



Socio-Economic Conditions Of Agricultural Laborers: A Case Study Of Ambalapara Grama Panchayat, Palakkad District, Kerala

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Abstract

Agricultural laborers constitute one of the most socio-economically deprived communities in India. Chronic poverty, limited education, underemployment, and lack of assets have perpetuated their vulnerability. This study examines the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers in Ambalapara Grama Panchayat, Palakkad district, Kerala. Based on primary data from 150 respondents and supplemented by secondary literature, the study reveals long working hours, seasonal employment, low income, and limited youth engagement as dominant concerns. The findings call for targeted policy reforms to address labour welfare, improve education, and incentivize youth participation in agriculture.

Keywords: Agricultural labourers, socio-economic status, rural poverty, employment, Palakkad, Kerala

1. Introduction

Agricultural labourers play a vital role in India's agrarian economy, yet they remain one of its most marginalized groups. These workers are often landless and rely on seasonal, low-wage employment, with limited social protection (Ramachandran, 1990). In Kerala, demographic changes and shifts in crop patterns have further diminished the employment prospects for these labourers (Joseph & Joseph, 2005).

This study focuses on understanding the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers in Ambalapara Grama Panchayat in Palakkad district. The region has witnessed significant agrarian stress, and this micro-level analysis aims to inform policy discussions on labour welfare and sustainable agricultural development.

2. Review of Literature

Ramachandran (1990) explored wage dependency and social unfreedom among agricultural workers in rural India. Kalpana Wilson (2001) highlighted the deepening exploitation of labourers under neoliberal globalization. Singh (2009) emphasized the necessity of housing and debt-relief schemes for labourers. Becchetti and Costantino (2008) analysed the socioeconomic impact of fair-trade initiatives on farmers' incomes and capacities.

In Kerala, S. Mohan Kumar (2008) described how the crisis in agriculture has disproportionately affected labourers from Scheduled Castes and Tribes. More recently, Pasula and Sridaya (2021) observed a decline in youth interest in agriculture, linked to poor earnings and social prestige. These studies underscore the structural challenges agricultural labourers face and the need for comprehensive intervention.

3. Objectives

- To assess the socio-economic status of agricultural labourers in Ambalapara Grama Panchayat.
- To identify the challenges faced by labourers related to employment, income, education, and livelihood sustainability.
- To offer policy suggestions for improving the welfare of agricultural labourers.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, integrating both primary and secondary data to gain a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers. Primary data was collected from 150 agricultural labourers in Ambalapara Grama Panchayat using a structured questionnaire. Due to field constraints, convenience sampling was employed to select respondents who were easily accessible. In addition to primary data, secondary data was gathered from academic literature, government reports, and journal articles to support the analysis and provide contextual insights.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Demographic Profile

Age

A significant majority (88%) of the respondents were above 40 years of age, with nearly half (48%) falling within the 51–60 age group. This suggests that agricultural labor in the region is predominantly undertaken by older individuals, indicating either a lack of youth interest in farm labour or a generational reliance on agriculture due to limited employment alternatives. The aging workforce may have implications for productivity and long-term sustainability in the agricultural sector.

Gender

The sample comprised 58% male and 42% female respondents, showing a modest gender disparity. While men continue to dominate agricultural labour roles, the notable presence of women indicates their growing participation, either due to necessity or as supplementary earners in the household. This gender distribution may reflect traditional roles in rural economies but also hints at evolving patterns in labour contribution.

Marital Status

Most respondents (75%) were married. This reflects the family-oriented structure of rural communities, where married individuals often engage in agricultural labour to support household livelihoods. Marital status can also influence the level of economic responsibility, with married individuals potentially facing higher financial burdens, including children's education, healthcare, and daily needs.

Caste

A majority (64%) belonged to Other Backward Classes (OBC), while 22% were from Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST). This demographic detail underscores the socio-economic stratification in rural agricultural labour. Historically disadvantaged communities appear to be overrepresented in agricultural labour, often due to limited access to education, land, and alternative employment opportunities.

Education

Educational attainment was low among respondents, with 56% having education below the SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate) level, and 16% being completely illiterate. This lack of formal education limits opportunities for skill development, non-agricultural employment, and access to government schemes. It also affects awareness about financial planning, health care, and welfare entitlements.

5.2 Economic Conditions

Income

Income levels were generally low, with 44% earning less than ₹500 per day, and another 46% earning between ₹500 and ₹1,000. These figures suggest that a vast majority of the agricultural labourers are engaged in low-wage, possibly irregular work. The earnings may barely cover essential needs, let alone allow for savings or investments, thus reinforcing a cycle of poverty.

Monthly Expenditure

Despite low daily incomes, 52% of respondents reported monthly expenditures ranging from ₹25,000 to ₹50,000. This apparent mismatch between income and expenditure could indicate dependence on credit, borrowing, or income from other household members. It also suggests financial stress, with potential implications for debt accumulation and economic vulnerability.

