
Socio-Economic Conditions of Agricultural Labourers in Punjab

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural labourers are one of the most important components of the agricultural development of a country but it is contentious if the development in turn benefits the agricultural labourers. The following study was conducted in the year 2016-17 among 300 agricultural labour households in different agro-climatic zones of Punjab. The data pertaining to caste structure, family composition and other parameters was collected to enquire into the socio-economic conditions of these labourers in Punjab which indicate that 69.33 per cent of the agricultural labour households belonged to scheduled castes, 32.12 per cent of the sampled respondents were literate among which 64 per cent of the family heads were illiterate. Almost 88 per cent of the labourers were living in the pucca houses, whereas the average number of rooms was 2.37. In terms of the economic viability on an average 72 per cent of the population are non-earners and 28 per cent earning population carry the burden of these non-earners and the dependency ratio worked out to 2.56. About 84.11 per cent of households were indebted. The study recommends that there should be some employment guarantee schemes and loan waiver plans, specifically for the agricultural labourers to enable them to come out of the clutches of indebtedness and improve their level of living.

Keywords: Agriculture, Labour, Caste, Economic, Literacy, Family, Earners

JEL.: I38, J15, J43,

I

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is ever destined with the law of diminishing returns. As such, one cannot develop very fast by putting more and more of additional doses of capital and other kinds of inputs. Yet, the element of labour has its own proverbial say to cause and effect radical returns and is ever crucial in revolutionising the total average and marginal productivity of agriculture (Palanisamy and Mahesh, 2014). The green revolution technological leaps might have brought prosperity and fortune for some, but not for the agricultural labourers. A person whose major source of income in the previous year was agricultural wages, i.e., wages earned by doing work on other's farm, is considered to be agricultural labourer (Government of India, 1956-57). Besides, their significant contribution to the green revolution, they have not benefited from it, in terms of the betterment of their conditions (Bharti, 2011). Agricultural labourers are a necessary adjunct of the agricultural development and growth of any economy but ironically this section of the agricultural community is the most vulnerable one as well. Being an important section in the rural population of Punjab State, this section is most

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neglected in the rural structure of Punjab state. A large proportion of persons are dependent on agriculture for their earnings, particularly agricultural labourers, living in undignified conditions and are subjected to social, political and economic exploitation and discrimination (Singh and Singh, 2015). The declining income and unproductive expenditure on religious as well as social ceremonies have made the peasants debt-ridden (Gaur, 2014). Very low standard of living has been indicated by the expenditure pattern of agricultural labourers as they were spending maximum amount on food and clothing items (Chitodkar,1992). The majority of farmers and agricultural labourers were unable to meet their consumption expenditure with their income. This gap compels the agricultural labourers to use a major proportion of debt to maintain their minimum level of consumption (Singh *et al.*, 2017). Despite being a noteworthy size of workers and population of agricultural labourers, their socio-economic conditions have deteriorated over time and have reached a level that raises alarm. Victims of dire economic hardships, a large proportion of them are subject to misery; subsequently, many are ending up taking their own lives (Singh *et al.*, 2021). Keeping in view above stated issues, a study was conducted to analyse the social-economic conditions of the agricultural labourers in Punjab.

II

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In view of the above objectives, the following study was conducted in three agro-climatic zones of Punjab pertaining to the year 2016-17.

TABLE 1. METHODOLOGY FOR COLLECTING THE DATA

Zones											
Zone I			Zone II				Zone III				
Gurdaspur			Kapurthala		Ludhiana		Sangrur		Mansa		Shri Muktsar Sahib
Batala Burh			Sultanpur lodhi		Sidhwan bet		Sangrur		Sardulgarh		Malout
Sham	Aliwal	Talwandi	Kamalpur	Bhundi	Sherpur	Dhuri	Kanjla	Fatta	Sangha	Chaplan-	Alam
Sherpur	Arayian	Chaudhrian			kalan			Malukan		wali	wala
Agricultural Labourer Households											
25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25

Source: Author's survey 2016-17-An excerpt from Ph.D. Thesis.

Multi-stage random sampling design was used to select the districts, blocks, villages and agricultural labour households and a sample of 300 agricultural labour households was taken. Using a well-structured schedule the data were collected relating to the socio-economic parameters like family structure, age-composition, education level and debt-structure of the agricultural labourers.

(i) *Zone I*

It comprises 19 per cent of geographical area of the Punjab state. This zone includes Gurdaspur, Hoshiarpur, Pathankot, S.A.S Nagar, S.B.S Nagar (Nawan Shehar) and Roopnagar districts.

