

**Challenges of Marginal Peasants and Agricultural Labourers in India**

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**Abstract**

*The Indian economy is an agricultural economy because more than half of India's population is engaged in agriculture in many ways. Some people are owners of land while some are reliant on labour work to fulfill consumption needs. The government of India has taken many steps to improve the economic conditions of landless labourers. Poor economic conditions of people reflect in their standard of living and are also associated with many problems. Nowadays, many changes have taken place in Indian agriculture. In this situation, only large peasants are able to cope with the challenges. On the other hand, marginal peasants and landless labourers, who do not have sufficient land to cultivate and are partially reliant on labour work to meet consumption needs, face many problems. This paper explores all the changes that have taken place in agriculture and the responsible reasons behind them. This paper is based on existing literature related to agrarian relations and some observations from rural areas.*

**Keywords**

Agriculture, labour, landholding, marginalization, income

**Introduction:**

There are two types of human settlement in the world; 'rural' and 'urban'. These both settlements are quite different on the point of ritual sphere as urban represent to modernity and rural symbolizes to traditions. Both are also different in social, cultural, and economic aspects. Rural economic life is completely based on agriculture, and it is also a way of life for peasants and agricultural labourers. The plot of land that a peasant cultivates with the help of family members works as his main source of livelihood and gives him a sense of identity and belonging. Rural

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settlement also has a different household system where many families live under one roof and kinship plays a crucial role in different affairs, as described by S. S. Jodhka (2012). Marginal peasants also work as labourers to supplement the household income. In Indian rural society, diversity in lifestyles can be seen on the basis of differences in landholdings. As Daniel Thorner (2006) described that socially malik form a distinct group within the village. These maliks generally belong to the Brahmin, Thakur, or any other high ranking caste. They live in larger houses, wear finer clothes, and have a better diet than the rest of the villagers. Contrary to this, the kisans are drawn primarily from cultivating or artisan castes, and the majdurlog primarily from harijans, scheduled, depressed or "backward" classes. These landless labourers are reserved to do those types of works that are considered degrading, such as ploughing in the Eastern Uttar Pradesh (Thorner: 2006). Thus, maliks belonged to higher castes usually. They did not like to cultivate the land by their own hands because they thought that doing physical labourer cultivating land by themselves would decrease their social prestige in the society. They lease-out their land to tenants or marginal peasants to get it cultivated. This paper will examine the impact of government initiatives, crop diversification, non-agricultural income, dropout rates, and online education on the lifestyles of peasants and agricultural labourers.

### **Impact of Government Initiatives**

Government of India initiated land reform programs to remove the large gap in landholdings of people. Abolition of zamindari, ceiling on land, consolidation of landholdings, security of tenants and distribution of land were some steps taken by the government. The main aims of land reform program were to achieve an egalitarian society, to improve economic conditions of people and prevention of exploitation of actual tillers who used to cultivate land for deriving livelihood. Besides, voluntary land reform movements like Bhoodan and Gramdaan movements were also started by Acharya Vinoba Bhave, for collecting land to distribute among landless people. But there were some loopholes in these policies of land reforms. So rich people who were aware of those loopholes took advantage of them and became successful in retaining large sizes of land. As Daniel Thorner (2005) described that according to a sample survey which was conducted after five years of implementation of the Zamindari Abolition Act, reported that 10 percent households in villages still continued to own 50 percent of land of the village. This was because in Zamindari Abolition Act there was a provision that if a landholder proves his land as 'sir' and 'khudkhast' (land which is self-cultivated by owner) then he is allowed to retain that amount of land. Many record keepers were small people. Many of them were

appointed by large landholders. So, by exerting pressure the larger landholders increased the amount of land on their name as *sir* and *khudkhast* (Thorner, 2005). J.P. Singh (2006) also found that India is dominated by marginal farmers but they own only 17 percent of the total cultivable area. They face livelihood crisis. Their holding is not viable economically. There are not much additional employment opportunities for them in rural areas to improve standard of life. Consequently, they migrate to cities and rural area of advanced states in search of job. In this process many of them sell their land (Singh: 2006). Further, Esha Shah (2012) also recorded about changes which took place after green revolution in India. After independence of India, a great amount of hunger and famine were faced by the people. As a solution of grain's scarcity, program for technological development was projected through 'green revolution'. The term 'green revolution' came into existence in the late 1960s as 'new technology' in which high yielding varieties of cereals like wheat and rice was introduced and focused on high use of agro-chemicals like pesticides and fertilizers, new techniques of irrigation and cultivation for more production (Esha Shah: 2012). These marginal peasants had very small size of landholdings and did not have appropriate techniques for its cultivation. Economically they were not efficient to purchase these agricultural appliances. They usually hired-in techniques of cultivation on high rents. Thus agriculture proved unprofitable for them. In that situation crop diversification could be helpful to face the challenges.

