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PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN KARNATAKA

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural labour in Karnataka occupies a paradoxical position in the state's political economy: indispensable to agricultural production yet persistently marginalised in economic returns, social protection, and policy attention. This study examines the problems and prospects of agricultural labour in Karnataka, drawing on available evidence from academic research, government data, and field reports. The central argument is that Karnataka's agricultural labourers face a structurally embedded set of problems—seasonal employment, low and stagnant wages, weak bargaining power, vulnerability to bonded labour, and inadequate social security—that are compounded by regional disparities and the uneven penetration of welfare schemes. At the same time, emerging prospects—out-migration to higher-wage regions, the expansion of non-farm rural employment, and the potential for collective organisation—offer pathways, however constrained, for improving labourers' conditions. The study synthesises evidence from a 2006 doctoral thesis on Karnataka agricultural labour , a 2018 field study in Belagavi district documenting seasonal employment (33%) and low wages (21%) as the dominant challenges , recent reports of bonded labour rescues in Hassan and Chamarajanagar , and analyses of wage differentials driving migration from North Karnataka to the Malnad region . The findings indicate that while agricultural labourers in some regions have benefited from migration opportunities and wage increases, the structural problems of informality, seasonality, and exploitation remain unresolved. Policy recommendations emphasise strengthening social security portability, enforcing minimum wage and bonded labour laws, and supporting alternative livelihood diversification.

Keywords*: Agricultural Labour, Karnataka, Rural Labour Markets, Bonded Labour, Seasonal Employment, Wage Differentials, Social Security*

I. INTRODUCTION

Agricultural labour in Karnataka is a category defined more by vulnerability than by occupation. Labourers who depend primarily on wage employment in agriculture—rather than on cultivation of their own land—constitute one of the most economically insecure segments of the state's workforce. They are exposed to the twin uncertainties of nature and market: crop failures reduce demand for their labour, while price fluctuations and employer discretion suppress their wages. Unlike farmers with land, they have no asset base to cushion shocks. Unlike formal-sector workers, they have no employer-provided social security.

The available scholarly literature on Karnataka agricultural labour is thin and dated. The most direct academic treatment is a 2006 doctoral thesis from Bangalore University titled "Problems and Prospects of Agricultural Labour in Karnataka" . While this work provides a historical baseline, the nearly two decades since its completion have witnessed significant changes: the expansion of MGNREGA, increased rural-to-urban migration, the growth of plantation agriculture in the Malnad region, and the persistence—even resurgence—of bonded labour cases. A fresh synthesis is needed.

This study is necessary because agricultural labour remains numerically significant in Karnataka. According to Periodic Labour Force Survey data cited in a 2018 village study, 67.2% of Karnataka's rural workforce was dependent on agriculture in 2017–18, a higher share than in Tamil Nadu or Kerala . Within this workforce, agricultural labourers—those who work on others' land—form a substantial and vulnerable subset. Their problems are not residual relics of a pre-modern economy; they are actively reproduced by contemporary labour market structures, migration patterns, and gaps in legal enforcement.

The study's scope is defined by the available evidence. It draws on academic research, government reports, and journalistic documentation to construct a composite picture of agricultural labour in Karnataka. It does not claim to be a primary survey; rather, it synthesises existing knowledge to identify patterns, gaps, and policy priorities.

II. DEFINITIONS

Agricultural Labourer: A person whose primary source of income is wage employment in agriculture, who does not cultivate land as an owner or tenant, and who may or may not possess marginal land holdings. In Indian statistical classifications, agricultural labourers are distinguished from cultivators, though the boundary is often blurred in practice.

Seasonal Employment: Work availability that is concentrated in specific agricultural operations (sowing, transplanting, harvesting) and absent during intervening periods, forcing labourers to seek alternative income sources or migrate.

Bonded Labour: A form of forced labour in which a person is compelled to work to repay a debt or obligation, often under conditions of confinement, surveillance, and coercion. It is prohibited under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976.

Wage Differential: Variation in daily or piece-rate wages across regions, crops, and seasons, which influences labour migration patterns.

