



Agriculture in Our Times

It is groundnut harvesting season in Venkatapuram. Farmers sow groundnut seeds in the last week of November and harvest them in February. On our way to the main village, we found Rama, Lakshamma and Padma, three women labourers, having breakfast in a groundnut fields. We talked to 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 groundnuts 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 100-150 rupees for the whole day’s work.” Lakshamma said.

“All of you must be very busy these days?” we asked.

“Yes, but we get such work only for a few weeks in a year. Sometimes, we get work in government schemes. We don’t get enough work, so often we sit idle in our houses.” Padma said.

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



Fig. 7.1: Groundnut harvesting

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

Normally, women workers earn about Rs.100-130 per day, whereas men workers get Rs. 200-250 per day. In the government

employment scheme, men as well as women get about Rs.150 per day. In non-agricultural activities such as loading and unloading of sand or bricks and construction works, they get a little more – Rs. 300 for men and Rs. 180-200 for women. But such work is scarce.

“Where do we get non-agricultural employment here? It is also not easy to suddenly become a construction worker. We have to go to towns and cities for that.” Padma said.

“Some farmers in our neighbouring villages cultivate flowers and grapes. Only those who go regularly and who have learnt the work get employment there. How can we suddenly learn to do such tasks that too for a few days of work in a year? They also don’t allow young children there. How can I leave my children behind?” Lakamma added.

“We like to work for the government schemes as they do not require any special skills,” Rama said.

Poor labourers like Rama, Lakshamma and Padma face a lot of challenges in earning income to run their families. The women also spend a lot of time on their household work such as getting their children ready for school, preparing food and getting water and firewood.

Nearly two-fifths of all rural families are mainly agricultural labourers in Telangana. Of these, hardly a few have small plots of land and the rest are landless. Although earnings are higher in non-agricultural jobs, they are scarce in rural areas. That is why many families in Venkatapuram have migrated to towns and cities.

- ◆ What kind of work do labourers find in Venkatapuram to meet their expenses?
- ◆ 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

On 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 uprooting groundnut plant, gathering bundles and carrying the bundles to a place. Women are engaged in plucking 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 did not send her to college in the nearby town as he was not able to pay the fees and other expenses. So, she works in the fields now.

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 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 not 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 him back, I have to sell these groundnuts to him at a lower price than the market price. He has already telephoned me for the produce.”

“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 quality of seeds is not good or if they apply fertilizer improperly or if pests attack their crop, their yield will be low. Then, they will be unable to pay back their loans. Since they borrow mostly from money lenders and brokers and have to sell at a lower pre-fixed prices, their harvest does not get good returns, and for the family to survive, they have to borrow more money.

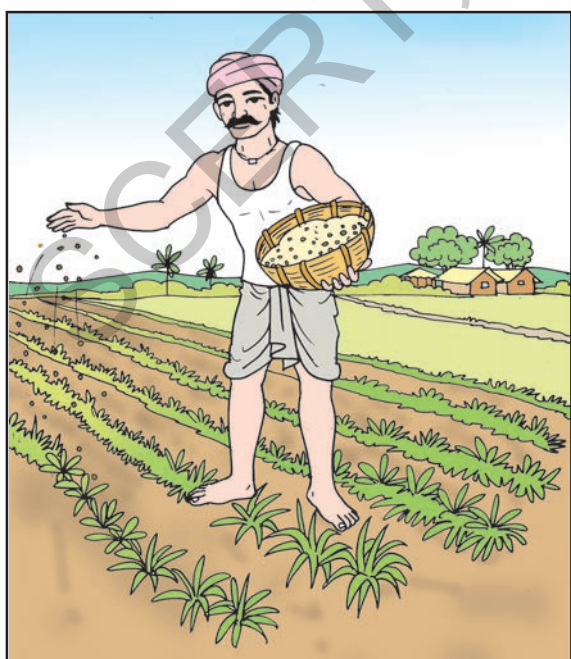


Fig: 7.2 Fertilizers used by farmer

Soon, the loan becomes so large that they are unable to repay it. Moreover, to add to their misery, sometimes there is a crop failure, due to one or the other reason. Consequently, there is acute distress in farmers. In recent years, the distress of small farmers has been on the increase but they are unable to find a way out.

