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D Rafi
ICAR-Indian Institute of Millets Research, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

Sangappa
ICAR-Indian Institute of Millets Research, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

Laxmi B
College of Forestry, KSNUAHS, Shivamogga, Karnataka, India

Amasiddha B
ICAR-Indian Institute of Millets Research, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

G Meghana
ICAR-Indian Institute of Millets Research, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

Corresponding Author:
Sangappa
ICAR-Indian Institute of Millets Research, Hyderabad, Telangana, India

Agrarian struggles: The reality of tenant farming in Andhra Pradesh

D Rafi, Sangappa, Laxmi B, Amasiddha B and G Meghana

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Abstract
India's agrarian economy heavily relies on tenant farming. It is a growing practice wherein landless, small and marginal farmers lease land from absentee landowners for cultivation. This study investigates the challenges encountered and suggestions proposed by tenant farmers in East and West Godavari districts of Andhra Pradesh, where tenancy is widespread. An ex-post facto research design was adopted, covering 180 tenant farmers across 12 villages of East and West Godavari districts. Data was collected through structured interviews and analyzed using frequency and percentage methods. Findings revealed that the primary limitations faced by tenant farmers included lack of access to government schemes (100%), absence of crop insurance (90%), no input subsidy (93.33%), and dependency on high-interest loans from private moneylenders (88.33%). The informal and undocumented nature of tenancy further excluded them from institutional credit and support services. Based on these constraints, respondents strongly recommended formalizing lease agreements, extending crop loans (100%), ensuring provision of MSP (94.44%), subsidized inputs, and monitoring of lease rents by the government. Further, the study highlighted the urgent need for policy reforms and targeted interventions to protect tenant farmers' livelihoods and integrate them into the broader agricultural support ecosystem.

Keywords: Tenant farming, small & marginal farmers, credit, livelihoods, policy reforms

Introduction
India stands as a global agricultural powerhouse, with its prosperity closely tied to agricultural productivity. Agriculture remains the primary livelihood for a significant portion of the population, with about 70-80% of the country's people still directly or indirectly dependent on it. However, today's farmers face a multitude of challenges. Modern agriculture has become input-intensive, labour-intensive, cost-intensive, and heavily reliant on human resources. Increased urban migration, particularly of landowners moving to nearby towns and cities, has led to a decline in the number of landowners actively cultivating their fields (Haws *et al.*, 2025) [2]. This trend has contributed to the rise of tenancy in agriculture (Kumar *et al.*, 2020) [4]. As landowners seek to supplement their income by leasing out land, landless individuals and small and marginal farmers have stepped in to cultivate these rented plots in hopes of boosting their household income (Deb *et al.*, 2016) [1]. This practice is known as tenant farming, and those who engage in it are called tenant farmers.
According to the CESS Report (2014), Andhra Pradesh alone have 13,48,035 tenant farmers. Notably, the East and West Godavari districts accounted for 4,50,000 of these tenant farmers (Revathi, 2014), indicating the scale and significance of this system in the state. Farming continues to serve as the main livelihood activity for a large section of India's population, particularly for the landless and smallholder farmers (Mohanty & Lenka; 2023) [5]. Tenant farmers in India often lack formal rights or legal recognition, which prevents them from accessing institutional credit, government schemes, and other support services. Based on household surveys, the Sample Survey Office estimates that around 20% of agricultural land in India is leased indicating a significant presence of tenant farming (Saikia *et al.*, 2024) [11]. However, these tenant farmers often lack access to crucial facilities such as institutional credit and government support services due to the absence of formal recognition. In contrast, data from the Agricultural Census, which relies on official land records, reports only 0.36% of land as leased. This stark disparity highlights the widespread informal nature of tenancy arrangements (Ricker *et al.*, 2022) [8].

In recent years, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of tenant farmers, much of which remains undocumented and outside official records (Srinivas 2024) [1].

