

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### AGRICULTURAL LABOURER AND POLITICS

The agricultural labourers like others in rural areas take equal interest in politics. Almost all of them are followers of some political party or the other. Every political party is aware of their potential strength as voters. Taking up India as a whole they constitute 25.16 per cent of the total working population<sup>1</sup>. It is but natural that all the political parties would strive to seek support of these people in elections either at the local, the state or the national level.

But it appears that the agricultural labourers are more committed to local panchayat elections, as, such elections directly centres around local issues. Often the candidates who contest in the panchayat elections are personally known to the electorates as they are the inhabitants of the same village. This makes the people of the area to approach the elected members of the local bodies easily and seek redressal of their grievances. The elected members on the other hand should be well acquainted with the local problems and should work hard to solve them.

The agricultural labourers as well as other rural poor were not exposed to political culture before Independence. Their behaviour within the rural society was determined by religion, caste and traditional values. A number of factors like the

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1. Census of India, 1981, p. 31.

prevailing stratification of society, the authoritarian pattern of decision making, and the limited channel of communication in the absence of universal literacy prevented the rural people from being aware of political developments in the country. To top it all, the feudal system monopolised the whole political process of rural community in the hands of a few landlords, who were ardent supporters of the colonial rule. Thus, in the village community, due to the lack of political culture, the common man was apathetic towards the political system. Mass participation and democratic attitude could not get any ground to flourish in rural political system as the rural people lacked orientation towards political system and political process.

The political set-up has undergone a complete change after Independence. The democratic government, formed on the basis of adult franchise took the responsibility of making them aware of their rights and duties. A.R. Desai states that, "the entry of the rural millions in the orbit of active politics as a result of the grant of universal suffrage and elections is a veritable new point of departure in the history of rural society pregnant with incalculable possibilities"<sup>1</sup>. The Panchayati Raj and community development scheme was introduced with the aim of bringing about social change and progress with a definite direction and plan to lay the foundation of democratic structure and democratic behaviour at village level. The social education scheme also attempted to

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1. A. R. Desai, Rural Sociology in India, Bombay, 1969, p. 773.

change those social practices, habits and attitudes of the people which hindered the transformation of a society from old pattern to a new one.

The emergence of large number of political parties in the country started the politicisation campaign more effectively. Political discussions, meetings, processions and demonstrations, especially during elections under the guidance of political parties, were the unprecedented events and new phenomenon in the life of the rural community. The process of political mobilization of rural communities has been greatly accelerated by the spread of mass media like the radio, newspaper and cinema.

Various agencies of political socialization like radio, newspaper etc. are making villagers socially and politically conscious and increasing the degree of political awareness in them. The traditional leaders have brought a good deal of change in their autocratic attitude. They are cultivating democratic and liberal attitudes, may be it is due to the pressure of circumstances and changes in social set-up, or due to a general increase in social and political consciousness, but whatever may be the cause an overall change in the political atmosphere of the village society is discernable.

Before Independence, the people of the lower class were bound to tolerate the ill treatment, suppression, exploitation and autocratic behaviour of upper class. But after Independence, educational facilities, various means of communication and different political agencies have made them politically and socially more conscious. On many occasions, these lower class

people, belonging to different castes, unite and make a joint front to fight against suppression at the hands of upper class. Frequent happenings of this nature have provided an opportunity to the people belonging to lower stratum of the society to have a permanent organization of their own which would safeguard their interest. The leadership of this class is very much active in sending its representatives to the village panchayat, in organizing programmes for the upliftment of the lower class, in contacting authorities and leaders for the fair implementation of the programmes for lower class<sup>1</sup>.

#### Local self-government

In this section we shall briefly explain the three tier bodies of local self-government which have been evolved under the Panchayati Raj system in the villages of West Bengal.

The Second Plan (1956) stressed the principles of reorganizing rural self-government and the need for creating within the districts a well organized democratic structure of administration in which the village panchayats would be organically linked with popular organizations at a higher level. In view of these, the Balwantrai Mehta Committee which was appointed for the purpose of examining this question recommended in 1957 the creation of an entirely new three-tier system of inter-linked local authorities in every district which would be entrusted with responsibility for development work in that area.

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1. S.N. Mishra, Political Socialization in Rural India, Delhi, 1980.

The Panchayati Raj institutions comprising the Zila Parishad at the district level, the Panchayat Samiti at the block level and the Gram Panchayat at the village level represent a new political nexus. The Gram Panchayat is constituted by direct elections on the basis of adult franchise, though provision is made for co-optation for representation of women, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Although three bodies of the Panchayati Raj are individually autonomous, they have to act in concert.