### **Crop Diversification**

Sukhpal Singh (2005) found that small farmers faced a number of challenges in the era of globalization and liberalization. Crop diversification could be fruitful idea for profit maximization or risk minimization if they work hard and learn new skills and risks but small farmers failed in producing high value profitable crops due to non-availability of sufficient and timely irrigation, high cost of cultivation, lack of capital and credit availability, lack of access to new technology, attack of Pests and diseases and high risks (Singh: 2005). Besides cultivating own land, these marginal peasants used to work as labourers on the land of large peasants for fulfilling consumption needs. But technological advancement proved a boon for large peasants as through techniques rich farmers were able to cultivate large size of land by their own hands. So they preferred to hire-in labourer occasionally as per needs. Although introduction of irrigation facilities increased possibility to grow many crops in a whole year but all replaced labour could not be absorbed. Anand Chakravarti (2001) used interview and observation

techniques to collect data and conflict approach to describe agricultural operations and activities. By using conflict approach he took data from those who controlled over means of production and those who labored for them. Purnea district falls under the region of North Bihar where highest proportion of agriculture labourer exists (census 1991). Aghanbigha village had large tracts of level land assuring with canal irrigation that's why it was possible produce both Rabi and Kharif types of crops. Farmers of other villages used to produce only Kharif crops because of dependency on monsoon for irrigation. In Aghanbigha village sharecropping (Bataidari) pattern was in practice. But due to introduction of tractorisation and canal irrigation cropping pattern shifted to commercial crops and rich farmers started to cultivate their land by hiring labour and farm servants. Both the categories, labourers and servants worked under the supervision of a sepahi (an elite category among farm servants). As by tractor it was easy to cultivate large tracts of land. Thus demand of bataidars decreased. On the other hand introduction of canal irrigation farmers started to grow many crops in a year which resulted in increase in demand of labourers. Earlier due to lack of irrigation, people used to produce only one crop in monsoon season. Replacement of bataidar by hiring labour gave birth to class struggle between bataidars and farmers because bataidar tried to resist their eviction from land and farmers wanted to retain possession on same land. Exploitation lies on pattern of ownership on means of production because exploiter has control over means of productions while exploited are dependent of them to get basic needs (Chakravarti: 2001). Thus crop diversification proved beneficial to only large peasants who have good techniques of cultivation and irrigation.

### **Impact of Non-agricultural Sources of Income**

Although nowadays many opportunities have opened in rural areas to work as labourers in non-agricultural sectors but usually people get lower wages in them. So people prefer to go to cities for jobs as in cities they get higher wages. If they work as labourers, and security guards in a company, industry or in a factory on a fixed salary then too they can earn more than working in rural areas.

Land is seen as a source of wealth and status in the village society. That's why a person tries not to sell the land which is an affirm source to derive livelihood. Selling land is considered a sin in village society. A strong belief is prevalent in rural India that if one cannot increase the size of land by purchasing from others then at least he should not sell ancestral land which is transferred from generations to generations. But for a marginal peasant who has tiny size of land and does not have techniques of

cultivation, it is impossible to fulfill consumption needs of the family. Gradually, he loses his interest in farming and prefers to be involved in non-agricultural activities for survival after selling land. Income diversification can be seen as a good idea to supplement household income and to deter land sell as Deborah Fahy Bryceson (1999) in her study on income diversification in four villages of Tanganyika territory of Africa, found that some members of small peasant families turned to jobs in non-agricultural sector for seeking additional sources of income apart from cultivation of land (Bryceson: 1999). After selling land they do not want to be engaged in labour work in nearby areas but prefer to migrate to distant areas where no one knows to them. Their preference for migration to distant areas after becoming landless is an effort to maintain prestige and status in the eyes of villagers. Although they face many problems in doing non-agricultural works which is new to them as they were born in peasants' family so they knew the nuances of agriculture.

In the seminar proceedings held at National Institute of Community Development in 1974, Paramahansa (1975) also reveals that in some parts of India where new agricultural technologies and high value commercial crops were introduced, large farmers took the advantage of commercial crops like cotton, tobacco, etc. In these areas small farmers who have one acre or even less of land were not in a position to take advantage of the new agricultural technology. So they leased out their land to big farmers who were interested to increase the size of holdings under cultivation to take advantage of modern methods of cultivation. After selling land these small farmers either migrated to neighboring towns and cities in search of jobs or opted to work as landless agricultural labourers. Further, it also recounts that this trend was observed by scholars in Maharashtra, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh where land was allotted to agricultural labourers to turn them into landowners, some of them sold their land due to lack of money for cultivation. It is also observed that some small farmers sold their allotted land due to high values of land. But having a small piece of land was not enough reason. Whenever tiny pieces of land were allotted to the landless, there was also a need to provide them necessary resources to make a beginning (Paramahansa, 1975: 9-10). Government has taken many steps to improve economic conditions of landless labourers. Under the land reforms program, surplus land was allotted to these needy people but they could not retain the land because of several reasons. Debal K. Singha Roy (2005) also described that the government of West Bengal has distributed surplus vested (common) land to agricultural labourers and they have thus become peasants. But due to non-availability of appropriate technologies, the poor peasants are selling the small pieces of land to commercial cultivators

(SinghaRoy, 2005). Thus after selling land, these people migrated to cities in search of jobs. They were totally dependent on labour work to fulfill consumption needs of the families.

