



Growth of Agricultural Labourers in Colonial India

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This paper examines the emergence and expansion of agricultural labour as a significant occupational category during colonial India. Agricultural labourers are typically defined as landless or near-landless individuals who earn the majority of their income by working on land owned by others. The study traces the trends in the size, growth, and regional distribution of this category and explores the underlying causes of its expansion.

Scholarly debates on this subject offer contrasting perspectives. One group of scholars attributes the growth of agricultural labourers to colonial policies that led to de-industrialization, land alienation, de-tribalization, and the breakdown of traditional village economies—factors that pushed a large number of people into wage labour. On the other hand, some researchers question the accuracy of colonial census data and challenge the extent of the reported increase, calling for a more critical interpretation of available sources.

Despite these differing viewpoints, the overall evidence indicates a significant rise in the number of agricultural labourers during the colonial period, driven largely by structural changes imposed by colonial rule.

Keywords: labourers, colonial, de-industrialization, population-growth

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1. Introduction

Agricultural labourers are defined as a category of agriculturists, who are landless or near landless and earn the major part (50 % or more) of their incomes by working on others' land in the capacity of labourers.[1] This category grew during the colonial period and has remained an important category even since. This article discusses the trends in size, growth and regional pattern of agricultural labourers and, afterwards, reasons for the increase in their number and their regional distribution are analysed.

Most scholars agree that during the late colonial period India was basically an agrarian economy and it was among the poorest countries of the world on the eve of independence. There has been intense debate on the nature of Indian economy during the colonial period. While the nationalist scholars held the British colonial rule responsible for Indian backwardness, some other groups of scholars believed that although the British rule acted as a progressive force of change in India, the overwhelming legacy of Indian backwardness from the pre-colonial period acted as fetters on Indian economic development.

Size and Growth of Agricultural Labourers

Agricultural sector (including animal husbandry, forestry and fishing) formed the main basis of Indian economy as around 75 per cent of workforce was dependent on it during 1911-51 period. The contribution of this sector towards national income during 1900-1/1904-5 was around 66.6 per cent, and during 1942-3/1946-7, it was 57.6 per cent. Most of the people dependent on this sector were very poor and could barely survive. The productivity per worker decreased from 0.89 in 1901 to 0.76 in 1951.[2] At the same time, this sector was very important to the colonial government as a source of revenue, as a supplier of raw materials to the British and European industries, for earning export surplus for realization of tribute, and for creation of a class of collaborators such as zamindars and taluqdars for the sustenance of colonial rule.[3]

There are two broad opinions about the formation of the class of agricultural labourers in India. One school believes[4] that, although agricultural labourers may have existed before, but their number was small and the existence of a 'distinct' category of agricultural labourers as a big social force was the result of the British rule.

The other school[5] believes that the same category was quite significant even before and their proportion did not change much during the British period. According to the latter school, it merely represented a "continuity" with the past rather than a "change" as it is made out to be by the first school. The first view is based on the argument that the land revenue system introduced by the Britishers during their rule, commercialization of agriculture and the decline of indigenous industries resulted in pauperization of peasants and artisans who became agricultural labourers. The second view is based on the argument that it was the population growth rather than pauperization of peasants and artisans which was responsible for the significant increase in this category.

However, both views accept that by the beginning of the 20th century, this particular category was sizeable to be noticed even though they differed about the causes of its growth. However, even if we accept that agricultural labourers did exist before, their magnitude, form and nature changed significantly during the British period, particularly in the second half of the 19th century. For example, one study on South Gujarat observed that this "category was never absent in the traditional society, but the point is that, their proportion rose sharply in recent decades – a development which also took place elsewhere in India." [6] It is impossible to estimate the magnitude of agricultural labour in the pre-census period i.e., before 1870s and even the census data for the later period is not without problems. About the form and nature of agricultural labour relations, there are less disputes and most studies suggest that agricultural labour-employer relations around the mid-18th century had greater resemblance with the pre-capitalist feudal type than with the casual free labour of capitalist type.[7]

Scholars have interpreted the census figures in different ways and, therefore, their opinions vary on the subject. While some scholars have taken census figures at face value, some others have pointed to many conceptual[8] and statistical[9] shortcomings in census figures, such as the creation of categories which never existed before,[10] changes in economic classification from census to census which made inter-census comparison difficult,[11] differences in coverage of area, method of collection and quality of statistics.

