

Labour Issues: A Major Concern of the Agricultural Sector of Alappuzha District, Kerala

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Abstract- Agriculture includes all activities done by a farmer, who is engaged in agriculture or farming which is done on a farm as a conjunction with such farming operations, including preparations for market, delivery to storage or to market or to carriers for transportation to the market. Farmer's activities include farming in all of its branches and the cultivation and tillage of the soil, dairying. These activities depend on the labour force. Farming activities, especially wetland farming, need huge supply of labourers. Alappuzha district in Kerala is known as the "Granary of Kerala" because of the abundance of rice cultivation in this part of the state. Mechanization is not possible in the district due to Geographical as well as financial constraints. So it does not suit to the geographical conditions of the wetlands of the district. Here farmers are forced to depend on human labourers. So the availability of labourers, their wages, their attitudes are important in the agricultural activity of the district. Unfortunately Alappuzha district is facing certain problems on the basis of labourers. The problems associated with their availability, mobility, wages, compensations are major constraints faced by the farmers of the district. The problems incurred by the labour force are not only affecting the farming activity but also they are affecting the land use pattern of the district. They even lead to the increase of the cultivable waste land of the district.

Keywords- Labour Force, Labour mobility, Labour bank, Illegal wage, Cultivable waste land

I. INTRODUCTION

Land can be used for agricultural and non agricultural activities. Agricultural land use includes the land used for agricultural activities. Agriculture is "the deliberate effort to modify a portion of Earth's surface through the cultivation of crops and the raising of livestock for sustenance or economic gain". (Rubenstein, J.M.) It includes all activities done by a farmer, who is engaged in agriculture or farming which is done on a farm as a conjunction with such farming operations, including preparations for market, delivery to storage or to market or to carriers for transportation to the market. Farmer's activities include farming in all of its branches and the cultivation and tillage of the soil, dairying. It also includes the production, cultivation, growing and harvesting of any agricultural, aquaculture, floricultural or horticultural commodities. It involves the growing and harvesting of forest products upon forest land. The farmers works comprises the raising of livestock, poultry, swine, cattle and other domesticated animals used for food purposes, bees, fur-bearing animals, and any forestry or lumbering operations also.

All these works need labour force. Without the labourers agricultural activity is not possible. Farming activities, especially wetland farming, need huge supply of labourers. Alappuzha district in Kerala is known as the "Granary of Kerala" because of the abundance of rice cultivation in this part of the state. Mechanization is not possible in the district due to Geographical as well as financial constraints. The cost of mechanization is high and unaffordable especially for the farmers having small holdings. Big machines designed and manufactured in foreign countries where the conditions of wetland of Alappuzha district are unfamiliar. So it does not suit to the geographical conditions of the wetlands of the district. Here farmers are forced to depend on human labourers. So the availability of labourers, their wages, their attitudes are important in the agricultural activity of the district. Unfortunately Alappuzha district is facing certain problems on the basis of labourers. The problems incurred by the labour force are not only affecting the farming activity but also are affecting the land use pattern of the district. They even lead to the increase of the cultivable waste land or idle land of the district. This paper is an attempt to study the labour issues that affect the farming activity of Alappuzha district

II. METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on primary data. These data are collected from the survey done among the farmers in the different panchayats of Alappuzha district. Five percent of total farmers of the district including tenants were taken for the study. The survey was conducted among 922 farmers out of 17805 farmers according to the 2011 census. The sample is taken from all over the district on the basis of area under cultivation

III.IMPACT OF LABOUR FORCE ON AGRICULTURE

Labourers are major factor in determining the farming activities. Like the rest of the state, the district is also facing problems from this factor of production. The constraints faced by the farmers from this factor is discussed as follows

A. The Wages of Labour

The wage level of the state is high when compared to that of the neighboring states. This problem is highly intense in the district of Alappuzha. This was traditionally a district which had given priority for agriculture, especially for

rice cultivation. The state government declared the wage rate for agricultural labourers as, Rs. 560 for males and Rs. 330 for females per day. The government rate of wages is Rs. 100 and Rs. 85 respectively for male and female labourers in the neighboring states. The national wage rate is also less than that of the state wage rate. At the national level the wage difference does not exist on the basis of sex difference but it depends on the quality. They are classified as skilled as well as unskilled labourers in the national level rather than male and female labourers.

The government has fixed a high rate of wages. This is not the only problem. The labourers demand more wages than the rate the government has fixed. Not only high wages are demanded it differs from one region to another in the district itself. Such a higher wage demand is supported by the labour unions. If the farmers disagree to pay the rate the unions force them by reducing the supply of labourers to the field. From the survey it can be seen that the rate fixed by the government changes from one part to another: that ranges from Rs. 600 to Rs. 800 per day depending on the demand of labourers. For example the Kuttanad region which had more wetlands than the other regions and has more demand for labourers. As paddy is the first ranking crop, the farmers of the region have to pay a higher wage that is more than Rs. 800 per day. The problem of this wage rate can be understood when this wage rate is compared to the returns that farmer gets. A farmer who has an area of 1 acre gets an average return of Rs. 20,000 per season that is less than Rs.5000 per month, while a labourer who work for 20 days is to be paid an amount of Rs. 16,000.

This is not only the problem of wetlands but also of the garden lands. For plucking coconuts from the trees the farmer has to pay wages between Rs. 50 to Rs. 100 per tree. This wage when compared with the price of the nuts is too high. In the case of other garden crops also the labour cost are high especially for the maintenance of the crops. This huge labour costs implant lack of interest among the farmers to do farming activities.

