

CHAPTER FIVE

TYPES OF LABOUR CONTRACT

A fundamental change in the mode of production has brought about large-scale changes in the employment system and labour relations. The British colonial rulers introduced two kinds of land relations in India-Ryotwari and Zamindari. In the former the ownership right belonged to the cultivators, and they had to pay tax regularly to the state. In the Zamindari system the cultivators were mere rentiers and the ownership right of the lands only belonged to the Zamindars. These Zamindars had to pay a share of their collected rents to the colonial rulers. Cooch Behar had been a princely state before it was amalgamated with India in 1951. In this princely state, there was two kinds of lands : rent-paying and rent-free. Both the rent-paying and rent-free lands were divided into five categories each. Most of the rent-paying lands were given as Ijara for five years. These Ijaradars were mostly the close-kins, queens and high officials of the kings¹. After Independence all the Zamindari, Ryotwari as well as Feudatory systems have been abolished by law. The landlordism became possible under all the three systems because of large-scale concentration of land in the hands of Zamindar, Ryot or Ijaradars who did not themselves cultivate the land. They leased-out all the lands to the tenants and lived on rent and services from hereditary farm servants.

1. H. N. Chowdhury, Cooch Behar and its Land Revenue Settlement, pp. 541-542;
W. W. Hunter, op. cit., pp. 428-430;
Todormol, Bhumi, Rajashya and Jarip (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1981, pp. 69-72.

Agrarian structure has not remained static since then.

A number of factors, mostly exogenous in nature, have effected a significant change in its content and form of the agrarian structure. Among these factors mention may be made of :

(a) implementation of land reform legislation; (b) the impact of an expanding domestic market for agricultural products as a result of large-scale government out-lays under the plans from the mid-fifties in particular; (c) technical changes introduced in agriculture by encouragement of private investment in improved techniques by the government etc¹.

About the employment situation in particular it appears that, (a) intensity of employment in agriculture has gone up during the recent times for all the regions compared to that in the pre-sixties; (b) intensity of employment has gone up significantly from the mid-sixties in the green revolution areas compared to non-green revolution areas; (c) proportion of hired labour has gone up for all the regions, especially in the green revolution areas; and (d) share-cropping tenancy has declined and owner cultivation with hired labour has gone up².

It is to be noted here that the category of begar (or forced) labour is almost non-existent in the surveyed villages. The theory of slavery in Indian agriculture system is based upon the assumption that when there is scarcity of labour and land is in large supply forced labour comes into existence since the

1. M. Chattopadhyay, op. cit., p. 131.

2. M. Chattopadhyay, op. cit., pp. 131-132.

labourer is likely to run away from the landlord and seek his own fields green and pastures new.

The argument advanced by some of the midieval historians and also by the social anthropologists like M.N. Srinivas is that it is this scarcity of labour and the plentitude of land untilled, that brings in the element of compulsion of the worker by the landlord to work on his land and not run away¹. This is secured by involving the poor labourer in the chains of an eternal debt.

There is of course, an apparently bewildering variety of labour relations in agriculture not only in different regions of India but even in the same area. They not merely have different local names to describe them (even the same name sometimes means different things in different villages), but they also vary widely in the terms and conditions of contracts between employees and employers. One can, however, discern some patterns when one finds that these different relations differ because of different combinations of a certain number of attributes such as the following: (a) duration of contract: day, month, season, period of a particular operation, year etc.; (b) basis of payment: hourly, daily, piece rate, product share, etc.; (c) frequency of payment: day, month, year, bonus during festivals, etc.; (d) medium of payment: cash, kind, meals, snacks, and their different combinations; (e) degree to which work obligations and hours of work are specified or are left unspecified; (f) interlinkage with other

1. J. Breman, *Patronage and Exploitation: Changing agrarian relations in South Gujarat*, New Delhi, 1979, pp. 10-18.

contracts with the employer in credit or land relations, or in employment of other member of the labourer's family on the same employer's farm; (g) freedom to work for different employers : full freedom, total absence of such freedom, conditional or restricted freedom, etc., and so on¹.

In the rural areas one may find a variety of labour contract. Following the national tradition and in view of the prevalent illiteracy, there are hardly any written contracts. Oral engagements, usually sanctioned by custom, are the rule.

Child labourer

From early childhood onwards girls and boys assist their parents in practically all their tasks. From the age of 10 they participate fully in agricultural work. The little boys are seen either work in the field or they graze the cattle. The little girls not only assist their mothers in the house work but also learn transplantation, weeding, harvesting, etc. They assist their parents in the contractual work as we shall see later, boys and girls are involved in different kinds of gathering activities, they also work as a maid servant or a farm servant.

The hiring of children as a wage labourer is hardly found in the villages. But their participation as a non-wage labour in agricultural and domestic activities is quite substantial. Sometimes they may be engaged for a meal and no cash wages. Now the question is, why children is not hired as a wage labourer?

