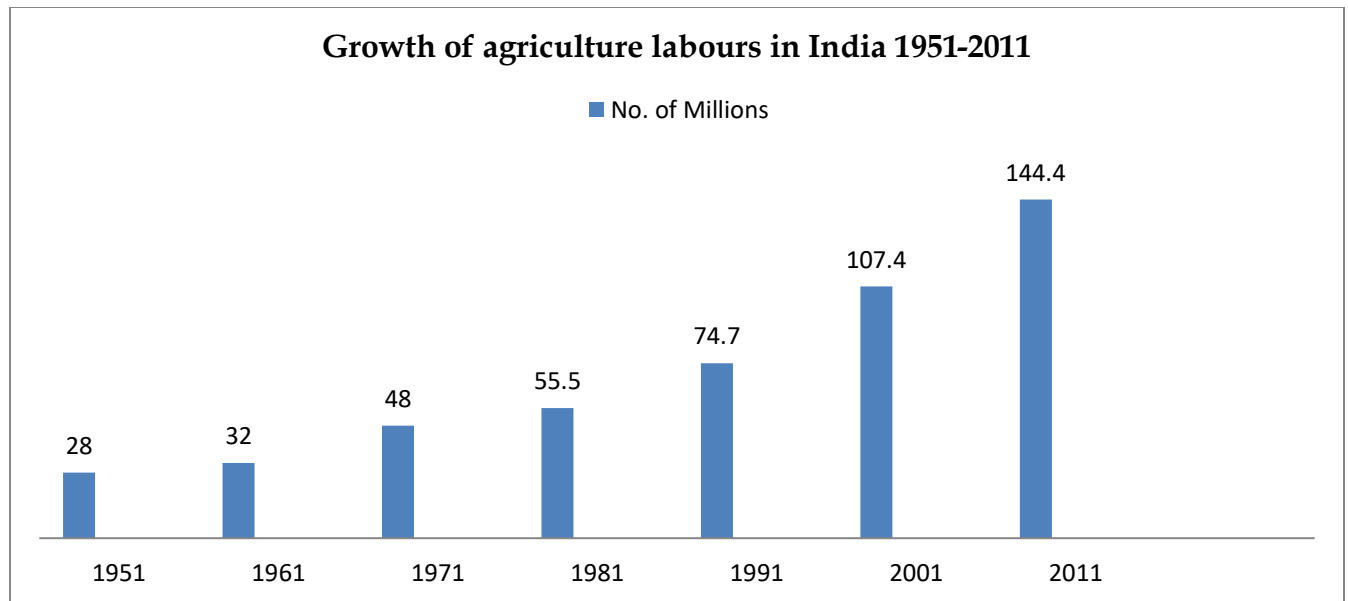
It appears from available evidence that before independence our country was unaware of any such phenomenon which later on came to be known as the class of agricultural labourer. The Indian census reports from 1961 to 2011 are one of the earliest warning notes about the growth of surplus population on land. It was cumulative effect of a large number of factors like land tenure, monetization and commercialization of the agriculture and decline of the handicrafts, etc. During the period after independence the proportion of agricultural labour continued to be increased.

⁴ Gurralla Sreenivasulu and Venkatamuni Reddy, *A Review Study on Conditions of Rural Agricultural Labourers in India*, Juni Khyat Vol-10 Issue-7 No. 10 July 2020, P.210.

⁵ *Annual Report of Periodic labor Force Survey, (PLFS) for the year 2023-24*, <https://www.mospi.gov.in> > annual-report-periodic-labour force survey

⁶ Hiralal J and Debarata B, *Agricultural labours of India: Bedrock of dynamic agriculture*, *International journal of current research*, Vol. 16, No.1, 2024, P.2935.

⁷ Ramanathan T. *Labour Agriculture in India-Some Issues*, *Shanlax International Journal of Commerce*, Vol. 5; No. 2; April – 2017 P.46.