Social Security: Protective measures—including insurance, pensions, food security, and guaranteed employment—intended to cushion workers against income loss and vulnerability.

III. NEED FOR THE STUDY

The need for a focused analysis of agricultural labour in Karnataka rests on three grounds. First, the problem is under-researched. The 2006 thesis remains the most direct academic treatment, and subsequent scholarship has largely focused on farmers, crop patterns, or rural development rather than labour specifically. Policy discourse in Karnataka tends to centre on farmer welfare—loan waivers, MSP, irrigation—while agricultural labourers, who constitute a distinct economic category, receive less attention.

Second, the evidence that does exist points to persistent and serious problems. A 2018 field study in Kakati block, Belagavi district, found that seasonal employment (33% of respondents) and low wages (21%) were the most frequently reported challenges, followed by irregular working hours (11%) and physical strain (11%) . More alarmingly, cases of bonded labour continue to be documented: in February 2016, 18 workers were rescued from a ginger farm in Hassan district where they had been confined and forced to work without wages ; in September 2016, 32 labourers, including seven women, were rescued from a sugarcane field in Chamarajanagar . These are not historical anomalies; they are contemporary realities.

Third, the prospects for improvement are uneven and poorly understood. Migration from drought-prone North Karnataka to the Malnad region offers wages of up to ₹1,000 per day compared to ₹250–300 in source districts . But this migration is seasonal, often mediated by contractors, and does not alter the structural position of labourers in their home regions. Understanding which prospects are genuine pathways to improvement and which are merely temporary escapes is essential for policy.

IV. AIMS

The primary aim of this study is to synthesise available evidence on the problems and prospects of agricultural labour in Karnataka, identifying the structural constraints that reproduce their vulnerability and the emerging opportunities that may improve their conditions, in order to inform more effective policy and programmatic responses.

V. OBJECTIVES

1. To document the principal problems faced by agricultural labourers in Karnataka, including seasonal employment, low wages, weak bargaining power, and vulnerability to bonded labour.
2. To examine regional variations in agricultural labour conditions, with attention to wage differentials and migration patterns.
3. To assess the role of social security schemes, particularly MGNREGA, in supporting agricultural labourers.
4. To identify emerging prospects for improvement, including migration, non-farm diversification, and collective action.
5. To evaluate the effectiveness of legal protections, particularly the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act and minimum wage enforcement.

6. To propose policy recommendations for improving the economic and social conditions of agricultural labour in Karnataka.

VI. HYPOTHESIS

H_0 (Null): The problems faced by agricultural labourers in Karnataka are primarily individual or household-level and can be addressed through targeted welfare schemes without structural reform of rural labour markets.

H_1 (Alternative): The problems of agricultural labour in Karnataka are structurally embedded in the organisation of rural labour markets—characterised by seasonality, contractor intermediation, weak enforcement of labour laws, and regional wage disparities—and require institutional and regulatory interventions beyond individual welfare schemes.

Operational Hypothesis: Agricultural labourers in Karnataka experience persistent low wages and seasonal unemployment despite the existence of legal protections and welfare schemes, because the informal and dispersed nature of agricultural employment makes enforcement difficult and collective bargaining rare.

VII. LITERATURE SEARCH

A systematic search was conducted across Shodhganga, Google Scholar, Zenodo, and news archives for materials specifically addressing agricultural labour in Karnataka. The search revealed a sparse scholarly literature. The primary academic source identified was Naik's 2006 doctoral thesis at Bangalore University . A 2018 study by Dalawai and Basargi, published on Zenodo, provides primary survey data from 100 farm workers in Kakati block, Belagavi district, and explicitly frames its findings within the Karnataka context . A 2018 village study of Alabujanahalli in Mandya district, published in *Review of Agrarian Studies*, provides longitudinal data on rural labour market changes .

Journalistic sources fill critical gaps. Reports from *The New Indian Express*, *Deccan Herald*, *The Hindu*, and *ChiniMandi* document bonded labour rescues , migration patterns , MGNREGA implementation issues , and labour shortages in specific crop sectors . While journalistic sources lack the methodological rigour of academic studies, they provide contemporary evidence that academic literature has not yet absorbed.

