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# Agriculture Labour in Palghat District - Some Preliminary Findings of a Socio-Economic Enquiry

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# AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN PALGHAT DISTRICT - Some Preliminary Findings of A Socio-Economic Enquiry

## I Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a series of legislative enactments and organisational efforts affecting agrarian relations in Kerala which would lead one to expect significant improvement in the income and levels of living of agricultural labourers. The State legislature has passed land reform bills which are claimed to be more radical than the measures adopted in other States; in respect of the implementation of these Acts, the Governments in this State have shown as much resoluteness and speed as in other States. It is also a fact that agricultural labourers have organised themselves to a degree far surpassing similar efforts elsewhere in India. Further, money wages of agricultural labourers in Kerala have registered a substantial increase in recent years and, according to some, real wage rates also have gone up significantly even higher than in Punjab, the land of the Green Revolution.[1] Whether the above changes have led to any substantial improvement in the lot of these workers is the question examined in this paper.

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1 Pranab Bardhan, "Green Revolution and Agricultural Labourers", Economic and Political Weekly, Special Number, July 1970. See also A.V.Jose, "Trends in Real Wage Rates of Agricultural Labourers", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.IX, No.13, March 30, 1974.

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Agrarian reforms which were introduced in Kerala during the last two decades, for example, Kerala Agrarian Relations Act (1960), Kerala Land Reforms Act (1963), Kerala Stay of Eviction Proceedings Act (1967), etc, were the result of long struggles in which the agricultural labourers were also actively involved. These reforms were mainly aimed at the fixity of tenure and fair rent, to start with, and subsequently, abolition of intermediaries in land, tenancy reforms, ceiling on land holdings and redistribution of surplus land in favour of the landless. However, as it turned out, the land reforms boiled down to a transfer of land from the former feudal landlords or intermediate tenants to the tenants at the lower levels. A significant amount of land became the property of large tenant farmers. Further, before the relevant provisions of the land reform act came into force, most of the holdings which exceeded the ceiling limit got partitioned, leaving very little for redistribution among the landless agricultural labourers.[2] All that the agricultural labourers got out of the land reformwas the ownership rights over their homesteads ranging from 5 to 10 cents. Thus, the benefits of recent land reforms have been mostly confined to former tenants.

It is true that as a result of the relentless organisational efforts, agricultural labourers have been able to put an end to the most ruthless forms of exploitation and bring about some improvement in their working conditions. They have succeeded to make the State intervene in fixing hours

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[2] Originally when the Kerala Agrarian Relations Act was introduced, then Revenue Minister estimated the extent of surplus land above ceiling limit at 1.75 lakh acres. By 1961, when the Kerala Land Reforms Act was introduced, the area of land in excess of the ceiling came down to 1.15 lakh acres. By the end of March 1972, only 691 ceiling returns involving 60000 acres were filed; the actual amount of land declared as surplus by the end of May 1973 dwindled from this to 40000 acres and the actual extent of land redistributed by that date was a mere 956 acres. See M.A. Oommen, Study of Land Reforms in Kerala, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., 1975, p.34.

of work and minimum wages. Indeed, in the Palghat region, there has been a substantial increase in the wages during the past five years or so. Whether the increase in wage rates has led to an improvement in the earnings of agricultural labour households would depend upon the trends in the employment levels. We have no evidence or reason to believe that there has occurred an increase in the total volume of agricultural wage employment. On the other hand the number of agricultural labourers has increased over the years. It is also true that certain traditional avenues of employment for the members of these households have been closed. Therefore, we have a hunch that the increase in wage rates has been offset by a decrease in the average number of days of employment per worker.

The present study is based on primary data collected in the course of a field survey conducted in one of the villages in Palghat district.* Incidentally, Palghat was one of the two districts in Kerala covered in Bardhan's study. A sample of 50 agricultural labour households was surveyed during 1976 covering two paddy seasons, viz., Mundakan (winter) and Punja (summer). Some of the findings of this survey are presented below.

## II Agricultural Labourers in Palghat District: An over-view

### 1. Relative Size of Agricultural Labourers

Before we proceed to examine the results of our investigation it may be useful to have a broad picture of agricultural labour in Palghat districts as a whole. Among all the districts in Kerala, Palghat has the

* The field survey forms a part of a larger research project on the socio-economic aspects of the adoption of high yielding varieties of rice in Kuttanad and Palghat, the two major rice growing areas in Kerala.

largest number of agricultural labourers. As of 1971, the total number of agricultural labourers in Palghat came to 2.93 lakhs, of these, 1.41 lakhs were males and 1.52 lakhs were females.

Agricultural labourers constitute 48.40 per cent of all workers in this district, as against 30.68 per cent for the State as a whole, this proportion being the highest among all the districts. Further, agricultural labourers as a proportion of total workers in industrial categories I, II and III, that is, agriculture and allied activities, comes to 71.47 per cent, also the highest among all the districts. The corresponding proportion for the State as a whole worked out to 55.31 which, it may be noted, is the highest among all the States in the Indian Union. (Appendix Table 1).

The ratio of agricultural labourers to cultivators comes to 3.08 in the district, as against 1.72 for Kerala and 0.61 for the country as a whole. Palghat tops the list in respect of this ratio also.

The comparative position of Palghat in the relative size of agricultural labour force is brought out in Table 1.

It is well known that Kerala has the highest man-land ratio among all the States in India. The number of agricultural labourers per hectare of area under principal crops work s out to 0.82 in Kerala in 1970-71 as against 0.30 for the country as a whole (See Appendix Table 2). The number of agricultural labourers per hectare of gross cropped area in Palghat comes to 0.87, again the highest in the State. The number of agricultural labourers per hectare of (gross) cropped area in the various districts is given in Table 2.

Table 1: SIZE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN THE DIFFERENT DISTRICT OF KERALA, 1971

| | District | No.of Agricultural labourers | | | No.of cultivators: Persons. | Agricultural Labourers as a proportion of: | | Ratio of agricultural labourers to cultivators |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Males | Females | Persons | | All workers | Total workers in Industrial categories I to III | |
| 1 | Cannonore | 134264 | 108119 | 242383 | 130878 | 33.84 | 58.96 | 1.85 |
| 2 | Kozhikode | 105984 | 43348 | 149332 | 82607 | 36.17 | 51.00 | 1.81 |
| 3 | Malappuram | 131741 | 64913 | 196645 | 94713 | 38.79 | 61.19 | 2.08 |
| 4 | Palghat | 141308 | 151575 | 292883 | 95204 | 48.40 | 71.47 | 3.08 |
| 5 | Trichur | 104901 | 93302 | 198203 | 82354 | 33.40 | 63.80 | 2.41 |
| 6 | Ernakulam | 90468 | 62291 | 152759 | 100547 | 21.74 | 52.10 | 1.52 |
| 7 | Kottayam | 115014 | 46200 | 161214 | 150655 | 25.04 | 38.43 | 1.07 |
| 8 | Alleppey | 110609 | 72872 | 183481 | 95798 | 31.93 | 55.87 | 1.92 |
| 9 | Quilon | 109318 | 34329 | 143647 | 185620 | 19.92 | 38.80 | 0.77 |
| 10 | Trivandrum | 1195755 | 712359 | 1908114 | 1106663 | 30.68 | 55.31 | 1.72 |

Source: Census of India, 1971, Kerala, Union Census Abstract 1971.

