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Tamil Nadu Rural Manual Labour Survey 2023

INTRODUCTION¹

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) constituted a committee to study and report on the changes in rural class relations against the backdrop of over thirty years of liberalized policies since 2014. This committee included both party leaders leading rural mass organizations at the All India level and Marxist scholars working on rural political economy. The report of the Committee provides a description as well as an analysis of the changes in socio-economic characteristics of the major agrarian classes in India, particularly after the accelerated introduction of policies of capitalist liberalization, privatization and globalization in 1991. The committee submitted its Report to the Party in 2015.

An important aspect of the Report of the Committee was its analysis of the socio-economic category of rural manual labour. It noted, in relation to manual workers in the countryside, that “... rural manual workers are engaged in a variety of jobs and can no longer be regarded as primarily engaged in agricultural wage labour. The general characteristics of rural manual workers, are, nevertheless, distinct from those of fully urban proletarians.”

Summing up its study of rural manual labour, the Report noted:

Hired wage workers, agricultural and non-agricultural, constitute the vast class of rural manual workers. The main points of the report in this respect are as follows. First, hired workers in agriculture and hired workers in non-agricultural tasks no longer constitute two distinct sections of rural workers. Wage-workers in agriculture work in a wide range of non-farm tasks as well, including as migrant workers in urban areas. Rural workers nevertheless retain a partial agricultural and rural character, and are, in important respects, distinct from the urban proletariat [paragraph 54]. Secondly, wage rates in rural India are, in absolute terms, low. They are marked by very wide regional differences and by sharp gender discrimination. Thirdly, the average number of days of employment actually received by rural workers is abysmally low, particularly for women. Fourthly, taken together, low wage rates and inadequate days of employment per worker make for very high levels of poverty and deprivation among manual workers.

The Report concluded as follows:

¹ This article is based on a draft report of the survey on manual labour in rural Tamil Nadu conducted in 2023 under the direction of the Tamil Nadu State Secretariat of the CPI(M). The report was prepared by P. Sanmugam, U. Vasuki and Venkatesh Athreya.

The struggle for future development and growth and for the progress of our Party in rural India will have to be informed by a clear understanding of objective conditions in the countryside. Such an understanding, in turn, must be based, in part, on concrete and objective study of the productive forces in the countryside, changes in the characteristics of rural socio-economic classes and other social groups, and changes in the relations of production. This report attempts to take a very small step in that direction.

The party deliberated on the committee's findings. Based on these deliberations, the Kolkata Plenum of the Party in 2015 recommended the formation of labour unions/alliances encompassing all manual labourers in rural areas.

Subsequently, the Party's 23rd All India Congress held in April 2022 advised state committees to conduct surveys to identify all types of work being done by rural manual labourers and study their conditions of employment. In continuation, the Central Committee elected at the 23rd party congress decided that a survey on rural manual labourers should be conducted. Based on this, in August 2022, the Party's Politburo sent a circular to the state committees asking them to conduct such a survey. It shared some guidelines regarding how the survey should be conducted. A sample survey questionnaire was also sent.

SURVEY OF RURAL MANUAL LABOUR IN TAMIL NADU

The Tamil Nadu State Secretariat of the Party constituted a team consisting of three comrades of the State Committee to undertake and complete this task. Following the guidelines of the All India circular, and taking into account agroclimatic variations across the state and other variables such as cropping patterns and irrigation systems, the team submitted recommendations to the State Secretariat of the Party regarding the choice of districts to be surveyed. The Secretariat considered the proposals of the team, and on that basis, decided that the survey should be conducted in 12 districts: Tiruvallur, Tiruvannamalai, Dharmapuri, Namakkal, Dindigul, Villupuram, Tiruvarur, Sivagangai, Ariyalur, Kanyakumari, Pudukkottai, and Kallakurichi. Accordingly, a circular was sent to the district committees concerned. It was also informed that comrades from these districts should be sent to the training camp for conducting the survey that the State Committee planned and organized.

An APP for the survey was developed by the social media comrades of the Party at the state center, based on the questionnaire to be used in the field. The field work was conducted by Party activists from rural mass fronts in each district chosen for the survey.

The state training camp was held as planned in Dindigul in October 2022. Subsequently, training in canvassing the questionnaire in the field was provided in several districts. Surveys were conducted in ten districts, and a total of more than 2200 forms were submitted to the State secretariat. Data from Namakkal and Tiruvannamalai districts did not arrive. Due to various shortcomings in the completed forms received, details from only 1647 forms were finally identified as valid and used for arriving at the results of the survey. The district-wise breakdown is as follows: Dharmapuri 19, Kallakurichi 25, Kanyakumari 96, Sivagangai 158, Pudukkottai 190, Tiruvallur 205, Villupuram 228, Dindigul 230, Ariyalur 236, Tiruvarur 260, totaling 1647.