The literature reveals a clear gap: no comprehensive, methodologically rigorous study of agricultural labour in Karnataka has been published since 2006. The 2018 Belagavi study is valuable but limited to one block. The journalistic evidence, while vivid, is anecdotal and episodic. This study represents an attempt to bridge these sources and identify what is known, what is uncertain, and what remains unknown.

VIII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design: Qualitative synthesis and secondary analysis of available evidence.

Study Area: Karnataka state, with attention to regional variation between North Karnataka (drought-prone, labour-surplus), the Malnad region (plantation agriculture, labour-receiving), and the irrigated southern districts.

Data Sources: Academic theses and journal articles; government reports and data (MGNREGA dashboard, PLFS); civil society and activist documentation; journalistic reporting from credible outlets.

Analytical Approach: Thematic synthesis organised around the study's objectives. Evidence is triangulated where multiple sources address the same issue. Gaps and contradictions in the evidence base are explicitly noted.

Limitations: The absence of a recent comprehensive survey of agricultural labour in Karnataka means that the study cannot provide statistically representative estimates of wages, employment duration, or household income. The reliance on journalistic sources for contemporary evidence introduces potential selection bias, as reported cases may not be typical. The study cannot establish causal relationships or measure policy impacts rigorously.

IX. STRONG POINTS OF THE STUDY

The principal strength of this research is its synthesis of disparate evidence sources into a coherent picture. Academic literature, government data, activist documentation, and journalistic reporting each capture different facets of agricultural labour reality. By bringing them together, the study provides a more complete account than any single source could offer. The 2006 thesis establishes the historical baseline; the 2018 Belagavi survey provides

contemporary primary data; the bonded labour reports document the extreme end of exploitation; and the migration analyses explain regional dynamics.

A second strength is the study's attention to regional variation. Agricultural labour conditions in Karnataka are not uniform. A labourer in the irrigated sugarcane belt of Mandya faces different opportunities and constraints than a labourer in drought-prone Koppal or a migrant worker on a coffee estate in Chikkamagaluru. By disaggregating the analysis by region and crop system, the study avoids the misleading generalisations that plague aggregate treatments.

Third, the study foregrounds the legal and enforcement dimension. The persistence of bonded labour cases, documented as recently as 2016 , demonstrates that formal legal prohibitions are insufficient without enforcement. The study's emphasis on the gap between law and practice—including the challenges of enforcing minimum wages in dispersed agricultural settings—provides a realistic assessment of what legal protections can and cannot achieve.

Fourth, the study's integration of migration analysis adds a dynamic dimension. Labour markets are not static; workers move in response to wage differentials. The finding that North Karnataka labourers can earn three to four times more in Malnad plantations is economically significant, even if the migration is seasonal and mediated by contractors. Understanding these flows is essential for any policy that seeks to improve labour outcomes.

X. WEAK POINTS OF THE STUDY

The most significant weakness is the dated and incomplete nature of the scholarly evidence base. The 2006 thesis predates MGNREGA's full implementation, the expansion of rural telephony and digital payments, and the changes in migration patterns documented in recent years. Its findings may no longer accurately describe contemporary conditions. The 2018. Belagavi study is valuable but limited to 100 respondents in one block; its findings cannot be generalised to the state.

A second weakness is the reliance on journalistic sources for contemporary evidence. While credible outlets such as *Deccan Herald* and *The Hindu* employ professional journalists and fact-checking processes, their reporting is necessarily selective. The bonded labour cases that receive media attention may be the most egregious; the everyday exploitation that does not result in police raids remains invisible. Similarly, the migration stories that are reported may not represent the average migrant experience.

Third, the study cannot provide quantitative estimates of key parameters: the number of agricultural labourers in Karnataka, their average daily wages, the duration of employment, or the extent of indebtedness. The Periodic Labour Force Survey and other official sources contain some of this information, but it is not disaggregated in a way that allows for precise characterisation of agricultural labour as distinct from cultivation. This limits the study's ability to make evidence-based policy recommendations with confidence.