(ii) *Zone II*

It comprises 47 per cent of geographical area of the Punjab with Amritsar, Tarn-Taran, Kapurthala, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, Moga, Fatehgarh Sahib, Sangrur, Barnala and Patiala districts.

(iii) *Zone III*

It includes 34 per cent of geographical area of the Punjab and includes the districts of Ferozpur, Faridkot, Fazilka Muktsar, Mansa and Bathinda.

III

CASTE STRUCTURE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS IN DIFFERENT ZONES OF PUNJAB

From the onset of Aryans and its origin thereafter, the caste system from the last 2000 years has been constantly paralysing the society from economic as well as social point of view. Those who were born in higher castes, sailed in the cruises of the higher castes till now and those who were born in the lower castes are still trying to make the boats to float on the deep seas of luxuries and necessities. Same is the situation with the agricultural labourer households. Most of the households belonged to the socially and economical backward classes. The scenario was such that the agricultural labourers used to be a caste-specific job, but the agrarian crisis has so adversely affected the agrarian community that even the persons belonging to higher castes like Jats have started working as agricultural labourers. Most of these persons belonged to the small and medium farmers, due to agrarian crisis these persons were deprived of their lands as they had to sell their lands in order to make their both ends meet as well as to pay off loans, if any. Table 2 highlights the caste structure of the agricultural labourer households selected in the sample. On an average, out of all the total selected households 36 households belonged to the general category, most of them were jat sikhs, 56 households belonged to the backward classes, most of them were Sainis and 208 households belonged to the scheduled castes, comprising various sub-castes.

TABLE 2. CASTE STRUCTURE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS OF PUNJAB

S. No. (1)	Caste Structure (2)	Zone I		Zone II		Zone III		Overall	
		No. (3)	Percentage (4)	No. (5)	Percentage (6)	No. (7)	Percentage (8)	No. (9)	Percentage (10)
1)	General	6	12.00	17	11.33	13	13.00	36	12.00
2)	BC	9	18.00	29	19.34	18	18.00	56	18.67
3)	SC	35	70.00	104	69.33	69	69.00	208	69.33
4)	Total	50	100.00	150	100.00	100	100.00	300	100.00

Source: Author's survey 2016-17-an excerpt from Ph.D. Thesis.

The highest proportion general category households were in zone III, they were 13 per cent of all households. Agricultural labour households with maximum population of backward classes were in zone II whereas the households with highest proportion of the schedule caste population were in zone I. It is interesting to note that the agricultural labourers were limited to the lower castes as 69 per cent of these households belonged to the schedule castes categories whereas just 12 per cent of these households belonged to general category.

IV

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS IN PUNJAB

The total sample consists of 1351 persons as total population of the sample, out of which 224 persons belonged to zone I, 677 persons belonged to zone II and 450 persons belonged to zone III. From the Table 3, it is quite evident that 64.10 per cent persons went to school and 32.12 per cent persons have never been to the schools, whereas the children of less than 3 years were 3.78 per cent that have not started the school yet. Among the 300 agricultural labour households only 36 per cent of the agricultural labour households were literate and out of these 82.40 per cent were above the middle standard and 19.60 per cent were below middle standard. In zone II, maximum persons were literate whereas in zone I, about 64 per cent persons were literate followed by 62.22 per cent literate persons in zone III. The percentage of literate family heads was

TABLE 3. EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS OF PUNJAB

S. No. (1)	Particulars (2)	Zone I		Zone II		Zone III		Overall	
		No. (3)	Percentage (4)	No. (5)	Percentage (6)	No. (7)	Percentage (8)	No. (9)	Percentage (10)
A) Literacy Level of all agricultural labour households									
1)	Illiterate persons	72	32.14	204	30.13	158	35.11	434	32.12
2)	Literate persons	143	63.84	443	65.44	280	62.22	866	64.10
3)	Children < 3 years	9	4.02	30	4.43	12	2.67	51	3.78
4)	Total	224	100.00	677	100.00	450	100.00	1351	100.00
(B) Literacy level of family head									
1)	Literate family head	19	38.00	56	37.33	33	33.00	108	36.00
2)	Illiterate family head	31	62.00	94	63.67	66	66.00	192	64.00
3)	Total	50	100.00	150	100.00	100	100.00	300	100.00
(C) Education level of family head									
1)	Family head above middle	15	78.94	47	83.92	27	81.81	89	82.40
2)	Family head below middle	4	21.06	9	16.08	6	18.19	19	17.60
3)	Total	19	100.00	56	100.00	33	100.00	108	100.0
(D) Gender wise literacy									
1)	Male literates	72	50.35	218	49.20	136	48.57	426	49.19
2)	Female literates	71	49.65	225	51.80	144	52.43	440	51.81