Contract farming

Some farmers have tried to get rid of this problem by entering into a contract with companies for production and supply of some special crops. Although not widespread, in some parts of Telangana, some companies have made contracts with farmers to cultivate crops such as palm oil, paddy, *amla*, maize, groundnut, soybean, cotton, chilli and cucumber. In contract farming, companies advise farmers to follow specific farming practices and also provide financial support. They buy the harvest at pre-determined prices 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 welcome this arrangement as they get advances for the crop inputs and are assured of the prices. However, they have to bear the risk of poor harvest. In case the harvest is not of the quality desired by the company, it may refuse to buy the crop leaving the farmers in trouble. In order to get high yield under contract farming, farmers use chemical fertilizers extensively and exploit groundwater resources. This may reduce the groundwater level further and deteriorate the soil quality. Often small

farmers use the best lands earmarked for their own food production for contract farming – thus harming the security of their own food.

- ◆ 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 also a 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 about farming 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 money from him whenever I need.”

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 Ramu’s land is irrigated or not. Four years ago, 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. Now, he 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 too employs a few workers only at the time of harvest.

Since the income from his fields is not sufficient to run his 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 task is assigned to him. Since Ramu can drive, he also works as a tractor driver for ploughing the fields and transporting paddy and other things to the market.

Small farmers of Telangana

Four out of five farmers in Telangana 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, money lenders or brokers for this. They are forced to sell their produce at lower prices. To make 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 are small farmers unable to 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 has got a good harvest of groundnut.

“When are you going to sell it?”

“Not now. I will sell it after drying it for a few weeks.” Vijayakumar said.

Vijayakumar has a large ‘kallam’ or threshing floor which is used to dry the harvest. He has a godown-like large shed to keep paddy, fertilizer bags and other farming equipment.

“Since the fresh groundnut sells at a low price, I usually dry it and sell it 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. Many farmers in