Table 2: NUMBER OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS PER HECTARE OF CROPPED AREA, 1970-71

| | District | Number of agricultural labourers per hectare |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Palghat | 0.87 |
| 2 | Trichur | 0.81 |
| 3 | Alleppey | 0.79 |
| 4 | Malappuram | 0.78 |
| 5 | Trivandrum | 0.75 |
| 6 | Cannanore | 0.68 |
| 7 | Ernakulam | 0.54 |
| 8 | Kozhikode | 0.54 |
| 9 | Kottayam | 0.44 |
| 10 | Quilon | 0.40 |

Estimated on the basis of: Census of 1971 and Kerala Economic Review.

2. Level of Education

The level of education among the agricultural labourers in the district is very much lower than that of their counterparts elsewhere in Kerala. Illiterates formed 87.40 per cent and 94.90 per cent respectively among male and female agricultural labourers in Palghat in 1961, the highest among all the districts. On the other hand, the proportion of workers with even primary education constituted only 1.59 per cent among male and 0.42 per cent among female labourers, the lowest in the State. Within the district itself, the educational levels of agricultural labourers are significantly below that of the total population of workers and non-workers. The educational levels of agricultural labourers and that of the total population in the different districts are presented in Table 3.

## 3. Composition of Agricultural Labour

(a) It may be recalled that in Palghat district female agricultural labourers outnumber male agricultural labourers. Of the total agricultural labourers here female workers account for about 52 per cent, as against a little over 37 per cent for the State as a whole. The proportion of male and female agricultural workers in the different districts is given in Table 4.

Table 4: PROPORTION OF MALE AND FEMALE AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN DIFFERENT DISTRICTS (1971)

| | District | Females | | Males | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Number | Per cent | Number | Per cent | |
| 1 | Palghat • | 151575 | 51.75 | 141308 | 48.25 | 292883 |
| 2 | Trichur | 93302 | 47.07 | 104901 | 52.93 | 198203 |
| 3 | Cannanore | 108119 | 44.61 | 134264 | 55.39 | 242353 |
| 4 | Ernakulam | 62291 | 40.78 | 90468 | 59.22 | 152759 |
| 5 | Alleppey | 72872 | 39.71 | 110609 | 60.29 | 183481 |
| 6 | Malappuram | 64913 | 33.01 | 131741 | 66.99 | 196645 |
| 7 | Kozhikode | 43348 | 29.03 | 105984 | 70.97 | 149332 |
| 8 | Kottayam | 62291 | 28.66 | 90468 | 71.34 | 152759 |
| 9 | Quilon | 34329 | 23.09 | 109318 | 76.91 | 143647 |
| 10 | Trivandrum | 35410 | 18.88 | 152148 | 81.12 | 187558 |
| | Kerala | 712359 | 37.33 | 1195755 | 62.67 | 1908114 |

It may be noted that Palghat holds the first rank in the proportion of female workers to total agricultural labourers in all the districts of Kerala. In this connection it is worth mentioning that the ratio of the number of female labour to male labour is higher in rice than in other crops.

TABLE 3: EDUCATIONAL LEVELS: TOTAL POPULATION OF WORKERS AND NON-WORKERS, AND AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS, 1961

(Percentage Distribution According to Educational Levels)

| | Total population of workers and non-workers | | | | | | | | | | | | Agricultural labourers | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Illiterate | | | Literate without educational levels | | | Primary or Junior Basic | | | Matriculation and above | | | Illiterate | | Literate without educational levels | | Primary or junior basic | | Matriculation and above | |
| | Persons | Male | Female | Persons | Male | Female | Persons | Male | Female | Persons | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Palghat | 67.03 | 59.09 | 74.31 | 24.99 | 30.74 | 19.73 | 6.38 | 7.70 | 5.17 | 1.59 | 2.46 | 0.80 | 81.40 | 94.90 | 16.97 | 4.68 | 1.59 | 0.42 | .. | . |
| Kozhikode | 61.34 | 50.73 | 71.80 | 27.47 | 34.71 | 20.35 | 10.12 | 12.84 | 7.45 | 1.05 | 1.70 | 0.40 | 66.86 | 91.87 | 28.08 | 6.73 | 4.97 | 1.40 | 0.07 | . |
| Cannanore | 60.53 | 49.62 | 71.01 | 27.27 | 34.65 | 20.18 | 10.93 | 13.58 | 8.36 | 1.26 | 2.09 | 0.47 | 56.31 | 83.58 | 36.76 | 13.28 | 6.82 | 3.14 | 0.01 | . |
| Trivandrum | 57.65 | 49.46 | 65.73 | 30.44 | 35.66 | 25.29 | 9.44 | 11.36 | 7.53 | 2.47 | 3.51 | 1.44 | 55.77 | 86.94 | 38.15 | 11.41 | 5.96 | 1.64 | 0.13 | 0.( |
| Trichur | 52.83 | 46.01 | 59.08 | 32.89 | 37.89 | 28.31 | 11.56 | 12.61 | 10.59 | 2.72 | 3.49 | 2.02 | 61.77 | 78.86 | 35.02 | 18.37 | 3.14 | 2.76 | 0.07 | .. |
| Ernakulam | 51.69 | 44.58 | 58.71 | 34.41 | 39.06 | 29.81 | 11.17 | 12.80 | 9.56 | 2.71 | 3.57 | 1.87 | 56.91 | 78.96 | 37.58 | 18.90 | 5.39 | 2.11 | 0.09 | 0.( |
| Quilon | 50.06 | 42.80 | 57.32 | 34.86 | 39.04 | 30.68 | 12.51 | 14.59 | 10.42 | 2.57 | 3.58 | 1.56 | 58.13 | 86.80 | 36.25 | 11.83 | 5.47 | 1.38 | 0.10 | .. |
| Kottayam | 44.50 | 38.50 | 50.70 | 36.35 | 38.94 | 33.64 | 16.27 | 18.58 | 13.86 | 2.87 | 3.95 | 1.76 | 30.88 | 60.60 | 56.03 | 33.79 | 12.91 | 5.38 | 0.18 | 0.( |
| Alleppey | 43.44 | 36.59 | 50.09 | 40.63 | 44.82 | 36.58 | 12.89 | 14.61 | 11.22 | 3.04 | 3.99 | 2.11 | 39.01 | 66.97 | 57.56 | 30.27 | 6.27 | 2.73 | 0.15 | .. |

Source: Computed from Census 1961, Kerala, District Census Handbooks.