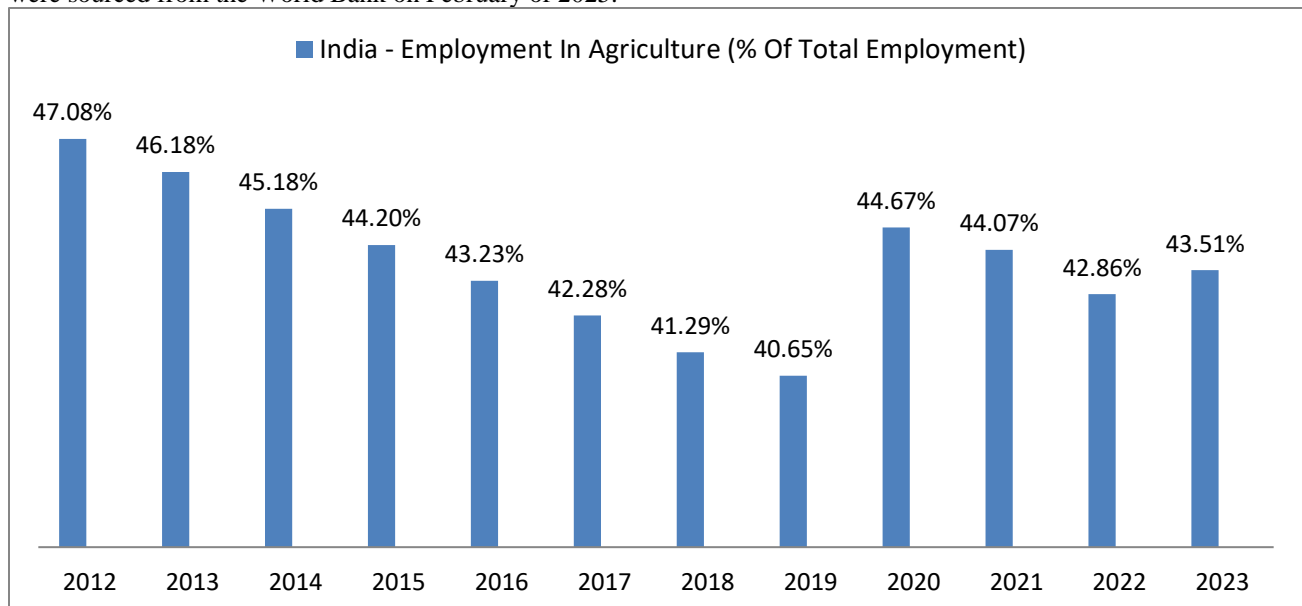


Source: Census 2011

The data provided in Table shows that the proportion of agricultural Labourers tended to rise with the increasing year in Indian economy. Such proportion was estimated at 28.0 million and 144.3 million in 1951 and 2011, respectively.⁸

B. INDIA - EMPLOYMENT IN AGRICULTURE (% OF TOTAL EMPLOYMENT):

The employment in agriculture (% of total employment) (modeled ILO estimate) in India was reported at 43.51 % in 2023, according to the World Bank collection of development indicators, compiled from officially recognized sources. India - Employment in agriculture (% of total employment) - actual values, historical data, forecasts and projections were sourced from the World Bank on February of 2025.



Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/india/employment-in-agriculture-percent-of-total-employment-wb-data.html>.⁹

C. AVERAGE AGRICULTURE WAGE RATE FOR LABOR IN DIFFERENT STATES IN INDIA

⁸ Gobind Kumar Das, Problems of Agricultural Labour in India, International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology (IJIRSET) Volume 9, Issue 7, July 2020 P. 6207.

⁹ Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/india/employment-in-agriculture-percent-of-total-employment-wb-data.html>



The Government of India has long been reporting agricultural wages in different States. There are 18 States considered in this study, each with a population above five million. Table No. 1 presents the yearly money wages earned by men and women engaged in field labour operations from 2015-16 to 2019-20. The final year reported in the table is probably the last “normal” year noted in Indian labour markets before the Covid-19 pandemic. The table includes yearly averages and median wages, standard deviation, and coefficients of variation among the 18 States.