For purpose of panchayat election each village is divided into wards, the number of wards and the number of members to be elected from each village is determined by the number of electorates.

The institution of Panchayati Raj was virtually dead or defunct until the Left Front, after coming into power in 1977 in West Bengal, revived it and brought young and energetic people from the electorate in the Panchayat Committees. The elections to Gram Panchayat were held in 1978 after 20 years and the Zila Parishad after 15 years. While during this period the power-structure in the State has drastically changed, the position at the lower level has remained more or less static.

#### Power structure

The growth of local structures of power is linked, with the increasing importance, to what has been termed 'institutional power'<sup>1</sup>. Whereas in the past a man's power depended significantly

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1. R. Kothari, Politics in India, Orient Longman, 1970, p. 225.

upon his ascribed position as a member of a high caste or a substantial land owner, in the contemporary rural setting the holding of the office in the new institutionalized power structures, such as cooperatives and local party organizations, is perhaps the most important source of power. The power and resources of these bodies have made it imperative for party politicians, especially in the district level, to acquire control over them and use them as levers for dispensing patronage and building up a following<sup>1</sup>. The Independence which was followed immediately by the abolition of the Zamindars and other feudal relations in agriculture has brought about a fundamental change in the rural power structure.

The participation of all the rural classes in the local self-government and other institutions is not equal in the villages. The economically, socially and culturally backward sections participation in the rural power structure is significantly poor. Even the introduction of Panchayati Raj based on universal adult franchise has been unable to change this situation appreciably. As some studies show that though Panchayati Raj has broadened the base of power in the rural areas the poor and the weak had remained outside the power structure - they have been used as 'vote banks' by the more affluent members of the society. The leadership pattern as it emerged after the panchayat election of 1978 in the villages of West Bengal is shown in the following table.

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1. Brass, Popular Participation in Social Change, Mouton, 1976, pp. 229-237.

Table - 34

Distribution of the Panchayat member's on  
the basis of occupation

Occupational category	No.	%
1. Owner cultivator	743	50.69
2. Teacher	206	14.05
3. Unemployed	110	7.05
4. Landless labourer	70	4.77
5. Share-cropper	26	1.77
6. Shopkeeper	20	1.36
7. Gramin Shilpi	20	1.36
8. Karigar (Artisan)	19	1.30
9. Jele (Fisherman), Tanti (Weaver), Mistri (Technician), Barber, Tailors	19	1.30
10. Doctor, Lawyer	17	1.16
11. Others	216	14.76
<b>Total</b>	<b>1466</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: B. Dasgupta, Panchayat, Bhumi-Sanskar and Gram-Unnayan (in Bengali) Calcutta, 1985, pp. 99-100.  
The total discussed Mouza is 1143 and the total Gram Panchayat members are 1466.

The representation of the agricultural labourers in the Gram Panchayat is nil in the studied villages. In Bamangram, both the two Gram Panchayat members are owner cultivators. One of them owns 13.13 acres of agricultural land and the other member, though owns only one acre of agricultural land is a businessman which has made him economically better of than others. In Batla-Bhita, both the Gram Panchayat members are primary school teachers as well as owner-cultivators. In Alokjhora, out of a total of three Gram Panchayat members one is a primary school teacher who owns

10 acres of cultivable land. The other owns 8.33 acres of agricultural land but is a businessman of jute and tobacco.

The representation of the agricultural labourers in other organizations is also nil in the studied villages. In the village Co-operative, School Managing Committee, Puja Committee, Sports Committee etc. the land owning groups predominate.

#### Panchayat election of 1978 and 1983

The Panchayat election of 1978 was held in the villages of West Bengal immediately after the State Legislative Assembly election of 1977. In the State Legislative Assembly election of 1977, the Left Front with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) at its head came into power with a huge majority.

The main political parties in West Bengal are Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its partners like Forward Block, Communist Party of India (CPI), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) etc. and Congress (I). At the state and national level elections the left radical political parties made alliance against the Congress (I) but at the local level elections the alliance was not uniform in all the localities. Apart from the CPI(M), other left alliance partners have influence only in certain areas.

In Bamagram and Batla-Bhita, the main political parties in the panchayat election of 1978 were CPI(M) and Congress (I), whereas in Alokjhora, the main parties were Forward Block, Congress (I) and CPI(M). In the panchayat election of 1978 in Alokjhora, both the Forward Block and the CPI(M) contested

together against the Congress (I) and won all the three Gram Panchayat seats. But in 1983 election, the left parties could not reach a consensus over seat distribution and contested individually. The result of that election went against the left political parties and all the three seats were won by the Congress (I) in Alokjhora Gram Panchayat. The election results goes to prove that in Alokjhora, the Congress (I) as a single political party enjoys more support of the electorate than the other two parties taken singly. In Bamangram, in both the panchayat elections direct contest took place between two political parties, the CPI(M) and the Congress (I). In the 1978 election, both the two seats in the Bamangram Gram Panchayat were bagged by the CPI(M). Whereas, in the next election, the Congress (I) candidates defeated the CPI(M) candidates in both the seats.