Source: Author's survey 2016-17-An excerpt from Ph.D. Thesis.

the highest in Zone I as it was 38 per cent followed by 37.33 per cent in zone II and 33 per cent in zone III. Being socially and economically backward section of the society, it was interesting to note that there were more female literates than the male literates. The proportion of female literates was the highest in Zone III (52.43 per cent) followed by Zone II (51.80 per cent) and Zone I (49.65 per cent). On an average there were 51.81 per cent female literates and 49.19 male literates.

V

LIVING CONDITIONS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS IN PUNJAB

Table 4 highlights the living conditions of agricultural labourer households in terms of the condition of the house and the environment in which the agricultural labourers live. The average number of rooms was 2.37 and it was the highest in zone II as the number of rooms over there was 2.40. Majority of the households were living in the pucca houses, only 2.67 per cent households on an average were living in the katcha houses. In zone I there was only one family living in the katcha house whereas not even a single family lives in the katcha house in zone II. About 96 per cent households on an average had the access to the covered kitchen. Drinking water was available to all the households taken in the sample. Over 98 per cent of the households had access to the covered bathrooms, while this facility was unavailable to 0.33 per cent of the households.

TABLE 4. LIVING CONDITIONS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS IN PUNJAB

S. No. (1)	Particulars (2)	Zone I		Zone II		Zone III		Overall	
		No. (3)	Percentage (4)	No. (5)	Percentage (6)	No. (7)	Percentage (8)	No. (9)	Percentage (10)
1.	Average no. of rooms	2.34		2.40		2.38		2.37	
2.	Status of house								
a.	pucca	41	82.00	144	96.00	80	80.00	265	88.33
b.	Semi-pucca	8	16.00	6	4.00	16	16.00	30	10.00
c.	Katcha	1	2.00	0	0.00	4	4.00	5	2.67
3.	Kitchen								
a.	Covered	47	94.00	149	99.33	91	91.00	287	95.67
b.	Uncoverd	3	6.00	1	0.66	9	9.00	13	4.33
4.	Drinking water								
a.	Available	50	100.00	150	100.00	100	100.00	300	100.0
b.	Not available	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
5.	Bathroom								
a.	Covered	49	98.00	148	98.66	96	96.00	293	97.67
b.	Uncovered	1	2.00	2	1.33	3	3.00	6	2.00
c.	Not available	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	1.00	1	0.33
6.	Toilet								
a.	Available	48	96.00	147	98.00	97	97.00	292	97.33
b.	Not available	2	4.00	3	2.00	3	3.00	8	2.67

Source: Author's survey 2016-17-An excerpt from Ph.D. Thesis.

Toilets were available to 97.33 per cent of the population. So it is quite evident that the majority of the agricultural labourer households lived in the pucca houses, had access to the covered kitchens, covered bathrooms and toilets. Electricity was available

most of the time to all the households in all the zones of Punjab, Moreover, first 150 units were being provided to these households by the government.

VI

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC CONDITION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS

The size of the family is an important component in estimating the consumption as well as income level of a household. Moreover, the number of earners and non-earners significantly influence the income level of the family. The dependency ratio indicates the economic health of the household. It quite evident from the Table 5 that the average family size was 4.50. It was 4.48 in Zone I, 4.51 in Zone II and 4.50 in Zone III. On an average there were 31.53 per cent adult males, 36.42 per cent females and 32.05 per cent children. Number of children was highest in Zone III with 32.67 per cent of the whole family followed by the zone I, with 32.14 per cent and in zone II with 31.61 per cent.

TABLE 5. FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC CONDITION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS OF PUNJAB

S. No.	Family structure (2)	Zone I		Zone II		Zone III		Overall	
		No. (3)	Percentage (4)	No. (5)	Percentage (6)	No. (7)	Percentage (8)	No. (9)	Percentage (10)
1)	Adult Male	1.42	31.70	1.44	31.91	1.39	30.89	1.42	31.53
2)	Adult Female	1.62	36.16	1.65	36.48	1.64	36.44	1.64	36.42
3)	Children	1.44	32.14	1.43	31.61	1.47	32.67	1.44	32.05
4)	Family Size	4.48	100.00	4.51	100.00	4.50	100.00	4.50	100.00
5)	Earners	1.26	28.13	1.25	27.77	1.29	28.67	1.27	28.13
6)	Non-Earners	3.22	71.88	3.26	72.23	3.21	71.33	3.24	71.87
7)	Dependency Ratio	2.56		2.60		2.49		2.56	

Source: Author's survey 2016-17-An excerpt from Ph.D. Thesis.

