

CHAPTER FOUR

AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS : DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL FEATURES

The demographic and social features of the agricultural labourers in the three villages, as presented here, is based on a sample of 40, 21 and 45 households in Bamangram, Batla-Bhita and Alokjhora respectively. The households are mostly small (3 or 4 persons) and medium (5 or 6 persons). In Bamangram, in the 190 sample population 95 are males and 95 are females; in Batla-Bhita it is 77, 42 males and 35 females. In Alokjhora, in the 198 sample population 110 are males and 88 are females.

Table - 22

Distribution of the sample population by sex and size

| Name of the villages | HHS No. | Population | | | HHS size | |
|----------------------|---------|------------|----|-------|------------|------------|
| | | M | F | Total | Small | Medium |
| Bamangram | 40 | 95 | 95 | 190 | 23 (57.50) | 17 (42.50) |
| Batla-Bhita | 21 | 42 | 35 | 77 | 18 (85.72) | 3 (14.28) |
| Alokjhora | 45 | 110 | 88 | 198 | 29 (64.44) | 16 (35.56) |

Note: Figures in brackets denote percentage.

The family structure

The family is not only a place of sustenance and shelter but also a repository of affection and a nursery of civic virtues which are transmitted to children in their early years. But an agricultural labourer's family falls short of the middle class concept of home where one finds not only the above mentioned qualities but also a place for comfort and passing leisure time.

The agricultural labourers conceive their home as a place of sustenance and shelter. Both men and children are found to spend their leisure time outside their home especially in the market place and road. Even on the day they are hired out for work, after returning from work they prefer the company of others rather than their own family members.

Children, particularly boys, between 8 to 12, most of whom do not go to school, are hardly found in the house except at meal times and at night. Majority of them play some local games on the street, or swim in the ponds of others, or observe fish catching, or they themselves are engaged in it. Girls, particularly teenagers are mostly found within the house or around it, either playing or doing a variety of domestic chores. Sometimes they go out to gather fuel, cow dung or fetch water. Some of them also assist their parents in their contractual work.

In order to earn subsistence almost all women of the working age-group are engaged fully as labour and the like. In such cases the mother stays away from home during the day and the children grow up without proper parental care. We have seen earlier that the majority of the agricultural labourers' families are nuclear. So when the mother goes out for work for the whole day the responsibility of taking care of the children falls upon the elder children who stay home. On her return from work in the evening, the mother immediately becomes busy with the preparation of the evening meal. After taking food they go to the bed as they are very tired. Being fatigued after a day's hard labour they seldom have the desire to indulge in idle talks and gossips.

In an agrarian economy women are not gainfully employed outside home throughout the year. We have elaborately discussed the employment pattern of male and female labourers throughout the year in the next chapter. The number of working days in the non-agricultural seasons is particularly few, though during agricultural season outside work is available a plenty. During the lean period women labourers have long hours of leisure. Our finding is that on the days when women labourers do not find any work, they either engage themselves in collecting fuel or cow dung. And for the rest of the day they either gossip with their neighbours or spend the time idly.

Majority of the earnings of women are spent in meeting the food and other needs of the family. Of course, smoking of bidi among the women is not uncommon among the lower castes and the tribes. Those, who are addicted to it spend between fifty paise to one rupee daily. In contrast to female labourers, the male labourers spend a part of their earnings on tea, bidi, tobacco, and occasionally, on liquor. After the day's work the male labourers usually do the necessary marketings, they buy rice or flour, oil, vegetables and other necessary articles before returning home. Hence, the question of handing over money to their wives hardly arises.

In almost all the agricultural labourers' families in the surveyed villages, roles are highly differentiated along sex lines. Wives whether earning or non-earning are subservient to their husbands and have to do all the household work. It was observed that the women were engaged in preparing morning and

evening meals. Even those women who had gone to work outside the home had to prepare the family meals before leaving for work and also after coming back from work. Both men and women informants agreed that preparation of meal is the exclusive task of women. Men may do some construction or repair work at home or nurture the small vegetable plot attached to their huts. After coming back from work men often go to market place to spend the time with their friends. Between the sexes, all relationships are usually determined by age and sex. Men, women and children spend all their free time with their own kind.

