

Precarious Employment and Bonded Labor: Assessment from Agriculture Sector of Punjab (Pakistan)

Farhat Jamshed¹, Afzaal Afzal², Asiya Anwar³ and Muhammad Arshad⁴

<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2023.12.4.99>

Abstract

Despite strict constitutional provisions and laws existing against bonded labor, the situation is still plagued by this contemporary form of slavery in Pakistan—the trends of bonded labor historically associated with numerous sectors where laborers have to bear precarious employment circumstances. The International Labor Organization estimates that more than 9.5 individuals are forced to engage in bonded labor due to debt bondage, meager employment opportunities, and the absence of adequate implementation of policies in the South Asian region. The prevalence of bounded labor is the product of unawareness, poverty, unavailability of basic human needs, social exclusion, and, above all, the failure of governments to eliminate the practices. This primary study covers three administrative divisions of Punjab, and data was collected through multistage simple random sampling techniques. The interview schedule was used as a tool of data collection and study findings revealed that a considerable proportion of agriculture laborers worked in bounded circumstances. In contrast, the government's writ regarding implementing bounded labor laws is very poor. Due to this unattended situation, agricultural laborers have to face a large number of issues that become significant reasons for morbidity and mortality every year, especially among women and children belonging to these bounded laborers.

Keywords: Bonded Labor, Agricultural Labor, Socio-economic Problems, Agricultural Development.

Introduction

Despite strict constitutional provisions and laws existing against bonded labor in Pakistan, the situation is still plagued by this contemporary form of slavery (Ahmad et al., 2023). The trends of bonded labor are historically associated with numerous sectors, and the laborer has to bear precarious employment circumstances in all developing nations (Feng et al., 2022). In the South Asian region, the International Labor Organization estimates that more than 9.5 individuals are forced to engage in bonded labor due to debt bondage, meager employment opportunities, and the absence of adequate implementation of policies, among others (George et al., 2023). The prevalence of bounded labor in developing countries like Pakistan is the product of unawareness,

¹Assistant Professor, Government Municipal Graduate College Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Email: farhatbaloch146@gmail.com

²Community Development Officer, Housing Urban Development and Public Health Engineering Department, Punjab.

Corresponding Author Email: afzaal.afzal2010@gmail.com

³Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Sargodha, Pakistan. Email: asiya.anwar@uos.edu.pk

⁴Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of the Punjab, Lahore. Email: arshad.dsw@pu.edu.pk



poverty, unavailability of basic human needs, social exclusion, and the failure of governments and alliance organizations to eliminate the practices (Saikh et al., 2023).

The individuals who enslaved themselves are desperately pitiable with no other assets to sell for their basic needs and livelihood. A vast proportion of bonded laborers belongs to poor social classes, scheduled castes, uneducated, and minority groups (Sharma et al., 2023). Most people with low incomes in developing countries residing in rural vicinity and engaged in the agriculture sector for their bread and butter. In that case, the bounded labor phenomenon is significantly associated with the agricultural industry that impacts the landless population (Khan et al., 2022). In Pakistan, the widespread penetration of bounded labor in the agriculture sector was reported, and this labor also involved the brick kiln industry, tanning, mining, sport, cotton, and carpet industries, among others (Patri et al., 2022).

The bonded labor in the agricultural sector is one of the most critical segments of the rural population in Pakistan. The rural population of Pakistan comprises 67% of the total population, and nearly 51% of the country's total labor force is directly or indirectly associated with the agriculture sector (Kumar et al., 2023). Overall, the agriculture sector is an important economic sector, and agricultural labor ensures the availability of food for the entire population of the country besides earning their livelihood. The role of farming laborers is very significant for the development of Pakistan. Economists divide agriculture's bonded labor force into wage laborers, sharecroppers, peasants, and subsistence farmers (Ewert et al., 2023).