On an average dependency ratio was 2.56, which means that 2.56 persons were dependent on a single person for making their both ends meet. Dependency ratio was the highest among the agricultural labourers households in Zone II, followed by Zone I and Zone III where the dependency ratio was 2.56 and 2.49 respectively. The earners and non-earners are the most important components of any family for the determination of the income levels. On an average there were 28.13 per cent earners and 71.87 per cent non-earners. Most number of earners were in Zone III, followed by Zone I and Zone II. There were 28.67 earners in Zone III, 28.13 per cent in Zone I and 27.77 per cent in Zone II. It is clear from this proportion that the households were living on the subsistence levels and approximately 33 per cent of the persons belonged to earning category in all zones of Punjab while the remaining 67 per cent were non-earners.

This clearly brings out the depriving situation that persons who are earning have to bear the burden of the of the non-earning members which is more than three times their number. This is one of the several reasons for their economic as well as social backwardness, social in the context that the economically backward households will

find it it hard to socially maintain themselves upto the respectable levels of the society. With the primary motive of these households to just make their both ends meet it would be utmost difficult to aspire for a higher or better level of living.

VII

ASSETS BASE OF THE AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS IN DIFFERENT ZONES OF PUNJAB

Table 6 depicts the structure of assets base of the agricultural labour households in all the zones of Punjab. It was interesting to note that majority of the households were living in their own houses. An average agriculture labour household in all the zones of Punjab had the total assets worth ₹181576 on an average. However, about 96 per cent families in all the zones on an average were living in their own houses. Average value of the dwelling house was ₹134726, which accounted for 74.20 per cent of the total assets. Livestock assets including milch and non-milch animals were 7.81 per cent of the total assets. About 23 per cent of the labour households possessed jewellery items worth ₹1661. Similarly every household had utensils, cots and quilts worth Rs. 1498, Rs. 603 and Rs.614 respectively. In terms of possession of assets, almost 88 per cent of the households owned cycles, 98 per cent had fans, almost 29 per cent had furnitures, 64 per cent had petis and almost 56 per cent had almirahs. Nearly 52 per cent of the households possessed the refrigerators, 93 per cent had the LPG connections and stoves and almost 91 per cent of the households had the television sets. It is interesting to note that despite high level of indebtedness discussed in the following

TABLE 6. ASSETS STRUCTURE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS IN PUNJAB

Assets structure (1)	Value (₹) (2)	Percentage (3)	Access (Percent) (4)
Dwelling House	134726	74.20	97
Cycle	1283	0.71	90
Fan	994	0.55	98
Utensils	1498	0.83	100
Cots	603	0.33	99
Quilts	614	0.34	98
Furniture	1131	0.62	35
Peti	1175	0.65	68
Almirah	983	0.54	58
LPG Stove	2120	1.17	97
Pressure Cooker	404	0.22	100
Beds	1116	0.61	64
Refrigerators	3195	1.76	54
Gold/Jewellery	1661	0.91	23
Cooler	917	0.50	31
Mobile Phone	3163	1.74	99
Television	3713	2.04	86
Motorcycle/Scooter	6820	3.76	39
Grain Storage Bin	1275	0.70	85
Livestock	14186	7.81	38
Total	181576	100.00	100.00

Source: Author's survey 2016-17-An excerpt from Ph.D. Thesis.

sections, almost 98.33 per cent of the households owned mobile sets. About 41 per cent of the households were having motorcycles with them. The number of the motorcycle-owners was the highest in zone II and that also in the Ludhiana region. Livestock occupied a major part of the assets next to the dwelling house. On an average the agricultural labour households owned the livestock assets worth ₹14186. It was the highest among the households in zone I of all the other zones of Punjab.

VIII

DEBT POSITION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS

The Table 7 shows that around 84 per cent households were indebted in the state. If we take a look at the debt position per sampled agricultural labour household and per indebted agricultural labour household, the average amount of debt was ₹76016.90 and ₹85411.03 respectively. It is also interesting to note from the Table 7 is that the number of indebted households was the highest in the zone III. The indebted households were 84.66 per cent, 82.31 per cent and 85.47 per cent in zone I, II and III respectively.