Fourth, the study's treatment of prospects is necessarily speculative. Migration to Malnad offers higher wages, but it also exposes workers to new vulnerabilities—contractor dependence, unfamiliar linguistic and social environments, and the risk of accidents or illness far from home. The 2015 landslide in Thirthahalli that killed three members of a migrant worker's family is a stark reminder that migration is not a risk-free pathway. The study can identify prospects but cannot assess their net welfare implications without more rigorous data.

XI. CURRENT TRENDS

Several contemporary trends shape the conditions of agricultural labour in Karnataka. The most visible is the persistence of acute labour shortages in specific crop sectors, coexisting with surplus labour in others. Coffee planters in Hassan and Chikkamagaluru report that harvesting wages have nearly doubled, yet migrant labourers are fewer and contractors are capturing an increasing share of the wage bill. Local workers earn ₹1,000–2,000 during harvest, while migrant workers brought by contractors receive only ₹400–450 per day, with the difference absorbed by middlemen . In Yadgir's cotton sector, women labourers charge ₹200 for four to four and a half hours, and farmers who attempt contract-based picking pay ₹15 per kilogram . These wage figures indicate that agricultural labour is not uniformly low-paid; the key variables are location, crop, season, and—critically—whether the worker is engaged directly or through an intermediary.

A second trend is the continued reality of bonded labour, despite its legal prohibition. The Hassan ginger farm case involved 18 workers, mostly from other states, who were locked in a shed and given only rice and curry, with no

medical facilities . The Chamarajanagar sugarcane case involved 32 labourers, some of whom had worked for up to two years without payment, and who were supervised by associates who restricted their movement and assaulted them . These cases share common features: migrant workers, contractor intermediation, confinement, and non-payment or minimal payment. They are not isolated incidents but symptoms of a labour market where the most vulnerable workers lack effective legal protection.

Third, MGNREGA's role as a fallback for agricultural labourers has been eroded by implementation failures. In Karnataka, average workdays per household fell to 44.62 in 2010–2015 from 52.08 in 2016–2018, well below the statutory 100 days . Payment delays are common; the central government owed payments for 10 lakh delayed workdays in Karnataka at the time of reporting . Workers report that the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS) app-based attendance system creates additional hurdles, with some days not recorded at all . For agricultural labourers who depend on MGNREGA during lean seasons, these failures translate directly into income loss and distress migration.

Fourth, migration from drought-prone North Karnataka to the Malnad region has become a established livelihood strategy. Labourers from Koppal, Ballari, Vijayanagara, Chitradurga, and Davanagere travel to Shivamogga, Hassan, and Chikkamagaluru for plantation work, earning up to ₹1,000 per day compared to ₹250–300 in their home districts. Employers in Malnad provide food, clothing, and housing, and treat workers with relative respect, according to labour inspectors and workers themselves . This migration is not without risks—the Thirthahalli landslide killed three family members of a migrant worker—but it represents a genuine improvement in earnings for those who undertake it.

XII. HISTORY

The historical trajectory of agricultural labour in Karnataka mirrors broader patterns in India, with distinct regional inflections. Prior to the Green Revolution, agricultural labour was embedded in semi-feudal relations in many parts of the state, particularly in the Malnad and coastal regions where plantation agriculture and tenancy arrangements created dependent labour relationships. In the northern plateau, labour relations were shaped by the dryland agricultural cycle, with labourers combining work on others' fields with cultivation of small holdings or engagement in artisanal crafts.

The Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s transformed labour demand in irrigated areas. The expansion of paddy and sugarcane cultivation in the Cauvery and Tungabhadra command areas created seasonal peaks of labour demand, attracting migrant workers from drought-prone districts. Mechanisation—particularly the spread of tractors and combine harvesters—displaced some labour, but the net effect on employment was mixed, as higher yields and multiple cropping increased total labour demand in irrigated tracts.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the beginnings of large-scale rural-to-urban migration, as agricultural labourers sought work in Bengaluru's construction and informal service sectors. This migration was initially circular and seasonal, but over time became more permanent for some households. The 2006 thesis was completed at the cusp of this transition, capturing a moment when traditional labour relations were eroding but alternative livelihoods had not yet become established.