#### Election campaign and the agricultural labourers

The nature of campaigning in the panchayat election is different from the municipality, state or national level elections. In the panchayat election, the main emphasis is put on slogans and door-to-door visits. The other media of campaigning like, hand bills, posters and public meetings are not so frequent in the election. The panchayat election is also different from other elections from another point of view. The candidate, here is personally known to the voters. The local problems take primacy over the national or ideological questions in this type of election. If in a village, there are two Gram Panchayat seats and two candidates contest from the same political party, each of them

try to influence the voters individually. It does not necessarily mean that the party affiliation or party organization does not play any significant role in influencing the voters. But the candidates personal image is an important consideration in the panchayat election.

Usually, as observed in the three villages the agricultural labourers did not have any particular candidate to cast their votes and their ultimate choice was the one which was imposed upon them either by sheer propaganda of a particular party or by the persuasion of friends or neighbours.

The agricultural labourers are not satisfied with the activities of the present members. When we started to talk about politics many of our respondents were very bitter and did not hesitate to talk ill of their elected members. Some commented, "none works for the poor". Others' remarked, "all are thieves, some more, some less". One agricultural labourer's wife in Alokjhora said, "in the coming election I shall invalidate my vote by entering into the booth and casting vote against all candidates". She appeared to be scared of the political parties. Being asked why she was fearful, she said, "if I decline to cast my vote, the existing facilities will not be available". Others were very emphatic, "all these members (taking the name of them) will not be able to come back again in the next election because they have done nothing during their tenure despite the fact that we were assured by them with a good number of promises before election".

The agricultural labourers seem to be more favourably inclined towards the Left Front because of certain legislations relating to debt-relief, land to landless, distribution of home-  
stead plot to homeless etc. have been brought by it.

Candidates standing for election to the local Gram Panchayat have a comparatively easy task to convince the agricultural labourers because in the process of electioneering they need not refer to such issues that affect them indirectly. Their main concern is with those issues which affect them immediately, e.g., lack of drinking water, work in the lean agricultural season, debt-relief, securing official loan etc. They are least bothered with national issues like curtailment of Fundamental Rights or the question of the freedom of the press.

When the agricultural labourers expressed grievances against elected members I asked them why they did not come forward to contest in the election. They said, "we are leading a hand-to-mouth existence, our family will starve tomorrow if we do not go to work today; we cannot procure adequate financial support or mobilise enough man power to campaign for us. One needs to be salaried man with security of tenure or owner of substantial amount of agricultural land who need not worry about day-to-day existence".

#### Determinants of Party preferences

The agricultural labourers take little interest in politics outside the village. These people are mostly illiterate. Hence, they are not influenced by the propaganda carried out through the press. The other media like, radio, television also have little or no impact upon them. None of them has a clear

idea about a television set. Radio is not a rare thing at present in the country-side but most of the agricultural labourers do not own a radio-set.

An enquiry about the agricultural labourers' access to mass media was conducted. Only two respondents, one in Batla-Bhita and the other one in Bamangram have radio-sets. The number of respondents who listen to radio in the studied villages is shown in the following table.

Table - 35

Radio listners among agricultural labourers

Name of the village	Total No. of respondents	Radio listners	
		No.	%
Bamangram	40	10	25.00
Batla-Bhita	21	1	4.76
Alokjhora	45	6	13.33

Those who said 'yes', were mostly dependent upon others' radio - sets as we have stated above that only two respondents in the three villages had radio-sets at the time of field work. It is not that all respondents take interest in news and political matters. They show more interest in listening to Hindi and Bengali film songs. Not a single respondent could tell me the time of news broadcast. Only two respondents said that they try to listen to radio news at the time of election. For others there is no specific time of listening radio.

The above facts make it clear that all these agencies of mass-media like radio, newspaper, television have little or no impact upon the agricultural labourers. This indifference to information, indirectly reduces their political awareness which in its turn affects their chances to organize into a vocal protest group. In many news papers and radio news, one can often hear or read the instances of conflict between agricultural labourers and employers for better wages, control over the vested land, distribution of share of harvest or quarrel over registration of a share-cropper as a registered share-cropper. Thus, the news of struggle of the agricultural labourers in a particular village do not necessarily spread to other villages, which otherwise would have helped them to become organized.