TABLE 7. DEBT POSITION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR HOUSEHOLDS IN DIFFERENT ZONES OF PUNJAB, 2016-17

S. No. (1)	Particulars (2)	Zone I (3)	Zone II (4)	Zone III (5)	Overall (6)
1)	Percentage of indebted households	84.66	82.31	85.47	84.11
2)	Percentage of households that repaid whole loanable amount	6.91	7.33	5.17	6.47
3)	Percentage of households that repaid partial loanable amount	15.64	17.34	17.81	16.93
4)	Percentage of households that were completely unable to repay any loanable amount	73.33	70.02	73.14	72.17
Debt position per sampled household (₹)					
1)	Loan taken per sampled household (₹)	61232.34	60876.67	63453.78	64187.59
2)	Repaid Per sampled household (₹)	13563.82	14675.43	13456.13	13898.46
3)	Debt per sampled household (₹)	75890.76	74604.51	77555.45	76016.90
Debt position per indebted households (₹)					
1)	Loan taken per indebted household (₹)	79765.34	80976.12	82786.90	81176.12
2)	Repaid per indebted household (₹)	19708.90	21453.89	23890.64	21684.48
3)	Debt per indebted household (₹)	84567.54	85675.36	85990.21	85411.03

Source: Author's survey 2016-17-An excerpt from Ph.D. Thesis.

Out of these indebted households 73.33 per cent households from zone I, 70.02 per cent households from zone II and 73.02 per cent households from zone III were completely unable to repay the loans.

IX

FARM REFORMS AND AGRICULTURAL LABOUR

Since the introduction of new farm acts namely the Essential Commodities (Amendment) act, 2020; the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of

Price Assurance and Farm Services act, 2020; and the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) act, 2020 by the union government September, 2020, one has been witnessing the nationwide farmer's protests. Overlooked in much of the reporting and commentary on the opposition to the new laws is the active participation of farm labour unions in the Punjab protests. They are of the opinion that there is a propaganda that the new farm bills are an issue of the farmers. But this is also an issue for labourers, shopkeepers, arhtias, students, employees, and young boys and girls (Sinha, 2020). There is a looming fear that the three agri-laws will bring about the end of minimum support price (MSP), abolish the mandis/APMCs (Agricultural Produce Market Committee) and throw open the agricultural sector to exploitation by the corporates and contract farming. The agricultural labourers especially, fear that if the farmers are adversely affected by the agri-laws they would be impacted too. The Dalit landless farm labourers of Punjab feel that if the landed farmers do not get paid assured returns for their crops under the MSP and find themselves at the mercy of the big corporates, the labourers would suffer the consequences too (Gupta, 2020). Agricultural labourers who have been living on subsistence levels will be adversely affected by the essential commodities (amendment) act, 2020. As per 68th round of NSSO sample survey, out of 136 crore population, the expenditure pattern of the lower 90 per cent population on the food items indicated that the per capita income was Rs.1200 per month that will increase to Rs.1790 after the introduction of farm laws. The expenditure per family will increase to Rs.2600 per month and Rs.31000 per annum per family. So in this way the expenditure of the people on food items will be 8.76 lakh crores which will go directly into the pockets of the corporate houses. Moreover, the public distribution systems will also be affected the essential commodities amendment act. Earlier under the revamped public distribution systems people used to get the food and other necessary items under subsidised rates, after the introduction of targeted food distribution systems the number of beneficiaries have been cut down to 67 per cent. Under the new farm laws the corporates will be allowed to buy crops at cheaper rates from the farmers who in turn will sell their products to consumers at high rates. According to new farm laws there will only be two to three corporate houses that will buy the crops and the same number will be selling the products as well, thereby resulting in a monopoly like market situation (Singh, 2021).

X

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The present study analysed the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers in Punjab. Majority of the households belonged to the schedule castes which were already socially and economically backward. Though most (97 per cent) of the households were living in their own houses but the average number of rooms was just 2.35. Only basic amenities were available to the households, however the luxury amenities was almost absent in their lives. The number of earners and non earners that

the households were living on subsistence levels and approximately 33 per cent of the persons were earning in all zones of Punjab and the remaining 67 per cent were non-earners. This is the gravity of the situation that persons who are earning have to bear the burden of the non-earners who are more than three times their number. This is one of the several reasons for their economic as well as social backwardness, social in the context that economically backward households will find it hard to socially maintain themselves up to the respectable levels of the society. Government should undertake the issue of upliftment of these deprived lot on top priority. There should be employment guarantee schemes and loan waiver plans, specifically for the agricultural labourers so that they can come out of the clutches of indebtedness and improve their level of living.

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