

# Survival of Agricultural Labour in Punjab: A Burning Question

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The recent crackdown on the prolonged struggle being waged by dalit agricultural labourers in Mansa, Sangrur and Bhatinda districts of Punjab under the leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (Liberation) for homestead land and jobs under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act calls for an investigation of the plight of this most oppressed and exploited section in rural Punjab.

The recent arrest of over 1,300 agricultural labourers and labour leaders in Punjab necessitates a deeper look into the plight of agricultural labourers, predominantly dalits, in the state of Punjab. A study of farmer and agricultural labour suicides by Punjab Agricultural University for the government of Punjab was released in April 2009. Through a census conducted in the two districts of Bhatinda and Sangrur, the study reveals that during the period of 2000-08, 2,890 suicides were committed by the farmers and agricultural labourers, out of which 1,133 (39.2%) were of agricultural labourers.

The ratio of farmer suicides amongst farmers and labourers is substantially higher as compared to suicides in other states. Punjab has the highest percentage of dalits among the states of India, comprising over 30% of the total population. The recent arrests are part of a prolonged struggle being waged by dalit agricultural labourers for homestead land and jobs under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). Led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (Liberation) [CPI-ML (Liberation)], these labourers belong to 27 villages of Mansa district, seven villages of Sangrur and four villages of Bhatinda. Let us have a look at specific trends within the agricultural sector to contextualise the condition of agricultural labour in Punjab.

The structural transformation process in Punjab has reduced income generation in the rural economy, although the population continues to be dependent upon agriculture as the most important source of livelihood. The commercialisation and mechanisation of agriculture have distorted the self-sufficiency of villages, forcibly exposing them to the vagaries of the market economy. The pace of transformation of the livelihoods of the rural population from agriculture-related activities to other sectors of the economy is pretty slow.

When profitability from farming showed a downward trend, turning the green revolution pale, the crisis of the rural economy came to the fore.

Agricultural labour is one of the most important means of livelihood in the rural economy in terms of numbers, and this has been increasing over time. This can be partly explained by the fact that the marginal farmers, finding their holding inadequate to support the rising number of dependents, join the rank of the agricultural labourers. More importantly, these farmers find capital-intensive agriculture and its high-cost inputs unviable. The principal mode of livelihood has thus shifted from cultivation of one's operational holding to wage labour employment. During the last one and half decades, due to non-viability of farming, about two lakh small farmers have given up self-cultivation in Punjab. It is further alarming that about 22% of these farmers have joined the labour market either as agricultural labourers or as industrial workers (Singh et al 2007). While the peasantry faces a severe crisis, one can imagine the plight of agricultural labourers in the state as their principal means of livelihood have got squeezed.

After cultivators, agricultural labour is the largest rural worker category, accounting for 30.5% of total workers, slightly lower than that for India as a whole (31.8%). The demand for human labour in the farm sector in Punjab has decreased significantly since the late 1980s. On the basis of per hectare labour use in the crop sector, the demand for human labour is estimated to have fallen from 479.3 million person-days in 1983-84 to 421.93 million person-days in 2000-01. The maturity period of high-yielding variety crops has shortened and harvesting takes place simultaneously. This process has reduced the length of the peak season of employment, resulting in lower labour absorption in the rural economy of Punjab. On the one hand, there is large-scale unemployment prevailing amongst the local labour, while, on the other, there has been substantial immigration of labour. It is estimated that about 4.2 lakh migrant labourers work in Punjab during the lean period, the number of these labourers doubling during the peak season. It is a general perception that economic development in

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general and agricultural development in particular holds the key to the betterment of agricultural labourers. Despite the fact that measures such as placement of the Minimum Wage Act, 1948 on the Statute Book, reservation in government employment and initiation of the Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labour Agency, a vast majority of this section is eking out its existence with hardly two square meals.

### Discontent

The share of agriculture in Punjab's net state domestic product (NSDP) witnessed a substantial fall over the period 1961-2001, whereas the workforce declined only marginally over the same period. In terms of numbers, the share of agriculture and livestock in NSDP, at current prices, declined from 52% in 1961 to about 34% in 2001. As compared to this, the share of the agriculture workforce in the total workforce declined from 55.89% to 42.85% during the same period. Moreover, the all-India average growth of real wages for unskilled agricultural workers has risen continuously at the rate of about 3% per annum, whereas in Punjab during this time period, the average increase in real wages was only 1.21% per annum (GOI 2001).