Retaining and empowering tenant farmers is crucial to strengthening the agricultural sector. This can be achieved by ensuring secure livelihoods (Jena *et al.*, 2021) [3]. The term "livelihood," derived from *life-lode* (meaning "way of life"), encompasses the activities and capabilities people use to secure the necessities of life — such as food, shelter, clothing, and health. A sustainable livelihood ensures not only the fulfillment of basic needs but also dignity and stability over time (Ranjan *et al.*, 2024) [7]. For tenant farmers, livelihood means more than just income — it means recognition, access to support systems, and the ability to farm with security and pride (Sarbjeet 2022) [10]. Strengthening their livelihoods will ultimately contribute to the resilience and prosperity of Indian agriculture as a whole.

Methodology

An Ex-post facto research design was used for carrying out the research study. Based on the highest number of tenant farmers among the districts in Andhra Pradesh, the top two districts namely East and West Godavari were selected for the study. From each district three mandals were selected purposively based on the number of tenant farmers and thus 6 mandals included for the study. From each mandal two villages were selected and from each village 15 respondents were selected thus making to a total of 12 villages and 180 respondents (shown in table 1). The study was conducted during the year 2023-24. A well framed interview schedule was prepared for collecting the data. Frequency was used to know the distribution pattern of the respondents according to the objectives under study. Percentages, averages, frequencies were used for standardization of sample size.

Percentage (%) = (X/Y) ×100

Table 1: Particulars of selected mandals, villages and respondents

S. No.	Name of the mandal	Name of the village	No. of respondents
1.	Nidadavolu	Gopavaram	15
		Jeedigunta	15
2.	Chagallu	Chagallu	15
		Chikkala	15
3.	Kovvur	Kovvur	15
		Chidipi	15
4.	Narasapuram	Gondi	15
		Chittivaram	15
5.	Tanuku	Tetali	15
		Duvva	15
6.	Achanta	Achanta	15
		Koderu	15
Total			180

Results

The socio-economic and demographic characteristics of tenant farmers were examined in detail and presented in Table 2. The analysis of the age distribution revealed that the majority of tenant farmers belonged to the old age group (43.89%), followed by 31.67% in the middle age group, and 24.44% were young farmers. This indicates that tenant farming is predominantly practiced by older individuals, possibly due to lack of alternative employment options. In terms of gender, the study shows that 60% of the tenant farmers were male, while 40% were female, highlighting a moderate level of participation of women in tenant farming, possibly driven by household income support needs. With regard to educational status, a significant proportion of 40% of the respondents were illiterate, followed by primary school level (22.78%), secondary school (18.33%), intermediate education (14.44%) and only 4.44% of tenant farmers held a degree of higher qualification. When considering the type of farming, 70.56% were purely tenant farmers, while 19.44% practiced both tenant and own land farming, and only 10% were engaged in farming on their own land. This reaffirms the focus of the study on the tenant farmer community and indicates their heavy dependence on leased agricultural land.

Family size analysis showed that a majority (51.67%) of the households were small (less than four members), followed by 37.22% with medium-sized families (4-5 members), and 11.11% with large families (6-10 members). This suggests that most tenant farmers manage with limited family labor and resources. In terms of farming practices, a substantial 77.78% of the respondents relied on chemical farming, while only 17.22% practiced natural farming, and a meager 5% engaged in organic farming. This indicates a high reliance on conventional agriculture, possibly due to a lack of awareness or access to resources and training for sustainable practices. When analyzing occupation, 38.33% of tenant farmers reported farming as their primary occupation, whereas 41.11% were engaged in both farming and wage earning activities. Additionally, 13.33% were wage earners, and 7.22% were self-employed. These findings highlight the economic vulnerability of tenant farmers, who often diversify their income sources to sustain their livelihoods.

Overall, the profile of tenant farmers reveals a predominance of older, male, and low-educated individuals, with a majority practicing chemical-based agriculture on leased land and depending on multiple occupations for survival. This calls for targeted interventions focusing on education, sustainable agricultural training, credit support, and social security measures tailored to the needs of tenant farming communities.

