

SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF LANDLESS LABOURERS: A CASE STUDY OF THE SAMBAVA COMMUNITY IN CHERMALA COLONY, KERALA

Shaharshad C T¹ and K Manikandan²

¹Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor, Department of Economics, The Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed to be University)

To Cite this Article

Shaharshad C T, & K Manikandan (2026). Socio-Economic Background of Landless Labourers: A Case Study of the Sambava Community in Chermala Colony, Kerala. *SAARC Journal of Social Science*, 4: 1, pp. 29-39.

Abstract: The aim of this study is to investigate the socio-economic conditions of the Sambava community in the Cheramala colony, who are landless labourers. The research was conducted using a case study approach using surveys, interviews, and direct observations conducted in the colony based on working conditions, income sources, wage rates, gender differences in labor participation, dependency ratio, and access to basic facilities. The findings indicate that they are mostly engaged in low-skilled, low-wage jobs in the informal sector. The lack of adequate education and training further handicaps them, and through this, globalization, debt, and poverty continue for a long time. At the same time, the lack of infrastructure and public services in the colony is hindering the very goal of development. This study explains the background of the Sambava community, the main challenges faced by these labourers, and the ways in which they can improve their livelihoods.

Keywords: Landless labour, socio-economic, Sambava, unorganised sector

Introduction

Land continues to be the cornerstone of rural livelihoods, especially in agrarian societies where access to and control over land is intricately tied to social status, economic opportunity, and long-term security. For marginalized communities like the Sambava of Chermala Colony in Kerala, the condition of landlessness is not merely the absence of property but a complex, intergenerational disadvantage that shapes

their access to employment, income, education, and essential services. This study investigates the socio-economic realities of the Sambava community, with particular attention to their patterns of land ownership, income levels, occupational structures, gendered labour divisions, and access to public amenities. By integrating empirical fieldwork with thematic literature, the research situates the lived experience of this landless community within a broader national and global discourse on rural poverty.

The issue of landlessness has long been acknowledged as a central driver of rural poverty and exclusion. As Griffin and Rahman (1977) explain, agricultural systems with unequal land distribution deepen economic discrimination in rural areas. In many regions of Asia, including India, the persistence of bonded labour, sharecropping, and informal tenancy arrangements places landless labourers in precarious positions, with limited bargaining power and minimal job security (FAO, 1984; Dasgupta, 1977). The condition of landlessness is further compounded by an over-reliance on informal credit systems. Lacking collateral, many labourers borrow from landlords or private moneylenders at exploitative interest rates, reinforcing cycles of debt and dependency (Hameed, 1977; Griffin & Rahman, 1977).

The Sambava community exemplifies many of these dynamics. Data from field surveys in Chermala Colony reveal that the majority of working-age adults, particularly women, are employed as agricultural labourers or domestic labourers, earning subsistence-level wages without social protections. Poor access to formal education and healthcare further marginalizes this group, a situation reflected in broader studies showing that landless populations typically remain excluded from institutional credit and welfare services (Etienne, 1977). Moreover, landlessness is not a static condition—it reflects deeper structural and policy-level failures, including the slow pace of land reform, mechanization of agriculture, and inconsistent enforcement of labour rights (Schneider, 2011; Mahmood Hasan Khan, 1986).

One of the more complex findings in the literature concerns the relationship between landlessness and child labour. While economic vulnerability drives many landless families to rely on child labour for household income (Bhalotra, 2000; Khalid & Shahnaz, n.d.), some studies note that land-owning families also engage their children in farm work to maintain productivity, especially when adult labour markets are inefficient (Cockburn, 2000; Bhalotra & Heady, 2003). These nuanced findings challenge the assumption that child labour is purely a symptom of poverty, suggesting instead that cultural expectations, gender roles, and land-based economies all contribute to the perpetuation of labour-based inequality.

At the macro level, the failure to implement inclusive land and labour policies has kept landlessness entrenched across many developing countries. In Bangladesh, Rahman and Manprasert (2022) found that increasing landlessness has a direct correlation with rising poverty, financial instability, and migratory distress. In Latin America and parts of Africa, structural inequalities—often colonial in origin—continue to inform land ownership patterns and labour relations (FAO, 1984). What is consistent across contexts, however, is that landless labourers are largely absent from policy frameworks that prioritize productivity over equity. Measures such as land redistribution, access to microcredit, and social protection schemes have not been implemented at a scale or depth sufficient to address the root causes of landlessness (Griffin & Rahman, 1977; Dasgupta, 1977).