SOME GENERAL INFORMATION FROM THE SURVEY

All individuals surveyed were manual labourers. Among them, 675 were women and the remaining 972 were men. Their age-wise distribution is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Age Distribution of Workers Surveyed

Age range (yrs)	19-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66-75	Above 75	Total
No of labourers	38	251	517	472	276	81	12	1647

Categorized by caste, our sample includes 759 persons from Scheduled Castes, 696 from Backward Classes, and 52 from Scheduled Tribes. Thus, while Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes constitute 20% and 1% of the general population respectively, in our sample of manual labourers, they account for 46% and 3.2% respectively. These sections, who are subjected to social oppression and class exploitation, have an incidence of manual labour far higher than their respective proportions in the population. The proportion of workers from Backward Classes is 42.3% in our sample. This is approximately in line with their percentage in the general population. They too are subjected to significant exploitation as manual wage labour.

Among the 1647 manual labourers included in the survey, 1106 individuals (67.2%) belong to households that do not own any land. 442 individuals (26.8%) belong to households owning less than 2.5 acres of land. This means that 94% of manual labourers are from landless or marginally landowning households. Only one out of 1647 individuals is a large farmer, and this individual belongs to a tribal community.

Roughly speaking, in our sample, over 200 rural labourers aged above 60 – approximately 12-13% of the total sample – are forced to survive through manual labour without productive assets or land (or with very minimal holdings) and without social security. *It is imperative that we raise demands for their social security – shelter, proper pensions, physical and mental health facilities, and daily care.*

In our survey, a total of 31.5% of the participants are illiterate. This is substantially higher than is the case for the rural population of Tamil Nadu as per 2011 population census at 20%. Those who have studied up to fifth grade or less and the non-literates taken together constitute 50.7%. In our sample, this percentage is 73% among Scheduled Tribes, 55% among Scheduled Castes, and 45% among Backward Classes.

On the other hand, the number of labourers with a degree or higher is 41 (6.1%). Despite studying for many years, they are forced to perform hard manual labour for very low wages.

DAILY WAGE DETAILS

The questionnaire used in the survey provides important details about the number of days manual labourers received work in the past year, the nature of these jobs, and wage details. Based on the relatively complete data from seven districts, the key aspects related to three main types of work (agriculture, NREGA, construction) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: District-wise Wage rates for Male and Female workers in three key types of work

Average Daily wage rates for male and female workers, by district and type of work
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District			D a i l y a v e r a g e w a g e f o r a g r i c u l t u r a l l a b o u r (Rs)	Daily wage u n d e r N R E G A (Rs)	Average daily w a g e i n C o n s t r u c t i o n , (Rs)
Ariyalur	Women	Average	194.783	189.157	355.403
	Men	Average	363.253	180.828	584.118
	ALL	Average	286.776	185.082	475.779
		Total no o f Workers	152	139	19
Dindigul	Women	Average	255.306	214.157	311.880
	Men	Average	405.753	215.731	497.610
	ALL	Average	345.328	214.913	432.604
		Total no o f Workers	122	127	40
Pudukkottai	Women	Average	185.231	196.776	350.000
	Men	Average	384.177	188.315	686.905
	ALL	Average	294.375	192.398	598.246
		Total no o f Workers	144	172	19
Sivagangai	Women	Average	221.604	182.337	350.000
	Men	Average	331.765	192.648	497.436
	ALL	Average	265.418	185.872	477.778
		Total no o f Workers	88	105	15
Tiruvallur	Women	Average	193.333	197.357	600.000

	Men	Average	355.238	200.267	620.435
	ALL	Average	285.225	199.071	618.800
		Total no o f Workers	111	146	25
Tiruvarur	Women	Average	230.370	194.754	600.000
	Men	Average	405.413	199.533	583.272
	ALL	Average	336.918	197.474	584.425
		Total no o f Workers	207	188	29
Viluppuram	Women	Average	164.350	172.380	397.143
	Men	Average	309.318	178.107	406.875
	ALL	Average	254.137	175.592	404.352
		Total no o f Workers	155	189	27
ALL	Women	Average	205.472	192.174	370.999
	Men	Average	371.627	194.703	555.419
	ALL	Average	301.176	193.500	513.077
			1033	1143	196

The data in Table 2 reveal some important facts:

Generally, in rural Tamil Nadu, women receive significantly lower wages than men. Only in the 100-day work scheme (NREGA) is there almost equal pay.

For agricultural work, the average daily wage for women is around Rs. 200. For men, the average daily wage in agricultural work is around Rs. 370. This means that the average daily wage for women is only about 55% of what men receive.