Therefore, it is important for us to keep these limitations in mind while analysing census figures as they cannot be accepted at their face value. That is one of the reasons why the opinions of scholars are so drastically different from each other on the subject.

Census enumerated less than 15% of agriculturists as agricultural labourers in 1871, which seems to have increased to 38% by 1931 (see Table 1.1), a 'drastic' increase of about 20% in the span of 50 years, according to S.J. Patel.[12]

Table 1.1: Proportion of Agricultural labourers to Total Agricultural Population

Year	1871	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931
Percentage	18%	15%	13%	25.1%	22%	26.2%	38%

Source: Censuses of India, reproduced in Patel, 1992.

However, J. Krishnamurty points out the problems of comparison of various censuses and calls for adjustment in census figures. His adjusted figures, which are given in table 1.2 below, suggest the share of male agricultural labourers to be fluctuating between 20%-30% and the possibility of 'not so drastic increase in the proportion of agricultural labourers' as shown by Patel above.[13]

Table 1.2: Share of Agricultural Labourers in Agricultural Workforce: The Indian Union

Year	1901	1911	1921	1931	1951	1961
Males	24.1%%	24.5%	21.9%	26.4%	25.1%	24.6%

Source: Krishnamurty, J., 'The Growth of Agricultural Labour in India-A Note', in Prakash (ed.), 1992, p. 111.

Dharma Kumar also draws the same conclusion as Krishnamurty's that the increase in agricultural labourers was not drastic, but she refers to a much longer period (whole of 19th century), and approaches the problem 'indirectly'. According to her, even at the beginning of the 19th century, the number of landless agricultural labourers was significant. She derives this result from an extrapolation of agrarian castes from the Census of 1871 for south India.[14]

The first Agricultural Labour Enquiry (henceforth ALE) conducted in 1950-51 puts around 27% of working population into the category of agricultural labour.[15] The issue of numbers and their growth is very complex and probably will remain inconclusive because of poor statistical evidence.

Whether we accept or reject the hypothesis of growth of agricultural labourers, we can be sure that, at the end of the British rule around one fourth of agriculturists were agricultural labourers. However, this proportion was not the same across all the regions, and there was a distinct regional pattern, which is discussed below.

Regional Pattern of Growth of Agricultural Labourers

Census of India in 1951 and the First ALE (1950-51), both show that proportion of agricultural labourers to total rural families across various regions was not the same or even similar and there was a distinct regional pattern. According to ALE data (see table 1.3), the highest proportion of agricultural labourers was in south India (45.4%), and in central India (32.4%), whereas the lowest proportion was in north India (12.6%) and in north-west India (7.2%).[16] Similar picture emerges if we look at the census data for the beginning of the century. In fact, while analysing the census data for 1901-31, Patel concludes that "...this proportion of agricultural labourers to total agricultural population was the highest in the southern triangle comprising Bombay, Madras, and the Central provinces and it was the lowest in the Great north comprising Uttar Pradesh., Punjab and Northwest frontier provinces – below 1/5."[17]

Table 1.3: Percentage of Agricultural Labour Families to Total Rural Families- 1950-51

Census Zone	Agricultural Labourers (%)	With Land (%)	Without Land (%)
All-India	30.45	15.24	15.21
North India	14.13	5.73	8.40
East India	32.56	18.88	13.68
South India	50.29	27.36	22.93
West India	21.31	9.21	12.10
Central India	36.55	14.57	21.98
North West India	10.09	2.87	7.22

Source: Report on Intensive Survey of Agricultural Labour, Vol.-I, *Agricultural Labour Enquiry*, 1950-51, p.19.