Table 1 Average agricultural wage rate for field labour, men and women, States of India, 2015-16 to 2019-20 rupees per day

Average agricultural wage rate for field labour										
State	Men					Women				
	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Andhra Pradesh	295	321	331	362	381	200	224	239	256	272
Assam	245	275	278	288	318	200	227	229	232	252
Bihar	215	235	246	270	297	203	216	227	244	264
Chhattisgarh	181	201	200	214	234	134	142	135	153	170
Gujarat	176	211	219	228	251	156	187	196	203	228
Haryana	388	390	416	440	453	322	320	350	373	385
Himachal Pradesh	276	278	300	322	338	252	266	279	300	312
Jharkhand	182	226	263	256	258	170	202	232	230	239
Karnataka	272	326	354	384	366	245	280	310	357	336
Kerala	576	582	613	673	701	427	454	482	506	525
Madhya Pradesh	213	230	246	249	265	184	199	210	213	226
Maharashtra		132	261	278	328	209	90	131	209	225
Orissa	224	239	270	280	307	173	191	227	239	257
Punjab	373	395	403	412	425					
Rajasthan	300	314	336	357	368	247	261	269	302	303
Tamil Nadu	334	327	346	372	392	142	153	167	180	195
Uttar Pradesh	238	233	241	260	269	216	212	223	236	248
West Bengal	259	267	274	279	305	219	225	236	236	256
All India Average	281	296	315	330	348	218	228	244	262	276
Rajasthan	300	314	336	357	368	247	261	269	302	303
Standard Deviation	96.11	96.32	93.69	104.59	104.48	68.75	77.38	80.29	82.38	79.84
Average of States	279.24	287.89	310.94	329.11	347.56	217.59	226.41	243.65	262.88	276.06
Coefficient of variation	34.42	33.46	30.13	31.78	30.06	31.59	34.18	32.95	31.34	28.92
Median wages	259	271	276	284	323	203	216	229	236	256

Source: Agricultural Wages in India

Note: **Entries in bold:** States with wages above the median; *Entries in Italics:* States with wages below the median
The variation in wages for men and women among the States of India is pronounced. Kerala has the highest wage for men (columns 2-6) and women (columns 7-11) as given in Table 1. This observation applies not only for the years under review but also for several decades in the past. Other States consistently on top of the ranking are Haryana, Punjab, Tamil Nadu (for men only), Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh (for women only).

The relative positioning of States suggests that the ordering of men’s wages roughly corresponds to the ordering of women’s wages, and that the overall ranking in both cases has mostly remained unchanged.



The low-wage States –Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh – are in the heartland of India, while the high-wage States are in the south and northwest. It appears that some of the more urbanised and industrially advanced States – Gujarat, Maharashtra, West Bengal, and for women in Tamil Nadu – have reported low agricultural wages. At the same time, State-wide variation has tended to diminish over the years, as indicated by the coefficients of variation.¹⁰

V. CLASSIFICATION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

Agricultural labourers can be divided into four categories -

- 1) Landless Labourers, who are attached to the land lords;
- 2) Landless labourers, who are personally independent, but who work exclusively for others;
- 3) Petty farmers with tiny bits of land who devote most of their time working for others and
- 4) Farmers who have economic holdings but who have one or more of their sons and dependants working for other prosperous farmers. The first groups of labourers have been more or less in the position of serfs or slaves; they are also known as bonded labourers.¹¹

A. Agricultural labourers can also be divided in the following manner

- i. Landless agricultural labourers
- ii. Very small cultivators whose main source of earnings due to their small and sub-marginal holdings is wage employment.

B. Landless labourers in turn can be classified into two broad categories

1. Permanent Labourers attached to cultivating households.
2. Casual Labourers. The second group can again be divided into three subgroups :
 - i) Cultivators
 - ii) Share croppers
 - iii) Lease holders.

