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# **A DETAILED STUDY ON SOCIAL SECURITY PROBLEMS OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN COVID - 19 SITUATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted agricultural workers, highlighting significant social security challenges. This study examines the multifaceted social security problems faced by agricultural workers during the COVID-19 crisis, focusing on issues such as income instability, lack of health coverage, and inadequate access to social protection measures. The research explores how lockdowns and movement restrictions exacerbated these vulnerabilities, leading to increased poverty, food insecurity, and health risks. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, the study reveals the urgent need for comprehensive social security reforms to protect this critical workforce. Recommendations include enhancing health insurance coverage, providing direct financial support, and implementing robust social safety nets to ensure the resilience and well-being of agricultural workers in future crises.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The person who works on someone else's land and does not participate in farm management and its maintenance, and receives money or a part of the harvest in consideration for his service, neither has any rights on the land nor does he have to bear any risk regarding the farm, briefly by agricultural labour, we mean such labourers who "earn their livelihood by working on agricultural farms of others." Agricultural labourers receive almost all of their income from agriculture.

Agricultural workers sum up almost half of the total workforce of our country and more than half of the population of India depends upon agriculture as primary income. According to census 2011 data, the total number of agricultural workers in source. India has increased from 234.1 million (127.3 million cultivators and 106.8 million agricultural labourers) in 2001 to 263.1 million (118.8 million cultivators and 144.3 million agricultural labourers) in 2011. The share of the workforce

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<sup>1</sup> B.COM, L.L.M.

engaged in the agriculture sector has come down from 58.2% in 2001 to 54.6% in 2011." Yet there is no such clear legal or financial support for the social securities of agricultural labourers, in the lockdown period and post lockdown period they have suffered a lot, from not able to work in the lockdown period to the loan burden, financial crisis, not having any life insurance in case of they get affected by the virus, no health insurance no clear government support to the disturbed crop season because of the Pandemic. All these social security problems have occurred because they did not have any social security. The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) 2017 data show that the average daily wage for general agricultural labourers is Rs.264.05 for men, and Rs. 205.32 for women. Women in the sector on an average earn 22.24% less than their male counterparts. But the figures on paper are further removed from ground reality. Women farm labourers don't get more than Rs.150 a day, while men get Rs. 200-300. How can they save any money out of this little amount of income they are earning from the work; it is not possible and that is why they were so vulnerable during the Pandemic? National Crime Records Bureau show that 25,610 of the 57,336 suicides in the agrarian sector between 2014 and 2018 were of farm labourers.<sup>2</sup>

## **MEANING OF SOCIAL SECURITY**

Every person faces social problems and risk at some time in his lifespan due to risks related with any major accidents, sickness, disability, maternity, old age etc. The Social Security policies are intended to provide the cover the cost of these problems and risks.

## **SOCIAL SECURITY OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS**

Agricultural labourers have faced and still facing a lot of problems in this COVID 19 pandemic, like - No insurance policy and paid sick days, non-availability of safety equipment, not having proper awareness about social distancing and other safety measures, travel restrictions, lack of support from the govt., as a result none of them were able to generate money which resulted in increasing unemployment rates, starvation and increased suicide rates. We can't just avoid such loop holes in our system. There is no social security for the agricultural workers and because most of them are from the Schedule caste and Schedule tribes, they face racism problems too. Agricultural wages and family incomes of agricultural workers are very low in India. The average annual income of household was Rs. 477 during 1950-51 which declined to Rs. 437 in 1955-56 according to the Agricultural Labour Enquiry Reports. It is high time to take necessary measures

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<sup>2</sup> <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1601902>

to reduce the problems they are facing. It is not only about them, it's about the whole nation, our economy, GDP and our future. Whatever our agricultural labourers are facing is impacting the whole system and us.<sup>3</sup>