The 2000s and 2010s brought two significant policy developments: the implementation of MGNREGA (from 2006) and the strengthening of legal protections against bonded labour. MGNREGA provided a statutory floor for rural wages and a fallback source of employment during lean seasons. However, as the recent evidence indicates, its implementation in Karnataka has been uneven and has deteriorated in recent years . Bonded labour, meanwhile, has proven resilient despite legal prohibition, with cases continuing to be documented through the 2015s .

XIII. DISCUSSION

The evidence assembled in this study points to a central conclusion: agricultural labour in Karnataka is characterised by a persistent gap between legal protections and lived reality. The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act has been on the statute books since 1976, yet workers are still being rescued from confinement and forced labour in 2016. Minimum wages are notified, yet contractors pay migrant workers a fraction of what they collect from employers . MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of employment, yet average actual provision is less than half that, with payment delays and digital attendance hurdles.

This gap is not accidental. It reflects the structural characteristics of agricultural employment: it is dispersed across thousands of farms, seasonal and irregular, mediated by contractors who operate in the informal economy, and performed by workers who are often migrants without local social networks or knowledge of their rights. Enforcement of labour laws in this environment is expensive and difficult. Collective bargaining is rare because agricultural workers are dispersed and lack the workplace concentration that facilitates unionisation.

The regional variation in wages and conditions is significant. Labourers who can access the Malnad plantation economy earn substantially more than those confined to the dryland districts of North Karnataka . This differential drives migration, which is rational from an individual household perspective but does not alter the underlying structure of the labour market. The workers who migrate are the relatively mobile and able-bodied; those who remain—the elderly, women with care responsibilities, the infirm—are left in the lowest-wage, least-secure segments of the labour market.

The prospects for improvement are real but conditional. Migration to higher-wage regions offers immediate income gains for those who can undertake it. The expansion of non-farm rural employment, if it continues, would reduce dependence on agricultural wages. MGNREGA, if properly funded and implemented, could provide a genuine fallback during lean seasons. But none of these prospects addresses the fundamental problem: agricultural labourers lack the bargaining power and legal enforcement mechanisms to secure a fair share of the value they create. Until that changes, their problems will persist, and their prospects will remain contingent on external circumstances rather than structural improvement.

XIV. RESULTS

The synthesis of available evidence yields the following principal findings:

Principal Problems: A 2018 field study in Belagavi district identified seasonal employment (33% of respondents) and low wages (21%) as the most frequently cited challenges, followed by irregular working hours (11%), physical strain (11%), and pesticide exposure (9%) . These findings are consistent with the broader literature on agricultural labour in India.

Bonded Labour: Documented cases in Hassan (February 2016, 18 workers) and Chamarajanagar (September 2016, 32 workers) demonstrate that bonded labour persists in Karnataka, with migrant workers particularly vulnerable. Common features include confinement, non-payment, contractor intermediation, and physical abuse .

Wage Differentials and Migration: North Karnataka labourers earn ₹250–300 per day in their home districts but can earn up to ₹1,000 per day in Malnad plantations, driving seasonal migration from Koppal, Ballari, and Davanagere to Shivamogga, Hassan, and Chikkamagaluru.

Contractor Intermediation: In the coffee sector, contractors negotiate piece rates with estate owners but pay workers only ₹400–450 per day, capturing the margin. Workers from Assam and West Bengal are particularly vulnerable due to language barriers and contractor control.

MGNREGA Implementation: Average workdays per household in Karnataka fell to 44.62 in 2010–2018, well below the statutory 100 days. Payment delays affect 10 lakh workdays, and digital attendance systems create access barriers .

XV. CONCLUSION

Agricultural labour in Karnataka remains a category defined by vulnerability. The problems—seasonality, low wages, contractor exploitation, weak legal enforcement, and inadequate social security—are structural, not incidental. They are reproduced by the informality of agricultural employment, the dispersal of workplaces, the dependence on intermediaries, and the limited reach of labour law enforcement. The persistence of bonded labour cases in 2016, five decades after the abolition law was enacted, is the most extreme manifestation of this structural failure.

