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SEASONAL EMPLOYMENT: A STUDY OF AGRICULTURAL LABORERS IN PUNJAB, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the employment status of agricultural laborers in Bathinda district of Punjab. It presents the major activities of agricultural laborers in farm and non-farm sector. The lack of employment opportunities in agriculture during off season compelled the agricultural laborers to seek alternative employment sources like construction work, National Rural Employed Guarantee Act (NREGA) etc. In spite of it, the harsh reality is that the condition of Agriculture Labors (especially non-regular) is miserable.

INTRODUCTION

The main objectives of the study are

- To study the major farm and non-farm activities carried out by the agricultural laborers.
- To study the employment pattern of agricultural laborers.
- To study perceptions of the agricultural laborers for improving their livelihood.

The structural transformation process in Punjab has reduced income generation in the rural economy. The impact was more visible on marginal and small farmers. These farmers, finding their landholding inadequate to support the rising number of dependent family members, started to work as agricultural laborers. The principal mode of livelihood is thus shifting from cultivation of operational holdings to wage labour employment. During the last one and half decades, due to non-viability of farming, about two lac marginal and small farmers have given up self-cultivation in Punjab (Singh, 2009). Thus, in order to earn their livelihood, they work as agricultural laborers.

According to Census of India, 2011, there are about 8.61 billion agricultural laborers in India out of which about 36 per cent are female and about 64 per cent are male workers. Agriculture sector has been experiencing a downfall for the last two decades in terms of stagnating yields and rising costs (Ghuman, 2008). The growth rate in wheat and paddy declined to 2.09 per cent and 1.29 per cent respectively during last decade. Although in case of cotton, growth rate in productivity revived to 10.39 per cent largely due to emergence of Bt cotton (Sidhu *et al.*, 2011).

The shrinking net income has led to economic distress. Unemployment in general and rural unemployment in particular has become serious phenomena in Punjab. In Punjab, there are around 11.68 lac agricultural laborers (Table 1.1). Of these, about 87 per cent laborers are male and remaining 13 per cent laborers are female. Agricultural laborers are mainly categorized in two categories- casual and permanent agricultural laborers. Permanent agricultural workers receive more job security as they get regular work, relatively higher wages and work benefits than do other casual waged agricultural workers. However, this does not mean that such workers are well- paid, relative to the average wage levels in a real terms, are generally lower than in cities and the hours of work are longer. Casual work refers to those employed and paid at the end of each day worked or on a task basis.

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Table 1. Structure of Work Force of Main Workers in Punjab

Workers	2011(in lakh)
Cultivators	18.03 (21.35)
Agriculture labour	11.68 (13.82)
Industrial workers	3.00 (3.56)
Other workers	51.78 (61.28)
Total workers	84.50 (100)

Source: Census of India

Temporary work refers to those employed for a specific but limited period of time. Most seasonal, casual or temporary workers do not receive any form of social security or unemployment benefit, holidays with pay, or sickness or maternity leave. In some farm operations, crops like wheat harvesting and paddy transplanting, casual laborers also worked on contract basis and sometimes their family members including women and children also engaged in it. The study has been carried out in Bathinda district of Punjab as it is major district in production of cotton in the state and cotton is a more labour intensive as compared to other crops such as wheat and paddy. Two blocks namely Nathana and Talwandi Sabo were purposefully chosen from the Bathinda district. These blocks were chosen to give a representation to the district as Nathana block is in north, while Talwandi Sabo is in south of the district. Two villages from each block were selected randomly in Bathinda district for primary study. And from each village, a sample of 25 agricultural laborers was selected randomly. From Nathana block, two villages Chak Bakhtu and Lehra Khanna; and from Talwandi Sabo block two villages, Maiserkhanna and Jhanduke were selected. Thus, the study has been carried out with 100 agricultural laborers.

Nature and Employment Pattern of Agricultural Laborers

Agricultural laborers are worked on permanent basis or casual. In this study data collected from 100 agricultural laborers and table 1.1 shows (mentioned above) that out of 50 Marginal Agriculture Laborers, 37 (74 per cent) worked on casual basis and 16 per cent worked as permanent agricultural laborers. Remaining 10 per cent worked as both casual and contractual laborers. In case of Full Agricultural Laborers, 35 (70 per cent) did only casual work and another 30 per cent were working as both casual and contractual agricultural laborers. None of the FAL worked as permanent labourer in farm sector (Figure 1.1).