## **SOCIAL SECURITY OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN INDIA**

India is among the 15 leading exporters of agricultural products in the world. Agricultural export from India reached US\$ 38.54 billion in the Financial year 2019 and US\$ 28.93 billion in Financial year 2020 (till January 2020). The organic food segment in India is expected to grow at a CAGR of 10% during 2015-25 and is estimated to reach Rs 75,000 crore (US\$ 10.73 billion) by 2025 from Rs 2,700 crore (US\$ 386.32 million) in 2015. According to the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), the Indian food processing industry has cumulatively attracted a Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) equity inflow of about US\$ 9.98 billion between April 2000 and March 2020. Yet agricultural labourers have no social security, their problems have been ignored over the years and in the pandemic situation we got to see the worse side effect that was caused not only because of the Virus but also because of the lack of social security they have. If they were self-sufficient and had decent social security rights, they would have not suffered this much as they did in the pandemic.

During 2019-2020 crop year, food grain production was estimated to reach a record 295.67 million tonnes (MT). In 2020-21, the Government of India was targeting food grain production of 298 MT. Production of horticulture crops in India was estimated at record 320.48 million metric tonnes (MMT) in financial year 2020 as per second advance estimates. India had the largest livestock population of around 535.78 million, which translates to around 31% of the World population. Milk production in the country is expected to increase to 208 MT in Financial year 21 from 198 MT in Financial year 2020 registering a growth of 10% sugar production in India reached 26.46 MT between October 2019 and May 2020 sugar season according to the Indian Sugar Mills Association (ISMA) But the pandemic came and changed the whole scenario, it highlighted the real problems of agricultural workers, because we were estimating such big targets for the future and were expecting growth, only increase in exports is not the growth we should target but also the growth of the farmers, the workers who are working in the farm, they are the real gems of our

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<sup>3</sup> <http://mospi.nic.in/agriculture-surveys>

nation. Yet they are ignored and facing some real big issues of social security. It may look very fascinating but it's not as it looks like. There is a whole different part of the coin which not many people like to discuss. Our agriculture practices and agricultural labours have seen a lot of changes over the years. There were certain major reasons why many people switched or forced to switch to become agricultural workers and still are facing many social security problems.

The reason of this rapid and continuous evolution of the class of landless labourers was the dispossession of the peasants of their lands. That was the reason, their proportion was the highest in the ryotwari areas of Madras, Bombay and the central provinces where, in contrast to the Zamindari or Mahalwari areas, land could be easily transferred by sale or mortgage. The disparity between the Mahalwari North and the Zamindari East can be explained by the fact that the British administration and its land settlements together with the disintegration of the traditional Indian village community started much earlier in the eastern Zone than in the North.

All the social security problems were multiplied by 10 when COVID 19 hit our country. Labourers already have no such access to the internet so they were not aware of such crisis, for them, it was proper shock. They were stunned and in misery when they came to know about the lockdown and there will be no jobs for the next few months. Agricultural labourers and the whole labour force of India had no choice but to wait for the crisis to end quickly. It is estimated that Punjab involves one million migrant workers and Haryana about 0.6 million workers during this rabi season, of whom belong to the state of Bihar. In the wake of this pandemic on the one hand there has been a shortage of labour in these northern states to carry out harvest and post-harvest operations, while on the other hand in the states from where the workers could not migrate the agricultural wages have fallen due to oversupply of labour. The migrant workers in their home states have also been adversely affected by the absence of all non-farm work during this period of lockdown. Under such conditions, the present agricultural season was even more crucial for the rural workers to fight their daily battles of hunger and destitution. Village studies have come to show that in the Indian countryside there no longer exists a pure class of agricultural labourers as a result of declining days of employment available in agriculture. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.downtoearth.org-in/news/fagriculture/economic-survey--2019-20-agriculture-growth-stagnant-in-last-6-years-69076>