The bonded labor phenomenon most of the time is transmitted from one generation to another and all the men and women who are working in the fields, orchards, glasshouses, livestock, and primary processing facilities to produce the food fibers on wages are considered (Rehman et al., 2022). These workers do not own the land on which they are working, and they also do not own the equipment they use, and all this distinguishes them from the farmers. There are many categories of such workers due to the terms and conditions of their employment, like permanent or full-time agricultural workers, temporary or casual agricultural workers, seasonal agrarian workers, migrant agricultural workers, piece-rate workers, or workers receiving some form of 'in-kind' payment. These agricultural workers receive 'wage' in cash, 'in-kind' payment, or any other commodity (Sumberg et al., 2023).

The situation of bonded labor in Pakistan is very alarming, and various studies pointed out that bonded labor is modern-day slavery in Pakistan. The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1992 is not an effective law for abolishing the menace of bonded labor in Pakistan (Pradhan et al., 2022). In 2013, different statistics showed that Pakistan was among the top positions in slavery's list of shame. In 2014, the report of the global slavery index indicated that more than one percent of the total 185.13 million population in Pakistan are enslaved (Abbas et al., 2021). This report also cites that debt bondage was the primary factor behind this slavery. At the same time, the situation in Punjab and Sindh provinces was critical, and both provinces mentioned above, Pakistan were our hotspots of bonded labor. These laborers were without fundamental rights, and the practice of bounded labor could be found in the agriculture sector and brick kilns industry (Milheiras et al., 2022).

The problems of bonded laborers in Pakistan bring numerous allied socio-economic and development issues, such as the global slavery index that pointed out that 2.5 million people in Pakistan are enslaved (Saravana et al., 2022). The ranking of Pakistan is 3 in the total 167 countries according to the list of WFF Index, and the problem of human slavery is hazardous in Pakistan. After China and India, Pakistan is considered to have the most significant number of people who are living in such conditions that can be described as belonging to modern-day slavery. The total

number of such people in Pakistan, India, and Thailand is estimated to be almost half of the total 36 million people who are trapped in slavery globally (Mekonnen et al., 2021).

Government policy of wages for agriculture workers faces a fundamental lack, and governments and authorities cannot implement it in the true sense (Sengupta et al., 2023). The absence of implementation of government policies is the leading cause of the problems faced by the agricultural bonded laborers. This labor is almost 3 / 4 of the total labor force due to increased population, decreasing agricultural land, river erosion, increasing landless labor, and uneconomic holdings (Chothodi et al., 2022). There are few big farmers or landlords in the district, while on the other hand, the agricultural laborers are landless, unorganized, bonded, and have low social status. Indebtedness, illiteracy, poverty, absence of alternative occupation, and seasonal unemployment are found.

Study Objectives

- To discover the psycho-social, economic, and demographic problems agricultural laborers face in Punjab, Pakistan.
- To understand the causes and consequences behind the adaptation of bonded labor in the agriculture sector of Punjab, Pakistan.
- To evaluate the government agricultural policies regarding bonded laborers and present suggestions for bettering bounded labor circumstances in Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

Marx's Theory of Class and Exploitation

Karl Marx developed theories about class conflict in society, which resulted in the exploitation of the lower class. According to Marx, all the people of the working class are exploited by the bourgeois class. Marx argued that the ultimate source of profit, the driving force behind capitalist production, is the unpaid labor of workers. So, for Marx, exploitation forms the foundation of the capitalist system (Paracchini et al., 2022).

Karl Marx was a great philosopher and thinker who provided many great ideas and theories and pioneered the Marxist school of thought. He was an advocate of the labor theory of value and believed that the wages of laborers were held at the subsistence level by the existence of a large number of unemployed (Paracchini et al., 2022; Sumberg et al., 2023). This theory provides a basis for understanding the lesser wages of laborers, and agriculture is also one of the sectors famous for the low wages of agricultural laborers.

David Ricardo, with many other classical economists, advanced the subsistence theory of wages, and the present work done by these classical economists, was based on the population theory of Thomas Malthus. It held that the market price of labor would always tend toward the minimum required for subsistence (Peeters et al., 2021). If the labor supply increased, wages would fall, eventually causing a decrease in the labor supply. If the salary rose above the subsistence level, the population would increase until the more significant labor force again forces wages down.