And the fact of the matter is that Palghat district accounts for a very high proportion of the total area under rice in the State. Operations in rice cultivation like transplanting, weeding and, to a large extent, harvesting and threshing generally involve more female labour than male labour. Further, the impact of mechanisation so far in rice cultivation has been felt in dewatering, ploughing, levelling, etc. which traditionally were carried out with male labour, and the process of mechanisation, however limited in scale has, meant displacement of males. It is also true that Palghat district has experienced significant out-migration of males to Tamil Nadu. All these factors may have contributed to the relatively high ratio of female labour in this district.

(b) It is also significant to note that a good proportion of the agricultural labourers in Palghat district, 39.45 per cent, belong to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. As a matter of fact, this district has the largest number of agricultural labourers belonging to these two communities, viz., 85,838 persons. The distribution of agricultural labourers belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the different districts of Kerala is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS FROM THE SCHEDULED CASTES AND SCHEDULED TRIBES, 1961.

| | District | Persons | Males | Females | Percentage share (persons) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Palghat | 85838 | 39832 | 46006 | 24.29 |
| 2 | Alleppey | 50812 | 23254 | 26558 | 14.38 |
| 3 | Kozhikode | 48685 | 23615 | 25070 | 13.78 |
| 4 | Quilon | 45969 | 27814 | 18155 | 13.01 |
| 5 | Ernakulam | 28908 | 13555 | 15353 | 8.18 |
| 6 | Trichur | 28548 | 12947 | 15601 | 8.07 |
| 7 | Trivandrum | 24172 | 15020 | 9152 | 6.84 |
| 8 | Cannanore | 23545 | 10948 | 12597 | 6.66 |
| 9 | Kottayam | 17111 | 9387 | 7724 | 4.84 |
| | Kerala | 353586 | 177370 | 176216 | 100.00 |

Source: Computed from Census of India, 1961, Vol.VII, Kerala, Part V : Special Tables for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, 1967

It may be noted that Palghat accounts for nearly one fourth, 24.29 per cent, of the total agricultural labourers of Kerala belonging to this category, the remaining three quarters being shared by the other 8 districts. However, it deserves mention that a significant proportion of the scheduled castes population in the districts lying to the north and south of Palghat district embraced Islam and Christianity respectively to escape the odium of castes and/or hoping to gain more equitable economic opportunities. This may partly explain the lower proportion of workers belonging to this group in the other districts. It is also interesting to observe that female labourers outnumber male labourers in the case of these communities in Palghat district. This feature is found to be true of some other districts also.

In sum, Palghat district has a large number of agricultural labourers relatively to the total cropped area. More than half of them are females. They are socially and educationally backward.

## III Study Area and Survey Design

(a) As mentioned above, the field survey was conducted in one of the villages in Palghat taluk. The population of Palghat taluk, one of the five taluks in the district was 36,9001 in 1971, i.e., 21.90 per cent of the district total. Of this, 72.14 per cent was rural and 27.86 per cent urban. The literacy rate in the taluk as of 1971 came to 48.81 per cent. Total workers in the taluk under all industrial categories added upto 1.62 lakhs of which 58,558 or 44.2 per cent were agricultural labourers.

The population of the sample village according to the census of 1971 was around 9000 of which about 3000 were counted as workers. Of the total workers in the village, a little over 47 per cent. reported as agricultural labourers. The village panchayat comprises 7 wards of which 3 were selected for the present survey. In the selection of the three wards due weight was given to the representation of cultivators of different strata and agricultural labour households, etc.

Rice is the principal crop in the selected village which receives water from the Malampuzha irrigation project. Under the traditional cropping pattern, rice used to be cultivated during two seasons, viz., Virippu (Autumn) and Mundakan (Winter). Of late, with the commissioning of the Malampuzha irrigation project, a third crop, Punja (Summer), has been introduced in some parts. Under the traditional cropping pattern the first crop, Virippu, mainly a rainfed crop, is sown in May and harvested during late August, September or October depending upon the variety of seeds sown and the timing of the South west monsoon. For Mundakan, sowing starts in October and harvesting is spread over January-February. The duration of the Punja crop is from late January to early May.

However, there is considerable overlapping of the cropping season. Within one large contiguous block of rice fields, one comes across plots at different stages in the cultivation cycle, ranging from ploughing and transplantation to harvesting and threshing. Thus, the virippu crop overlaps into Mundakan and Mundakan crop into Punja. The overlapping of Viriappu and Mundakan is traditional in this area for a number of agronomic and social reasons. The social reasons relate to the tendency of cultivators to stagger the work for their permanent labour force. The resulting picture is a veritable mosaic of rice crop at various stages of growth.

The three wards covered by our survey contained 900 and odd households. Of this, 176 were cultivator households and 270 agricultural labour households. The remaining households belonged to other occupational categories. A good proportion of the agricultural labourers consist of Harijans and Vadukas (a Tamil speaking backward class); there were also quite a few Ezhavas (an intermediate caste between Harijans and upper castes such as Brahmins and Nairs).

Agricultural labourers are fairly well organised in this area. The vast majority of them belong to the Karshaka Thozhilali Union under the C.P.I.(M). According to one leader of this Union, it is interesting to note that about three-fourths of the members of his Union are females. As a result of the organised effort of the workers, wage rates have registered a rise in recent times. During 1975-76, the daily wage rate of agricultural labourers came to 6 'edangazhi' of paddy for males and 5 'edangazhis' for females during harvest period; at other times the rates are even lower. At the price prevailing in the locality at the time, the money equivalent of the above would be Rs.7.8 and Rs.6.5 respectively. For harvesting and threshing, which operations are treated together, wages are always paid in kind and reckoned in terms of a ratio of the gross produce. The prevailing wage rate for harvesting now a days is 1/7 while some cultivators continue to pay at the rate of 1/8 of the gross produce. But then, as late as 1970 or 1971, the average rate for harvesting and threshing was 1/10. On the otherhand, the labourers have reported the tactics which some cultivators resort to of late in order to reduce the share of labourers. Thus, the labourers are allowed to beat the rice bundles for threshing only two times, leaving some grain still in the bundles. The bundle is put aside and after a few days workers

are engaged on a daily wage basis to complete the threshing operations. The prevailing money wages are Rs.7 for males and Rs.5 for females, as against the statutory minimum wage of Rs.9.50 and Rs.6.50 respectively.