Reasons for the Growth of Agricultural Labourers and Their Regional Pattern

The reasons suggested for the growth of agricultural labourers by the first school (which holds colonialism responsible) are analysed below.

Later, views of the other School are also given. According to the first School, one of the reasons was that the land revenue system introduced by Britishers destroyed the traditional self-sufficient village communities, in which each particular caste performed their pre-defined roles/occupations and each had their fixed share from the produce.[18] The creation of modern proprietary rights in land, high pitch of revenue demand,[19] its rigid payment with no relaxation whatsoever,[20] not even in the case of crop failure, and insistence of payment of revenue in cash, affected the traditional system of production, distribution and exchange. Peasants were exposed to the market of debt as very often they had to rely on debt to pay the revenue and, in the process, they were pauperized and sometimes joined the ranks of agricultural labourers. An increase in population further compounded the situation. Lack of employment opportunities outside agriculture increased the pressure on land which resulted in fragmentation of holdings, which gradually impoverished peasant proprietors to the position of petty cultivators, tenants, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers with small holdings and finally to the position of landless agricultural labourers.[21] Neeladri Bhattacharya shows that in north-west India, there is a significant class of agricultural labourers who originally were peasants. These peasants became agricultural labourers only in the course of time[22] because of shrinking of their holdings which forced them to take loan from local money-lenders and the easy saleability of land newly created by British rule led to the land frequently moving out of their hands. An official enquiry by Mr. Thornbush in four selected circles of Punjab revealed that indebtedness among agriculturists was widespread and land was frequently getting transferred from them.[23]

Secondly, the dispossession of tribal population from their customary right on land, a process which began much earlier but gathered momentum during the British rule, resulted in their swelling the ranks of agricultural labourers.[24] It has been pointed out that "One of the earliest groups to feel the impact of colonial policies were the tribals, ...many of whom were reduced in a short space of time to the level of migrant proletarian...migrant labourers were employed in growing numbers in agriculture in the Punjab, Khandesh, Berar, Narmada valley and Gujarat." [25]

The forest land which belonged to no one was declared to be private property, such as the grant of 'malguzari rights' in 1862 to the mahajan-moneylender of central provinces.[26] In Bengal and Assam, thousands of acres of land were sold off to European planters at concessional rates.[27] This led to dislocation of tribal communities which practised jhum cultivation and lived the lives of nomads in the forest areas. "In the process tribals became both actively and indirectly, one of the most heavily coerced elements in the migrant workforce." [28] It is difficult to estimate the proportion of dispossessed tribals who were assimilated in the mainstream during the British period but still one can easily say that a significant proportion of agricultural labourers originated from tribal background.[29]

Another important cause of this increase was the decline of indigenous industries, a phenomenon known as 'de-industrialization'. According to Daniel Thorner [1962] and A.K. Bagchi [1976, p.136], de-industrialization may be defined as 'a decline in the proportion of working population engaged in secondary industry or a decline in the proportion of the total population dependent on secondary industry'. This term was probably used for the first time in 1940 meaning 'the reduction or destruction of a nation's industrial capacity'. [30]

The nationalist historians firmly held that India was gradually de-industrialized due to various policies of the colonial government. Initially, the monopolistic control of the East India Company and unfair trade policies of the colonial regime resulted in de-incentivizing the Indian trades and industries. Later, since the 1830s, the massive influx of British machine-made goods into an India without tariff protection led to decimation of the indigenous manufacturing. This process resulted in unemployment in industrial sector and dependence of an increasing number of workers on agricultural sector. According to S.J. Patel, the census data show that during this period in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the number of agricultural labourers drastically increased. He argues that it was due to the decline of Indian industries and the release of these workers who now moved to agriculture creating severe pressure on it.