### **Dropout**

Education can play an important role in improving economic conditions of the family especially in case of marginal peasants and landless labourers. Nowadays these people have understood the value of education. They also know the difference between quality of education in private schools and government schools. But because of poor economic conditions they are not able to send their children in private schools. As Shashi Bhushan Singh (2004) described that due to the low quality of education in government school people prefer to send their children to English-medium private schools which is costly (Singh, 2004). Moreover, Mona Sedwal and SangeetaKamat (2011) described that income of the household, parental education, home environment and school environment are main factors to retain a child's education and complete it and often these are associated with affluent upper caste families (Sedwal and Kamat, 2011). Besides that, it is found that children of marginal peasants and labourers help their parents in domestic works and also work as part-time labourers as their parents alone are not able to earn enough to meet all expenses of the family. This is the reason which results in their dropout from education. It can be seen mainly in the peak season of crops when the time is very crucial as timely cutting and threshing of crops is required. So, children of poor people assist their parents to store wheat for consumption of the family members for the whole year. Children of marginal peasants not only work on their own fields but also work on the fields of others. Amartya Sen (1971) analyzed data on school dropout for all India and for rural schools of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. He observed that withdrawal of children from school during the peak agricultural seasons was considerably higher among the economically less privileged group (Sen, 1971). Thus, weak economic conditions are responsible for school dropouts.

### **Non-accessibility to Online Education**

Covid-19, a pandemic also posed a new threat for labourers. Prime Minister Modi declared "Janta Curfew" on Sunday, March 22, 2020. On March 24, 2020, the Government of India under Prime Minister ordered a nationwide lockdown. Due to the lockdown colleges, industries, and transportation facilities had been closed. Lockdown was imposed in hurry so these people could not move to their native places. Factories had been closed, so their income was stopped suddenly. Even they were not

able to arrange necessary items to fulfill consumption needs in urban areas where they were staying. Consequently, they started to move to their native areas. No transportation was available, so they kept moving on foot to reach their homes, some of them hundreds of miles away.

After reaching home they had to find work to fulfill the needs of the family, as mentioned earlier. Further, this situation resulted in over availability of labour force in rural areas and posed many problems to labourers, sharecroppers, and tenants who were engaged in working in the villages already.

It is found that villages are not self-sufficient in nature. All needs of villagers cannot be fulfilled in the territory of the village. There are many things for which they have to go to another villages or cities. During lockdown, there were some restrictions on free movement from villages to cities. Government officials were not coming to the offices. All government offices like blocks, tehsils, District Magistrate offices and District Courts were closed. Farmers need a copy of land records, i.e.  *khasra*  and  *khatauni* , for getting credit cards issued from the bank, an income certificate, and electricity connections for tube wells etc. So, for these aforementioned tasks farmers needed to go to offices that are located in Amroha city. The Government of India took various measures to ensure smooth delivery of items for domestic consumption without any increase in their prices.

All educational institutions had been closed. To minimize the loss of the classes, online teaching system was adopted. This was a new experience for teachers and students. For attending online classes students needed a smart mobile phone, tablet, or laptop with a good internet connection. As reported in India Today on July 7, 2020, online teaching is based on the assumption that every student has access to the internet, a smart phone or laptop, and a reliable electric connection to get them charged. But in reality, a large section of the Indian population does not have access to these all necessary appliances. This problem is pertained mainly to students, especially in rural areas (India Today, July, 7, 2020). Thus, people who have good sources of income and access to smart phones, laptops and internet connection their children were able to attend the online classes. Network related problems like disconnection from the online classes, voice breaking and inability to join the classes, etc. also worked as barriers to taking online classes. On the Other hand, as mentioned above, children with poor economic background did not have access to smart phones or laptops along with good internet connections so they were not able to attend online classes. Moreover, these people were striving hard to fulfill their consumption needs, so it was not feasible for them to purchase (during the unlock period) a smart phone or

laptop with a good internet connection to attend online classes. So, their children could not benefit from this initiative of online teaching, even though it adversely affected their education.

### Conclusion

Landholding is seen as a status symbol in rural society. That's why no one prefers to sell his land, but in contingent situations, land comes on the market for sale. Crop diversification and income from non-agricultural sources have proved significant in supplementing peasants' households' income. Although it is found that large peasants are in a position to reap maximum benefit from crop diversification since they are economically sound and have good techniques for cultivating land. Marginal peasants, whose landholding is not viable to fulfill needs of the family, prefer to sell their land and get involved in jobs in non-agricultural sectors to meet needs of the family since agriculture has proved unprofitable venture for them as mentioned above. This land is usually purchased by such peasants who have other sources of income. Thus, the government's initiatives to improve the quality of life of landless labourers have proved to be very limited in their impact. COVID-19 has also created many problems for them. Non-accessibility to smart phones, laptops, and internet connections affected the education of their children negatively. Consequently, some of them lost their interest in education, which is seen as a key factor for improving standards of living by getting knowledge and good jobs in non-agricultural sectors.

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