#### Settlement pattern and voting behaviour

Politics is not an independent phenomenon. It works within the social framework in relation to the other factors like, settlement, caste or community, economy, etc.

In almost all the villages people have built their houses in compact clusters surrounded by agricultural land. Only rarely one does find a solitary family living away from the main settlement. Settlement vary in their size and social complexity.

A hamlet (para) is a small named, cluster of houses which form a part of the larger village. These hamlets vary in size. Most are predominantly inhabited by a single caste or community; a large hamlet may contain members from other communities as well. In Alokjhora, there are 3 hamlets, namely, Muslim Para, Sen Para and Kayastha Para and Rajbanshi Para. All these hamlets have been

named after the caste/community who predominate there. In Bamangram, there are 5 such hamlets : the Hindu Para which is mainly inhabited by the non-Scheduled Caste Hindus, Palia Para or Rajbanshi Para where the Scheduled Caste Hindus live, the Muslim dominated area is known as the Muslim Para; the Santal Para consists mainly of the Santals and the Panschim Para which is located in the western part of the village and is inhabited by the Scheduled Castes. Batla-Bhita has no such hamlet.

The settlement pattern is considered important by all the political parties in selecting their candidates for election to the local government. All the political parties find their nominees from the numerically dominant hamlets. As for example, in Alokjhora, in both the panchayat elections of 1978 and 1983, the candidates were selected from the three hamlets. All the political parties had put up one candidate from each of the hamlet.

An agricultural labourer generally finds work in the neighbouring houses. In such a case both employer and employee belong to the same caste or community. The immediate neighbourhood feelings, the caste or community sentiments and the employer's choice of candidate often influence agricultural labourers' voting behaviour.

The physical distance between two hamlets or villages sometimes inhibits the workers to act unitedly. In 1981, when the agricultural labourers of Rajbanshi Para in Alokjhora tried to organize a wage movement and made an attempt to occupy the vested land of an inhabitant of that hamlet, workers from other hamlets

did not join this movement. However this is not always the cause of failure to organize themselves into a unified body, there are other reasons as well which we shall discuss in the later part of this chapter.

#### Political participation and party affiliation

The relatively high electoral participation in India, far higher than what is expected in a predominantly illiterate population, is seen by many commentators as a symbol of the maturity of the Indian voter, indeed of Indian democracy. A closer inspection of the different aspects of Indian political culture, however, leads to a more cautious assessment of polling and election results<sup>1</sup>.

First of all, in the Indian context voter turnout cannot be considered conclusive indicator of political participation in the proper sense of the term. If we understand by political participation a conscious concomitant to a political programme or grouping, then knowledge and political interest become important prerequisites. However, various surveys have yielded very low scores for precisely these indicators. Thus, a study of four states conducted by the 'Centre for the Study of Developing Societies' (Delhi) showed that only 38.7 per cent of the interviewees knew the name of the prime minister, only 19 per cent the name of the chief minister of their state, and only 25 per cent were aware of the party to which their chief minister belonged<sup>2</sup>.

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1. I. Rothermund, *The Political Contours of the Coalfield*, 1980, p. 180.

2. I. Rothermund, *op. cit.*

Furthermore, it must be born in mind that roughly one-fifth of the voters change their party preferences at least once every few elections, that upto one-fifth of the electorate goes to the polls for the first time each election and that another 30 per cent are uncommitted voters. Taking together the state of information and interest as well as the reported unpredictability of the electorate, it must be concluded that the average Indian voter goes to the polling booths without any understanding of the significance and implications of his vote and that is preferences for this of that party can be contributed to other factors and motives that can be expected to politically conscious and knowledgeable voters<sup>1</sup>.

In this section we have made an attempt to analyse the political knowledge of the respondents of the three villages.

Table - 36

Political awareness: knowing the names of prime minister and chief minister

Name of the village	Total no. of respondents	Knowledgeability			
		Prime Minister		Chief Minister	
		No.	%	No.	%
Bamangram	40	24	60.00	22	55.00
Batla-Bhita	21	6	28.57	9	42.86
Alokjhora	45	26	57.77	20	57.77

1. I. Rothermund, op. cit., pp. 181-82.

The above figures show that a considerable number of voters exercise their franchise without knowing the name of the prime minister and the chief minister. In Bamangram and Alokjhora, respondents in greater number know the names of their prime minister and chief minister. A little better political awareness is partly due to the presence of a permanent market in the villages where people congregate for gossips and news.

In addition to the market in Alokjhora, a political conflict had occurred between the landless poor and a rich farmer concerning the occupation of vested land. This political conflict might have had sharpened the political awareness of the agricultural labourers because, political discussion was the usual feature among them as long as the conflict continued.