(b) As mentioned above, the survey was conducted in 50 agricultural labour households selected at random from the total 270 such families resid in the three sample wards in the Panchayat. A schedule covering demographi details, caste, level of education, occupation status, housing conditions, assets and liabilities, current borrowings, employment, wages, etc. was canvassed among the sample households. Preliminary work such as training of t investigators, listing of households, drawing the sample, etc. was complete by March 1976. Intensive investigation was started in March by which time harvesting of the Mundakan crop 1975-76 was almost over and the initial operations for the 1976 Punja just commenced.* The design of the present research project envisaged collection of data for all the three crops, viz., Virippu, Mundakan and Punja. However, we felt that the collection of data for 1975 virippu at that stage would involve considerable memory lapse on the part of the respondents resulting in a wide margin of error and we, therefore, decided to limit the reference period of the first round to the Mundak and Punja of 1975-76 and to postpone the enquiry on the Virippu crop to the next round during the 1976 Virippu season. The collection of the data for Mundakan season could be started only towards the end of the season, while the data relating to the Punja crops was collected during the course of the crop season. It may however be borne in mind that for the study region, as for other parts of the district, Virippu is a major crop and, therefore, a

* The investigators visited the sample households generally during such time when the members were available at home and comparatively free and willing to give information. We found the members of these households quite responsive. Though they are not educated, they seemed to be fully conscious of their rights and privations and ready to answer any question posed to them. Therefore, it was a comparatively easy task for our investigators to establish the necessary rapport with them.

complete picture will emerge only after we have covered the forthcoming Virippu season in 1976.

As regards employment, wages, and related matters, one proforma was filled for each agricultural labourer in every household and that too for the two seasons separately. Besides the schedule covering details of a quantitative nature, a comprehensive questionnaire dealing with certain qualitative aspects of their employment conditions, caste and social status, customary obligations, systems of wage payment, credit needs, sources and terms, etc. was also canvassed. Here again, one proforma was filled up for every working member of the household.

The following discussion is mainly based on the analysis of the data collected through the schedules filled up in the sample households. The authors' observations and impressions gained in the course of their visits to the study area are also incorporated at appropriate places. The coverage of the study is confined to two crop seasons only, viz., Mundakan 1975-76 and Punja 1976 and, to that extent, the findings relating to employment and income have some limitations.

## IV General Characteristics of the Sample Households

(a) The present sample included 50 agricultural labour households. Of this, the filled up schedules for 5 households contained certain gaps and errors and, therefore, were rejected at the time of tabulation. The following analysis is based on the data collected for the remaining 45 households. The membership in these 45 households adds upto 218 of which 105 are males and 113 are females. Thus, the average size of our sample households comes to about 5. In 26 households the size is less than 6 members and in the rest, 19, there were 6 or more members.

(b) A little over one-third of the members of the sample households, 74 out of 218, belong to the age group 0-15; there are 27 persons in the group 55 years and above. The rest of the members, a little over one half, are in the age group 16-55 years.

Table 6: AGE COMPOSITION OF THE MEMBERS OF THE HOUSEHOLDS BY SIZE OF HOUSEHOLDS

| Household size | 1-2 | | | 3-5 | | | 6-8 | | | 9-11 | | | All households | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age group (years) | M | F | P | M | F | P | M | F | P | M | F | P | M | F | P |
| 0- 5 | - | - | - | 4 | 3 | 7 | 7 | 9 | 16 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 12 | 13 | 25 |
| 6-10 | - | - | - | 3 | 5 | 8 | 11 | 6 | 17 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 15 | 12 | 27 |
| 11-15 | - | - | - | 5 | 2 | 7 | 7 | 6 | 13 | 2 | - | 2 | 14 | 8 | 22 |
| 16-25 | 1 | - | 1 | 7 | 10 | 17 | 11 | 16 | 27 | - | - | - | 19 | 26 | 45 |
| 26-35 | 1 | - | 1 | 5 | 7 | 12 | 9 | 8 | 17 | - | 1 | 1 | 15 | 16 | 31 |
| 36-45 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 7 | 11 | 1 | - | 1 | 9 | 13 | 22 |
| 46-55 | - | 2 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 7 | 4 | 6 | 10 | - | - | - | 9 | 10 | 19 |
| Above 55 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 12 | 5 | 4 | 9 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 12 | 15 | 27 |
| All members | 4 | 7 | 11 | 37 | 40 | 77 | 58 | 62 | 120 | 6 | 4 | 10 | 105 | 113 | 218 |

Note: M: Males F: females P: Persons

(c) The level of education among the members of these households, as is to be expected in the light of the earlier discussions, is extremely low. Of the 218 persons, 136, or a little over 62 per cent are found to be illiterate. Persons with some formal education add upto 80. Only 6 of them are matriculates, 22 have completed middle school, and 42 have primary education. Among the 113 females, 88, that is about 78 per cent are reported as illiterates; 6 of them have completed middle school, 2 are matriculates, and 15 have primary schooling. As the level of education, so the nature of occupation. For the vast majority of working members, agricultural labour

Table 7: CLASSIFICATION OF HOUSEHOLD MEMBERS ACCORDING TO OCCUPATION AND LEVELS OF EDUCATION

| Occupation Levels of Education | No.occupation | | | Wage labour in agriculture | | | Wage labour in others | | | Domestic services | | | Cowboy | | | Skilled labour (wage) | | | Student | | | Self-employed | | | Other Miscellaneous | | | Total | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | F | P | M | F | P | M | F | P | M | F | P | M | F | P | M | F | P | M | F | P | M | F | P | M | F | P | M | F | P |
| Illiterate | 17 | 27 | 44 | 21 | 57 | 76 | 5 | - | 5 | - | 3 | 3 | 1 | - | 1 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 3 | 1 | 4 | 1 | - | 1 | 48 | 88 | 136 |
| Literate without formal education | - | 2 | 2 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 2 | 2 |
| Primary | 5 | 5 | 10 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 5 | - | 5 | 1 | - | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | 2 | - | 2 | 11 | 7 | 18 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 27 | 15 | 42 |
| Middle | 6 | 1 | 7 | 5 | 2 | 7 | - | - | - | - | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | 3 | - | 3 | 4 | 3 | 7 | 7 | - | 7 | - | - | - | 26 | 6 | 32 |
| SSC | 2 | - | 2 | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 2 | 1 | 3 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| College | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Above college | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Others | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Total | 30 | 35 | 65 | 28 | 62 | 90 | 10 | - | 10 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 3 | - | 3 | 5 | - | 5 | 17 | 11 | 28 | 10 | 1 | 11 | 1 | - | 1 | 105 | 113 | 218 |

Note: M: Males F: Females P: Persons

is the principal occupation. It may also be noted that these are landless households, except for the homesteads which cover 5 to 10 cents. Wage employment in agriculture is reported in the case of 90 persons. Those engaged in skilled jobs or self-employment of some sort come to a mere 16. Female members are mostly engaged as farm labourers; out of 67 females reporting some occupation, 62 were engaged as agricultural labourers. As the proportion of students in the 'population' of 6-15 age group is also low, viz., 28 students out of the total 49, the predominance of low-paid wage employment is apt to be perpetuated with the coming generation as well (See Table 7).