Recently, the wage rate fixation for paddy cultivation has caused anxiety among labourers. On 6 June 2009 in Ferozepur district, the large farmers of 12 villages reduced the fixed wages of agricultural labourers for paddy transplantation to Rs 1,000 per acre. Last year, this rate had touched Rs 2,000 per acre. It was also decided among the large farmers that any farmer who does not follow these fixed wage rates for labourers will be fined a sum of Rs 5,000. Such arbitrary measures indicate the total absence of any semblance of protection or security for agricultural labourers.

Although agricultural labourers have contributed significantly to the green revolution, they have not benefited in the least in terms of the betterment of their conditions. The recent study shows that the daily per capita income of 68% of households dependent on agricultural wage labour is less than or equal to only Rs 10. As a result of low wages and low family earnings,

about 70% of labourers are living under debt ranging from Rs 10,000 to Rs 20,000. As regards the level of education, 90% of rural labour households do not have even a single member with qualification up to matriculation (Ghuman et al 2007). Employment in agriculture is casual, intermittent and uncertain and labourers find it most difficult in making both ends meet at this consistently low level of living. The major reasons behind the "casualisation" of farm labour in the state have been mechanisation of major farm operations, inflow of migrant labour, slowdown of agricultural growth, and non-viability of small and marginal holdings.

The current agitation of agricultural labourers is in response to the failure of the administration to provide NREGA job cards and the fact that the Punjab government returned Rs 350 crore of NREGA funds unused to the centre. The agitation is also gaining momentum due to official failure to implement a section of the Land Consolidation Act of 1961 which permits one-third of panchayat land to be leased out to agricultural workers for cultivation. In the current agitation in 38 villages, where over 1,300 labourers, including 511 women and 42 children got arrested, the labourers started living in hutments built on such land. The police also evicted and bulldozed the homes of the people from the land where they had built their huts in protest.

The Punjab government had promised to provide 5 *marla* (150 sq yard) residential plots to every rural poor family, but this has remained a promise only. The official estimates show that the panchayat departments have about 8 lakh acres of land, out of which 1.62 lakh acres are cultivable, which has been leased out to farmers. The remaining land of 6.38 lakh acres has been falling under canals, ponds, tanks, grounds and roads. According to the Land Consolidation Act 1961, one-third of this 1.62 lakh acres of land should be leased out to agricultural labour at a nominal rate of rent. But this provision only exists on paper. In Punjab, according to unofficial estimates, some landlords occupy about 30,000 acres of common land, land allotted for waste disposal, etc. There is no doubt that active intervention from the state is

required to meet the basic rights of the rural poor.

### What Ought To Be Done

The following policy measures must be taken. First of all, the housing plots of at least five marlas of land, as promised earlier, should be given to the agricultural labourers so that they feel secure and can sleep under a roof with minimum dignity. Due to the shrinking employment elasticity in agriculture, non-farm employment opportunities should be generated in the rural and semi-urban areas. Lower wage rates and lesser number of days of employment available have led to a deterioration of their economic conditions and pushed them further into debt. Therefore, a debt waiver scheme, like the one given to farmers, should also be launched for these people. Moreover, for increasing the number of employment days, the NREGA scheme must be efficiently implemented in all the districts of the state. For taking care of health, education of the children, and social commitments, social security measures must be initiated in the rural areas. In the agricultural sector, provision of an eight-hour workday, weekend holidays, and a minimum wage rate should be formulated and efficiently implemented. Moreover, the wage rates fixed by deputy commissioners must be revised from time to time in view of inflation and improvement in the general living standard of the society. After registration of these labourers, life insurance and health insurance at government premium should be provided so that economic help may be extended to these people at the time of accident and illness. Moreover, an agricultural labour commission should be set up for addressing their multi-pronged problems. In the given socio-economic and political structure, these policy measures may help reduce some of the woes of agricultural wage labour.

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