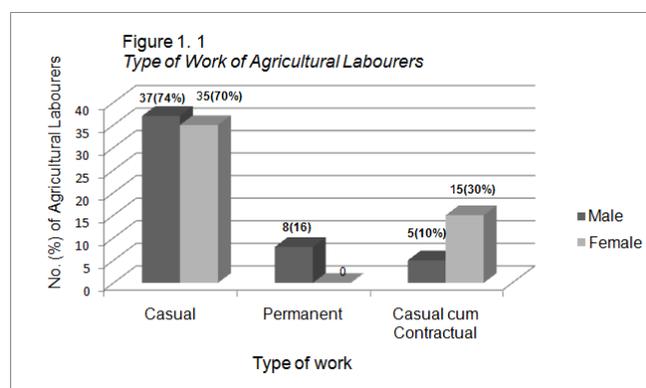
Table 1.1 Distribution of Agricultural Laborers by Type of Work

Type of work	MALs	FALs
Casual	37 (74)	35 (70)
Casual-cum-Contractual	5 (10)	15 (30)
Permanent	8 (16)	-

Employment Pattern of MALs in Farm Activities

Distribution of agricultural laborers by farm activities carried out is shown in Table 1.2 Activity-wise involvement of MALs in farm operations was highest in wheat harvesting (98 per cent) followed by cotton picking (92 per cent), weeding (84 per cent), spraying (78 per cent), harvesting in other crops (58 per cent), paddy transplanting (54 per cent), sowing of crops

(46 per cent), plucking of cotton bolls (38 per cent), land preparation and removal of cotton sticks (34 per cent), irrigation (32 per cent) and fertilizer application (30 per cent), straw burning (16 per cent), paddy harvesting (8 per cent) and cob harvesting in maize (6 per cent). In case of FALs, activity wise their involvement in farm operations was highest in cotton picking (96 per cent) followed by wheat harvesting (76 per cent), plucking cotton bolls (70 per cent), weeding (62 per cent), paddy transplanting (48 per cent), harvesting in other crops (18 per cent) and removal of cotton sticks (12 per cent). Average employment of MALs and FALs was highest in cotton picking with 56.4 days and 59.8 average employment days respectively. It is also pertinent to note that activities such as fertilizer applications, paddy harvesting, spraying, land preparation, sowing, straw burning and cob harvesting in maize were carried by only MALs. MALs were involved in more farm activities (Table 1.2 and Figure 1.2). Table 1.3 shows that total average number of working days of MALs were 234.6, while that of FALs were only 110 in a year.



Employment Pattern of MALs in Non - Farm Activities

Most of the agricultural laborers were employed as casual workers. 46 per cent of MALs worked under national rural employment guarantee scheme (NREGA) during slack period in farm operations. The average wage obtained in NREGA was around Rs. 141 per day. 22 per cent of MALs also did as labour in construction of houses and buildings. 4 per cent MALs each rendered their services as driver and labourer in factory as a casual worker. 4 per cent of MALs also worked as sweeper on regular basis and earned on an average about Rs. 4,000 per month. Self employment among MALs during slack period was done by only 2 per cent of MALs and earned about Rs. 2,000 per month. Some of MALs worked as *paledars*, *banjaras* etc. Thus, the average non -farm employment days was only around 46 days among MALs (Table 1.3).

Employment Pattern of FALs in Non- Farm Activities

FALs were also involved in non- farm activities. 68 per cent of FALs worked under NREGA during slack period in farm operations. The average wage obtained was around Rs. 143. And 26 per cent of FALs involved in domestic work like moping and sweeping in homes, cloth washing, removal of cattle's wastages on regular basis etc. The average wage earned was around Rs. 183.02. Another 10 per cent of FALs were self employed and only 2 per cent of FALs were involved in each mid day meal and sweeping in school on regular basis and earned Rs. 1200 and Rs. 800 per month respectively.

Table 1.2. Distribution of Agricultural Laborers by Farm Activities and Employment Days

Farm operations	MALs		FALs	
	No. of Laborers %	Average Employment (in days)	No. of Laborers %	Average Employment (in days)
Wheat harvesting	49 (98)	17.6	38 (76)	12.4
Paddy transplanting	27 (54)	13.5	24 (48)	9.4
Cotton picking	46 (92)	56.4	48 (96)	59.8
Irrigation	16 (32)	28.5	-	-
Weeding	42 (84)	28.2	31 (62)	14.58
Fertilizer applications	15 (30)	9.5	-	-
Paddy harvesting	4 (8)	1.4	-	-
Spraying	39 (78)	34.6	-	-
Land preparation	17 (34)	5.8	-	-
Plucking cotton bolls	19 (38)	5.94	35 (70)	10.14
Sowing	23 (46)	7.74	-	-
Straw burning	8 (16)	2.6	-	-
Harvesting in other crops	29 (58)	17.04	9 (18)	2.3
Cob harvesting in maize	3 (6)	0.8	-	-
Removal of cotton sticks	17 (34)	5.02	6 (12)	1.4
Average employment days	234.64		110.02	