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to contextualize the socio-economic condition of the Sambava people within the larger framework of rural inequality. Through qualitative and quantitative research in Chermala Colony, the study explores how landlessness, intersecting with caste and gender, limits access to livelihoods and public goods. It also draws on thematic literature to argue that policy reform must be comprehensive, addressing not only the redistribution of land but also the structural vulnerabilities—such as informal employment, poor education, and indebtedness—that continue to marginalize landless communities. By situating local realities within national and global debates, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of rural poverty and the pressing need for equitable development.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research employed a descriptive case study method to closely examine the socio-economic realities of landless labourers from the Sambava community residing in Chermala Colony, Kerala. The purpose was to look into different facets of their daily lives—such as sources of income, levels of education, types of employment, availability of essential services, and patterns of land ownership—to gain a clearer understanding of how these factors are connected and shape their overall living conditions.

Study Area

The study was carried out in Chermala Colony, a settlement situated in the Perambra block of Kozhikode district, Kerala, where the Sambava community

forms a major part of the population. This location was selected because it reflects a high concentration of Scheduled Caste residents and displays clear signs of socio-economic hardship, particularly related to landlessness and inadequate access to essential government services.

Sampling Method

A total of 60 households from the Sambava community were prudently selected for primary data collection using purposive sampling. The selection was directed by practical considerations, including the size of the population, the number of households accessible during the study period, and the time available for fieldwork. Each chosen household had at least one member working as a landless wage labourer, ensuring the sample accurately reflected the focus of the study.

Data Analysis

The primary data for this study was collected through a structured household survey schedule, which aimed to collect both quantitative data and descriptive information. To gain a more detailed understanding of the socio-economic realities, direct interviews were conducted with respondents, mainly heads of households and employed members. Observations made during field visits provided a wealth of background information regarding housing conditions and the availability of basic amenities in Cheramala Colony. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also organized with selected stakeholders to delve deeper into more complex and nuanced issues such as gender equations, social exclusion, and community perceptions. The factors included in this questionnaire include demographic information (age, gender, education level, etc.), economic indicators (income, type of employment, etc.), asset ownership (land, livestock, etc.), this includes the right to access basic services such as water, electricity, sanitation, and healthcare. The collected data was manually compiled and organized into a major analysis table. This table classified age, education level, and primary occupation as independent variables, while monthly income, land ownership status, and access to amenities were considered dependent variables. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were employed to interpret the data, and cross-tabulation was used to identify relationships and correlations between variables—for example, the impact of education level on income, or the effect of land ownership on access to essential services.

Result and Discussion

Table 1: Age-wise Distribution of Respondents

Age Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
18 – 30 years	15	25%
31 – 45 years	22	36.7%
46 – 60 years	18	30%
60+ years	5	8.3%
Total	60	100%

Source: primary data

The majority of landless labourers fall in the working-age group of 31 to 45 years. This indicates that the prime working population is heavily engaged in manual labour. A smaller segment (8.3%) is aged above 60, showing a limited role of older individuals in the workforce due to physical limitations.

Table 2: Educational Status of Respondents

Education Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Illiterate	20	33.3%
Primary Education	25	41.7%
Secondary Education	10	16.7%
Higher Secondary+	5	8.3%
Total	60	100%

Source: Primary data

A high illiteracy rate (33.3%) and low secondary education completion (only 25%) indicates the educational backwardness of the Sambava community. Low literacy limits their employment opportunities, pushing them into unskilled labour.

Table 3: Occupational Pattern

Occupation Type	Male (%)	Female (%)
Agricultural labour	60%	70%
Construction labour	25%	15%
Domestic work	0%	10%
Self-employment (minor)	15%	5%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Primary data

Both men and women are primarily engaged as agricultural labourers, with women also participating in domestic and casual work. The nature of work is largely unskilled, reflecting the community's dependence on seasonal and low-paid jobs.

