

SOLITARY REAPER

MACHINE SCENE After combine-harvesters, improved saw reapers make business sense for farmers, but for the rural labourer, agri technology is equal to no work



bitterharvest

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MANSA: It's been a productive wheat harvest for his employer, but Hodla village daily-wager Chet Ram finds himself out of sorts.

The "advancement in harvesting technology" has left him and many other rural labourers at the receiving end. Till a few years ago, working along with his siblings and parents, Chet Ram would gather as their wages wheat for the entire year's consumption and straw for their cattle.

This year, however, the family would have to buy wheat from the market, and straw too, most likely.

Pitted against machines, this season labourers on an average were given 1.6 quintal of wheat for an acre of harvesting, costing Rs 1,800 (it takes



Harvesting of wheat by combines and straw by reapers costs Rs 1,500 per acre. So why will the farmer give 1.6 quintal wheat (costing Rs 1,800) and 3 quintal straw (costing Rs 1,100) to the labourer

seven people to harvest an acre a day). Even the harvesting season — 30 days till a decade back — lasted a meagre 10 days this time. "It was too short a period for us to collect sufficient wheat and straw," says Chet Ram.

High mechanisation — quality straw reapers, which col-

lect straw from wheat stalks left after combine-harvesting — have reduced the need of manual harvesting. The outcome is that a number of labourers of Chet Ram's village could not even get work this harvesting season.

For the lucky ones, it wasn't sufficient to earn enough

wheat and straw. "You very well know what the prices of wheat in market are," says Chet Ram.

Gurpreet Singh, district president of Mazdoor Mukti Morcha, traces the root of the crisis to 2006 when prices of straw shot up to Rs 350 a quintal. "Straw became a commodity.

Combine-harvesting alone



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CHET RAM

wasted a lot of straw and thus, straw reapers came into the picture. Initial reapers failed to produce good quality straw, so farmers preferred manual harvesting and labourers were getting good work till then," he tells.

But three years back,

improved reapers came in. They yield is as good as manual harvesting. "Now harvesting by machine costs much less than manual labour. Why will a farmer go in for manual harvesting in that case?" asks Gurpreet Singh.

"Earlier, along with wheat we would also get 3 quintal of straw per acre, which would help us feed cattle. Now the farmer does not even make mention of that because straw too fetches good money," says Chet Ram.

Harvesting of wheat by combines and straw by reapers costs around Rs 1,500 per acre according to the prevailing market rates.

"So why will the farmer give 1.6 quintal wheat (costing Rs 1,800) and 3 quintal straw (costing Rs 1,100) to the labourer in the field?"

The changed scenario has even forced many of the labour families to purchase straw from the market. As such, many helpless labourers are thinking of giving up rearing cattle also.

"Not just wheat or straw, many of us will have to buy milk from the market as well now," says Chet Ram.

29, MAY, HT, CHANDIGARH
2010