Study Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this study was developed by considering the nature and available literature regarding precarious employment and bonded labor. With careful consideration of the various aspects of the study objectives and research question following hypothesis was developed,

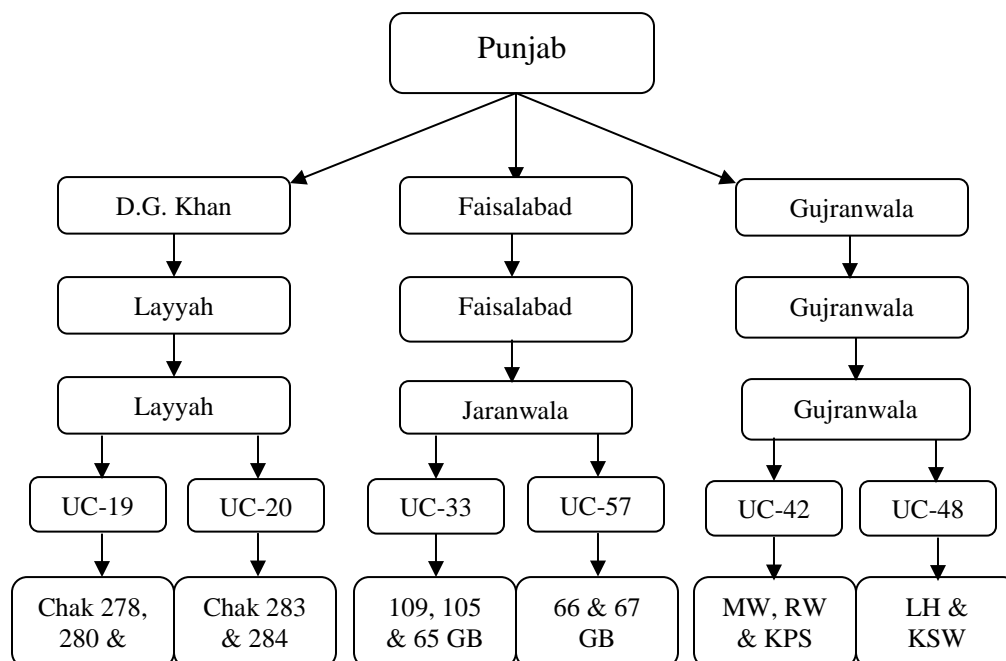
H1: The higher the level of precarious employment opportunity, the higher the level of bounded agriculture labor.

H2: Higher the level of bounded agriculture labor, lower the level of socio-economic and livelihood of agricultural labor.

Research Methodology

Multistage sampling techniques were applied for this experiment and researchers collected primary data from the bonded laborer working in the agriculture sector of Punjab province. The Punjab province administration is divided into ten divisions and there are no exact figures about the strength of agricultural laborers in Punjab. For data collection purposes in the first stage, three divisions named Gujranwala, Faisalabad, and Dera Ghazi Khan were randomly selected from the nine divisions of Punjab. In the second stage, three districts named Gujranwala, Faisalabad, and Layyah (one district from each selected division) were selected through the fish bowl draw sampling method. In the third stage, three Tehsils named Gujranwala, Jaranwala, and Layyah (one from each district chosen) were also selected through the fish bowl draw sampling method. In the fourth stage, 15 villages (five from each Tehsils) were selected using a random sampling method. In the fifth and last stage, 25 respondents were selected from each town through deliberate sampling. The list of selected villages is given below.

Figure 1: Geographical distribution of study participants



The researcher applied the purposive sampling method, which is the most appropriate method for conducting this kind of primary study, where most of the participants were uneducated. Most of the time, the unaware population feels hesitant and does not respond to the researchers for studies. Another thing is that there needs to be proper data or records of the laborers associated with farming. The researcher had to find the respondents from the proposed sampling area. So, a purposive sampling method was adequate for this purpose. A structured interview schedule was prepared according to the study's nature, objectives, and hypothesis, comprising both closed and open-ended questions. All the socio-economic aspects of the problems of agricultural laborers

were considered covered in the interview schedule. Pre testing of the tool is made with 39 respondents to check the validity and reliability of the tool before actual data collection. Interviews were conducted from the field in the day timing, and it took a total of one month to complete 375 interviews. Various descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were applied to draw results/findings through the statistical software SPSS-22.