The average wage for agricultural work is higher in Dindigul and Tiruvarur districts compared to other districts, and lower in Villupuram district. For men, the average daily wage is highest in Dindigul and Tiruvarur districts at Rs. 405, and lowest in Villupuram district at Rs. 309. For women in agricultural work, the

highest average daily wage is Rs. 255 in Dindigul district. It is Rs. 231 in Tiruvarur district. The lowest average daily wage for women at Rs. 164 is reported from Villupuram district.

Construction is the sector where rural manual labourers receive comparatively higher daily wages. In this sector, the average daily wage for men is Rs. 555. For women, it is Rs. 370. This is only two-thirds of the wages received by men. The wages for women generally range from Rs. 350 to Rs. 400. In contrast to agricultural and NREGA work, Dindigul district has the lowest average wage for women in construction work, at Rs. 311. Surprisingly, in Tiruvallur and Tiruvarur districts, it is very high at Rs. 600. In fact, in these two districts, there is no significant difference between the average wages of men and women in construction work. The same situation exists in Villupuram district, though wages in the construction industry are very low in this district.

Wage rates vary from district to district. Even in the government scheme of 100-day work (NREGA), such disparities can be observed. The average daily wage provided in NREGA is highest in Dindigul district, with men receiving Rs. 215 and women Rs. 214. It is lowest in Villupuram district, with men receiving Rs. 178 and women Rs. 172. In Ariyalur and Pudukkottai districts, women receive slightly more than men in the NREGA scheme, while in other districts, the opposite is true. However, gender-based daily wage disparities are very minimal in the NREGA scheme.

NUMBER OF DAYS OF EMPLOYMENT IN SOME OTHER ACTIVITIES

In the previous section, we presented the status and wage details in the three main sectors that account for the total workdays. However, rural manual labourers also do various other jobs. Some important details of these are provided in Table 3.

Table 3 Days of Employment and Average Daily Wages, all reported types of work

Type of Work, days of employment and daily wages	Females		Males		Total	
	Average no of days of work	Number of Workers	Average no of days of work	Number of Workers	Average no of days of work	Number of Workers
Days of employment in agriculture	63	433	76	578	70	1011
Daily wage in agricultural work Rs	205	438	372	595	301	1033
Days of Employment in NREGA	41	544	43	598	42	1142
Daily wage in NREGA Rs	192	544	195	599	193	1143
Days of employment in Construction	95	45	117	148	112	193
Daily wage in Construction Rs	371	45	555	151	513	196
Days of Employment in Brick Kilns	123	9	106	28	110	37
Daily wage in brick kilns Rs	335	10	528	31	481	41

Days of employment in painting	-	-	122	18	122	18
Daily wage in painting Rs	-	-	530	21	530	21
Days of Employment in Security work	-	-	246	9	246	9
Daily wage in security work Rs	325	2	407	12	395	14
Days of employment in driving	209	4	188	49	189	53
Daily wage in Driving Rs	532	4	444	49	451	53
Days of work in loading and unloading	35	4	63	17	57	21
Daily wage in loading work Rs	225	4	516	17	460	21
Days of employment in earth work	28	5	31	25	30	30
Daily wage in earth work Rs	228	5	513	25	466	30
Days of work as shop assistant	162	5	196	13	186	18
Daily wage of shop assistant Rs	264	5	333	13	314	18
Days of home - based work	90	15	130	14	109	29
Daily wage in home-based work Rs	226	15	298	14	261	29
Days of work in domestic employment	170	20	135	8	160	28
Daily wage in domestic employment Rs	149	20	177	8	157	28
Days of employment in work at weddings	52	13	69	14	61	27
Daily wage in wedding related work	356	13	401	13	379	26
Days of work as machine operator	210	6	157	18	170	24
Daily wage of machine operator	426	6	546	18	516	24
Days of employment in other work	131	79	133	171	132	250
Total for previous year	110	675	141	972	129	1647

These provide us with some important insights:

The survey has gathered details about workdays and daily wages for labourers engaged in more than fifteen types of manual labour.

The 1647 manual workers in our sample are employed in agriculture, NREGA, construction, brick kilns, painting, security work, vehicle driving, load carrying, earth-digging, home-based work, domestic wage labour, shop assistant work, marriage-related work, machine operating, and many other unspecified miscellaneous jobs.

The average number of workdays received by manual labourers in the last year was 129. Men received 141 days of work on the average and women received 110 days.

Agricultural work continues to be important. 433 women and 578 men went for agricultural work. Thus, out of 1647 manual labourers, 1011 individuals engaged in agricultural work. On average, women worked 63 days and men worked 76 days in agricultural work. The average daily wage for men was Rs. 438, and for women, it was Rs. 205.

