

Agriculture in Our Times

It was groundnut harvesting season in Venkatapuram. Farmers sow groundnut seeds in the last week of November and harvest in February. On our way to the main village we found Rama, Lakshamma and Padma, women labourers, having breakfast in a groundnut field. We talked with them about their work.

Venkatapuram - Agricultural labourers in groundnut fields

"Squatting on the floor in fields for long hours bearing the scorching sun and plucking groundnut is not an easy job. Ravi, our employer pays us on the basis of the quantity of groundnut we pluck. We have to be fast; otherwise, we will not get even 50-60 rupees for the whole day's effort," Lakshamma said.

"All of you must be very busy these days," we asked.

"Yes. But we get such work on farms only for a few weeks in a year. Otherwise we have to look for work in government schemes or sit idle in our houses," Padma said.

"Even in government schemes also we get employment only for a few weeks in the entire year," Rama said.

Lakshamma said, "We don't know why the prices of essential food items and vegetables, clothes and stationery for our school going children rise fast but not our wages."

Normally women workers earn about Rs. 70-80 per day whereas men workers get Rs. 120 per day. During harvest or sowing seasons, women labourers get Rs. 120-150 per day whereas male



Fig: 7.1 Groundnut harvesting

fields. About 5 years back, he borrowed Rs. 75,000 and dug a borewell. For the first 2-3 years, he cultivated two crops a year. Since last year water from the borewell is sufficient to cultivate even one crop in a year.

"I borrowed money from a broker in our village to buy seeds and fertilizers. To pay back I have to sell this groundnut to him at somewhat lower price than the market price. He has already telephoned me asking for the produce to be delivered."

"Why don't you take loans from banks?" we asked.

"Banks are reluctant to lend to us, especially when we need it desperately. Most of the time, we depend on brokers or moneylenders."

Farmers like Ravi need to borrow money to buy inputs like seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. If the seeds are not of good quality, or if they apply fertilizer in

improper ways or if pests attack their crop, their yield will be low. Due to low yield, farmers sometimes are unable to pay back their loans. Since they borrow mostly from money lenders and brokers and have to sell at lower pre-fixed prices, their harvest also does not fetch a good price. And, for the family to survive, they may even have to borrow more money. Soon the loan becomes so large that no matter what they earn, they are unable to repay. In some years there is crop failure, due to one or the other reason, resulting in acute distress. In recent years, the distress of small farmers has been on the increase. So much that many farmers could not find a way out.

Contract farming

Some farmers have tried to get out of this problem by entering into contract with companies for production and supply of some special crops. Although not widespread, in some parts of Andhra Pradesh companies have made contracts with farmers to cultivate crops such as oil palm, rice, cucumbers, cocoa, Amla, maize, groundnut, soybean, cotton and chilli. In contract farming, companies advise farmers to follow specific farming practices and also provide financial support. They buy the harvest at pre-determined price and pay the farmers after deducting the input costs. The companies use the produce as a raw material for making their own products (like chips or tomato sauce or medicine) or export them directly to other countries.

Many farmers find this arrangement welcome as they get advances for the crop inputs and are assured of the prices. However, the farmers have to bear the risk



Fig: 7.2 Fertilizers used by farmer

workers get Rs. 150-200 per day. In the government employment scheme, both men and women workers get about Rs. 120 per day. In non-agricultural activities such as loading and unloading of sand or bricks and construction works they get a little more – Rs. 200-250 for men and Rs. 200 per day for women. But there is very little such work.

"Where do we get non-agriculture employment here? Also, it is not easy to suddenly become a construction worker. We have to go to towns and cities," Padma said.

"Some farmers in our neighbouring villages cultivate flowers and grapes. Only those who go regularly and have learnt the work get employment there. How can we suddenly do the tasks in grape or flower fields and that too for a few days of work in a year? They also don't allow young children there. How can I leave our children?" Lakshamma added.

"We do government scheme works as they do not require any special skills," Rama said.

Like Rama, Lakshamma and Padma, poor labouring families face a lot of challenges in maintaining their income to run their families. The women also spend a lot of time on their household work such as getting their children ready to go to schools, preparing food, getting water and firewood.

Nearly two-fifths of all rural families are mainly agricultural labourers in Andhra Pradesh. Of these, hardly a few have small plots of land and the rest are landless. Although earnings are higher in non-

agricultural jobs, such jobs are scarce in rural areas. That is why many families in Venkatapuram have migrated to towns and cities.