The prospects are not uniformly bleak. Migration to higher-wage regions offers genuine income gains for mobile workers. MGNREGA, despite its implementation failures, remains a critical fallback. And the legal framework, however imperfectly enforced, provides a basis for advocacy and accountability. But these prospects are conditional and partial. They do not alter the fundamental position of agricultural labourers as price-takers in a labour market where they have little bargaining power.

The policy implication is clear: improving the conditions of agricultural labour in Karnataka requires not only better implementation of existing schemes but also structural interventions that strengthen workers' bargaining position. This means enforcing labour laws through proactive inspection and penalties for violations, supporting collective organisation among agricultural workers, and designing social security systems that are portable across the migration circuits that workers actually traverse. Without these structural changes, the problems will persist, and the prospects will remain what they have always been: temporary escapes from a system that has not been fundamentally reformed.

XVI. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen Labour Law Enforcement in Agriculture: The persistence of bonded labour and minimum wage violations indicates that current enforcement is inadequate. The Karnataka Labour Department should establish a dedicated agricultural labour inspection wing, with authority to conduct unannounced inspections of farms and plantations employing migrant workers, and to impose penalties on employers and contractors who violate the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act or minimum wage notifications.

2. Regulate Contractor Intermediation: Contractors are central to the exploitation documented in the coffee and bonded labour cases. The state should require registration and licensing of labour contractors operating in agriculture, with mandatory disclosure of wage rates paid to workers and the commission retained. Employers should be held jointly liable for violations committed by contractors they engage.

3. Reform MGNREGA Implementation: The shortfall between the statutory 100 days and actual provision of 44–52 days must be addressed. The state should ensure adequate funding for MGNREGA, streamline the National Mobile Monitoring System to eliminate attendance recording failures, and ensure timely wage payments with automatic compensation for delays, as required by law.

4. Portable Social Security for Migrant Workers: Agricultural labourers who migrate between districts need social security that travels with them. The state should pilot a portable benefits card—integrating health insurance, accident coverage, and pension contributions—that workers can access regardless of their current location. This would reduce the vulnerability associated with migration while preserving its income benefits.

5. Support Collective Organisation: Agricultural workers face structural barriers to unionisation. The state should support the formation of agricultural labour cooperatives and associations, provide legal aid and rights awareness training, and create institutional spaces—such as district-level labour councils—where workers can voice grievances and negotiate with employers and contractors.

6. Promote Alternative Livelihoods in Labour-Surplus Districts: The migration from North Karnataka to Malnad is a symptom of insufficient local economic opportunities. The state should prioritise investment in non-farm rural employment—food processing, rural infrastructure, and small-scale manufacturing—in the drought-prone districts that supply migrant labour, reducing the pressure to migrate and improving the bargaining position of those who remain.

XVII. FUTURE SCOPE

The most urgent priority for future research is a comprehensive, state-representative survey of agricultural labour in Karnataka. The 2006 thesis is nearly two decades old, and the 2018 Belagavi study covers only one block. A new survey should collect data on employment duration, wages (disaggregated by crop, task, and gender), indebtedness, migration patterns, access to social security, and awareness of legal rights. Such a survey would provide the empirical foundation that current policy lacks.

Second, research on the economics of contractor intermediation is needed. The finding that contractors capture a substantial share of the wage bill in the coffee sector suggests that the contractor system is not merely a convenience for employers but a mechanism for extracting surplus from workers. Quantifying this extraction, and identifying the conditions under which workers can bypass contractors, would inform interventions.

Third, the gendered dimensions of agricultural labour require dedicated attention. Women form a substantial share of the agricultural workforce, particularly in transplanting, weeding, and harvesting, yet they are often paid less than men for equivalent work and face additional constraints related to care responsibilities and mobility. Research that centres women's experiences would reveal dynamics that aggregate analyses miss.

Fourth, the long-term impacts of MGNREGA on agricultural labour markets—wage levels, bargaining power, and migration patterns—remain understudied in Karnataka. Comparative research across districts with varying MGNREGA implementation quality would help isolate the scheme's effects from other factors.

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