

A STUDY OF HIRED LABOUR PAYMENT FOR PADDY HARVESTING OPERATIONS IN THE GAL OYA SCHEME

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The mode and scale of payments for agricultural labour in Sri Lanka varies widely from area to area and is dependent on the type of crop and several other socio-economic factors and cultural practices. In this paper A.S. Widanapathirana, Research and Training officer of the Agrarian Research and Training Institute (ARTI) presents the findings of a survey he carried out into the system of payments for hired labour used in paddy harvesting operations on the Left Bank of the Gal Oya Scheme during the 1983/84 Maha season.

Unlike most other crops, paddy requires relatively large amounts of labour inputs in different stages of production. Evidence shows that the labour cost alone accounts for about 46 percent of total paddy production costs. Because of the increase in wages, the labour cost is bound to go up further. With the advent of New High Yielding (NHY) paddy varieties, the labour inputs associated with paddy production is also bound to increase. Tractorization in a way will help cut down part of the expensive labour inputs associated with paddy production. However with the frequent increase in cost of fuel, there will naturally be a limit beyond which it may not be profitable to replace labour inputs with tractor power. Unlike most other operations associated with paddy production, harvesting activities cannot be tractorized completely under existing conditions of paddy production in Sri Lanka. Moreover, complete mechanization of all the operations cannot be achieved as those which are mechanized will also require some labour inputs. Because of these reasons, it may not be possible to cut down on labour use in harvesting beyond a certain level.

This paper presents the mode of payment, the wage rate and different systems of payments for hired labour involved with paddy harvesting operations in the Left Bank of the Gal Oya Scheme, during 1983/84 Maha season.

Harvesting

Paddy harvesting is defined as an operation involving all the activities from the stage of reaping through winnowing. The seven sequences of activity which make up the process of harvesting are reaping, collection, bundling, transport to threshing floor, stacking, threshing and winnowing. Hired labour is used in different intensity in all these stages. The payment for hired labour is made either for each of the seven operations or for a few operations combined.

Cash and Non-cash Payment

Hired labour is generally paid either by cash or by kind (paddy) throughout the Scheme. However, there is a spatial difference in the mode of payment; in the head area of the Scheme, it is usually made by cash whereas in the tail area (3), it is by kind. Cash payments are rare in the latter area. This difference between the head and the tail area is linked to the socio-economic circumstances that prevail in the Scheme. In the tail area, there is usually no Yala cultivation and because of frequent water shortages and subsequent crop failures, the crop yield even during the Maha season is very low. Hence, both consumption needs during the period from one Maha harvest to the subsequent Maha harvest (this period is usually over one year) as well as the expenditure that may have to be incurred on the cultivation of the subsequent Maha crop have to be met out

of the proceeds of Maha paddy harvest. The opportunities for outside employment too are rare particularly throughout the long Yala season. Therefore, the conditions of living without some form of outside borrowings is extremely difficult in the tail area. The borrowings for the consumption needs throughout the year are usually obtained from local money lenders, who insist that the repayment be done only in the form of paddy. Therefore, the farmers in the area who also work as hired labourers upon completion of their own harvesting operations, demand paddy from which a major portion is utilized to settle the existing loans. The farmers in the head area, on the otherhand, have no such loan commitments due for settlement soon after harvest. Since, there are usually two crops, in an year in the head area, the income position is not as bad as in the case of tail areas.

Wage Rate

The rate of payment for each of the activities connected with paddy harvesting ranges from Rs.25/- to Rs. 35/- per labour day in the head area. In other words, there is no difference in the wage rate among activities. In the tail area, however, the rate of payment is different among activities. For instance, reaping labour is paid with 2 *marikkars* (4) whereas for threshing it is as high as 6 *marikkars* per labour day.

System of Payment

The system of payment associated with paddy harvesting different in the head vis-a-vis the tail area. It is also found to be dependent on the activity

1. "Gal Oya Water Management Project : Seasonal Report for 1983 Yala Season", ARTI Occasional Publication.
2. The head area refers to that part which is in close proximity to the reservoir, which has no serious water problems.
3. The tail area is that part further down from the reservoir. It has neither adequate nor reliability in the supply of irrigation water.
4. One *marikkar* is equivalent to 0.25 bushels of paddy.

concerned. The different systems of payments adopted in the area are discussed below.