## SOCIAL SECURITY FOR AGRICULTURAL WORKERS IN ODISHA

The state's economy is expected to grow at 6.16% of gross domestic product as compared to the national economy at 5% in 2019-20. The state's per capita income is growing at 6.75 %, compared to the national average of 6.84 per cent during 2018- 19. According to India's Periodic Labour Force Survey data, the labour force participation rate in the state was 51.7 %, as compared to the national average of 53.96. The proportion of workers in the informal sector, combining self-employment and casual labour, is more than 80%. The agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors were the highest sources of employment across the states. These account for 48.76 % in Odisha.<sup>5</sup> Odisha's agriculture sector continues to be a low-productive sector. Despite employing more than 60% of the state's total workforce, it contributes about 26% to the gross state domestic product. The reasons associated with low productivity are small land holdings, unscientific methods of cultivation, rain-fed nature of agriculture, lack of innovation, inadequate financing, vicious circle of poverty.<sup>6</sup>

As per National Sample Survey Office's Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017-18, an average farm worker in Odisha makes Rs. 202 per day. Odisha remains among the bottom five states and union territories in wage earnings from casual work in the agricultural sector. The average daily wage of a male worker is Rs. 76 higher than his female counterpart a male worker makes Rs. 215, while a female worker makes Rs. 139. All these statistics clearly show that it is the same problem all around the world and Odisha's agricultural worker class too is facing huge problems regarding their social security. If a person is working without any advanced equipment, with such a low wage, without any insurance scheme given by the authority, even in the Pandemic situation they did not get any security from the government like a life insurance policy for the working member of the family of the agricultural workers or any tool kit for working under the COVID-19 situation or rent-free residential houses etc. It was total devastation for the agricultural workers. They earn low wage rates so they can't save enough money for times like the pandemic or any other calamity or natural

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gktoday.in/gk/impact-of-british-policy-on-indian-agriculture-and-land/#:~:text=The%20major%20reason%20of%20commercialization,%2C%20jute%2C%20tea%2C%20tobacco. RD-~>

disaster. They are the classes who we need to take care of because they are made up of our half of the labour workforce and it directly affects the economy of our country and states too.<sup>7</sup>

## LEGAL ANALYSIS

Agricultural workers have faced a lot of social security problems in this pandemic situation, legal analysis will help us to understand what kind of legal steps have been taken for the relief of the agricultural workers in the pandemic situation. Our Indian Constitution also backs up the agricultural workers, not directly but indirectly. Article 39 says, equal pay for equal work. So that women can also earn the same amount of money as men. Article 43 says, Secure a decent standard of living and social & cultural opportunities for all workers. If all states try to bring a change according to this article, then, maybe the problem of social security for agricultural workers will get lighter.

Legal analysis will also put emphasis on the validity and effectiveness of the policies and other steps taken by the authority. They are discussed as follows: -

To tackle the rigorous effects of the lockdown on all sectors including agriculture and to save our economy, the Government of India on May 12, 2020, announced a package of Rs. 20 lakh crores, of which the agricultural sector accounted for Rs. 1.5 lakh crores. COVID-19 exposed the weaknesses of the supply chain infrastructure, and hence about two-thirds of the agricultural package aims at strengthening the post-harvest infrastructure and supply chains. The rest is shared by the micro food processing enterprises of Rs. 10,000 crores, fisheries of Rs. 20,000 crores, animal husbandry of Rs. 15,000 crores, herbal or medicinal plants of Rs. 4000 crores and beekeeping of Rs. 500 crores.

Besides, the allocation to "Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee act (MGNREGA) was raised by Rs 40,000 crores over and above its budgeted allocation of Rs. 61,000 crores. A new rural employment scheme "Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan" (GKRA) has also been launched with a provision of Rs.50,000 crores to generate employment opportunities for the jobless migrants in 116 districts spread over the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. This scheme was expected to absorb about two-thirds of

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<sup>7</sup> <https://odisha.pscnotes.com/geography-orissa/agriculture-in-odisha/>

the 10 million migrant workers who returned to their villages during the lockdown. The economic package aims at managing the supply as well as demand side effects of the lockdown.