The predominant form of family as we have discussed earlier in the studied villages is nuclear irrespective of caste/community, recent migrants or long time residents, migrated alone or with the rest of family members and kins. After marriage a man invariably puts up a separate shelter for himself, his wife and future family. Some aged informants said, "we actually insist on our younger brothers and sons setting up independent establishments upon marriage so that petty squabbles among the women folk will not spoil the relation among the men folk". Very often elders wish the younger ones to earn an independent living and set up separate establishments before the relations sour up. One respondent in the village Bamangram said, "petty squabbles among the family members start centering around the economic contribution of each earning member. One says, his economic contribution to the family is more than the other and the other says the reverse. This leads to the breakdown of peaceful coexistence. So,

the separate establishment is the only way to avoid the daily crisis". Another young married informant who has recently set up a separate household said, "during the days of living with father petty squabbles was a daily incident regarding money. Moreover why shall I take the responsibility of younger brother and sister? It is the responsibility of father to feed them". It thus leads us to the conclusion that the nucleation of family is a function of economy of the household.

In a land-owning family land is distributed among the heirs often after the death of the head of the family. Thus, the inheritors generally wait upto the death of the head of the family to set-up separate establishment. In contrast, in a labourer's family, the question of asset distribution arises hardly, as the head of the family is a labourer and the family owns hardly anything worth distribution among the heirs. Hence, as soon as a son attains the age to earn independently, he starts thinking of setting up a separate household of his own. The tendency to form a nuclear family is further accelerated by the government policies adopted from time to time for the agricultural labourers. Of these the most important one is the distribution of homestead plot among the agricultural labourers. The scheme was adopted in 1975. In a report of the Government of West Bengal, 1983, it is stated that by the end of 1982 about 150,000 such homestead plots have been registered. To bring about a change in the wages and employment conditions another programme was adopted like, National Rural Employment Programme (NREP). The extensive public works programme operated through the local level panchayats, were

intended to provide alternative employment opportunities and strengthen the labourers bargaining power. Under this programme mainly roads and irrigation structures were built or repaired and the wages were paid partly in cash and partly in kind. By the end of 1981 more than 140 million man days of work was created¹.

In all the three villages the above mentioned Government programmes have influenced the agricultural labourers to set-up separate households. In the distribution of homestead plots among the landless labourers, it is said that, if a married couple lives with their parents they are not considered landless but the whole family as a unit is considered landless. As soon as they set up separate establishment they are entitled to a house plot. Those who do not have a registered homestead plot are given the priority. In these villages, many beneficiaries said, initially they had built their separate huts on their parents land but after getting a house plot from the panchayat they have constructed their huts on the new plot away from their parents' huts.

During the lean agricultural season the working days are reduced considerably. During this period extensive public works programmes give considerable economic support to the agricultural labourers. To select the beneficiaries under this programme the panchayat usually selects one beneficiary from each family. Bigu

1. Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1983.

Singh, one of the beneficiary under the scheme in the village Batla-Bhita said, "when I was living with my father, only my father used to get work under the scheme. Now after my separate establishment I also get the work".

Parents of agricultural labourer families play a very insignificant part in socializing their children in any planned manner. The working conditions compel a male agricultural labourer to remain away from home throughout the day. Mother also can not stay at home as often she has to work to augment the family income. Hence, majority of the children grow up under the care of elder brother or sister. Children are seldom warned against what ought not to be done nor are they motivated, through incentives, to do a thing in a right way. When a child does something wrong he is rebuked for doing it, if the act is repeated, the child is beaten and warned not to commit it again. But rarely children are told why it is wrong to do certain things. In the absence of any systematic training children often do things on the sly in order to escape parental wrath.

As soon as a child is able to walk, he is not subjected to any kind of discipline. A child may be 4 or 5 years of age but he is not told to wash his face first thing in the morning. Where there is no pond near the hamlet a daily bath for a child of 4 or 5 years of age is not possible because of the shortage of water in the hamlet. It was observed in all the surveyed villages that on an average 20 to 30 families depend for water on a single tubewell or a well. Young children can not take bath by themselves. Mother also cannot give sufficient attention because she has to

hurriedly finish the household work in order to leave for her place of work. It is only on the day when mother does not find any work that she bathes her young children. Otherwise, they are left without bath or depend upon the elder sister, if any, to bathe them.

Children of the agricultural labourer families between the age of 6 to 12 years are hardly considered fit for schooling. Many boys of these years work as child labourer. By the time boys reach 14 and above years of age they are considered adults able to earn wages on regular basis. The case of girls are different from that of boys. Girls start work as agricultural labourer comparatively at an older age than boys. Right from the age of 5 or 6, a girl's life centres around the home and mother. It is not uncommon for an 8 or 9 years old girl to look after the younger brothers and sisters during the day when both parents are away from the home.