To understand the extent of their political awareness we asked another question, "can you name the ruling parties at the centre and the state"? The survey results is shown in the following table.

Table -37

Political awareness : Knowing the names of ruling parties at the centre and state

Name of the village	Total no. of respondents	Knowledgeability			
		Centre		State	
		No.	%	No.	%
Bamangram	40	3	7.50	3	7.50
Batla-Bhiata	21	3	14.28	5	23.81
Alokjhora	45	10	22.22	13	28.88

Majority of the respondents are either illiterate or semi-literate. Only a few of them have any idea about the central and the state government. Most of them even do not know which political party is in power. The above figures show more or less similar trend in all the studied villages. The respondents who could say the name of the political party ruling the central government are 7.50 per cent; 14.28 per cent and 22.22 per cent in Bamangram, Batla-Bhita and Alokjhora respectively.

In knowing the names of the political leaders majority of the respondents stated the names of the village level political leaders, especially the panchayat members. Only few of them could mention the names of the block, state or national level leaders. But they could not say the names of the leaders of smaller political parties in the village. The respondents in Alokjhora, mentioned the names of F.B., CPI(M) and Congress(I) leaders only. In Batla-Bhita, they could say the names of Congress(I) and CPI(M) leaders. Besides these two parties, a fraction of the CPI(M) has some followings in this village. Hence, a few respondents, mainly the supporters of the CPI(ML), could state the names of local CPI(ML) leaders. In Bamangram, the respondents mainly said the names of the political leaders belonging to the Congress(I) and the CPI(M), as these two parties are most influential in the village. Besides, a few respondents also stated the name of a local CPI(ML) leader.

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F.B. - Forward Block

CPI(M) - Communist Party of India (Marxist)

CPI(ML)- Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)

Party affiliation of the agricultural labourers

Our data shows different pictures with respect to the party affiliation in the three villages. In Bamangram, Congress(I) enjoys the majority support, CPI(M) is the dominant party in Batla-Bhita and in Alokjhora, Forward Block is the most influential party. The distribution on the basis of party affiliation is shown in the following table.

Table - 39

Respondents according to their party affiliation

Name of the villages	Total no. of respondents	Political parties				
		CPI(M)	Congres(I)	F.B	CPI(M)	Uncommitted
Bamangram	40 (27.50)	11 (35.50)	14	-	-	15 (37.50)
Batla-Bhita	21	14 (66.66)	5 (23.80)	-	2 (9.52)	-
Alokjhora	45	11 (24.44)	4 (8.88)	27 (60.00)	-	3 (6.66)

Note: Figures in brackets denote percentage

In Bamangram, 37.50 per cent respondents were politically uncommitted. In the absence of any organized movement or any significant individual gain from any political party despite their economic problems they are not committed to any particular party. They said, "all the political parties are equally good or equally bad. We are all fed up with the promises of the political parties".

### Migration and political affiliation

The Left Front has considerable influence upon the later migrants in all the three villages. The influence is more pronounced in Batla-Bhita and Alokjhora than in Bamangram. One possible reason may be that in these villages most of the agricultural labourers are later migrants. Immediately after migration from Bangladesh they had to face the acute problem of finding a place to settle down. The Left Front being in power since 1977 had the necessary resources to distribute homestead plots among the migrants. These migrants being new in the village were not tied up by the ties of kinship, master-servant/patron-client relationship and as such they could politically act more freely. The study supports the contention that migration of poor and helpless refugees from Bangladesh has to some extent stimulated political radicalism. Recent migration with poor economic condition is positively related to the percentage of vote secured by the Left Front. The political affiliation of the respondents has been broadly classified into two categories - "since birth" and "after migration".

In Bamangram, the number of recently migrated households are comparatively lower than the other two villages. Most of them have been living in the village since birth. In this village 3 respondents are recent migrants of which one supported the Congress (I) and the remaining two were uncommitted. Out of the total 11 recent migrants in Batla-Bhita, one voted for the Congress(I) and 10 voted for the CPI(M). In Alokjhora, out of the total 25 recent migrants 16 voted for the Forward Block, 8 voted for the CPI(M) and one voted for the Congress(I).