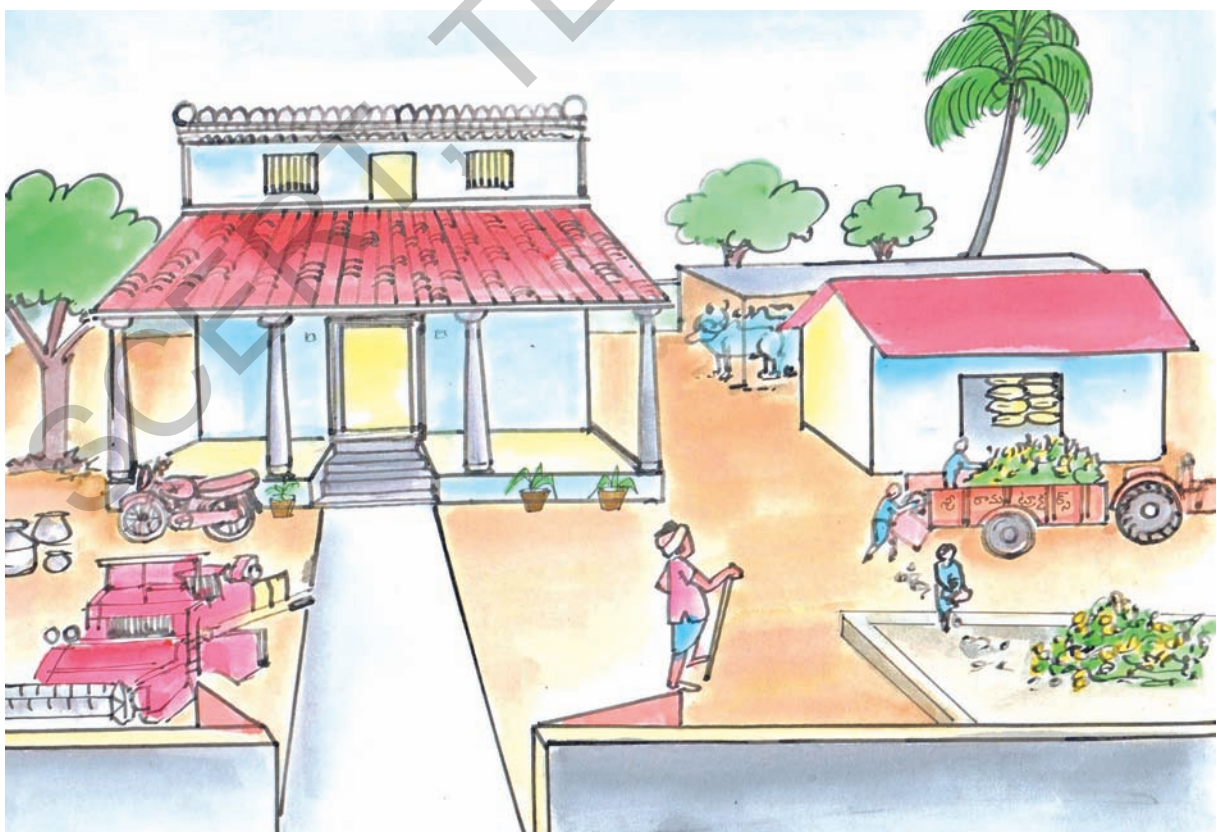


Fig. 7.3 Vijayakumar's House

Venkatapuram and the surrounding villages use these equipments. With all this additional income, Vijayakumar is able to buy more farm machines, borewells and lease in more lands from other small farmers. Vijayakumar gets some more income from selling the milk of more than 20 of his *murrah* buffaloes. He also has a fertiliser shop in the village. Since he lends money to farmers and other labourers, these labourers work regularly on his fields. Vijayakumar has another house in the nearby town in which his wife and children live.

Listening to our talk, Vijaykumar's 75 year old father came out and joined us in the discussion.

He said, *"I don't think farming is something worth talking about these days. 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, the yields don't increase. Many of our neighbours suffered from crop failures."

- ◆ How is Vijayakumar able to wait for higher prices while small farmers have to sell it at low prices?
- ◆ List the agriculture equipment owned by Vijayakumar. What kind of farmers can have such implements?
- ◆ List all the sources of income of Vijayakumar.
- ◆ Do you agree with Vijayakumar's father's opinion that farming is not as good as it was in the past? Give your reasons.

Agriculture in Telangana

Over the years, agriculture in Telangana 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 cotton, sugarcane, groundnut, turmeric, chillies, etc. All these crops need investment in the form of seeds, water, fertilisers, pesticides etc. for which the farmers have to take loans.

A few decades ago, most of the farmers depended upon tanks and canals to irrigate their lands. Now, more than half of the land in Telangana depends on borewells. This has resulted in the depletion of ground water levels and increased dependence on rainfall.

All this has made small farmers vulnerable to crop



Fig. 7.4: Cotton Field

failures. Consequently, they are unable to repay their loans. Many of them are forced to sell their lands and migrate to towns as labourers. Today four out of five small farmers are facing these adverse conditions.

On the other hand, big farmers benefit from the new equipments 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 are not getting enough work and their wages are not rising. Government employment schemes provide relief only for a few days in a year, so they are migrating to other villages or urban areas.

Keywords

Agricultural Labourers

Small Farmers

Migration

Money lenders

Contract farming

Kharif

Cashcrops

Pesticide

Improve your learning

1. How can the Government help the farmers in Venkatapuram and prevent migration?

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 a big farmer of your village with that of Vijayakumar in Venkatapuram.

4. Who took a bank loan in Venkatapuram? What was the reason for taking a bank loan?

5. How do banks and moneylenders give loans to farmers? Do you think borrowing from moneylenders is profitable? What are the alternative sources?

6. How do you think the 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	Agricultural 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 solve their problem
9. Now a days, all the farmers prefer cash crops to the food crops. What problems does this lead to?
10. Read about “contract farming” on page 59 and comment on it.
11. On the map of India, point out the regions where groundnut is grown. Take the help of the atlas.

Project :

1. Interview a small farmer and a big farmer with the help of your teacher. Find out about the condition of their farming practices – how many acres they cultivate, what they grow, how they sell it, what problems do they face etc. Compare these details with what we found in Venkatapuram.
2. 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.