- What kind of work do the labourers find in Venkatapuram?
- What are the different ways in which the labourers meet the expenses of the family over the year?
- Compare the wages for women and men in different contexts. Why do you think this difference exists?

Small farmers in Venkatapuram

Seeing us talking to the workers, Ravi, their employer came over to talk to us. Ravi employs only one or two men workers and several women workers for harvesting groundnut. Men workers are generally engaged to uproot groundnut plant with roots and stem, gather, bundle and carry the bundles to a place. Women are engaged to pluck groundnut pods from the plant.

"I employ labourers only for harvesting. I generally get other works done with my family members or take the help of other neighbouring farmers," Ravi said.

Ravi's daughter was also plucking groundnuts. Ravi didn't send her to the college located in the nearby town as he found the fees and other expenses are beyond his paying capacity. So, she now works in the fields.

Ravi has 4 acres of land with a borewell. Earlier he used to get water from the village tank. Now-a-days water does not reach his

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of poor harvest. In case the harvest is not of the quality desired by the company it may refuse to buy the crop putting the farmers in trouble. In order to get high yield under contract farming, farmers apply chemical fertilizers intensively and exploit groundwater resources. This may further reduce groundwater level and deteriorate the soil quality. Often small farmers use the best lands generally earmarked for their own food for contract farming – thus harming their household food security.

- Why do small farmers employ labourers during harvest time?
- Are small farmers able to meet their household needs through farming?
- Why do small farmers and labourers prefer wages in cash rather than in kind?

Small farmer-cum labourers in Venkatapuram

We found a tiled house in front of which there was a tractor with loads of harvested groundnut plants. We talked to the farmer living in the house. His name is Ramu. He is an another small farmer like Ravi.

"If you wish to know about farming, you should go to a big farmer," he said.

"You have a tractor in front of your house and we thought of discussing with you," we said.

"Oh! It is not mine. I work for Vijayakumar, a big farmer in this village. He supplies water to my fields and I borrow from him whenever I require money."

Ramu owns two acres of land which depends upon the village tank for irrigation. However, a few big farmers divert tank water to their fields and do not bother whether or not Ramu's land is irrigated. Four years back, Ramu dug borewell by borrowing money from Vijayakumar. No water was found even after digging upto 500 feet. Ramu had to stop dreaming of getting borewell water for his fields. He now has to pay back the loan. He cultivates his land only during the Kharif season with the help of his family members. Like Ravi, he employs a few hired workers at the time of harvest only.

Since the income from his fields is not sufficient to run the family for more than three months in a year, he works on Vijayakumar's fields. Vijayakumar provides water for Ramu's paddy fields. In return, he has to irrigate his employer's large paddy and sugarcane fields and do whatever important task assigned to him. Since Ramu can drive, he gets employed as a tractor driver for ploughing the fields and transporting paddy and other things to the market.

Small farmers of Andhra Pradesh

Four out of five farmers in Andhra Pradesh are like Ravi and Ramu. They own very little land and have poor irrigation facilities. They are in great need of loans and they have to approach banks or rich

peasants or moneylenders or brokers for this. They are forced to sell their produce at lower prices. To make both ends meet they have to work as labourers in other's fields.

- Why is it not possible for Ramu to grow two or three crops a year?
- How are small farmers dependent on big farmers? Give examples from Ramu's case.
- Why do you think small farmers cannot borrow money easily from the banks?
- What similarities and differences do you find in the condition of Ravi and Ramu?

Conversation with a big farmer

Ramu took us to his employer Vijayakumar. Vijayakumar's house had a big compound wall, inside which we found a paddy harvester, a thresher and a tractor-trailer. Labourers were unloading the harvested groundnut plants and about 10-15 women were plucking the pods in a tiled shed. Vijayakumar told us that this year he got a good harvest of groundnut.

"When are you going to sell it?"

"Not now. I will sell after drying it for few weeks," Vijayakumar said.

Vijayakumar has a large 'kallam' or threshing floor, used to dry the harvest. He has a godown-like large shed to keep paddy, fertilizer bags and other farming equipments.



Fig: 7.3 Vijayakumar's House

"Since the fresh groundnut during the season sells for low price, I usually dry it and sell after a few months. Traders generally pay a higher price for dried groundnut," Vijayakumar said.