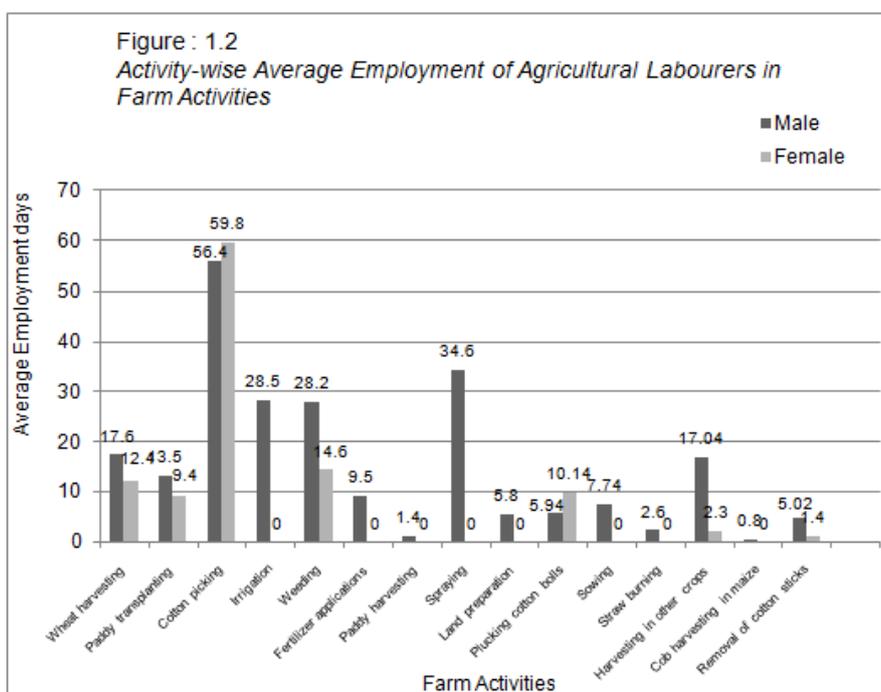


Table 1.3. Employment Pattern of Male Agricultural Laborers in Non-Farm Activities

Non- Farm operations	No. (%) of laborers	No. of days	Type of work	Average wage	
				Cash (Rs.)	Frequency
NREGA	23(46)	5.5	CL	141.08	Daily
Construction labour	11(22)	18.6	CL	236.36	Daily
Factory	2(4)	2.3	CL	300	Daily
Sweeping	2(4)	12	REG	4000	Monthly
Driving	2(4)	1.6	CL	375	Daily
Self employed	1(2)	0.4	SE	2000	Monthly
<i>Paledari</i>	1(2)	0.6	CL	500	Daily
<i>Banjara</i>	1(2)	3.6	CL	25	Daily
Average employment days		46.39			

Table 1.4. Employment Pattern of Female Agricultural Laborers in Non-Farm Activities

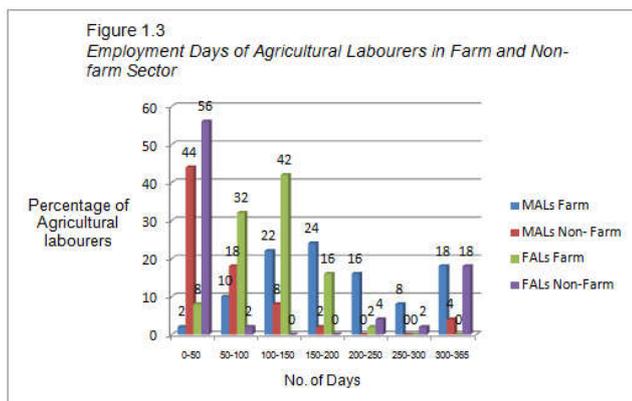
Non-Farm operations	No.(%) of laborers	No. of days	Type of work	Wage	
				Cash (Rs.) per day	Frequency
NREGA	34(68)	7.9	CL	143	Daily
Domestic work	13(26)	76.3	REG	183	Monthly
Self employed	5(10)	2.7	CL	103	Daily
Worker in Mid Day Meal scheme	1(2)	6	REG	1200	Monthly
Sweeper	1(2)	4	REG	800	Monthly
Average no. of days		96.9			

Thus, average non-farm employment days were around 97 days among FALs. Distribution of agricultural laborers by employment days is shown in Table 1.2. Employment days in a year in farm sector were 150-200 for 24 per cent MALs. Another 22 per cent MALs were also employed in farm sector for 100-150 days. About 18 per cent of MALs were generally employed all around the year in farm operations. These were mainly permanent laborers. Further, about 16 per cent MALs got the work for about 250-300 days. The working days in FALs were quite less as compared to the MALs. In case of FALs, 42 per cent were employed for only 100-150 days in farm operations. Another 32 per cent were engaged in farm operations for 50 -100 days only. 16 per cent FALs got the employment for 150-200 days. Further, 8 per cent FALs were employed for less than 50 days. Only one FAL was able to get employment for more than 200 days.