Table 2: Profile characters of tenant Farmers

S. No	Category	Number (n= 180)	Percentage (%)
1	**Age**		
	Young	44	24.44
	Middle	57	31.67
	Old	79	43.89
2	**Gender**		
	Male	108	60.00
	Female	72	40.00
3	**Education**		
	Illiterate	72	40.00
	Primary school (upto 5th std.)	41	22.78
	Secondary School (X std.)	33	18.33
	Intermediate (XI-XII)	26	14.44
	Degree & above	8	4.44
4	**Type of Farming**		
	Own land farming	18	10.00
	Tenant farming	127	70.56
	Own & Tenant Farming	35	19.44
5	**Family Size**		
	Small (less than 4)	93	51.67
	Medium (4-5)	67	37.22
	Big (6-10)	20	11.11
6	**Farming Type**		
	Natural	31	17.22
	Organic	9	5.00
	Chemicals	140	77.78
7	**Occupation**		
	Farming	69	38.33
	Wage earners	24	13.33
	Self employed	13	7.22
	Farming + wage earners	74	41.11

Limitations encountered in tenant farming as perceived by the respondents

The results presented in Table 3, depicted the constraints encountered and perceived in tenant farming by the respondents and ranked based on frequency and percentage. The data reveals that all tenant farmers (100%) reported the lack of beneficial government schemes as the most critical limitation (Rank I), followed by no input subsidy (97.5%), absence of crop insurance (98.33%), and high-interest rates charged by money lenders (95.0%). Further limitations include cumbersome loan procedures, non-remunerative MSP, high lease rents, and advance payments for land rents before harvest, placing additional financial burdens on tenant farmers.

The key issue is the informal nature of tenancy. Despite some government schemes extending benefits to tenant farmers, access is typically limited to cases where written agreements are in place, which are rare in practice (Ramadhan, & Alfarisy; 2025) [6]. Since most tenancy arrangements are undocumented and based on verbal consent, tenants remain outside the purview of formal institutional support. Additionally, landowners often hold the discretion to pass on subsidies or insurance benefits, making tenants dependent on their willingness. The requirement to pay lease rent in advance, along with high input costs, forces many tenants to rely on private money lenders, often at exploitative interest rates (Vijayabhinandan *et al.*, 2018) [13].

Table 3: Distribution of respondents based on the limitations encountered in tenant farming as perceived by the respondents

S. No.	Limitation	Tenant farmers (n=180)		
		Frequency	%	Rank
1.	No beneficial schemes for tenant farmers	180	100.00	I
2.	No input subsidy is provided to tenant farmers	168	93.33	II
3.	No crop insurance scheme for tenant farmers	162	90.00	III
4.	High rate of interest by money lenders	159	88.33	IV
5.	Complex procedure in getting loans from banks for tenant farmers	155	86.11	V
6.	Lack of remunerative Minimum Support Price (MSP)	152	84.44	VI
7.	High rents for the leased lands	149	82.78	VII
8.	Land rents to be paid before the crop is harvested	140	77.78	VIII
9.	Inadequate financial assistance from banks	135	75.00	IX
10.	Fluctuations in market prices	131	72.78	X
11.	Non availability of credit in time	128	71.11	XI
12.	Tenancy time is mostly short term	122	67.78	XII
13.	Verbal form of tenancy without documentation	119	66.11	XIII
14.	High cost of cultivation	115	63.89	XIV
15.	Lack of labour	110	61.11	XV

Suggestions to overcome the limitations in tenant farming by the respondents

To address these constraints, respondents provided suggestions, summarized and ranked in Fig 1**.** All respondents emphasized the need for access to crop loans (100%), suggesting it as the top priority. Closely following were demands for low-interest credit (98.33%), assured MSP for produce (95%), and government monitoring of lease rents (93.33%). Many tenant farmers (88.33%) also called for mandatory written lease agreements to secure their rights and access to support services. These suggestions directly reflect the constraints faced by tenant farmers, and align with findings reported by Saqib *et al.*, (2025) [9]. Formalizing tenancy agreements, increasing financial access, and improving institutional support were commonly echoed as the most effective ways to secure livelihoods and stabilize tenant farming systems.