(d) Most of these households are seen to belong to socially backward classes. Of the 45 households, 21 belong to Ezhava community, 11 to main Harijan Community of the area, viz., the Cheruman, and 12 to the Vaduka community.

Table 8: CLASSIFICATION OF HOUSEHOLDS ACCORDING TO CASTE

| Caste | No. of households |
|---|---|
| 1. Cheruman | 11 |
| 2. Vaduka | 12 |
| 3. Ezhavas | 21 |
| 4. Not recorded | 1 |
| Total | 45 |

However, the Harijans account for only about a quarter of the sample. The under representation of the Harijans in the present sample resulted from some oversight on our part at the time of selection of the wards.* We are trying to rectify this imbalance in the next round of our survey.

## V. The Employment Profile

(a) It may be recalled that in our sample households there are 91 agricultural labourers. Of these 70 are permanent labourers and the remaining 23 are casual labourers. The connotation of the term permanent labourer has changed over time. In earlier days, the permanent labourers comprised Harijans and tribals and the term attached labour would perhaps better describe their status in those days. Attached labour would imply that the worker was attached to landlords or their 'tharavads' (joint family) and assumed a hereditary character. In due course, mainly as a result of unionisation of agricultural labour in the district, the working class was gradually emancipated from the servitude associated with attached labour. Of late, the term permanent labour has come into vogue. A permanent Worker in relation to a landlord, as defined in the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act 1974[3] "means an agricultural worker who is bound by customs or contract or otherwise

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* In the selection of the wards we wanted to ensure that they contained a sufficient number of large cultivators and agricultural labourers. And on the basis of the information furnished by the Panchayat Officers we selected the wards. But only after completing the listing of the selected wards and preliminary compilation we discovered that the ward contained a relatively small number of agricultural labour households belonging to these communities. We have later come to know that the majority of the Harijans live in clusters in distant and isolated areas.

to work in the agricultural land of that land owner."[3] The term, broadly speaking, stands for a person who during the greater part of his/her working time regularly works for the same employer continuously over a comparatively long period. The status of permanent labour conferred certain advantage on workers. They had a prior claim on the work in the permanent employer's fields; the landlords or cultivators would hire other workers only when the involved, as during peak seasons, was more than their permanent labourers could cope up with. On the other hand, it also involved certain obligations on the part of the permanent labourers, viz., they were not expected to take up others' work unless their permanent employers did not need their services

During the sixties, the agricultural labourers, permanent labourers not excluded, began to press their demands for higher wages; the reaction of the cultivators was to try to hire workers from outside the village. The labour unions mounted an agitation to resist this move by the employers to replace permanent workers with casual labourers, which was by and large successful. By this time, thanks to increasing unemployment, the status of permanent labourer assumed added importance and the conflict of interests of the employers and permanent labourers came into the open. The enactment of the recent legislation which conferred benefits such as security of employment, provident fund, etc. brought the conflict into sharper focus, with cultivators trying to get rid of their permanent labourers on the one hand, and the labourers, on the other hand, trying to safeguard their position by registering their names with the Panchayat, as the Act required. It is interesting to note that the hostility between the new landlords, who were former tenants, and their permanent labourers is more acute. In our study area, very recently there were a few confrontations between the employers and agricultural labourers on this score.

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[3] "The Kerala Agricultural Worker's Act, 1974", A Digest of Kerala Laws 1974 Secretariat of the Kerala Legislature, Govt.of Kerala, Trivandrum 1974, .17

(b) The results of our survey bring out the relative employment position of permanent labourers and casual labourers. The permanent labourers have had work for more days during both the seasons than casual labourers, and naturally so. On the average a permanent labourer had employment for about 106 days for the two seasons, Mundakan and Virippu, taken together, as against 85 days for a casual labourer. The relevant facts are presented in Table 9.

Table 9: DURATION OF EMPLOYMENT OF PERMANENT AND CASUAL LABOURERS

| Activities | Number of days of employment per worker | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Permanent Labourers | | Casual Labourers | |
| | Mundakan | Punja | Mundakan | Punja |
| Farm work for permanent employers | 40.22 | 40.31 | .. | .. |
| Farm work on others' fields | 6.88 | 8.67 | 30.86 | 32.09 |
| sub-total | 47.10 | 48.98 | 30.86 | 32.09 |
| Non-farm work for permanent employer | 1.94 | 2.21 | .. | .. |
| Non-farm work elsewhere | 2.06 | 3.25 | 10.14 | 11.91 |
| sub-total | 4.00 | 5.46 | 10.14 | 11.91 |
| Grand Total | 51.10 | 54.44 | 41.00 | 44.00 |

It may be noted that farm work accounts for the bulk of the days of employment for both categories of labour. In the case of permanent labourers non-farm work engaged them for only 4 days during Mundakan, and a little over 5 days during the Punja season on the average; the rest of the days they were engaged in agricultural operations, mainly for their permanent employers. As regards the casual labourers, on the average 66 days out of 75

or three quarters of their employment, were on farm operations. The casual labourers had less number of days of work in agriculture as well as less of total employment. A disaggregated picture of the pattern of employment according to operations of the two categories is given in Table 10.

Table 10: DISTRIBUTION OF THE DAYS OF EMPLOYMENT IN DIFFERENT FARM OPERATIONS

| | Operations | Days per worker | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Permanent Labour | | Casual Labour | |
| | | Mundakan | Punja | Mundakan | Punja |
| 1 | Ploughing | 3.81 | 3.78 | 3.91 | 3.91 |
| 2 | Preparation of fields | 1.07 | 0.39 | 0.82 | 0.31 |
| 3 | Repair of Bunds | 0.09 | 0.25 | 0.41 | 0.41 |
| 4 | Sowing | | | 0.14 | 0.14 |
| 5 | Transplanting | 10.21 | 10.27 | 7.18 | 6.50 |
| 6 | Weeding | 8.45 | 8.58 | 3.64 | 3.69 |
| 7 | Manuring | 3.84 | 4.84 | 2.73 | 3.27 |
| 8 | Applying pesticides | 0.63 | 0.67 | 0.77 | 0.86 |
| 9 | Harvesting and threshing | 12.52 | 12.60 | 7.41 | 7.95 |
| 10 | Winnowing | 0.75 | 0.97 | 0.09 | 0.41 |
| 11 | Others | 5.75 | 6.64 | 3.77 | 4.68 |
| | All operations | 47.10 | 48.99 | 30.86 | 32.09 |

It must be pointed out that in this area more than one farm operation may be carried out with the same group of labourers in the course of a day. After weeding in one plot they may proceed to transplant seedlings in another plot at a different stage in the agricultural cycle in the afternoon or evening. Again, half the day may be spent in harvesting and the other half on threshing and so on. Therefore, any analysis of the distribution of employment is quite complex. Further, with the inevitable time lag between the cultivation operations, especially for the Mundakan season and the

of interviewing the labourers, some memory lapse is bound to affect the facts reported. Therefore, the detailed break up of days of employment is apt to contain a certain margin of error. However, we presume that these estimates indicate the broad order of magnitude.