Paddy reaping

There are four separate systems of payments associated with paddy reaping. The system adopted most frequently in the head area is the payment of a daily wage at the end of the day. The labourer is expected to work for a minimum of eight hours and lunch and refreshments are usually provided by the employer. Second, the contract system of payment is adopted both in the head as well as in the tail areas. This is normally practiced when ever wage labourers cannot be contacted each day. It is observed that the thoroughness of the operation has been unsatisfactory with contract labour. The number of individual labourers to be employed will be decided by the contractor and the payment is made by cash and by paddy in the head and tail areas, respectively. In this case the owner is not involved with the work and he has no commitment with regard to the provision of meals, refreshments etc. Third, the *alli* system is employed in the tail and some parts of the head area. In this case, each hired labourer is required to reap paddy in an approximate area of 6' x 16'. The area will be measured by the owner with a "special stick". A labourer is paid with 2 *marikkars* of paddy or Rs.25/- for reaping the crop in one *alli* area in the tail and head area respectively. A labourer usually can reap the area equivalent to 2 *allis* in one day. Refreshments and lunch are also provided by the employer. The paddy stand is usually thinner in areas where this system is practiced, as such the labourer may have to spend some time in "walking" in order to reap a bundle of paddy of given weight. It can therefore be considered that this system envisages to increase the turn over per labourer should the paddy stand become thin.

The final system of payment for reaping is practiced in some parts of the area which is based on the amount of seed paddy used in the establish-

ment of paddy stand. For each bushel of seed paddy used, 1.5 bushels will have to be given as the cost of reaping, collection, bundling and transport. In addition, meals and refreshments are also provided by the employer. In cases where more seed paddy is used the corresponding stand will also be thicker and the labour inputs that will be required to reap the harvest will also be greater. Hence the system envisages maintaining a specific turn-over per labour day.

Collection and Bundling

These two activities are considered a single operation as far as the payment is concerned. It involves the collection of reaped paddy which is spread over the area, arranging them into bundles of equal size and the transportation to threshing floor. There are two systems of payment levied, namely contract and wages. The contract system is not very popular and in case it is adopted transport will also be done by the contractor. The daily wage for the activity is around Rs. 25/- in the head area whereas a payment of 3 *marikkas* is made in the tail area.

Transport

This involves the transportation of bundled reaped paddy from the field and stacking them on the threshing floor. The system of pay arrangement in the case of transport is similar to the collection and bundling, except for the amount paid. In the tail area for each labour day a payment of 3 - 4 *marikkars* is made while in the head area, the cash payment is either Rs.4/- per bundle of paddy or the daily wage.

Threshing

Threshing comprises the separation of paddy grains from panicles, separation of straw from threshed paddy, cleaning of threshed paddy of debris, etc. The operation is performed either manually or by tractors. The involvement of hired labour in respect of threshing is for two purposes,

namely, in arranging bundles of paddy on the threshing floor on which the tractor is operated, frequent mixing in order to facilitate seed separation and to separate threshed paddy grains from straw, debris etc. In some tail areas, threshing is also done manually. Threshing is considered an arduous activity and the payment levied per hired labour day is 5 - 6 *marikkars* in the tail area whereas it is Rs.25/- to Rs.35/- per labour day in the head area. Threshing is done either during the night or day time and the remuneration for night threshing is higher than for day threshing.

However, some farmers do not prefer night threshing particularly with contract labour because the owner finds it difficult to ensure quality threshing. Threshing is also done by contract labour as in the case of other operations discussed above.

In addition to the system of hired labour payment discussed above, there are also several contract systems where shade or harvesting activities are involved. For example, in some tail areas, a payment of 1.6 *avanams*(5) of paddy is made in respect of reaping, collecting/bundling and transport of paddy in an acre. These systems are based on thickness of paddy stand, availability and cost of labour and other local factors.

Conclusion

The paper presents the mode and systems of payments for hired labour involved with paddy harvesting. In the head areas the payment is by cash while in the tail area it is in the form of paddy. The study identifies several systems of payment in different parts of the Gal Oya Scheme. The nature of the system practiced in tail parts of the Scheme are complex and varied whereas there are no such variations in the head areas. The variable nature of labour transactions can be attributed to the pattern of agricultural production and socio-economic circumstances that prevail in the tail area.

(5) One *Avanam* is equivalent to 7.5 bushels of paddy.