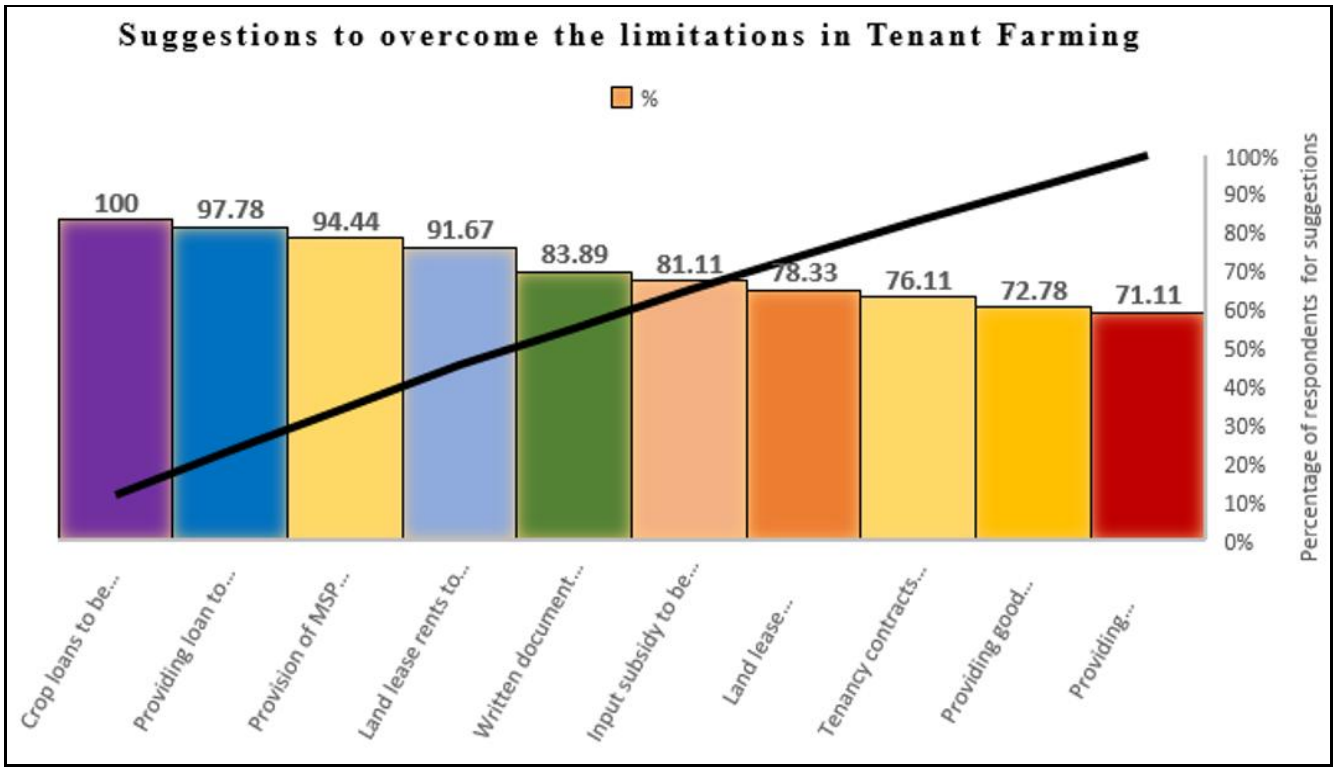

Fig 1: Suggestions given by the respondents to overcome the limitations in tenant farming

Conclusion

Tenant farming plays a critical role in sustaining agricultural livelihoods, particularly for the landless and smallholder farmers in India. However, tenant farmers often face significant challenges, including insecure land tenure, limited access to credit, and exclusion from government support programs. This study highlighted the pressing constraints faced by tenant farmers in Andhra Pradesh, including exclusion from government schemes, absence of subsidies and crop insurance, exploitative credit systems, and insecure lease arrangements. Strengthening policies to provide financial assistance, secure land rights, and enhance access to resources like irrigation and technology could make a substantial difference. Key recommendations such as legalizing tenancy agreements, offering institutional credit at low interest, providing input subsidies, and ensuring MSP will demonstrate clear pathways to improve the socio-economic conditions of tenant farmers. Integrating them into agricultural support networks would not only protect their livelihoods but also contribute to overall rural economic development.

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