Moreover, the general impact of British rule destroyed the 'village republics' caused by modern trade, transport and communication leading to integration of markets.

The entry of cheap western products in the village market decreased the demand of village industrial products. Spread of railways added to the crisis of village community. "The village potter, tanner, dyer, oil men and jeweller all faced strong competition from machine products, whether made in Britain or by the close of the 19th century, in the new industrial centres that grew up in India.... Millions of them have had to find other ways to gain a livelihood or to supplement their scanty earnings from the village".[31] Rural artisans went out of their traditional jobs. These out-of-job artisans added to the numbers of agricultural labourers. One study about the Punjab discusses, that, the artisan caste, which earlier served as agricultural labourers in the capacity of only supplementary occupation, now became full time agricultural labourers.[32] This study also asserts that the growth of modern industry was the cause of disintegration of the village community system which turned rural artisans into agricultural labourers. Another study on Uttar Pradesh talks about the de-industrialisation in the early 20th century and the conversion of artisan castes such as *Barhai, Chamars, Dhunias, Julahas, Kumhars, Lohars* and *Sonars* into the ranks of agricultural labourers.[33] This study says that "with the decline of their old occupations and in the absence of alternative employment, the artisans had no choice but to turn to agriculture. Few of them, however, could purchase land, consequently the majority of them became tenants or farm labourers or a combination of both." [34]

However, another group of scholars, including the British colonial official-scholars, emphasize that the then current situation was a continuity from the past and population explosion had led to drastic changes, if any, that have taken place in the Indian union. According to this group, a significant proportion of landless agricultural labourers already existed at the beginning of the 19th century and the caste groups which served as agricultural labourers continued to do the same even later. There was not much change in the caste structure during the later period and the origin of agricultural labourers did not particularly change during the British period. [35] Whatever increase took place in the proportion of agricultural labourers by the mid-20th century was due to the population explosion. Dharma Kumar argues that in south India, in the beginning of the 19th century, agricultural labourers formed 10%-15% of the total population and between 1871-1901,

the proportion of male agricultural labourers to the male work force varied between 16%-18%.[36] However, there was a change in their relationship with their employers.

Breman writes about south Gujarat that there was no significant change in land holding structure during the British period.[37] In fact, he asserts that the population growth of landlord class and that of agricultural labourers have shown distinctly different patterns. He concludes that the "growth of the proportion of agricultural labourers could, however, also be due to a sharp increase of the social category from which they were traditionally recruited." In fact, he finds the growth pattern of Anavil Brahmins (mostly landlords) and Dublas (agricultural labourers) are very different for the period 1881-1931. Comparing the census data, he finds that the numerical strength of the locally dominant caste had changed very little in the course of five decades whereas the increase in Dublas had been very significant at about 55%. Many reasons have been given for such a pattern of growth. Birth control to lessen the risk of many daughters, prohibiting widows of this high caste to remarry and out-migration are the chief factors which have been held responsible by Breman to explain the stagnation of the Anavils in their native region.[38] The Dublas, on the other hand, have showed a higher birth rate with a decrease of mortality which had led to acceleration in their numbers. Following table has been reproduced from Breman's work to show his point.

Table 1.4: Numerical Increase of Dublas and Anavils in the State of Baroda, 1881- 1931

Year	Dublas	Anavils	Ratio of Dublas to Anavils
1881	42197	10335	4.0
1891	48889	11148	4.4
1901	41043	10862	3.8
1911	50623	9916	5.1
1921	51834	10751	4.8
1931	65459	11818	5.9
1941	76479	-	-

Source: Breman, 1974, p. 72.

The official position of the colonial government about the causes of growth of agricultural labourers emphasized an increase in the pressure on land due to high population growth. In 1931, the Royal Commission on Agriculture opined that "the labour problem is, therefore,... a simple one: to lessen the pressure on land.