Employment of agricultural laborers in non-farm operations during slack period represents a dismal picture. Only 42 per cent of MALs and 34 per cent of FALs were able to find the work in non- farm sector. 16 per cent of MALs received work for only 50-100 days. Another 12 per cent MALs were employed for less than 50 days. There were only 8 per cent MALs who were employed for 100-150 days. 8 per cent FALs were engaged in non-farm work for less than 50 days. One FAL each was engaged for 50-100 days and 150-200 days respectively. Another two FALs were engaged in non-farm work for 200-250 days. About 18 per cent of FALs were worked on full time in non-farm operations and worked on part time basis for farm operations (Table 1.2 and Figure 1.3)

Table 1.5. Distribution of Agricultural Laborers by Employment Days in Farm and Non-farm Activities

No. of days	MALs		FALs	
	Farm	Non- Farm	Farm	Non-Farm
0-50	1 (2)	22 (44)	4 (8)	28 (56)
50-100	5 (10)	9 (18)	16 (32)	1 (2)
100-150	11 (22)	4 (8)	21 (42)	-
150-200	12 (24)	1 (2)	8 (16)	-
200-250	8 (16)	-	1 (2)	2 (4)
250-300	4 (8)	-	-	1 (2)
300-365	9 (18)	2 (4)	-	9 (18)



Total Employment in Farm and Non-Farm Activities

Table no 1.6 shows that the average employment of agricultural laborers in farm and non-farm activities during a year. The employment was much higher among the MALs

(281 days) as compare to that among FALs (207 days). The employment in non- farm activities was also more than double in case of FALs (97 days) than that in case of MALs (46 days).

Table 1.6. Average Employment in Farm and Non-Farm Activities during a Year (in days)

Activity	MALs	FALs
Farm sector	234.64	110.02
Non-farm sector	46.39	96.9
Total	281.03	206.92

Table 1.7. Distribution of Agricultural Labourers by Working in NREGS

Particulars	MALs	FALs
No. of workers in NREGS	23(46)	34(68)
No. of working days	11.95	11.58
Average wage (Rs.)	141.08	142.82

Participation in National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGA)

NREGA is a governmental scheme to provide employment to rural households. The scheme provides work for 100 days to the whole family. The results have shown from table 1.7 that 46 per cent of MALs and 68 per cent of FALs also worked in NREGA. The average wage rate obtained by both MALs and FALs ranged between Rs. 141 to about Rs. 143. The perceptions of agricultural laborers towards the work under NREGA revealed that they wanted to do more work in NREGA because they had to work for 8 hours only at reasonable wages. In farm operations, they had to work for more than 8 hours and received fewer wage. Moreover, there was no gender wise discrimination in wage under NREGA.

Conclusion

Punjab agriculture has contributed significantly during green revolution. The structural transformation has reduced the income generation of the rural economy. The worst suffers were small and marginal farmers; and agricultural laborers. The small and marginal farmers, finding their landholding inadequate to support the rising number of dependent family members, started to work as agricultural laborers. The principal mode of livelihood is thus shifting from cultivation of operational holdings to wage labour employment. In the last few years there are more use of machines in agriculture like tube wells, harvest- combines, tractors on a large scale has replaced the human labour. The machine costs of small and marginal farmers have been rising and are higher than those of big farmers, and as a result, the farmers are faced with an economic crisis and thus, unable to employ labor on permanent basis. In such a situation they are forced to engage in casual for different farm operations, ultimately leading to casualisation of agricultural labour in Punjab (Rangi *et al*, 2001). There is casualisation of all the farm operations like which indicated uncertain and irregular work with no guaranteed minimum wage. In this study 74 % male and 70 % female agricultural laborers got casual works in farm operations. MALs were involved in all different kinds of farm operations, while FALs generally participated in a few

activities such as wheat harvesting, paddy transplanting, cotton picking, weeding, plucking of cotton bolls, harvesting in other crops, removal of cotton sticks etc.

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