The MGNREGA and GKRA are expected to put more money in the hands of poor workers that will enable them to achieve their pre-lockdown income and consumption levels. On the supply side, most of the activities under both the schemes aim at building community assets and infrastructure and enhancing environmental services that contribute to improving the efficiency and sustainability of the agricultural production systems. The significant fall in the market arrivals and wholesale prices of agricultural commodities in the first phase of the lockdown resulted in an increase in post-harvest losses at the farm level, especially in perishable commodities. This brought forth the weaknesses of agriculture-food supply chains. A greater allocation of funds for strengthening the supply chain infrastructure, in terms of storage, warehousing, refrigerated transport, etc. will help farmers insulate from such shocks. The package also provides incentives for the diversification of agriculture towards medicinal plants and apiculture, the demand for their products is likely to grow at an accelerated rate in the near future. The promotion of micro-food enterprises is a step towards rural industrialization. These targets promote start-ups, processing, and packaging & branding, that will generate income and employment opportunities for people in rural areas, and discourage migration of rural labour to cities and towns in search of livelihoods.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the economic package, the Government of India came out with new reforms to change the agricultural marketing system. These new agricultural bills were passed by the Lok Sabha on 17th September 2020 and by the Rajya Sabha on 20th September 2020. There were mainly 3 reforms, those were: a) Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020. b) The Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farmers Services Act 2020.

## **JALA GANDHI VS ELURI VIJAYALAKSHMI (28TH MARCH, 2013)**

The revision petitioner/judgement debtor (J.Dr.) raised an objection in the execution proceedings that EP schedule property which is a residential house is not liable to be sold in execution of a money decree against him on the ground that he is an agriculturist and agricultural labour. The

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<sup>8</sup> <https://government.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/govt-unlocks-rs-1-7-lakh-crore-relief-for-poor-to-fight-covid-19-lockdown/74830860> 8



lower court repelled the contention of the J.Dr. on the ground that the EP schedule house property has attached in the year 2005, in I.A.No.173 of 2005 and that the J.Dr. did not raise any objection when it was attached. As the matter now stands, there is no material placed by the J.Dr. to show that he is an agriculturist or/and an agricultural labour. Even though, the J.Dr. is described as a business person in the execution petition, the J.Dr. did not deny the same. A businessman even if holds a small piece of land, cannot be styled as an agriculturist and will not come within the exemption under section 60(1) provision (c), C.P.C. The J.Dr. claims that he is both an agriculturist as well as an agricultural labour. In my opinion, an agricultural labour is one who does not possess any agricultural land and earns money by agricultural labour work and his principal source of livelihood is only from agricultural labour. In the absence of any evidence before the executing court and in the absence of raising objection at the stage of attachment in the year 2005 it does not lie in the mouth of J.Dr. now to contend that he is an agricultural labour and agriculturist in order to claim exemption under provision (c) for sale of his house property.

The objection raised by the J.Dr. in the execution proceedings was validly overruled by the executing court. I find no reason to interfere with the said order passed by the lower court.<sup>9</sup>

## **SWARAJ ABHIYAN V. UNION OF INDIA (2016)**

While not directly related to COVID-19, this case highlighted the plight of drought-affected farmers and pushed for better implementation of relief measures, which became even more relevant during the pandemic.

## **NATIONAL CAMPAIGN COMMITTEE FOR CENTRAL LEGISLATION ON CONSTRUCTION LABOUR (NCC-CL) VS. UNION OF INDIA (2020)**

This case highlighted the plight of construction workers, many of whom are seasonal agricultural labourers. The Supreme Court ordered state governments to provide financial assistance and

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<sup>9</sup> <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/107404819/>

support to these workers during the pandemic, setting a precedent for agricultural workers' social security.

## **THE POLICIES AND MEASURES TAKEN FOR SOCIAL SECURITY OF AGRICULTURAL WORKERS**

### **COVID-19 AGRICULTURE-TRACK**

The principal scientific advisor (PSO) has said they will help the returned migrant workers in their agriculture work. A survey stated that maximum no. Of migrant labourers who have returned to their villages are young ones, hence they can be shaped and moulded into a better-skilled worker by making them learn different scientific techniques and tools which will help them to maximize their yield and capacity building. It will safeguard the workers in the future. It will make them ready for the next industrial revolution which is about to come in the next 5 years in which non-skilled workers will be demolished and the unemployment rate to fly high. This plan i.e., COVID-19 Agri-Track will be beneficial if implemented national wide with consistency and dedication to improve our human workforce, we may see some really great improvement in the coming future if PSO gets successful in implementing this plan. The best way is always rigid and tricky in the beginning but we have to be ready for the next evolution.