Results and Discussions

Descriptive Analysis

Through descriptive analysis, the researcher tries to present the participants' overall geographical and demographic distribution. Descriptive statistics are used to present quantitative descriptions, which describe the basic features and mostly contain information regarding lists of numbers that represent a population. Table 2 presents the details regarding the demographic distribution of the study participants.

Figure 1: Age distribution of participants

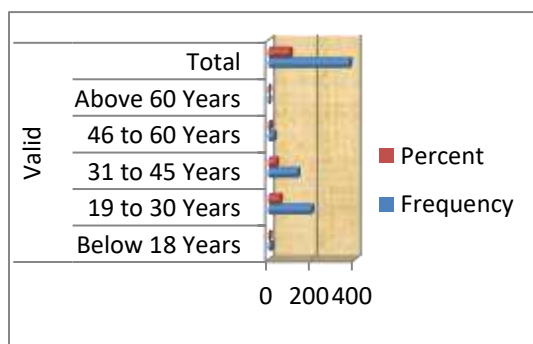
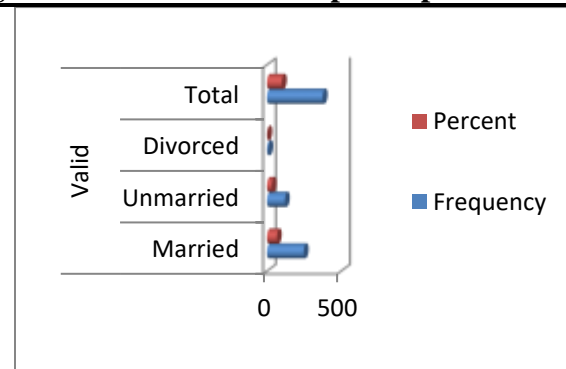


Figure 2: Marital status of participants



The figure 1 & 2 presents the age distribution and marital status of study participants, out of total 53.1% participants belonged from the age bracket of 19 to 30 years and 36% from 31 to 45 years of age. Similarly when participants were asked about their marital status, a huge proportion 65.9% was married.

Figure 3: Family system of participants

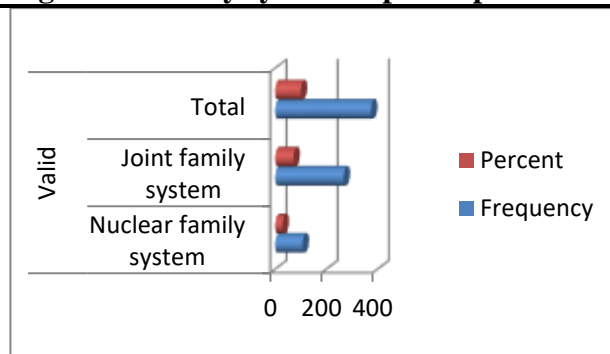
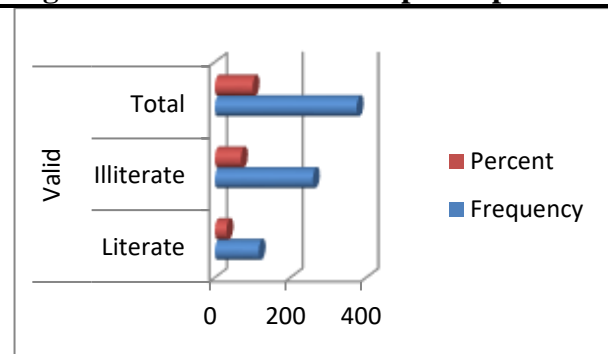


Figure 4: Education level of participants



The figure 3 & 4 presents the data regarding family system and education level of study participants. Out of a total 71.5% of the study population reported that they are living in a joint family system with their parents and other family members. When the participants were asked about their education 69.1% agriculture laborers were illiterate and did not obtain basic education.