Permanent or attached labourers generally work on annual or seasonal basis and they work on some sort of contract. Their wages are determined by custom or tradition. On the other hand temporary or casual labourers are engaged only during peak period for work. Their employment is temporary and they are paid at the market rate. They are not attached to any landlords. Under second group comes small farmers, who possess very little land and therefore, has to devote most of their time working on the lands of others as labourers. Share croppers are those who, while sharing the produce of the land for their work, also work as labourers. Tenants are those who not only work on the leased land but also work as labourers.¹²

VI. PROBLEMS OF AGRICULTURE LABOURS IN INDIA

The well functioning factors markets are a crucial condition for the competitiveness and growth of agriculture and for rural development to ensure the determination of efficient wages, employment and the efficient allocation of scarce resources. These problems may be broadly categorized

- 1) **Marginalization of Agricultural Workers:** The workforce in agriculture (cultivator's plus agricultural labourers) was 97.2 million in 1951 and this rose to 185.2 million in 1991. As against this, the number of agricultural labourers rose from 27.3 million in 1951 to 74.6 million in 1991. This implies that (i) the number of agricultural labourers increased by almost three times over the period from 1951 to 1991; Agricultural labourers increased from 28 per cent in 1951 to 40 percent in 1991. These facts indicate the fast pace of casualization of workforce in agriculture in India. Moreover, the share of agriculture and allied activities in GDP at factor cost has consistently declined over the years - from 55.3 per cent in 1950-51 to 37.9 per cent in 1980-81 (at 1999-2000 prices) and further to 14.0 per cent in 2011-12 (at 2004-05 prices)

¹⁰ Jose, A. V. *Wage Rates in Agriculture Review of Agrarian Studies* Vol. 12, no. 1, January-June, 2022, P.145.

¹¹ Subbaiah. B, *Development of Agricultural Labourer in Rural, India, International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research*, Vol. 1, No.2, June 2012, P.512.

¹² Mahadevaswamy H. R, *Issues and Challenges of Agricultural labour in India: Special reference to ChamaraJanagara District of Karnataka International Journal of Innovative Research In Technology*, Vo. 10, No.4, September 2023, P.548



- 2) **Employment and Working Conditions:** The agricultural labourers have to face the problems of unemployment and underemployment. For a substantial part of the year, they have to remain unemployed because there is no work on the farms and alternative sources of employment do not exist.
- 3) **Wages and Income:** Agricultural wages and family incomes of agricultural workers are very low in India. With the advent of the Green Revolution, money wage rates started increasing. However, as prices also increased considerably, the real wage rates did not increase accordingly. Currently labours are getting around Rs. 150/day under the MGNREGA in rural areas.
- 4) **Indebtedness:** In the absence of banking system in the— rural areas and trial process of sanction by the commercial banks, farmers prefers to take loans from un institutional sources like Sahukars (moneylenders), landlords at the very high rate (in some cases at 40% to 50%) . Thise xorbitant rate traps in the vicious circle of debt.¹³
- 5) **Low Wages for women in Agricultural Labour:** Female agricultural workers are generally forced to work harder and paid less than their male counterparts.
- 6) **High Incidence of Child Labour:** Incidence of child labour is high in India and the estimated number varies from 17.5 million to 44 million. It is estimated that one-third of the child workers in Asia are in India.
- 7) **Increase in Migrant Labour:** Green Revolution significantly increased remunerative wage employment opportunities in pockets of assured irrigation areas while employment opportunities nearly stagnated in the vast rain fed semi-arid areas.¹⁴
- 8) **Seasonal Employment:** The agricultural labor does not get work for the whole year. According to the Second Agricultural Labor Investigation Society, a Seasonal labor gets an average of 197 days of work in a year. Similarly, child labor gets 204 days and women get 141 days of employment. Thus, their average annual income is very lower.
- 9) **Exploitation of Child and Women Laborers:** Due to lower income the children and women of agricultural laborers are also forced to work for their livelihood. The child and women laborers are made to work more for livelihood. Thus, exploitation of child labor and woman labor is a major problem in the field of agriculture
- 10) **Increase in migrant labour:** Green Revolution significantly increased remunerative wage employment opportunities in pockets of assured irrigation areas while employment opportunities nearly stagnated in the vast rain fed semi-arid areas.¹⁵