(c) As pointed out earlier, in rice cultivation female labour accounts for a far larger proportion of labour input than male labour. The ratio of the days of employment between females and males, for the two seasons taken together, works out to 3.5:1. The number of man-days and woman-days, season-wise, and for the two broad categories of labour are summarised in Table 11.

Table 11: THE RATIO OF FEMALE TO MALE LABOUR IN RICE CULTIVATION

| | Total days worked in farm operations | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mundakan | | | Punja | | | Two seasons combined | | |
| | Female | Male | Ratio | Female | Male | Ratio | Female | Male | Ratio |
| Permanent | 2502 | 654 | 3.8:1 | 2653 | 629 | 4.2:1 | 5155 | 1283 | 4.0:1 |
| Casual | 449 | 202 | 2.2:1 | 474 | 220 | 2.0:1 | 923 | 423 | 2.1:1 |
| Total | 2951 | 856 | 3.4:1 | 3127 | 849 | 2.6:1 | 6078 | 1715 | 3.5:1 |

The ratio of female to male labour is seen to be higher among permanent labourers than among casual labourers. For the former the relevant ratio is about twice as high as that of the latter. This is found to be the case for both the seasons. The distribution of days of employment among males and females according to operations is presented in Table 12.

Table 12: DISTRIBUTION OF DAYS OF EMPLOYMENT IN DIFFERENT FARM OPERATIONS AMONG MALE AND FEMALE LABOURERS

| Farm Operations | Total Days worked in Different Farm operations: Two seasons combined | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Permanent Labour | | Casual Labour | |
| | Female | Male | Female | Male |
| Ploughing | .. | 508 | .. | 172 |
| Preparation of Field | 54 | 56 | 23 | 21 |
| Repair of bunds | .. | 23 | .. | 18 |
| Transplanting | 1372 | .. | 286 | .. |
| Weeding | 1141 | .. | 160 | .. |
| Manuring | 483 | 98 | 83 | 49 |
| Applying Pesticides | .. | 87 | .. | 36 |
| Harvesting and threshing | 1326 | 357 | 252 | 76 |
| Winnowing | 115 | .. | 11 | .. |
| Other farm work | 676 | 154 | 127 | |

As may be seen from the foregoing table, an overwhelmingly larger number of woman days are employed in transplanting, weeding, manuring, harvesting and threshing and other farm operations. Only ploughing, preparation of field, repair of bunds and application of pesticides are the monopoly of male labour. But, then, these together add up to only a small fraction of the aggregate input of labour in rice cultivation.

(d) For the two seasons taken together, which are spread over a period of not less than eight months, permanent labourers got wage employment for about 106 days and casual labourers for 85 days. In other words most agricultural labourers in our study area did not have any gainful economic activity for more than half the period under reference.

In this connection it may be mentioned in passing that, according to the 25th round of the National Sample Survey, 1970-71, the percentage of estimated man-days spent in gainful economic activities by members of the rural non-cultivating wage-earner households in Kerala came, on the average, to 25.61, as against 34.92 for all India, and next to Jammu and Kashmir, the lowest among all the States and Union Territories. The proportion of the estimated man-days worked as wage labour in agriculture came to 17.61 per cent for Kerala as against 24.95 per cent for the country as a whole, again the second lowest. Further, the proportion of estimated man-days by way of seeking and/or available for other work as 7.20 per cent for Kerala, compared to 3.13 per cent for India as a whole, and the highest for all the States.[4]

True, we have here not taken into account self-employment of members of these households. But, in the nature of things, and as illustrated by a table above giving the occupational pattern among the members of the sample households, they have very limited opportunities for gainful self-employment. In the past, agricultural labourers in this region, especially females, used to supplement their income from agricultural work by going to the forests and adjacent hills, when they had no work in the fields to collect fencing materials, fire wood, grass, etc. and selling them in the village. These forests were owned by the big landlords who presumably did not object to this activity. Several female agricultural labourers whom we interviewed reported that of late this avenue of self-employment has been closed. According to their version, the advent of a large number of Christian settlers from Travancore area and the entry of the government into the private forests have deprived the agricultural labour households of their traditional employment

[4] National Sample Survey Organisation, Twenty fifth Round, July 1970-June 19 Time Disposition and Wage Rate for Economically Weaker Sections of the Rural Population of India, Dept. of Statistics, Ministry of Planning, Govt. of India, 1975. The figures given above are the sample averages of the estimates for the four sub-rounds.

and income. The nationalisation of private forests has attracted a regular stream of enterprising settlers from Travancore, the Southern part of the State who unauthorisedly encroached the lower ranges of the hills, cut and removed the trees and started cultivating the lands so cleare In the areas owned by the Government, there has been large-scale deforestati mainly by timber merchants who moved in and felled the trees illegally and got away with it. The areas where some forests are still left are out of bounds to these less resourceful labourers since after the nationalisation one requires a permit to enter the area, and the permit is prohibitively costly as far as these labourers are concerned. The net result is a complet elimination of a major form of self-employment and supplementary source of income for the agricultural labourers in and around our study area.

## VI. Earnings of Agricultural Labour Households

In this section we shall examine the wage rates for different farm operations and the earnings of the sample households.

### (a) Wage Rates of Agricultural Labour

(i) Wage rates for different operations for males and females were collected for each of the two crop seasons under reference. Payment in kin viz., in paddy or unhusked rice, is widely prevalent, especially for certai operations performed by female labour, such as transplanting, weeding, manuring, harvesting and threshing which, as mentioned earlier, account for the bulk of the labour input in rice cultivation. The daily wage rate in kind ranged from 6 to 7 'edangazhis' of paddy for male workers and 5 to 6 'edangazhis' in the case of female workers during the Mundakan and Punja seasons. One 'edangazhi' of paddy would come to 0.725 kilogram.

Cash wages, on the other hand, was in the range of Rs.6 to Rs.6½ per day for males and Rs.4 to Rs.5 per day for females. It may be mentioned that at the going price, viz., Rs.1.3 per 'edangazhi' during Mundakan and Rs.1.2 during Punja, receipt of wages in kind was more advantageous to the workers. The average wage rates for different farm operations during the two seasons are given in Table 13.

