The labourer's manifesto[1]

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Most political parties woo labourers as voters but seldom think of them as a target for technological development and empowerment. Why should the interests of those who vote more than any other social segment be addressed so indifferently? Years of neglect have helped give rise to a situation in which more than 170 districts in the country, are faced with extremist violence; during a period of high growth, the number of districts where the state abdicated also grew. This couldn't be because extremists were more persuasive, or people more gullible. Can technological empowerment help? By alleviating distress, augmenting skills and widening options for labourers?

After all, rural labourers have far more technical information about local resources and variations in their use than do farmers. Thus a large body of non-monetary technologies can be transferred to the labourers, adding value to their knowledge to make them more productive. In addition, knowledge upgrade helps labourers enhance occupational safety. (Temporary or permanent disability can affect them and their families irreversibly.)

But have new tools been provided to break stones, make or carry bricks or harvest panicles of paddy? Even the design of sickles has hardly improved. New technologies don't exist and where they do, are not diffused among labourers because they have seldom been targeted. Tea pluckers move their hands several thousand times a day to put leaves in the basket behind them; simple mechanical devices can reduce this burden substantially. As we drink our morning tea, we may not think of the pluckers' pain; but if your tea can become more joyful in origin, it couldn't hurt. Where is the Design Mission to address such persistent problems for labourers?

Is it not tragic that we will first not give them opportunities for knowledge-intensive work, and then when manual labour is the only choice, not upgrade their tools for decades? "Farmers first" has been talked about for at least twenty years; "Labourer first" is yet to emerge as a priority even for the Left.

What can help? For one, despite the known negative effects of agro-chemicals, particularly chemical pesticides, there isn't a billboard clarifying their safe usage to be seen. Adverse health effects will follow; I have known of labourers using empty pesticide cans for their morning ablutions. Then, millions of women transplant paddy with feet underwater for hours, developing fungal (and secondary) infections. Castor oil and other such preventives can reduce their incidence. Innovation in this sector receives little attention, and no preventive information is provided to labourers under any employment programme. Also, more than sixty per cent of infections are water-borne; sickness causes

[1] On-line publication of Indian Express: http://www.indianexpress.com/news/the-labourers-manifesto/448247/

income losses. Low-cost water filtration and sanitation such as Moringa seeds, Jamun wood, coconut fiber, charcoal, lime, alum need dissemination.

If labourers can help in optimising input use, their wages will improve. Cross-pollination of cotton for hybrid seeds is done mostly by labourers from tribal areas, especially women and children. During the recent Shodh Yatra, a school-going son of a labourer asked, "If I have a small quantity of manure and I have to apply in a small field, how do I decide how much to apply where?" In precision agriculture, one can map the field's micronutrient profile and then apply what is needed where it is needed most. Labourers with this skill will help agriculture, which suffers from low input productivity; they could become service entrepreneurs. (Weed growth can be used to deduce soil mineral properties.)

The crop varieties developed by farmers across India shows farmers can make selections and conduct simple breeding — even crossing different parent lines. In most agricultural research stations, crossing work is actually done by labourers. Once scientists explain heritability and important selection indices, labourers typically make intelligent and well-informed selection and crossing. Once crop diversity increases, so does stability, health and hopefully productivity.

Innovation can emerge, too. Malleshan wove Pochampalli sarees in Andhra Pradesh. Winding yarn, his mother had to move her hand up and down 18,000 times a day; one day she told him that the pain was such that she wanted her son to choose another profession. Instead, Malleshan decided to invent a machine. After struggling for seven years, he invented an assu yarn winding machine. Why not help labour own the machine and thus become more productive? Help labour move up the value chain.

If we reskill labourers (instead of deskilling as we do currently) and share with them technology which aids their work, not only will their lives improve, they will also be able to buy more. Tree climbers have been developed by innovators like Appachan in Kerala and Mushtaq in Kashmir but few labourers have access; almost every coconut you eat has been harvested manually — and husked manually, though husking machines have been invented by Jaysheelan.

Rural tensions are inevitable if we do not address the forgotten labourers' concerns. Cheap food cannot be the long-term answer. Measures that enhance skills, improve productivity, reduce drudgery and better the quality of life should command attention.

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