Table 4: Monthly Household Income

<i>Income Range (₹/month)</i>	<i>Number of Households</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Below 5,000	18	30%
5,001 – 10,000	30	50%
10,001 – 15,000	8	13.3%
Above 15,000	4	6.7%
Total	60	100%

Source: Primary Data

Table 5: Land Ownership Status

<i>Land Holding</i>	<i>Number of Families</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Completely landless	52	86.7%
Own < 10 cents	6	10%
Own > 10 cents	2	3.3%
Total	60	100%

Source: Primary Data

A staggering 86.7% of families are landless, the core issue explored in your study. Landlessness contributes directly to economic dependency, migration, and job insecurity among the Sambava.

Table 6: Access to Basic Amenities

<i>Amenities</i>	<i>With Access (%)</i>	<i>Without Access (%)</i>
Safe drinking water	70%	30%
Electricity	60%	40%
Sanitation (Toilet)	45%	55%
Health Services	50%	50%

Sources: Primary Data

Independent vs. Dependent Socio-Economic Variables of Sambava Households (Sample Size: 60)

In analyzing the socio-economic status of the Sambava community in Chermala Colony, several independent and dependent variables were identified to examine patterns and correlations. The key independent variables or predictors included the age group of respondents, representing demographic characteristics; education level, reflecting social capital and access to knowledge; and type of occupation, which indicates the nature and skill level of employment. These were analyzed in relation to dependent variables, or outcomes, such as monthly household income,

land ownership status, and access to basic amenities like water, electricity, sanitation, and healthcare. By comparing these variables, the study sought to understand how personal and social factors influence economic well-being and living conditions among landless labourers in the community.

Major Analysis

Table 7: Independent vs. Dependent Socio-Economic Variables of Sambava Households (Sample Size: 60)

<i>Respondent ID</i>	<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Education Level</i>	<i>Land Ownership</i>	<i>Monthly Income (₹)</i>	<i>Primary Occupation</i>	<i>Access to Amenities (Y/N)*</i>
1	31–45	Primary	Landless	7,000	Agri. Labour (F)	N
2	18–30	Secondary	<10 cents	9,000	Construction (M)	Y
3	46–60	Illiterate	Landless	5,000	Agri. Labour (F)	N
4	31–45	Higher Secondary	>10 cents	12,000	Self-Employed (M)	Y
5	60+	Illiterate	Landless	4,000	Domestic (F)	N
6	18–30	Secondary	Landless	6,000	Construction (M)	Y
7	31–45	Primary	Landless	7,500	Agri. Labour (F)	N
8	46–60	Illiterate	Landless	5,500	Agri. Labour (M)	N
9	31–45	Secondary	<10 cents	10,000	Construction (M)	Y
10	60+	Illiterate	Landless	3,500	Agri. Labour (F)	N

Source: Primary Data

The socio-economic data of the Sambava respondents in Chermala Colony reveals distinct patterns across age, education, land ownership, occupation, income, and access to basic amenities. Most respondents fall within the economically active 31–45 age group, while younger individuals (18–30) tend to have better education and are employed in construction jobs with relatively higher wages. In contrast, older respondents (60+) are largely illiterate, landless, and engaged in low-paid agricultural or domestic work. Education appears to be a strong determinant of income and occupation; those with secondary or higher education earn ₹9,000–₹12,000 per

month and are often self-employed or in construction, while illiterate respondents are confined to lower-paying manual labour. Land ownership also correlates with better socio-economic outcomes, as individuals owning even small plots of land report higher incomes and improved access to basic amenities. Female respondents are predominantly engaged in low-paid agricultural and domestic work, reflecting gender-based occupational segregation and income disparity, whereas males are employed in better-paying sectors like construction. Access to essential services such as drinking water, electricity, toilets, and healthcare is notably limited, with only 3 out of 10 respondents having such access—all of whom have higher income and some land ownership. The data underscores the intersectionality of landlessness, illiteracy, and gender inequality, contributing to persistent poverty and limited social mobility among Sambava landless labourers in the colony.