Table 13: AVERAGE WAGE RATE FOR DIFFERENT FARM OPERATIONS
(Rs.per day)

| | Operations | Mundakan | | Punja | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| 1 | Ploughing | 7.86 | .. | 7.44 | .. |
| 2 | Preparation of field | 6.45 | 6.94 | 6.00 | 6.55 |
| 3 | Repair of bunds | 7.11 | .. | 6.67 | .. |
| 4 | Sowing | 6.50 | 5.80 | .. | .. |
| 5 | Transplanting | .. | 6.53 | .. | 6.38 |
| 6 | Weeding | 6.00 | 5.84 | 6.00 | 5.81 |
| 7 | Manuring | 6.83 | 6.69 | 6.36 | 6.28 |
| 8 | Applying pesticides | 6.12 | .. | 6.18 | .. |
| 9 | Winnowing | .. | 7.01 | .. | 6.81 |
| 10 | Other farm operations | 8.21 | 6.78 | 7.89 | 6.41 |
| | Non-farm work | 6.74 | 5.02 | 6.86 | 5.59 |

In arriving at the average wage rate, the money value of wage in kind was estimated at the rate of Rs.1.3 and Rs.1.2 per edangazhi for Mundakan and Punja respectively. These are the prices in the local market as reported by our Investigators. If one assumes that the workers consume all the rice they receive as wage, one should apply the retail price; if, on the other hand, it is assumed that they sell a part of it for cash, the price realised could be lower, the margin of difference depending on to whom

sell and under what conditions. Needless to say, if one inputes a differ price, one will get a different wage rate. We, however, take the inputed value as a rough approximation only.

By and large, the average wage rates of female workers are seen to be slightly lower than that of males. However, it seems that the disparity is wider when we compare the money wage rates of male and female labourer than that of the average wage which includes the inputed value of wages in kind.

(ii) We shall next examine the average wage rates of permanent and casual workers. The average wage rates for permanent and casual wor money wages and kind wages combined, for different operations are prese in Table 14.

Table 14: AVERAGE WAGE RATES OF PERMANENT AND CASUAL LABOURERS IN DIFFERENT FARM OPERATIONS

(Two Seasons combined: Rs. per day)

| | Operations | Permanent Labour | | Casual Labour | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| 1 | Ploughing | 7.76 | .. | 7.43 | .. |
| 2 | Preparation of field | 6.45 | 6.74 | 6.00 | 6.88 |
| 3 | Repair of bunds | 7.06 | .. | 6.80 | .. |
| 4 | Sowing | 6.50 | 6.00 | .. | 5.20 |
| 5 | Transplanting | .. | 6.68 | .. | 6.25 |
| 6 | Weeding | .. | 5.82 | 6.00 | 5.82 |
| 7 | Thauring | 6.57 | 6.57 | 6.51 | 6.26 |
| 8 | Applying posticides | 6.37 | .. | 5.90 | .. |
| 9 | Winnowing | .. | 6.68 | .. | 6.45 |
| 10 | Other farm operations | 7.85 | 6.53 | 7.72 | 6.66 |
| | Non-farm work | 6.51 | 6.11 | 6.93 | 5.22 |

The wage rates for permanent labourers in most of the farm operations are seen to be higher than those of casual labourers. This is true for males as well as females belonging to the two categories of labour. Generally, under the prevailing employment situation, the bargaining position of casual labourers is relatively weaker. But on the other hand, since permanent labourers have more days of employment on the farms of the households to which they are "attached", and in view of some past bonds they could conceivably be hired on lower wages. However, our data show that the permanent labourers in our sample were able to get higher wages. Let us, any how, examine the cash wage rates of the two categories of labour.

Table 15: CASH WAGES OF PERMANENT AND CASUAL LABOUR IN CERTAIN FARM OPERATIONS
(Rs.per day)

| | PERMANENT LABOUR | | | | CASUAL LABOUR | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mundakan | | Punja | | Mundakan | | Punja | |
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Ploughing | 6.33 | .. | 6.00 | .. | 6.60 | .. | 6.33 | .. |
| Preparation of field | 6.00 | 5.00 | 6.00 | .. | 6.00 | .. | .. | .. |
| Repair of bunds | 6.00 | .. | 6.00 | .. | 6.50 | .. | 6.75 | .. |
| Sowing | 6.50 | 5.00 | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. |
| Transplanting | .. | 5.00 | .. | 5.00 | .. | 5.00 | .. | .. |
| Weeding | .. | 4.25 | .. | 4.00 | 6.00 | 4.00 | 6.00 | 4.00 |
| Manuring | 6.15 | .. | 6.07 | 5.00 | 6.40 | .. | 6.28 | .. |
| Applying pesticides | 6.07 | .. | 6.00 | .. | 5.66 | .. | 5.93 | .. |
| Winnowing | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. | .. |
| Other farm operations | 6.28 | .. | .. | .. | 7.00 | .. | 7.00 | .. |

On the basis of the foregoing table (Table 15) we cannot assert categorically that there exists any wage differential in favour of permanent workers. The picture is rather mixed. Presumably, the permanent labourers receive more payment of wages in kind, and their imputation in money terms may partly explain the difference in the estimated average wage rates of the two categories of labour. This aspect needs further probing which we intend to pursue in the course of the subsequent rounds of the study.

(b) Earnings of Agricultural Labour Households:

(i) As mentioned earlier, wages of agricultural labour in Kerala, both in money terms and real terms, have risen in recent times compared to the rest of India. During the seventies agricultural wages in Palghat region have registered significant increase. The current level of money wages in our study area are fairly high, as the foregoing tables bear out. However, the level of living of the labour households is determined by the total earnings of these households. The average earnings per worker from work in agriculture for permanent and casual labourers are summarised in Table 16.

Table 16: AVERAGE EARNINGS PER WORKER FROM AGRICULTURAL LABOUR (in rupees)

| Season | Permanent Labour | | Casual Labour | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Mundakan | 397.21 | 413.18 | 285.01 | 339.75 |
| Punja | 404.71 | 433.36 | 310.37 | 358.02 |

It may be recalled that in the tables giving wage rates for different operations, wages for harvesting and threshing were not included as the payment for these two operations is on the basis of a piece rate. We have included wages for harvesting and threshing also in our estimates of total earnings given in table 16. However, we must point out certain limitations of the data on wages for harvesting and threshing. Usually, all working members of a household pool their labour in these twin operations and wages, paid on piece rate in terms of a ratio of the threshed paddy, are similarly given in one lot. In such cases, it is difficult to unscramble the amount of paddy received by individual workers as wages for harvesting and threshing. From our enquiry we learned that, on the average, one person would receive upto 1 para, i.e. 10 edangazhis, of paddy per day for these operations. We have uniformly applied this rate to the days engaged in harvesting and threshing for every worker reporting these activities.* True, this may introduce a certain margin of error, though we are not sure whether the bias is upward or downward. We should also remind the reader about the element of arbitrariness involved in bifurcation of the seasons for reasons explained earlier.

In view of the fact that female workers had more days of employment it is but natural that their average earnings exceed that of the male members. By the same token, the average earnings from wage employment in agriculture are higher in the case of permanent workers than that of the casual labourers.

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* on the average a permanent worker was engaged in harvesting and threshing for about 11 days each season, and a casual worker for about 6 days during each season.