B. High Compensation And Illegal Demands By Labourers

Not only the wages, but also the compensation demanded by the labourers when an agricultural labourer leaves his job in a particular field is high. If the labourer was working with the same farmer for several years when he leaves the job the farmer has to give him the huge compensation demanded by him in spite of the consideration whether it is his interest or the farmers' interest that he is leaving the job. They demand the compensation with the support of labour unions. The compensation is either demanded by the labourer himself or through labour unions. These compensations are usually high. The farmers are forced to pay it.

The compensation is not the only financial burden faced by the farmers of the district from the labourers. There are also other illegal demands for money from the farmers from local

labourers. They demand illegal wages in the local name 'nokkukuli'. This is the wage demanded without doing any work. This wage is demanded especially for the commodities kept in the field and or transported to other fields. The farmers may transport these commodities with the help of other labourers. But after the work is done some people who haven't involved in the work demand wages in the name of labour unions as nokkukuli i.e. for watching those works. These commodities may be fertilizers, seeds or even the yield. This is purely an illegal demand of money and the government and even the political parties oppose this type of demands. But it is prevalent even now and there are many unhappy incidents in many parts of the district in the name of this illegal wage. These factors push the farmers away from taking the risk of farming and related works.

C. Poor Availability of Agricultural Labourers.

Kerala is a state which lacks in the supply of labourers. Labour problem is a serious problem faced by the state. The supply of labourers in the field of agriculture is less all over the state. There are many reasons. The most important factor is seasonality in the field of agriculture. In all other sectors they are having jobs all the year round. In the farming field mostly their demand is only during the agricultural season. During the monsoon season there won't be any job and they have to face poverty during that season. Secondly, there are many job security programmes introduced by the government in other sectors which ensures 100 days job. In the construction field the labourers are getting job all the year round. As the labourers are getting job security in all sectors other than in agriculture they shift their attention to other sectors. The income from other sectors is also high when compared to the jobs in agricultural sector. Another problem is caused by the attitude of the people. Those who get primary education think that agricultural labour work is a degraded work. They want to work in offices. For many of them even a last grade servant job in government sector is better than agricultural labour. The life style and wages that they get from government jobs attract them to that field. Another factor is that the educated youth of the state believe that doing labour work is not up to their status. Education is considered as the meter for attaining government jobs. So the state of Kerala which stands high in the percentage of literacy ratio faces a high shortage in labour force in the field of agriculture.

The district of Alappuzha is not an exception to this problem of the state. Shortage of agricultural labourers is harsher in this district. This is because in this district not only large areas are cultivated but also agriculture which needs more labour force is practised. Wetland crops like paddy and garden crops such as coconut need more labourers. These agricultural activities need a large number of skilled labourers. Only experienced labourers can do the work.

In the case of garden crops there is a huge deficiency for labourers especially in the case of labourers for plucking nuts from the coconut trees. Their wage is also high. So in the

case of small holdings farmers pluck the nuts themselves for self consumption or wait for the fall of the nuts naturally. Moreover the farmers are not getting labourers to meet their need for the preparation and maintenance of garden land for all crops.

D. Absence of Labour Banks.

Labour banks are the main means to solve the problem of demand for the labourers. It needs the collection of labourers from different parts of the district. There is also large immigration from different parts of the country to the state for labour works. The district is not an exemption for this. There are a lot of migrants from states like Bengal, Orissa, Bihar etc to this state in search of jobs. If these migrants are trained well, they can be used as labour force in the agricultural sector. But they are to be collected to be given training so that they can be used for strengthening the agricultural sector. As there are no labour banks, they are not collected or monitored. Now there is no information about the availability of these labourers.

Likewise as the agricultural seasons are different from one region to another there will be surplus labourers in some areas. If there are labour banks the information about these excess labourers can be collected. When the demand for labourers in one area falls they will be demanded in another area. So, this resource of agricultural labourers can be judiciously used and shared among the regions. Thus, the problem of deficiency of labour force can be solved. The problem in seasonal jobs also can be solved by labour bank as labourers can be better utilized when they are idle. But unfortunately the farmers as well as authorities are unaware of labour banks.

E. Restrictions on Labour Mobility

. Labour mobility means hiring the labourers from the region where the supply is high or where this force is idle. The mobility is controlled by some external forces. Labour force is scarce. Here lies the importance of their mobility. But there are high restrictions on leasing the labour forces in the district.

Labour force is immobile because of interference of labour unions. If the farmers have to appoint new labourers in the field, they have to get the permission from the labour unions. Even though there is high deficiency in the number of labour force in some areas and though there is excess in other areas and though there is a situation of emergency this unwritten law created by labour unions exist. Otherwise the farmer has to pay the penalty. The farmer has to pay high compensations otherwise the supply of the labourer to the field will be cut short. The farmers who do not comply with unions will be kept in the unions black list and the farmers have to face many problems later. So, in cases of emergency the farmers approach the labour unions to employ labourers from other regions.

F. The Problems of Mechanization in Agriculture.

Mechanization is a means to solve the labour problem. But mechanization is also causing some problems. It is not easy to use machines in the fields of this district. The cost of mechanization is high and unaffordable especially for the farmers having small holdings. In the wetlands large machines are used for reaping. Big machines do not suit to the geographical conditions of the wetlands of the district. These machines are designed and manufactured in foreign countries where the conditions of wetland of Alappuzha district are unfamiliar. The soil of this district is soft and clayey. The clay content is high the wetlands of the districts and in areas like Onattukara region the soil is soft. These machines are heavy. In the areas where the soil is soft the machines cannot be used for reaping. There are instances in which these machines got stuck in the fields.

IV. CONCLUSION

Labourers are major forces in determining the agricultural activity of a region. Unfortunately the district of Alappuzha is facing a crisis in this factor of production, which is affecting the food production of not only the district but also the whole state as this district is the Granary of Kerala. The Labour issues also had contributed to the increase of idle or cultivable waste land of the district.

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