The essential condition for relieving pressure on land is, in our opinion, mobility.”[39]

However, the population growth as the sole reason for the growth of agricultural labourers is unable to explain the unprecedented growth of landless labourers as their rate of increase was greater than the rate of population growth. Therefore, there have to be other reasons for such a growth. In addition, the regional differences in the growth of agricultural labourers cannot be explained by more or less uniform population growth all over India.[40]

One of the reasons for distinct regional pattern and growth of agricultural labourers discussed in literature was the impact of British land revenue system on the growth of agricultural labourers in India. Patel argues that the introduction of different land revenue systems in different areas had different impact on the growth of agricultural labourers.[41] The areas where land alienation was the easiest show the highest proportion of agricultural labourers. According to him, land alienation was easiest in ryotwari areas because of direct settlement of revenue with the ryots and therefore southern India, which was mostly under ryotwari settlements, shows the highest proportion of agricultural labourers. According to him, land alienation was not so easy in the Mahalwari areas because of coparcenary units.[42] Therefore, the proportion of agricultural labourers was lowest in Mahalwari areas which were mainly situated in north and north-west provinces.

Other reasons for distinct regional pattern of growth of agricultural labourers emphasized in literature may be listed as pressure of population on land, differences in the extent of irrigation and double cropping, fertility of land, cropping pattern and employment opportunities outside agriculture.[43] Bhattacharya[44] traces the reasons for different patterns of growth of agricultural labourers in the cropping pattern and in the nature of cultivation in each of the regions. According to him some crops were more labour intensive such as rice and jute; therefore, in south and eastern India proportion of agricultural labourers was more than in the other parts of the India. Another explanation offered by him is that in north and north-west India peasant cultivation was the norm whereas in south India, landlords did not perform labour on the fields.

In fact, certain castes in south India were forbidden to touch the plough. However, a high demand for agricultural labour in such regions pulled the workforce in that direction.

2. Conclusion

There are different and conflicting views on the growth of agricultural labourers in colonial India. One School of scholars emphasize the big increase in the number of agricultural workers during the colonial period because of various policies of the colonial government leading to de-industrialization, alienation of land, de-tribalization, and destruction of traditional village relations. However, another group of scholars question the census figures and the suggested increase in the number of agricultural labourers. Yet, on the whole, we can say that there was an increase in the number of agricultural workers during the colonial period and the colonial policies were responsible for this.

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Footnotes:

- [1] The term here excludes the tenants who may also be working on others' land to earn most part of their earnings but their status, both economic and social, are different from the status of agricultural labourers.
- [2] Krishnamurty, 1982, p. 536, table 6.3.
- [3] For details on this, see Upadhyay and Rajni 2012.
- [4] Both Nationalists and Marxists hold this view. R. C. Dutt was the pioneer and later many others propagated and elaborated this idea. Patnaik, 1971, p. 40; Breman, 1979, Ch. 1 and Ch. 2; Patel, 1992, p. 47; Nanavati and Anjaria, 1970, p. 514; Thorner and Thorner, 1962.
- [5] Dharma Kumar, 1965, was the first one to question the widely accepted view about the existence of agricultural labourers. Also see review article by Morris D. Morris, 1966, pp. 185-209.
- [6] Breman, 1979, p. 69.
- [7] Chaudhury, 1982, p.165; Kumar, 1982, p. 211; Fukazawa, 1982, p.180; Breman, 1979; Nanavati and Anjaria, 1970, p. 515).
- [8] Conceptual problems were related to the classification and definition of various categories, such as, what categories to make, and what should be the appropriate definition of these categories. For details see Cohn, 1990, pp. 238-247.

