

Globalisation and Exclusion of Landless Rural Labour in India with Special Reference to Punjab

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After 70 years of independence and planned development, India is still a predominantly agrarian economy. It accounts for the largest section of the country's workforce. Hence, the agricultural sector becomes the natural focus of any study attempting to analyse the evolution of Indian economy as well as its process of exclusion and inclusion. Agriculture in India improved a lot after Independence, especially after the Green Revolution during the mid-sixties but subsequently, the technology fatigue and the onset of economic reforms pushed Indian agriculture into a profound crisis. During all these phases, the agricultural labourers - an important part of the agrarian economy remained mute partners who have a bigger share in the 'distress' than the 'gains'. The agricultural labourers mostly belong to the economically and socially backward section of society. They are generally employed in low paid and irregular jobs. They possess no skills, have spent fewer years in formal schooling and also have less assets. Hence, they have none or fewer alternative employment opportunities. Any downturn in the agricultural sector endangers their already minuscule sources of subsistence. Ironically, while debates about the agrarian crisis talk at length about the plight of the farmers, little has ever been examined or explored about this section of the rural society. The process of economic reforms in the nineties deepened the agrarian crisis which further increased the vulnerability of the agricultural labourers. The process of liberalisation and globalisation proved to be more disastrous for the agricultural labourers as the contradiction of neoliberalism has interwoven with traditional production relations in the agricultural sector which have worked against this asset poor section of the agrarian society. The rural poor are at further risk of marginalisation and continued exclusion if left to the market forces alone. Although, Indian agriculture has come a long way from the severe food shortages and acute rural poverty experienced during the 1950s and the 1960s, but it is still plagued by several challenges related to widespread rural

poverty in the increasingly globalised economy. The process of structural transformation too has not been able to make a significant dent upon the landless rural masses of the country. Rather, it has pushed the agricultural labourers to a tighter spot. Actually, the problem is that during the whole process of planned development, among all the sectors of the economy, agriculture is one of the most vulnerable sectors especially on the fronts of sustainability and stability. The growth of agricultural productivity, structural transformation and economic reforms along with continuously deepening agrarian crisis, have all added to the woes of this section of the rural society. The state of Punjab is no exception in this regard. This economy is also going through the phase of structural transformation, but its pace is slower than other states even though it has fully exhausted the productivity gains of the Green Revolution. The irony is that the process of structural transformation is even slower for the rural labour in the state. So, the agricultural sector continues to be the largest employer of rural workforce, and this is happening under a continuous process of fragmentation of land holdings. As a result, a majority of them work in the small sized, low productive holdings without any other alternative employment opportunity. In Punjab between 1991 and 2011, the number of cultivators has come down while that of the agricultural labourers has increased. During this period, the number of operational holdings in the state increased mainly due to increase in marginal and small land holdings while the numbers of semi-medium, medium and large land holdings have declined. This has led to a fall in the average size of operational holdings during this period. These facts clearly point out that now more agricultural workers are working on relatively smaller holdings. This reduces their bargaining power, and hence they form the poorest sections of the rural society. The real wages of an agricultural labourer in Punjab are lower than that of the non-agricultural workers in the rural areas. Most of these workers are not able to make both ends meet and live below the poverty line. As their earnings are lower than their consumption expenditure, they have to depend upon borrowings from the landlords, moneylenders or other non-institutional sources. Their access to institutional sources is usually minimal due to the absence of any collateral. As a mechanism of exploitation, social differentiation and labour control, debt continues to be a defining feature of rural lives. All agrarian relations and modes of exploitation are reflected through the extent and composition of debt in any agrarian society. The debt taken through non-institutional sources is an important method of surplus extraction and its redistribution without participating in its generation. It perpetuates the semi-servile conditions of the agricultural labourers by reducing their freedom to attain an alternative occupation with a different employer, thus creating the conditions of bonded labour. Hence, it is important to put together some of the insights on these issues. So, the present study is an attempt to analyse the impact of globalisation in the Indian economy upon the landless poor masses in the country. This study aims to know the extent and determinants of poverty and indebtedness and other sources of exclusion in rural India with a special reference to

Punjab (a forerunner in Green Revolution in the country). For this purpose secondary as well primary data has been used. For national scenario, the reports on Agricultural Situation in India by NSSO have been used while for the case of Punjab, a primary survey of three agro-climatic regions of the state has been conducted. This study points out the reasons why this class of workers is not able to be benefited from the programmes of public intervention for poverty alleviation.