Table 1: Nature of labor, Working condition, environment and practices

Characteristics		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Nature of Labour	Bounded	81	21.6	21.6	21.6
	Unbounded	294	78.4	78.4	100.0
	Total	375	100.0	100.0	
Working Hours	8 hours	111	29.6	29.6	29.6
	9 to 12 hours	165	44.0	44.0	73.6
	Above 12 hours	99	26.4	26.4	100.0
	Total	375	100.0	100.0	
Monthly Income (Rs)	Less than 5000	33	8.8	8.8	8.8
	5001-10000	214	57.1	57.1	65.9
	10001-15000	120	32.0	32.0	97.9
	15001-20000	8	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	375	100.0	100.0	
Problem faced during working	Yes	354	94.4	94.4	94.4
	No	9	2.4	2.4	96.8
	To some extent	12	3.2	3.2	100.0
	Total	375	100.0	100.0	
Minimum wage as per Govt. policy	Yes	43	11.5	11.5	11.5
	No	332	88.5	88.5	100.0
	Total	375	100.0	100.0	
Satisfaction with work	Yes	146	38.9	38.9	38.9
	No	155	41.3	41.3	80.3
	To some extent	74	19.7	19.7	100.0
	Total	375	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 highlighted the working condition, environment and practices by agricultural laborers among selected areas of the study. Out of the total 78.4% participants reported that they do this work on their own wish and need. Huge proportion of participants 69.6% work for 8 to 12 hours per day and unfortunately 57.1% earned only Rs 50001-10000; only 2.1% participants reported that they earn Rs15001 to 20000 per month. The major portion 94.4% of study participants reported that they always face problems during their work regarding requirements of work facilities. Due to their illiteracy conditions most of the participants 88.5% are not aware regarding the minimum wage policy by the government and almost half of the study population 41.3% did not show satisfaction with their work and working environment.

Hypotheses Testing Analysis

Hypotheses of the study were tested through Chi-Square statistics and cross tabulation presents the distributions of two categorical variables. The study hypotheses (H1) higher the level of precarious employment opportunity, higher the level of bounded agriculture labor and (H2) higher

the level of bounded agriculture labor, lower the level of socio-economic and livelihood of agricultural labor tested through chi square test.

Table 2: Association between community participation in planning and user satisfaction

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	92.672	5	.001
Likelihood Ratio	61.928	4	.003
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.000	2	.101
N of Valid Cases	374		
Pearson Chi-Square	66.788	4	.002
Likelihood Ratio	67.879	2	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	43.921	3	.001
N of Valid Cases	811		

a. 6 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .19.

It is evident from table 2 that the Socioeconomic problems of the agricultural laborers are significantly associated with the monthly income of the respondents and Chi-Square Value= .0001 and P-value= .0001. Therefore, the socioeconomic issues of the respondents are affected by the monthly income, and the low income of laborers creates problems for the laborers. It is evident from Table 2 that there is a correlation between the area of the agricultural laborers and bounded labor, and the test results show a Chi-Square Value= .0001 and P-value= .0001. Therefore, the information indicates that the element of bounded labor is associated with the area, and the above table results indicate that bounded labor is mainly present in Gujranwala. At the same time, this menace is also present in the Faisalabad division, and the ratio of bounded labor is smaller in Dera Ghazi Khan.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study concludes that the menace of bounded labor was present in the agriculture sector, and almost 21.6% (81) of respondents out of 375 fell victim to this curse, which was an alarming figure. The working conditions of the laborers could have been more conducive because most of the respondents, 60.4% (264), worked for 9 to 12 hours and more than 12 hours daily, but amazingly, their monthly income was meager. The majority of the respondents 57.1% (214), earned between 5001 to 10000 rupees monthly. In comparison, 8.8% (33) respondents had a monthly income of less than 5000 rupees, and 32.0% (120) respondents had a monthly salary from 10001 to 15000 rupees, while the majority of these 32% laborers were earning 11 thousand monthly, which was less than minimum wages announced by the Government. So, the overwhelming majority of the agricultural laborers received lesser wages from their employers. The monthly income of 71.5% (268) of the total 375 respondents was insufficient for their requirements, while 41.7% (155) respondents from that 268 had no other source of earning/ no time to be involved in different economic activities and were facing many social and financial problems. Among the 375 respondents, more than 70% answered that lower wages were the primary cause and factor behind the problems of agricultural laborers, and poverty of the laborers was the outcome of this factor. Almost the overwhelming majority of the respondents, 97.3% (365), think that agricultural laborers have to face health problems such as lung and hailing diseases, occupational injury, and pesticide poisoning. The study also concludes that agriculture is a hazardous sector, as the survey

