

Paddy Harvesting and Food Security of Landless Farm Workers

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I recently travelled in the rural area of Atarra (in Banda district of Uttar Pradesh) at a time when paddy harvest was in full swing. Although mechanization of harvesting has started in this region with some harvesters being brought here all the way from distant places, most of the harvesting is still done manually and in the place where I was staying all the harvesting was being done manually.

I noticed that for most of the landless workers this was the highest priority work during the harvesting season and they were declining to go for other work. Most of them were eager to take up this work compared to any other work. The reason was clearly that this contributes a lot to food security as workers are paid in kind (a part of the harvested crop).

I learnt that by harvesting the crop on one bigha of land (one acre is equal to 2.5 to 3 bighas) it is possible to earn about 50 kg of paddy which works out to about 30 kg of rice. Husband and wife team often working together is generally able to harvest one bigha in three days. Now harvesting season may last for almost a month but typically a couple may get employment on only 15 out of 30 days. Nevertheless, for 15 days work this couple will get 150 kg of rice (good quality local rice), which they consider very important for their food security. In addition there would be other means of earning like carrying/gathering the harvested paddy.

In the case of harvesting wheat, a couple is more likely to harvest a bigha in two days and get about 37 kg from a bigha. So on the basis of 15 days work and harvesting about 7.5 bighas, they are likely to get 277 kg of wheat.

Adding what is earned from paddy and wheat harvesting, the food security in terms of food grain needs only is assured to a large extent (while of course a lot of other produce like pulses, vegetables are also needed for food security).

Keeping in view this important role of employment obtained in manually carried out paddy and wheat harvesting for landless farm workers, the relentless increase of mechanization of crop harvesting should be questioned. In the areas where I was making my inquiries it was clear that if crop harvesting is mechanized the employment and food security of farm workers will be affected very adversely.

In the area where manual harvesting is still taking place, even if the paddy-wheat rotation is followed, there is no problem of parali burning.

On the other hand in those villages of this region where harvesting is being mechanized, the

problem of parali burning has also started appearing.

The policymakers should be well-aware of the implications of following policy of relentless mechanisation of harvesting to avoid very adverse impacts.

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