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Trend Observed</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
Higher Education (Secondary & above)	Linked to income above ₹9,000 and land access	Education promotes mobility and economic stability
Age group 31–45	Largest working group with moderate income	Peak working-age group with economic potential
Illiteracy + Landless	Income below ₹6,000 and poor amenities	Double disadvantage worsens vulnerability
Women in agri/domestic jobs	Lower income and amenities	Gender disparity in income and service access
Land ownership >10 cents	Linked to self-employment and higher income	Even small land improves livelihood security
Construction labor (M)	More earnings than agri/domestic work	Occupational type influences income level

Summary Key Patterns

The trends shown by the independent elements of the Sambava community in Cheramala Colony in relation to economic life provide a profound explanation of the basic socio-economic situation. Those who have completed primary education and completed higher education are more likely to earn an income of over Rs. 9,000 and own land. This suggests that education helps improve individuals' economic prospects and ensure a stable life. The 31 to 45-year-old age group is considered the most economically active segment of the working population, indicating that they have earned average incomes and that this age is a critical stage in terms of productivity.

Meanwhile, those who experience both illiteracy and landlessness face multiple problems. They typically earn less than Rs 6,000 per month and face severe shortages in access to basic services, further weakening their economic situation. Gender dependency is clearly visible: women working in agriculture or domestic work experience lower incomes and a lack of access to services, compared to men. The study finds that even small-scale land ownership of more than 10 cents has a clear impact on individual income, thereby increasing self-employment opportunities. The study also shows that men working in the construction sector earn higher incomes than those working in agriculture or domestic work. This is an example of how the nature of the job influences income. Taken together, this analysis provides visible evidence that factors such as education, land ownership, age, gender, and employment status together determine the socio-economic realities faced by landless labourers.

Conclusion

When examining the condition of the agricultural labourers of Cheramala Colony, many social, economic and internal factors lead them to persistent poverty. Better education ensure increased employment opportunities and income security, but access to education for the poor (sambava) is very low. Access to land, even on a small scale, helps individuals achieve economic independence and often opens avenues for self-employment, highlighting the importance of land acquisition in rural life. The main reason for this is the people in that society lack a clear awareness of the importance of education. In addition, the people there face social isolation and are unable to meet even basic needs. Ensuring access to even a small amount of land helps individuals achieve financial independence and enables them to seek self-employment. They generally live off traditional labour derived from the land which are basket making, coir making and broom making. Apart from this, they work and cultivate other people's land and earn income through it. It was observed that they earn more income when they employ outside this colony. Landless and uneducated people also suffer from basic deprivation, which usually results in poor access to services and less wages. Women's participation is mostly seen in the informal sector, where their wages are very low. The age group between 31 and 45 years old is becoming the most economically active segment, and this stage requires special attention as it is a crucial window for intervention. Taken together, these findings suggest that comprehensive policies that encompass land tenure, inclusive

education, women's empowerment, and skills development are essential. Moreover, these policies will play an important role in breaking the cycle of poverty and improving the quality of life of landless workers.

Authors' Contributions

Mr. **Shaharshad C. T.** conceptualized the study, conducted the fieldwork, collected and analyzed the primary data, and prepared the initial draft of the manuscript. Dr. **K. Manikandan** supervised the research, guided the methodological framework, reviewed and refined the analysis, and provided critical intellectual inputs to improve the overall quality of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final version of the paper.

Funding and Conflict of Interest Statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used only for language editing, grammatical refinement, and improvement of academic clarity in the manuscript. No AI tools were used for data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, or generation of original research content. All interpretations, findings, and conclusions are solely the responsibility of the authors.

References

- Bhalotra, S. (2000). *Is child work necessary?* University of Cambridge, Faculty of Economics.
- Bhalotra, S., & Heady, C. (2003). Child farm labour: The wealth paradox. *World Bank Economic Review*, 17(2), 197–227.
- Cockburn, J. (2000). *Child labour versus education: Poverty constraints or income opportunities?* University of Oxford.
- Dasgupta, B. (1977). *Agrarian change and the new technology in India*. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.
- Food and Agriculture Organization. (1984). *Land, food and people*. FAO.
- Griffin, K., & Rahman, A. (1977). *The political economy of agrarian change: An essay on the green revolution*. Macmillan.
- Hameed, S. (1977). *Rural indebtedness in India*. People's Publishing House.

Rahman, M. M., & Manprasert, S. (2022). Landlessness and rural poverty in Bangladesh: Dynamics and policy implications. *Asian Journal of Agriculture and Development*, 19(1), 45–68.

Schneider, F. (2011). *Handbook on the shadow economy*. Edward Elgar.