From the above discussions it can be said that, in an agricultural labourer family, parents play a very negligible role in socializing their children. Parent-child meeting takes place when there is some complaint against the child or he/she misbehaves. Children are often beaten for doing wrong but never taught how to avoid doing wrong things. Parents seem to be rather indifferent to how the children grow up. It is possibly because that is the way they have been reared by their parents.

Caste/Community background

Indian rural society is traditionally a multi-ethnic society where the rural population is divided on caste and

community lines. At one time the caste system was a very closed system where each caste was tied down to a traditional occupation. In this system normally the low caste people had to work as agricultural labourers. But now with the introduction of money and market economy the rural society and along with it the caste system has become much more open in so far as caste occupations are concerned. But despite this openness in occupation, the rural society still maintains its caste and community identities which in turn play some part in determining their economic and social relations. Viewed from this perspective it will be interesting to note how the agricultural labourers in the three villages represent different castes and communities.

Table - 23

Distribution of the sample households by caste/
community in the three villages

| Caste/Community Groups | Name of the villages | | | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-----------|---------------|
| | Bamangram | | Batla-Bhita | | Alokjhora | |
| | HHS | % | HHS | % | HHS | % |
| Scheduled Castes | 13 | 32.50 | 21 | 100.00 | 17 | 37.78 |
| Scheduled Tribes | 8 | 20.00 | - | - | - | - |
| Kayastha (Hindu) | 2 | 5.00 | - | - | 12 | 26.67 |
| Muslim | 17 | 42.50 | - | - | 13 | 28.89 |
| Nath (Hindu) | - | - | - | - | 3 | 6.66 |
| Total | 40 | 100.00 | 21 | 100.00 | 45 | 100.00 |

The table shows that not only the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Muslim, but some intermediary castes are also found among the agricultural labourer class.

During the field work a number of Kayastha informants were asked why they had taken this occupation. In reply they said, "what is left to do apart from doing this work". They, further said, "when we were separated from parents we were not given a single Katha (fraction of an acre) of agricultural land. Hence, in order to make hand to mouth existence possible we had to accept this occupation".

A considerable number of agricultural labourers have recently migrated from Bangladesh. Some Kayastha respondents in the villages said, "we had agricultural land in Bangladesh, but after migration we have not been able to purchase any land. So, in the absence of any alternative opportunities we are working as agricultural wage labourers".

Education

The importance of education for uplifting economic and social life of the people can hardly be overemphasized. Though all sections of concerned people, the government officials, the political leaders and the common man admit the importance of education, universal education is yet a far cry. The point is more true in the case of the agricultural labourers as the light of education has not just reached to the majority of them.

Considering the educational facilities available to the people in all the three villages, it can not be said that due to the lack of educational facilities, schools in particular, the literacy rate is so low.

In Batla-Bhita, there is a primary school in the midst of the village. The nearest high school is located one and half kilometres and the University of North Bengal is located half a kilometre away from the village. In Bamangram, along with a primary school, the village has a high school and the nearest college is located at Raiganj which is around 5 kilometres away from the village. There are two primary schools in Alokjhora. The nearest high school is located on the boundary of the village. The nearest college is located at Dinhatra which is not more than 3 or 4 kilometres away from the village. Moreover, all the villagers have good access to the local town either through the metalled road or railway line.

Table - 24

Distribution of the sample population by educational attainment in the three villages

| Educational level | Name of the villages | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|--------|----|--------|-------|--------|-------------|--------|----|--------|-------|--------|-----------|--------|----|--------|-------|--------|
| | Bamangram | | | | | | Batla-Bhita | | | | | | Alokjhora | | | | | |
| | M | % | F | % | Total | % | M | % | F | % | Total | % | M | % | F | % | Total | % |
| Illiterate | 77 | 81.05 | 88 | 92.64 | 165 | 86.85 | 29 | 69.04 | 32 | 91.42 | 61 | 79.22 | 74 | 62.27 | 77 | 87.50 | 151 | 76.26 |
| Literate | 2 | 2.10 | 2 | 2.10 | 4 | 2.10 | 4 | 9.53 | 1 | 2.86 | 5 | 4.49 | 4 | 3.64 | 2 | 2.27 | 6 | 6.03 |
| Primary | 14 | 14.74 | 5 | 5.26 | 19 | 10.00 | 5 | 11.90 | 2 | 5.72 | 7 | 9.09 | 21 | 19.09 | 7 | 7.96 | 28 | 14.14 |
| Jr. High School | 2 | 2.10 | - | - | 2 | 1.05 | 4 | 9.53 | - | - | 4 | 5.20 | 11 | 10.00 | 2 | 2.27 | 13 | 6.57 |
| Total | 95 | 100.00 | 95 | 100.00 | 190 | 100.00 | 42 | 100.00 | 35 | 100.00 | 77 | 100.00 | 110 | 100.00 | 88 | 100.00 | 198 | 100.00 |