Table - 39

Respondents by political affiliation and migration in the three villages

Name of the village	Total no. of respondents	Category	Political parties				
			1	2	3	4	5
Bamangram	40	Since birth	13	11	-	-	13
		%	92.86	100.00	-	-	86.67
		Migrated	1	-	-	-	2
		%	7.14	-	-	-	13.33
		Total	14	11	-	-	15
Batla-Bhita	21	Since birth	4	4	-	2	-
		%	80.00	28.57	-	100.00	-
		Migrated	1	10	-	-	-
		%	20.00	71.43	-	-	-
		Total	5	14	-	-	-
		%	100.00	100.00	-	-	-
Alokjhora	45	Since birth	3	2	11	-	3
		%	75.00	27.27	40.74	-	100.00
		Migrated	1	8	16	-	-
		%	25.00	72.73	59.26	-	-
		Total	4	11	27	-	3
		%	100.00	100.00	100.00	-	100.00

Note: 1. Congress(I); 2. CPI(M); 3. Forward Block; 4. CPI(ML); 5. Non-Committed.

Support to the political parties

The percentage of voter turn-out in the panchayat election is higher than that in the state or national elections. Almost all the respondents had exercised their franchise in the panchayat elections. To understand the basis of voters' choice of political parties the voters were asked to explain the reason for voting in favour of a particular candidate of a party. The explanation somewhat varies from one village to another depending on the nature of the local issues.

In Bamangram, 15 respondents were non-committed voters. Only 25 of the 40 respondents of Bamangram gave reasons for their preference. In Batla-Bhita, 21 respondents who cared to answer our query said that they had supported the party primarily because it works for class interest (21.42 per cent), it has helped the person personally (78.57 per cent) and the party has been supported by the father or other members of the family of the respondents. In Alokjhora, 42 of the 45 respondents gave different reasons for their party preference. These are listed in the following table.

Table - 40

Respondents by reasons for party preference in the three villages

Reasons	Bamanqram		Batla-Bhita			Alokjhora		
	Congress (I)	CPI (M)	Congress (I)	CPI (M)	CPI (ML)	Congress (I)	CPI (M)	F.B.
1. Barga-recording has caused harm to me and other poor	1 (7.14)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2. It works for my class	3 (21.42)	2 (18.18)	-	3 (21.42)	1 (50.00)	-	3 (27.27)	4 (14.82)
3. I have been helped by the party	4 (28.57)	6 (54.54)	-	11 (78.57)	-	-	3 (27.27)	9 (33.33)
4. Congress leaders are not good enough	-	1 (9.09)	-	-	-	-	-	-
5. My employer said to support	2 (14.28)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
6. Party has worked for wage increase	-	1 (9.09)	-	-	-	-	-	-
7. My community head has asked me to support	1 (7.14)	-	-	-	-	2 (50.00)	1 (9.09)	2 (7.40)
8. Congress is in power and the main political party in the village	2 (14.28)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
9. My father supported the party	1 (7.14)	1 (9.09)	5 (100.00)	-	-	2 (50.00)	4 (36.36)	12 (44.44)
10. Both CPI(M) and Congress(I) have been failure to keep their promises	-	-	-	-	1 (50.00)	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b> <b>(100.00)</b>	<b>11</b> <b>(100.00)</b>	<b>5</b> <b>(100.00)</b>	<b>14</b> <b>(100.00)</b>	<b>2</b> <b>(100.00)</b>	<b>4</b> <b>(100.00)</b>	<b>11</b> <b>(100.00)</b>	<b>27</b> <b>(100.00)</b>

The agricultural labourers' movement in Alokjhora

The mobilisation and movement of the agricultural labourers for fair wages is not a new phenomenon in West Bengal. A rather intensive movement on the part of the agricultural labourers involving a protracted period of conflict enabled them to attain a significantly higher wage rate and a shorter work day than what existed in the past. Although the conflict between land-owning and landless groups has been rather intense in many instances it has remained confined mostly at the local level and has not been revolutionary in nature. Thus the intensity and condition of the conflict between land owning and landless groups have been such that it contributed to the changes within rather than of the village social system<sup>1</sup>.

We have mentioned that in the villages under study there is broadly two-tier landed interest in place of three tier landed interest what existed during the colonial period. Today, the agricultural labourers are "more free" than they were earlier. The relations between employers and agricultural labourers are now based on depersonalised formal contracts involving well defined rights and obligations.

In Bamangram and Batla-Bhita, the agricultural labourers have not organized any movement for fair wages. Although the agricultural labourers in Alokjhora did not call for a strike but they participated in the meetings to discuss the issue under

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1. S. Dasgupta, Agrarian Crisis and Social Change in West Bengal Villages : A Conflict Perspective, 1986, p. 24.

the leadership of the leftist political parties. I have described below two case studies of attempts by the labourers of Alokjhora to organize themselves for a concerted action.