Vijayakumar has 25 acres of land with three borewells. His paddy fields are in the command area of the village tank. He borrowed Rs. 25 lakhs from a bank to buy the harvester and thresher. He hires them out to other farmers on rent basis. Many farmers in Venkatapuram and the surrounding villages use these equipments. We also saw his paddy and sugarcane fields near his house. With all this additional income Vijayakumar is able to buy more farm machines, borewells and also lease in more lands from other small farmers. Vijayakumar has more than 20 murrha buffaloes whose milk he sells. He also has a fertiliser shop in the village. Since he lends farmers and other labourers in times of need, he is able to get labourers regularly to work on his fields. Vijayakumar has another house in the nearby town in which his wife and children live.

Listening to our talk, Vijayakumar's 75 year old father came out and joined our discussion.

"I don't think doing farming is something worth talking about these days," Vijaya's father said. "Earlier we used only small amounts of fertilizer and pesticides. Though the yield was low, groundwater level was always stable. I do not remember any crop failure in my fields. Now we use heavy doses of fertilizers and pesticides and use our tractor to plough our lands. We are also using our own harvester and thresher. Yet

yields are not going up. Many of our neighbors suffered crop failures."

- How is Vijayakumar able to wait for higher prices before selling while small farmers have to sell it at low price?
- Make the list of agriculture equipments of Vijayakumar. What kind of farmers can have such implements?
- List all the sources of income of Vijayakumar.
- Do you agree with Vijayakumar's father that farming is not as good as it was in the past? Give your reasons.
- Interview a small farmer and a rich farmer with the assistance of your teacher. Find out about the conditions of their farming – how many acres they cultivate, what they grow, how they sell, what problems they face, etc. Compare these details with what we find in Venkatapuram.
- In case your school is in a big city prepare a list of occupations of families in your street or in your colony. Classify them into three groups: self-employed, casual labourers and regular salaried employees. Discuss the details in your class.

Agriculture in Andhra Pradesh

Over the years, agriculture in Andhra Pradesh has changed. Even though paddy continues to be the main crop, other food crops like ragi, jowar and maize have

declined and have been replaced by cash crops like sugarcane, groundnut, turmeric, chillies etc. All these crops need investment in the form of seeds, water, fertiliser, pesticide etc. for which the farmers have to take loans.

A few decades back most of the farmers depended upon tanks and canals to irrigate their lands. Now more than half the lands in Andhra Pradesh depend on borewells. This has resulted in depletion of the groundwater levels and increased dependence on rainfall.

All this has made small farmers very vulnerable to crop failures as they are unable to repay their loans. Many of them are being forced to sell their lands and migrating to the towns as labourers. Today

four out of five farmers are such small farmers.

Large farmers on the other hand are able to benefit from the new equipment and the growing market for agricultural produce. They have now diversified their investments into setting up dairy farms, poultry farms, shops, schools, moneylending, etc.

Agricultural labourers not only face lack of jobs in rural areas but their wages are not going up. Government employment schemes provide relief but not for many days in a year. Their families are left with no option but to look for work outside villages or move to urban areas.

Key words

Agriculture Labourers	Contract farming
Small Farmers	Kharif
Migration	Cashcrops
Money lenders	Pesticide

Improve your learning

1. How do you think that the Government can help the farmers in Venkatapuram and curb the migrations?
2. Fill in the following table:

Person	Wages during normal season	Wages during harvesting season	Wages in non-agriculture works	Wages paid in government schemes
Men				
Women				

3. Compare the condition of one big farmer of your village with that of Vijayakumar in Venkatapuram.
4. Who took bank loan in Venkatapuram? For what purpose?
5. How do banks and moneylenders give loans to the farmers? Do you think borrowing from moneylenders is profitable, what are the alternate sources?
6. How do you think conditions of farmers can be improved?
7. Compare three farmers in Venkatapuram and furnish details.

S.No	Subject	Ravi	Ramu	Vijaykumar
1	Size of land (in acres)			
2	Source of Irrigation			
3	Agriculture tools and implements			
4	Use of fertilizers			
5	Manner of selling groundnut			
6	Other works			

8. Collect news items on problems faced by small and marginal farmers and the measures taken by government to mitigate their problems.
9. Now a days all the farmers prefer cash crops to the food crops. Does this lead to any problems?
10. Read about contract farming in page 62 in your text book and answer the following question.
 - (a) If there are any contract farmers in your area discuss their experiences?