544 women and 598 men participated in NREGA scheme work. Thus, out of 1647 labourers included in the survey, 1142 individuals participated in NREGA work. On average, men worked 43 days and women worked 41 days in the NREGA scheme. The average daily wage for men was Rs. 195, and for women, it was Rs. 192. It can be said that there is practically no gender-based wage disparity in NREGA.

According to our survey, 148 men and 45 women found employment in construction work. Men engaged in these jobs received an average of 117 days of work, and women received 95 days. The average daily wage for men was Rs. 555. For women, it was Rs. 371. Comparing the wage rates received in various jobs worked by labourers, it is clear that both men and women receive the highest daily wages in construction work. It is true that the gender wage gap is significant. It is also true that construction work is very arduous. Nevertheless, construction work is an important livelihood for manual labourers.

Apart from the three occupations described above, there are some other occupations as well. 49 men and 4 women are employed as drivers. The average daily wage for male drivers is Rs. 444. The daily wage for female drivers is Rs. 532. The average workdays for men are 188, and for women, 209. It is noteworthy that women receive slightly more average daily wages than men in this occupation. However, since only four women are engaged in this occupation in our survey, the proposition cannot be generalized.

Among the labourers in our sample, 9 women and 28 men worked in brick kilns. Women worked an average of 123 days, and men worked 106 days. The average daily wage for women was Rs. 335. For men, it was Rs. 528.

Apart from the above-mentioned occupations, painters (18 men only and no women, daily wage Rs. 530, workdays 122), security work (2 women, 12 men, daily wage for men Rs. 407, for women Rs. 325), earth-digging (5 women, 25 men), shop assistants (6 women, 13 men), home-based wage workers (15 women, 14 men), domestic workers (20 women, 8 men), marriage functions-related workers (14 men, 13 women), machine operators (18 men, 6 women) are present in our sample. Additionally, 250 manual labourers – 79 females and 131 males – were engaged in various other types of work. Among them, women worked on the average for 131 days and men for 133 days.

THE PLIGHT OF RURAL MANUAL LABOURERS

Our study clearly reveals the extremely difficult living conditions of rural manual labourers. The average workdays per year are only 129 (141 for men, 110 for women). The average daily wage is very low. Only in a few jobs like construction, machine operation, earth-digging, and marriage-related work do women's daily wages exceed Rs. 200. For women, as an exception to the rule, four drivers earn more than Rs. 500 as average daily wage. The wage situation for male labourers is also not good. Only in five jobs, namely construction, brick kilns, load carrying, earth-digging, and machine operation, do men's daily wages exceed Rs. 500. There is an opportunity to formulate some demands regarding rural minimum wages, workdays, and working conditions, and combine them with other important demands (related to education, health, housing facilities, care services and infrastructure facilities) to plan awareness campaigns. The findings of the study expose the severe labour exploitation occurring in rural areas. It is essential that we select certain areas, put forward appropriate demands, and carry out strong, sustained movements to maximize the chances of success.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE STUDY

Firstly, as recommended by the Party's Plenum and Central Committee, a union/federation for all rural manual labourers can be formed. A concrete list of demands must be prepared by the Party in coordination with the concerned class and mass organizations led by the Party. This list of demands should include not only wages but also minimum aspects of a civilized life, such as working hours, physical and life safety at work, insurance, education, public welfare, etc. Our trade union movement has been fighting for many years, both independently and in conjunction with other organizations, for the demand of a minimum daily/monthly wage for labourers. Initially, the demand for a daily wage of Rs. 500 was put forward some years ago. This has to be continuously and appropriately updated, taking into account inflation. The demand for a minimum daily/monthly wage should be appropriately extended to rural areas. Legislation to increase the minimum daily wage has to be campaigned for. Appropriate administrative arrangements should be made to monitor and ensure its implementation.

In the rural employment guarantee scheme (NREGA), wages and workdays should be increased. Social audits should be conducted properly. Corruption and irregularities must be eradicated. We must insist that the state government fulfil its promise of providing 150 days of work. NREGS should be extended to cover town panchayats. Generally, there is a large gap between male and female wages in agriculture and in most rural employment. Ways to reduce the gender wage gap should be identified, and the state and union governments should be pressured to concede these demands. The demands of rural manual labourers need to be formulated properly, based on concrete studies, and campaigns and various forms of direct action to realise the demands need to be planned and executed. The demand for 200 days of employment per household under NREGA has been raised by our mass organizations such as AIAWU, but we have not been able to carry our sustained and major struggles on this demand. The State has moved in the opposite direction, trying to weaken and discredit the scheme of guaranteed rural employment, and put NREGA in cold storage. This issue needs to be addressed urgently.