Case one : wage movement

The initiative to organize a movement for fair wage started in Alokjhora immediately after the 1977 Assembly election when the Left Front came into power in the State. During the months of October-November in 1978 the local CPI(M) leader took the initiative. The party called a meeting at the house of Gouranga Roy, a local member of the party to discuss the issue. The meeting was attended by a few agricultural labourers out of the total strength of 132 labourers in the village. The other political parties in the village did neither attend nor oppose the meeting. Agricultural labourers from the surrounding villages also did not attend the meeting. Those who attended came only from one hamlet-Rajbanshi Para, of the Alokjhora village.

In the meeting the main discussion centred around the Government declared minimum wage. The meeting concluded that the employers should pay according to the government wage rate. They formed a committee and elected Dharani Barman, a local CPI(M) cadre as its convener. Dharani Barman was himself a marginal farmer as well as an agricultural labourer. It was further decided that whenever an employer would need labour he would have to contact first the convener and the convener would depute the labourer. Each of such labourers was required to pay one rupee per day of employment to the convener to help building a fund

for the welfare of the labourers at the time of their need.

The movement continued over a month. It compelled the employers to pay the minimum wage. It was able to attract other agricultural labourers irrespective of their political affiliation, caste or community. But, the movement caused great dissatisfaction among the employers because, on the one hand they had to pay higher wages and on the other hand they could not hire labourers from other villages. As a result some medium and small farmers began to cultivate the land themselves with the help of family labour. Consequently there was a sharp drop in the demand for agricultural labourer.

The Congress(I) since the beginning had taken a passive stand about the movement. Although the Forward Block initially was passive but became fearful later with the steady increase of the influence of the CPI(M) among the agricultural labourers. The agricultural labourers were also worried about the steady decrease in the number of work days. A section of the agitating labourers came to the local Forward Block office to discuss the issue. The Forward Block was also seeking the opportunity to get involved in the movement. Both the CPI(M) and the Forward Block jointly organized a meeting at the house of Gouranga Roy to discuss the emergent situation. In the meeting the following decisions were taken:

(i) the meeting appreciated the agricultural workers' demand and the way they were fighting. But as the working days have been reduced as a result of this movement it was felt necessary to find a solution to the problem. It was decided that the demand for

minimum wage will only be applied during the agricultural season. For work in the non-agricultural season no such demand will be made. The wages for the non-agricultural works will be decided by the employer and the employee themselves; (ii) whenever an absentee land owner engages a labour he will have to pay the minimum wage; (iii) a list of big land owners of the village was prepared - Bhaktinath Basunia (owning 35 acres), Priya Nath Mahanta (owning 18 acres) and minimum wage rate rules will apply to these land owners in all seasons; and finally, (iv) no outside labour will be allowed to work in the village.

During my field work it was observed that this effort on the part of the agricultural labourers to secure fair wages could hardly bring any change in the existing wage structure. Both employers and employees flouted the decision with impunity. They entered into mutually agreeable contract resulting into a wide disparity in the wage rate from individual to individual.

In the neighbouring village also the agricultural labourers made an attempt to raise the wage rate. In 1985 the agricultural labourers of Pannaguri village, in a meeting fixed the wage rate at Rs. 7. Although Rs. 7 was far below the minimum wage rate but higher than that existed at the time in the village. The employers of the village however were not ready to pay Rs. 7. When the village labourers decided not to work below Rs. 7, they hired the Santals of the neighbouring village. The Santal labourers agreed to work for Rs. 5 per day. The fellow village labourers became furious and jointly stopped the entry of outside labourers in the village

resulting into a conflict between the outside and inside labourers. The local Forward Block leaders took an active role to diffuse the crisis. They persuaded the Santal labourers, who were also incidentally supporters of the Forward Block, not to accept any wage below Rs. 7 per day.

#### Case two ; vested land movement

The left political parties have been very active in the distribution of vested land among the rural poor. Bose has reported that, "out of 10,68,000 acres of ceiling-surplus lands vested till January, 1978 (this figure has now gone up to more than 1.18 million acres) 4,50,000 acres of land vested in the State in the 12 years since 1955 when the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act came into effect, and the additional area of 7,48,000 acres of land vested thereafter was the result of the efforts of two short-lived United Front Government of 1967 and 1969 - 70 and the present Left Front Government.... The efforts of the two United Front and Left Front Governments resulted in the distribution of 0.70 million acres of vested lands. Till December 31, 1980 acres of vested lands have been distributed among 11,94,176 landless cultivators among whom 37 per cent were the members of Scheduled Castes and 20 per cent were members of Scheduled Tribes. This meets about one third of the total target of vesting of 3 million acres of surplus lands and their distribution among 3.5 to 4 million landless and land poor peasant families<sup>1</sup>.

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1. B. Bose, Agrarian Programme of Left Front Government in West Bengal, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol 16, No. 50, 1981, p. 1056.