**Special Schemes & Policies Introduced during the Pandemic:** "Labour is in the concurrent list so both state and centre can legislate in this issue, furthermore, most of the labour acts including migrant labour act is being implemented exclusively by the state govt." said the union labour and employment minister Santosh Gangwar. He further said, till mid-September, more than 2 crore migrant workers had been provided Rs. 5000 crores directly to their bank accounts through the construction and building works cess fund being maintained in various states, in order to reverse the grievance of migrant workers during lockdown, the ministry has set up 20 control rooms all over the country. Approximately 15000 complaints came to the control room and were resolved and during the lockdown period because of the intervention of the ministry, 2 lakh workers due daily wage was paid which is nearly 295 crores. The Government of India on May 12, 2020 announced a package of Rs. 20 lakh crores, of which the agricultural sector accounted for Rs. 1.5 lakh crores.

The allocation to "Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) was raised by Rs. 40,000 crores over and above its budgeted allocation of Rs. 61,000 crores. A new

rural employment scheme "Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan" has also been launched with a provision of Rs. 50,000 crores to (GKRA) generate employment opportunities for the jobless migrants in 116 districts spread over the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. This scheme was expected to absorb about two-thirds of the 10 million migrant workers who returned to their villages during the lockdown. The MGNREGA and GKRA expected to put more money in the hands of poor workers that will enable them to achieve their pre-lockdown. income and consumption levels. A relief package of Rs.1.7 crore was announced by the govt. On 25th December, 2020, India's Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi released the next instalment of PM-Kisan, the direct cash-transfer scheme for farmers, worth Rs18,000 crore into the bank accounts of 9 crore farmers. on 25th December 2020, India's Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi released the next instalment of PM-Kisan, the direct cash-transfer scheme for farmers, worth Rs18,000 crore into the bank accounts of 9 crore farmers.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

The suggestions are stated below Creating awareness about what schemes and policies have been launched by the government for the agricultural workers and how they can take benefit from the plans. This awareness will also make them understand their fundamental rights and how can they complain to the higher authority if the local one does not listen to their queries. Conducting seminars and small events will help a lot. Educating the workers as well as their children, so they don't get to face the problems that their parents have faced during the lockdown period. Life insurance or health insurance policy schemes during such a pandemic situation can truly reduce the stress of the workers because even if they get infected or die because of the infection, their families won't have to suffer. Training them to use different techniques of cultivation and handling new tools and equipment with safety masks and gloves can reduce the harmful effects of working in a dangerous working environment, it is because agriculture is one of the most harmful working environments in the world. This step may reduce the health problems and increase the yield at the same time.

## **CONCLUSION**

After going deep into the very ground of the problem and taking a good look at the data, We can conclude by saying, that it is clear the authorities have neglected the social security problem of agricultural workers and this problem was present even before the pandemic, not getting enough wages, exploitation of women workers no insurance policies, illiteracy, unemployment, and many

more problems made this pandemic situation bad to worse for the workers. The policies and schemes were launched and a sense of relief was felt by a portion of workers around the country but most of them were left with nothing except tears and hopelessness. The analysis clearly shows that the main problem was illiteracy, they don't even know what is social security and if they can ask for help from the authorities or if the government have launched some plans for them also. First, we need to accept that it is big problem and it is affecting our economy too, then We need to educate and upskill our workers that is the real solution to this big problem, only policies won't work nor only education, both need to done side by side to eradicate this problem from the root and make this world a better place for the agricultural workers too, where they can live with joy and dignity because it is their fundamental right too.

**"We should be talking about expanding social security benefits, not cutting them" -  
Elizabeth Warren**