[9] Statistical problems were related to the coverage in terms of area, method of collection and quality of statistics. Territorial coverage of area in each census was different and therefore cannot be compared without adjustment in the figures. For example, 1871-72 figures relate to British India including Burma, 1881 and 1891 estimates relate to larger area including Baroda, Central India, Hyderabad etc. 1901-1931 refers to present day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; see Krishnamurty, 1992. Secondly, quality of statistics depended on Patwaris and Chaukidars and on their wisdom and understanding. Supervisors were appointed by the British government in each district, and they appointed circle supervisors who in turn appointed enumerators and explained to them the questions. Enumerators were anyone literate available in the locality. Supervisors were Patwaris, Zamindars, school teachers etc. Patwaris sometimes did not even ask any question to the people and filled the questionnaire by themselves. Sometimes census operation itself affected the response of the people. For details see Cohn, 1990.

[10] The British, in order to make a 'proper' classification of agriculturists, often made categories which, to begin with, were not so distinct. On this Neale, 1962, wrote: "when the Britishers came to India it never occurred to them that cultivated land could belong to no one, or, if one prefers, to a large number of people, each owning it in a different way. Consequently, they insisted that there were landowners when no such persons really existed, and they actually created landlords."

[11] Krishnamurty observed that estimate of 1871-2 relate to adult males, for 1881 to all males, and for 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 to persons. So, the later censuses may exaggerate the numbers of agricultural labourers. Secondly, he says, 1871-72 and 1881, 1921, 1931, the worker concept is used, for 1891, 1901, and 1911, the concept of 'population supported' is employed. Thirdly, the 'unspecified' category has been used differently by analysts. Patel puts them in agricultural labourers. For details see, Krishnamurty, 1992, p. 108.

[12] Patel, 1992, p. 49.

[13] Krishnamurty, 1992, p. 109.

[14] Kumar, 1992.

[15] Ramamurty, 1954.

[16] North India includes Uttar Pradesh, east India includes Assam, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal, south India includes Madras, Mysore, Travancore-Cochin, west India includes Bombay and Saurashtra, Central India include, Madhya Pradesh, Madhya Bharat and Hyderabad, north-west India includes Rajasthan, Punjab, PEPSU, Jammu and Kashmir.

[17] Patel, 1992, p. 50.

[18] Sir Henry Maine presented a very idealized picture of village community in India and concerned himself with the decline of this system due to onslaught of British. R. C. Dutt, W.C. Neale, Thorner and many others worked and elaborated on this idea.

[19] Neale, 1962, p. 162.

[20] The element of uncertainty in the agricultural crop production is so high, that its rigidity created a lot of problem. There are many reports which suggest that very good harvests are followed by depression and scarcity. See Neale, pp. 162-165.

[21] Nanavati and Anjaria, 1970, pp. 515-516.

[22] Bhattacharya, Neeladri, 1992.

[23] Bhatia, *Famines in India*, 1967, p. 151.

[24] Kosambi, D.D., quoted by Patnaik and Dingwaney, 1985, p. 3.

[25] Bates and Carter, 1992, p. 243.

[26] Bates and Carter, 1992, p. 208.

[27] Bates and Carter, 1992, p. 208.

[28] Bates and Carter, 1992,, p. 208.

[29] Breman, 1992, p. 249.

[30] Habib, 2006, p. 9.

[31] Thorner and Thorner, 1962, p. 56.

[32] Bhattacharya, 1992, p.157.

[33] Joshi, 1963-64, p. 28.

[34] Joshi, 1963-64, p. 28.

[35] Kumar, 1992; Breman, 1979.

[36] Kumar, 1992, p. 105.

[37] Breman, 1979, p. 71.

[38] Breman, 1979, p. 71.

[39] *Royal Commission on Agriculture*, Report, London, 1928, p. 12. Quoted by Patel, 1992, pp. 49-50.

[40] Patel, 1992, pp. 49-50.

[41] Patel, 1992.

[42] Stokes, in Kumar, 1982.

[43] Nanavati and Anjaria, 1970.

[44] Bhattacharya, 1992, p. 179.

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