VI. CAUSES FOR THE GROWTH OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

There are a number of factors responsible for the continuous and enormous increase in the number of agricultural labourers in India. The more important among them are:

- i) Increase in population
- ii) Decline of cottage industries and handicrafts
- iii) Eviction of small farmers and tenants from land
- iv) Uneconomic Holdings
- v) Increase in indebtedness
- vi) Spread of the use of money and exchange system
- vii) Capitalistic Agriculture
- viii) Displacement of means of subsidiary
- ix) Occupations
- x) Disintegration of peasantry
- xi) Break-up of joint family system.¹⁶

¹³ Sawant, T.R. *Indian Agricultural Labour: Problems and Prospect*, International Journal for Scientific Research & Development, Vol. 5, Issue 01, 2017 Pp.65-66.

¹⁴ Mallikarjun Gadad et al, *An Economic Analysis of Agricultural Labours in India – An overview*, International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts Volume 11, Issue 6 June 2023 P.918.

¹⁵ Kayalvizhi, A., *Problems and Prospects of Agricultural Labourers in India – An Overview*, Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research, , Vol. 6, No. 1, January 2019, Pp.748-750.

¹⁶ Muna Kalyani, *Indian Agriculture Labour: Policy Prospects & Problems*, International Journal of Social Relevance & Concern, Vol.4, No.2, 2nd February, 2016, P.23.



VII. MEASURES TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT TO IMPROVE THE CONDITIONS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

The Government has shown awareness of the problems of agricultural workers and all plan documents have suggested ways and means to ameliorate the lot of these people. Measures adopted by the Government for ameliorating the economic conditions of Agricultural labourers are:

- 1) **Minimum wages Act:** The Minimum Wages Act was passed as long back as in 1948 and since then the necessity of applying it to agriculture has been constantly felt. Means the Act is not applicable to agricultural sector.
- 2) **Abolition of Bonded Labour:** Since Independence, attempts have been made to abolish the evil of bonded labour because it is exploitative, inhuman and violative of all norms of social justice. In the chapter on Fundamental Rights in the Constitution of India, it has been stated that trading in humans and forcing them to do *begar* is prohibited and can invite punishment under the law.
- 3) **Provision of housing sites:** Laws have been passed in several States for providing house sites in villages to agricultural workers.
- 4) **Special schemes for providing employment:** Rural Employment (CSRE), National Rural Employment Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana (JGSY), and National Food for Work Programme (NFFWP), Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act MGNREGA, National Scheme of Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSM), National Rural Employment Programme (NREP)
- 5) **Special agencies for development:** Special agencies - Small Farmers Development Agency (SFDA) and Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labourers Development Agency (MFAL) - were created in 1970-71 to solve the problems of Agriculture labour of the country.¹⁷

VIII. SUGGESTIONS

- 1) Better implementation of legislative measures.
- 2) Improvement the bargaining position.
- 3) Resettlement of agricultural workers
- 4) Creating alternative sources of employment
- 5) Protection of women and child labourers
- 6) Public works programmes should be for longer period in year
- 7) Improving the working conditions
- 8) Regulation of hours of work
- 9) Improvements in Agricultural sector
- 10) Credit at cheaper rates of interest on easy terms of payment for undertaking subsidiary occupation.
- 11) Proper training for improving the skill of farm labourers.

IX. CONCLUSION

The chapter finally concluded that agricultural laborers are socially and economically the poorest in society. Overcrowding and growth of agricultural laborers continued unabated, given poor labor absorption in the non-agricultural sector and also inadequacies of reforms in the agrarian structure. The condition of agricultural workers is not so good in many parts of India; their living standards and income are very low. To improve the conditions, the government should take proper steps for various aspects of agricultural labor, like wage reforms, new methods for agriculture, hours of work, improving the living conditions and overcoming natural factors like floods and erosion. Governments must take more effective steps for their upliftment and betterment.

¹⁷ Ishemant Singh, *Problems of Agricultural Labours in India*, <https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/problems-of-agricultural-labour-in-india-1446806332>, visited cite 30th January, 2024