(ii) Finally we shall attempt to estimate the total earnings from wage employment in farm operations in the course of the two seasons taken together in order to gain some insight into the level of living of these agricultural labour households. The estimates of total wage earnings from agricultural operations are summarised in Table 17.

Table 17: TOTAL WAGE EARNINGS PER HOUSEHOLD
(Mundakan and Punja combined)

| Seasons | Earnings in Rs. per household |
|---|---|
| Mundakan | 771.91 |
| Punja | 807.84 |
| Total | 1579.75 |

The two seasons taken together extend to a period of over eight months. This yields a monthly income of about Rs.200 per household. As employment in agriculture is the mainstay for the vast majority of workers in the sample households (92 out of 116 workers), and the rest are employed in low-paid occupations as domestic servants, cowboys, etc., wage earnings from farm operations would account for the lion's share of the income of these families. Assuming that the quantum of employment and wage level during the Virippu season would be proportional, the annual wage earnings from agricultural employment in the sample households would work out to Rs.2400 or so. Given the size of the sample families at about 5, their per capita income during 1975-76 would come to Rs.480 or say Rs.500. Incidentally the per capita income of Kerala for 1973-74, the latest year for which estimates are available, is estimated at Rs.735 at current prices.

Of course, our estimates of the income of these households is an under-estimate to the extent that their wage earnings from non-farm work or self-employment in a few cases have not been included here. However, the relative position emerging from the above comparison should not change considerably on account of this omission, since between 1973-74 and 1975-76, the State income per capita would have risen to at least a corresponding extent.

## Summary and Conclusion

Palghat has a very high density of agricultural labour per unit of cropped area. A good proportion of the agricultural labourers belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, Vadukas and other backward communities. The vast majority of them are illiterate. More than half of them are females. They are landless, except for their homesteads covering 5 to 10 cents. In brief, the agricultural labourers are a socially, economically and educationally backward group. However, they are fairly well organised under trade unions.

Wage rates of agricultural labour here have registered a significant increase in recent years, thanks to the organised efforts of the workers. While wages have improved, the employment situation has presumably deteriorated. Members in our sample household could not find work for even one-half the total number of days over the two crop seasons covered in the present study. Consequently, though the wage rates are fairly high, total earnings of these households are comparatively low. Thus, the average earnings per person in the sample families in 1975-76 would work out to a little over one half of the State income per capita during that year.

There is an apparent paradox in the coexistence of high wages and high levels of unemployment. Inspite of considerable open unemployment, trade unions not only prevent wages from falling, but even agitate for, and often succeed in getting, a rise in wages from time to time. Is not such a strategy detrimental to the interests of the workers? The answer would be positive if a wage cut would lead to a significant increase in the volume of employment. But the fact of the matter is that in the existing framework, the total quantum of employment is more or less inelastic with respect to wage rate. Generation of additional and newer employment opportunities depends on exogenous factors. Thus, it is all a question of sharing a constant amount of work by an increasing number of workers. Under a situation where every one's share of work is shrinking, is it an irrational strategy to try to compensate this by an increase in the wage rate? Most probably the average earnings per family would have been lower than what they are but for the cushion provided by higher wage rates.

Centre for Development Studies,
August 31, 1976.

APPENDIX

Table 1: RELATIVE SIZE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS, 1971

| States | Agricultural Labourers as per cent of total workers | | Agricultural Labourers as per cent of workers under industrial categories I - III | Ratos of Agricultural Labourers to Cultivators |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male | Female | Persons | Persons |
| Andhra Pradesh | 27.73 | 63.08 | 51.67 | 1.18 |
| Assam | 10.00 | 5.36 | 12.44 | 0.16 |
| Bihar | 33.29 | 73.61 | 46.76 | 0.90 |
| Gujarat | 17.65 | 48.35 | 33.26 | 0.52 |
| Haryana | 15.78 | 25.96 | 24.33 | 0.33 |
| Jammu & Kashmir | 3.12 | 1.93 | 4.27 | 0.05 |
| Kerala | 25.10 | 29.06 | 55.31 | 1.72 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 19.33 | 48.70 | 32.75 | 0.50 |
| Maharashtra | 25.21 | 51.55 | 44.11 | 0.82 |
| Mysore | 21.12 | 49.01 | 37.69 | 0.67 |
| Orissa | 25.38 | 52.55 | 35.54 | 0.58 |
| Punjab | 20.28 | 10.92 | 31.60 | 0.47 |
| Rajasthan | 7.63 | 20.80 | 12.12 | 0.14 |
| Tamil Nadu | 24.15 | 54.39 | 47.26 | 0.97 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 17.18 | 44.49 | 25.58 | 0.35 |
| West Bengal | 35.00 | 44.50 | 43.11 | 0.83 |
| All India | 21.26 | 50.46 | 36.54 | 0.61 |

Computed from Census 1971, India, Union Census Abstract.

APPENDIX

Table 2: MAN-LAND RATIO: RATIO OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS TO CROPPED AREA (1970-71)

| | State | Number of Agricultural Labourers Per Hectare Under | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Cereals | All foodgrains | All Principal crops |
| 1 | Andhra Pradesh | 0.8499 | 0.7199 | 0.53 |
| 2 | Assam | 0.2023 | 0.1941 | 0.16 |
| 3 | Bihar | 0.8836 | 0.6869 | 0.62 |
| 4 | Gujarat | 0.4086 | 0.3701 | 0.21 |
| 5 | Haryana | 0.1591 | 0.1119 | 0.09 |
| 6 | Himachal Pradesh | 0.0711 | 0.0650 | 0.06 |
| 7 | Jammu & Kashmir | 0.0576 | 0.0541 | 0.05 |
| 8 | Kerala | 2.1522 | 2.0604 | 0.82 |
| 9 | Madhya Pradesh | 0.3222 | 0.2410 | 0.21 |
| 10 | Maharashtra | 0.5171 | 0.4174 | 0.29 |
| 11 | Manipur | 0.0937 | 0.0937 | 0.09 |
| 12 | Meghalaya | 0.3737 | 0.3607 | 0.25 |
| 13 | Mysore | 0.4488 | 0.3781 | 0.27 |
| 14 | Nagaland | 0.0627 | 0.0627 | 0.06 |
| 15 | Orissa | 0.3935 | 0.3351 | 0.30 |
| 16 | Punjab | 0.2239 | 0.2003 | 0.16 |
| 17 | Rajasthan | 0.0809 | 0.0582 | 0.05 |
| 18 | Tamil Nadu | 0.9524 | 0.8641 | 0.62 |
| 19 | Tripura | 0.3230 | 0.2778 | 0.27 |
| 20 | Uttar Pradesh | 0.3449 | 0.2778 | 0.20 |
| 21 | West Bengal | 0.6000 | 0.5348 | 0.47 |
| | All India | 0.4666 | 0.3820 | 0.30 |