The table shows that the rate of illiteracy among the sample agriculture labourers' population is 86.85, 79.22 and 76.26 per cent in Bamengram, Batla-Bhita and Alokjhora respectively. The rate of illiteracy is much higher among the females than the males in all the three villages. In Alokjhora, the percentage of people having primary and junior high school level education is comparatively higher than that in the other two villages. This may be due to the fact that in Alokjhora many households have recently migrated from Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, many of them had agricultural land and have been educated there. It is stated by many respondents who have received junior high school education that, "we had our education in Bangladesh and not in India.

Thus it appears that the agricultural labourers take very little interest in educating their children. Whatever education a few of them had acquired is either up to the primary level or at best, upto the junior high school. This is broadly, due to their inability to realize the importance of education, and secondly, poor economic condition compels the children to seek employment as wage labourers at an early age. This speaks about why there is a very high rate of drop-outs.

Let us compare our observation with that of the other villages of West Bengal for a better understanding of the problem of excessive illiteracy among agricultural labourers. Poromesh Acharya after conducting a field survey in four villages of Bankura and Malda districts in West Bengal that 'not a single

student in class V came from either poor peasants or agricultural labourers. Only 5.26 per cent of the students in class IV belonged to poor peasants and none to agricultural labourers'¹.

Findings of some other surveys also largely corroborate the above observation. N. Chandra conducted a field survey in three villages of Burdwan district during the summer of 1977 and concluded that, "the existing school system barely caters to the needs of the children from the economically weaker sections"².

Hence, it can be said that mere expansion of educational facilities and external incentives like free books or mid-day meals may not be sufficient for solving the problems of expansion of education in an agrarian society. On the contrary, expansion of educational facilities may make the situation more complex for solving the problems. Phillip Foster has rightly observed, "Quite obviously, formal education in so far as it is unevenly distributed contributes to the process of structural and cultural differentiation. But substantial problems arise if privileged groups 'capture' the educational systems in such a manner as to use it as an instrument for maintaining existing status differentials"³.

1. P. Acharya, *op. cit.*

2. N. Chandra, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

3. P. Foster, "Access to Schooling", in Don Adams (ed.) *Education in National Development*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971, p. 29.

Along with economic backwardness, two other important impediments in the way of children's education are: the working conditions and family structure. More than 90 per cent agricultural labourer families are nuclear in the villages. It is found that in majority of cases both husband and wife go out to work for most part of the year. The working hours are normally between 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. In such a situation it is almost impossible for the parents to look after their children's education.

Children at the age of 8 or 10 are compelled to seek employment in the houses of the rich peasants or elsewhere as permanent labourer. The other type of problem arises in the contractual work. In this system the whole family including the school aged children participate in the work to complete the task as early as possible. Moreover, during the absence of both father and mother many school aged children are to look after their younger brother and sister.

Occupational diversities and special features

The opportunities to get work vary because of situational differences and differences in the attitude of different caste or community members towards different occupations. The conditions such as economy, neighbourhood, physical amenities, transportation, distance from the urban centres and the cultural environment - all these factors influence the nature of labour employment.

In Bamangram, it was observed that in the non-agricultural season, agricultural labourers go to Raiganj (the local town nearest to the village) to seek work. These labourers generally find work in the building and road constructions or work as

janmajurs (daily labourer) in the houses of the town people. The females hardly go outside the village to work as wage labourer.

With respect to caste and community it is seen that all male labourers belonging to the Scheduled Tribes are engaged in fishing as secondary occupation. These labourers hardly move to Raiganj for getting work in the lean agricultural season.

Agricultural labourers belonging to the Scheduled Castes are more efficient in the construction work. The labourers of this group go to Raiganj to work in construction sites, but not throughout the year. From discussions with them several problems were pointed out by them. Distance, non-availability of work in the rainy season and higher wages at the time of peak agricultural season are the three reasons for not seeking employment in the town throughout the year.