In explaining why the Left Front Government could not reach the target he mentions three constraints : (a) the loopholes and inadequacies in the two land reform statutes which made it impossible for the landlords of various categories to conceal their surplus land; (b) very strong bourgeoisie landlord influence in the government; and (c) an absolutely outmoded land administration kept under the leadership of the non-expert bureaucrats having no experience and commitment in progressive land reform<sup>1</sup>.

Before fixing up the date for occupying the land, the landless and the land poor had organized several meetings. The meetings were attended mostly by the supporters of both the CPI(M) and the Forward Block who were mainly the inhabitants of Rajbanshi Para. Hence, a number of people of the same economic class but who resided in other hamlets were left outside the movement. This happened mainly because, it was decided at the meeting that the land will only be distributed among the inhabitants of Rajbanshi Para.

Bhaktinath Basunia filed a case against the illegal occupation of his land and he own. The Forward Block called a meeting and decided that it would be illegal to forcibly occupy the land. Even they feared that the occupants might be arrested if they continue keeping the land under their control. However the followers of the CPI(M) and a section of the Forward Block supporters

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1. B. Bose, op. cit.

became furious with the decision of Forward Block. These people were determined to keep the land under their control. They forcibly collected the jute crops from the disputed land. A fresh crisis ensued. Bhaktinath Basunia hired the Santal from the neighbouring villages and with their help harvested the crop. The occupants of the land could not resist because of their very poor strength. It was stated that the hired Santal were the supporters of Forward Block but the Forward Block leaders did not take any step to stop them to help Bhaktinath Basunia. This is still under the control of Bhaktinath Basunia.

### Summary

In the preceding discussions we have seen that even after the introduction of Panchayati Raj and its regular elections after 1977, the agricultural labourers have remained outside the power structure. The panchayat members are mainly the rich or middle farmers, businessmen and school teachers. The rich farmers and businessmen are economically better off than others and the main resource of the school teacher is their education. Thus it appears that the wealth and education are the twin determinants of power. Besides, caste/community is another important determinant as most of the panchayat members belong to the numerically dominant caste/community.

It is also evident that, no single factor like caste/community, settlement pattern, education contributes solely to the voting behaviour, but there has been an agglomeration of all these factors influencing the voters. The local political leaders

have been more or less successful in influencing them to cast their vote in favour of their candidate. The result was that, majority of them did not hesitate to name the party they support and cast their votes to the party nominated candidates.

The agricultural labourers in the three villages appear to be little aware of the current political developments, both in the country and the state. This appears from the fact that only a few did know the names of the prime minister and the chief minister, they have either no or little idea of the difference between the parties or the central and state governments. The agricultural labourers are generally not able to receive the benefits of the mass media like radio, newspaper, television because of poverty and illiteracy. The main source of political information is the market place where they sometimes hear the informal discussion and occasional speeches made by the political leaders, political slogans and propaganda.

Even then the agricultural labourers in the studied villages are largely divided into three political camps - the CPI(M), the Congress(I) and the Forward Block. Supporters of all these parties live side by side. On the basis of their degree of involvement in the activities of the political parties and the kind of their duties and responsibilities they may be considered as passive voters (who just vote for the party of their choice). Besides, there could be a section of people who either do not attach themselves with any political party, or are not sure of their political stand.

Though a considerable section of the agricultural labourers voted for the left parties, a large majority of them do not have what could be termed as political consciousness. They seldom think about politics, nor do they discuss about political happenings at the local or the national level. They generally do not take part in political activities, such as meeting, processions etc., and confine their duty to mere voting in favour of the candidate advocated by the party of their choice. Though they have been voting consistently in favour of one party or other, most of them cannot make out the points of differences between the Congress(I) and the left parties.

Many of the agricultural labourers who have claimed to be supporters of a particular party cannot be considered as active supporters, they act merely as vote bank. An interesting aspect of the political behaviour of the agricultural labourers in Bamangram is that 37.50 per cent of the respondents do not support any political party. Sometimes they do not vote, and when they do so, it is done by persuasion.

The apparent lack of political consciousness on the part of the agricultural labourers may be explained in various ways. First, the working condition is such that they are always busy with their occupation, and often concerned with their own problems like unemployment and underemployment. Secondly, mass illiteracy even after introduction of compulsory education deprives them of a great deal of information. The combination of indifference and ignorance is tied up with poverty. Thirdly, no political

party, left or right, has been able to organize the landless labourers into an articulate trade union like outfit. All these factors combined have, at least, made the agricultural labourers mere pawns in the political game. There is hardly any political party who had worked consistently to ameliorate the hapless condition of these workers.