shows that 89.6% (336) faced health hazards while performing their duties. At the same time, occupational injury and pesticide poisoning were the significant health hazards that agricultural laborers had to face. Even though rural laborers were vulnerable to serious health issues, 96.8% (363) had no life insurance. On the other hand, when it was asked from the laborers about the way of handling and using the pesticides, no one was able to answer it. The element of harassment was also found in the study. More than half of the respondents, 55.7% (209), experienced harassment during the job period, while 2.4% (9) respondents replied to some extent, and these were facing physical, emotional, and sexual harassment.

The study's findings show that 40.5% (152) of respondents were homeless. The study concludes that most laborers were deprived of the basic facilities in their houses like kitchen, water supply, and sanitation. On the other hand, almost one-quarter of the respondents did not take breakfast, lunch, and supper regularly, while more than 90% did not take any fruit and dry fruit daily. The majority of the laborers were illiterate, so in this regard, they were being exploited due to their ignorance and illiteracy. The study shows that 88.5% (332) respondents were unaware of the minimum wage announced by the Government, 96.0% (360) respondents did not know about Govt. agricultural policies, and 77.1% (289) said that the Government was not securing the interest of the farming laborers.

In comparison, the overwhelming majority of the respondents, 92.3% (346), thank the role of Govt. The agricultural sector was not buoyant. The overwhelming majority of the respondents, 97.1% (364), said that the condition of farming laborers can be improved.

Recommendations

- The monthly income of agricultural laborers is low, and the present study suggests that the Government should organize efforts to enforce minimum wage acts in the agriculture sector.
- As the study shows that agricultural laborers have to face health hazards, a mechanism of social security benefits should be offered for these laborers.
- The government must adopt all appropriate measures to abolish all forms of harassment at the workplace and save poor agricultural laborers from this menace.
- Agricultural laborers must be provided non-formal education to develop sensitization among them about their rights.

The Government should organize:

- Training courses in rural areas to sensitize the agricultural laborers about pesticides, their exposure, use, and their poisonous effects.
- Bounded labor is a curse, and as the study shows, it is found in the agriculture sector, so in this regard, the Government must take all appropriate legal actions to control it.
- The Government should make agricultural policies by considering the interests of the agricultural laborers.
- There should be a proper service structure for the agricultural laborers.
- Agriculture should also be given the status of an essential economic institution like industry, and the agricultural laborers should also be given the same facilities as the industrial laborers.
- In case of any professional injury while performing their duty by the agricultural laborers, the affected must be given all appropriate basic facilities as are given to the industrial laborers.
- The benefits/policy of life insurance of the agricultural laborers should be introduced.