Land Holdings

A notable 84% of respondents owned land, though mostly in the form of marginal holdings. While land ownership might offer some stability, marginal landholdings often yield low productivity and are insufficient to support a family. Many landowners may still depend on wage labour to supplement income, highlighting the precariousness of their livelihood.

Financial Liabilities

A significant portion (64%) of the sample was burdened with debt. This may stem from the need to finance agricultural inputs, family expenses, health emergencies, or social obligations. High indebtedness among agricultural labourers is a long-standing issue and can lead to a cycle of dependency on informal credit sources with high interest rates.

Ration Card Status

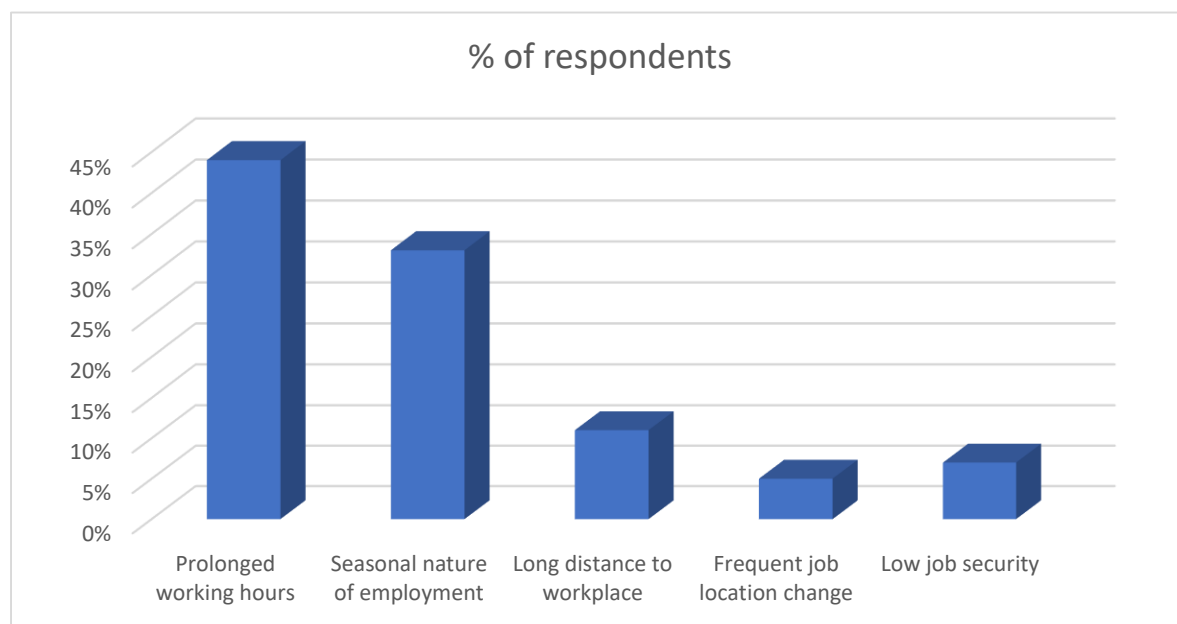
About 68% of respondents held Below Poverty Line (BPL) ration cards, confirming their economically disadvantaged status. BPL cardholders are eligible for subsidized food and welfare schemes, but the high percentage also reflects the extent of poverty in the agricultural labour community. This underlines the need for targeted policy interventions.

Alternative Sources of Income

Only 26% had access to alternative sources of income, suggesting a heavy reliance on agricultural work. Limited diversification of income makes these households more susceptible to seasonal unemployment, market fluctuations, and climate-related disruptions. Promoting skill development and livelihood diversification could significantly improve their economic resilience.

5.3 Working Conditions

Figure 1: Problems faced by the Agricultural labourers



Source: Primary data

The findings confirm the prevalence of irregular and insecure employment, with seasonal demand for labour and extended working hours being the most common complaints.

5.4 Observations

- The workforce is aging; youth participation is minimal.
- Education levels are low, limiting alternative employment.
- Most labourers belong to socially marginalized communities.
- There is a moderate degree of land ownership, but holdings are often non-viable.
- Financial liabilities persist, despite minimal access to credit.

6. Conclusion and Suggestions

The socio-economic profile of agricultural labourers in Ambalapara reveals persistent poverty, job insecurity, and limited social mobility. These issues are further intensified by low educational attainment and poor access to institutional support.

Given the significance of agriculture to India's economy and food security, policy attention is imperative. Recommendations include:

- Strengthening rural employment programs like MGNREGA.
- Creating rural skill training and micro-entrepreneurship programs.
- Introducing youth incentive schemes in agriculture.

- Ensuring comprehensive social security, including housing and health benefits.

Efforts to modernize agriculture must be paired with human development strategies to revitalize the agricultural labour force.

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