In Batla-Bhita, all labourers belong to the Scheduled Castes. Thus, the question of caste-wise differentiation in occupation is not relevant here. The impact of environment in the labour employment system is very much evident. The village is bounded by the military camp in the north, the University of North Bengal in the east and Siliguri, the largest town of North Bengal is located 9 kilometres north-east of the village. The University of North Bengal and the military camp is located within half a kilometre of the village. The village has good access to the Siliguri town through a National High Way.

Majority of the agricultural labourers both male and female work in construction. During the non-agricultural season these labourers seek employment in the construction sites either

at the University or in Siliguri. But in the peak agricultural season they do not prefer to work as construction labourer. The reasons are not different from what have been told by the respondents of Bamangram. One respondent in the village said, "in the agricultural season we get better wages at village than for working in the University or Siliguri. If we work in the village we do not have to spend any money for travelling. In the agricultural works we get two hours leisure for taking our mid-day meal. But in the construction work a labourer has to go early in the morning and can come back only in the late evening. The bus fare of Siliguri from the nearest bus stoppage of the village is around one rupee. Hence, a labourer must spend two rupees daily on transport from his day's earnings. Moreover, we do not like to remain away from home throughout the day. When work is not available in the village particularly in the non-agricultural season we have to move outside the village.

In Batla-Bhita, agricultural labourers have some more additional opportunity of earning. Sometimes they go to the nearest forest for collecting fire wood. They collect fire wood from the reserve forest clandestinely. However there is a great risk in getting caught by forest guard, police and be prosecuted.

In Alokjhora, unlike the other two villages chances of getting non-agricultural work are very limited. Agricultural labourers in this village is more or less exclusively dependent upon the availability of work within the village. In the non-agricultural season they search for work in the village like repair and construction of huts.

The main commercial crop of the region is tobacco. A trading class has emerged in the region who trade in this commercial crop. The traders are mainly Marawaris. Some labourers get work in the Marawari house. These labourers are appointed on daily basis, they work in the tobacco godowns - to sort the leaves, dry them in drying sheds, stack and store them for export. Marawari business men are settled in Dinhatra (the town, 3/4 kilometres from the village).

There are some differences in the attitude of the respondents belonging to the different castes especially in regard to female employment. The male respondents belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Muslim community do not hesitate to mention that their women work as agricultural labourer. But the Kayastha male respondents, majority of whom have recently migrated from Bangladesh, show some hesitation in admitting their women working as agricultural labourer though in actual practice they also do so.

Agricultural labourers' control over means of production

Most of the sample households are completely landless. Only a few of them own agricultural land. Even those who have small pieces of land are not able to use it productively because either it is dry land or they do not possess the means of production necessary for agricultural operations, such as wells, ploughs and, above all, draught animals. In Bamangram, out of the 40 sample households 27 are completely landless and the rest 13 households own 6 acres of agricultural land. In Batla-Bhita, 18 sample households are landless and 3 sample households together own 1.5 acres of agricultural land. While in Alokjhora, 38 sample households are landless and 7 sample households have together 3

acres of agricultural land. Hence, the vast majority of the agricultural labourers in the three villages have no control over the main means of production land. The same is true of other agricultural implements and tools, like harrows, sowers, carts etc. The only tools and implements in the possession of agricultural labourers are sickles (the universal tool with which they cut grass, do the weeding, reap ripe grain during harvest etc.). The main tool of production therefore is their manual labour.

In Bamangram, Batla-Bhita and Alokjhora some of the families own milk cows and draught animals. They have purchased the milk cows and draught animals with the loans from a commercial bank under the Integrated Rural Development Project and the Dairy Scheme. We have more elaborately discussed this point in the next chapter. The milk produced by these animals is mostly sold in the market. They use the draught animals in pulling the plough. Two households have received wheel barrow under the Integrated Rural Development Project. All these schemes are clearly oriented towards production for the market. The milk cows, draught animals, wheel barrow etc. are therefore means of production and they form part of the household economy. Some of the families also own chicken, goats etc.

The sample huts contain few belongings except the necessary containers and utensils for cooking : earthen jars for water and rice, earthen pots for cooking, self-made wooden ladle, a self-constructed earthen stove, several mats to sleep upon etc.

In conclusion, the agricultural labourers in the three villages have hardly any means of production in their possession. They are virtually deprived of control over all means necessary for production like land, wells, draught animals. The main means of production of the labourers are their manual labour.