References

- Abbas, G., Ali, A., & Khan, M. (2021). The transition from arid farming systems to agroforestry systems in Pakistan: a comparison of monetary returns. *Small-scale Forest* 20, 325–350. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11842-020-09470-5>
- Ahmad, M., Kumari, M., Kumar, N., Goswami, G., & Shahfahad, A. (2023). Assessing livelihood vulnerability to climate variability in the Himalayan region: a district-level analysis of Jammu Province, India. *GeoJournal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-023-10829-2>
- Chothodi, S., Patidar, H., Parmar, K., & Mishra, R. (2022). Environment and human well-being: revisiting linkages and major issues. *Indian Geogr J* 97(1), 1–16.
- Ewert, F., Baatz, R., & Finger, R. (2023). Agroecology for a sustainable agriculture and food system: from local solutions to large-scale adoption. *Annu Rev Resour Econ*. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-resource-102422-090105>
- Feng, Y., Chen, H., & Zheng, X. (2022). Component analysis of ancient glass products based on hierarchical analysis clustering algorithm. *Highlights Sci Eng Technol* 21, 180–185. <https://doi.org/10.54097/hset.v21i.3155>
- George, A., Sharma, P., & Pradhan, K.C. (2023). Spatiotemporal pattern of vulnerability to climate change in Madhya Pradesh, India. *Appl Spat Anal Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12061-023-09535-w>
- Khan, A., & Ximei, W. (2022). Digital Economy and Environmental Sustainability: Do information communication and technology (ICT) and economic complexity matter? *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(19), 12301. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191912301>
- Kumar, A., Kumar, S., Rautela, K.S., Kumari, A., Shekhar, S., & Thangavel, M. (2023a). Exploring temperature dynamics in Madhya Pradesh: a spatial-temporal analysis. *Environ Monit Assess* 195(11), 1313. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10661-023-11884-5>
- Mekonnen, M., Worku, T., & Yitaferu, B. (2021). Economics of agroforestry land use system, Upper Blue Nile Basin, northwest Ethiopia. *Agroforest Syst*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10457-021-00612-y>
- Milheiras, S.G., Sallu, S.M., & Loveridge, R. (2022). Agroecological practices increase farmers' well-being in an agricultural growth corridor in Tanzania. *Agron Sustain Dev* 42, 56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-022-00789-1>
- Paracchini, M., Wezel, A., & Madsen, S. (2022). *Agroecological practices supporting food production and reducing food insecurity in developing countries*, vol 2. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Patri, P., Sharma, P., & Patra, S.K. (2022). Does economic development reduce disaster damage risk from floods in India? Empirical evidence using the ZINB model. *Int J Disaster Risk Reduct* 79, 103163. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2022.103163>
- Peeters, A., Škorjanc, K., Wezel, A., & Migliorini, P. (2021). *OASIS, the Original Agroecological Survey Indicator System. A simple and comprehensive system for agroecological transition assessment*. Agroecology Europe, Corbais, Belgium.
- Pradhan, K.C., & Narayanan, K. (2022). Does climatic risk induce labour migration? Evidence from Semi-Arid Tropics region of India. *J Public Aff* 22(1). <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2323>
- Rehman, S., Azhoni, A., & Chabbi, P.H. (2022). Livelihood vulnerability assessment and climate change perception analysis in Arunachal Pradesh, India. *GeoJournal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-022-10703-7>

- Saikh, N.I., & Mondal, P. (2023). GIS-based machine learning algorithm for flood susceptibility analysis in the Pagla river basin, Eastern India. *Nat Hazards Res* 3(3), 420–436. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nhres.2023.05.004>
- Saravana, K. V., Lohano, H.D., & Balasubramanian, R. (2022). A district-level analysis for measuring the effects of climate change on production of rice: evidence from Southern India. *Theor Appl Climatol* 150(3–4), 941–953. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00704-022-04198-y>
- Sengupta, A., & Thangavel, M. (2023). Analysis of the effects of climate change on cotton production in Maharashtra State of India using statistical model and GIS mapping. *Caraka Tani: J Sustain Agric* 38(1), 152–162. <https://doi.org/10.20961/carakatani.v38i1.64377>
- Sharma, A. (2023). Drought risk management in Madhya Pradesh, India: a policy perspective. *Int J Emerg Manag* 18(1), 23. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJEM.2023.129408>
- Sumberg, J., & Giller, K.E. (2022). What is ‘conventional’ agriculture? *Global Food Sec* 32, 100617. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2022.100617>