1. P.K. Bardhan and A. Rudra, Types of Labour Attachment in Agriculture: Results of Survey in West Bengal, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol XV, No. 35, 1980, p. 1477.

A number of respondents have told me that a few decades ago it was easy for a child to get employment in the farmers house. Now such opportunity is very limited. The urge for sending the children to school may be a cause for the drop in the number of potential child labourer though in the surveyed villages, except in few cases, most of the agricultural labourers do not send their children to school. But the cause lies elsewhere in the villages. Here both the adult male and female labourers number more than what can be absorbed locally; hence, the employers do not show any interest in hiring child labour. Formerly, child labourers were employed to graze cattle, but now-a-days, their services are less often needed; young boys and girls of the family do this job. Further more, formerly most labourers were engaged together with their wives and children in a familial, semi-serf relationship. Today both male and female wage workers are hired independently; sometimes by the year or a month but more often by the day.

The importance of child labourer in the agrarian sector has declined sharply. But the expansion of the urban informal sector has widened the scope of employment for the child labourer. Today, they are found to work in the restaurant, tea stalls and many other small business enterprises.

A few case studies

The nature of participation of child labourer during the rice plantation period in Bamangram are illustrated by following account.

Lal Barman cultivates one bigha (0.33 acre) of land which he has taken on lease. Besides him, there are Niyoti (wife, 30), Minoti (daughter, 8) and Ghatu (Son, 10) in his family. Except the ploughing and levelling all other agricultural works like transplanting, weeding, harvesting, carrying etc. are done collectively by all the four members. The preparatory tillage and ploughing is done mainly by Lal and Ghatu.

Rice transplantation has to be done quickly, otherwise the seedlings get spoiled. They can not afford to hire any labour. Hence, the work is done entirely by all the members of the family. The family does not own any agricultural implement; draught animals belong to the owner of the land. The owner does not want to lend their draught animals for a long period. Lal Barman himself wants to complete the cultivation of his field as quickly as possible. Moreover, they work as wage labourer also. It is their main source of living.

(2) Basudeb

He works as a waiter in a restaurant. He is 10 years old. He has been working since last six months. Basudeb does not like to work as a waiter because of the bad working conditions. He starts working in the shop at 5 a.m. and continues till 9 p.m. with a short break at about one o'clock for bath and lunch. He works at a very low wage. He gets Rs. 30 per month along with two meals and tiffin.

In a small restaurant division of labour is not distinct. He has to do all kinds of works like preparing and serving tea, cleaning the chair, table, dishes etc. He sleeps in the shop

joining together the tables.

(3) Jogen

Some petty businessmen in the village need the help of some extra-hands especially on the market day. The businessmen generally prefer child labourers because they are available at very low wage.

Jogen is employed for twice in a week. This is because the shop-keeper attends only two markets in a week. On the market day the owner contracts him and for that the owner does not need any special permission of Jogen's parent. Sometimes he gets Rs. one or Rs. two but mostly he gets food only.

Besides, there are some children who are attached to a particular employer as a farm servant as we shall see later.

Farm servants

Farm servants have been defined as those who are attached with a particular employer for certain period of time (a month or a year). They are different from the casual labourers by the fact that in case of the farm servants payment is not made on daily basis. They have different names in the different villages. For example, in Bamangram, a labourer who is attached for a year is called chakar while in Alokjhora, they are known either as Bacharmara or as Baromaysha.

A farm servant is expected to perform all agricultural jobs from ploughing to harvesting. He looks after the cattle belonging to the master. He also helps in the employers domestic chores. Payments are made in both cash and kind. wages in kind

assume several forms. A Farm labourer gets two meals daily along with some breakfast or tiffin. A certain quantity of rice or paddy is also given on monthly basis. Besides, a farm labourer normally receives some annual clothing for himself.

Certain factors are taken into serious consideration by the employer to appoint a farm servant. Most important of these are the worker's age, sex (usually male), physical strength, skill and efficiency, faithfulness and of course religious temperament. Normally a farm servant has to live in the house of the master. A married farm servant however, is allowed to go home at night. If a master is satisfied with the performance of a farm servant, the terms are renewed for another period. I met during my field work with some farm servants who have been working with the same master continuously for few consecutive years. One such farm servant is Biren, who has been working since the last seven years. He started to work as a farm servant when he was 12 years old. He did not receive any cash payment for the first year. His wages has increased gradually later on. For the next six years he has received Rs. 100, Rs. 150, Rs. 250, Rs. 350, Rs. 500 and Rs. 600 in a year progressively. If some credit is taken from employer, the relationship becomes more enduring i.e., a sort of labour servitude still prevails. Religious background is an important consideration in order to appoint a farm servant. We have not come across a single case in the villages where a Hindu farmer has appointed a Muslim farm servant or vice-versa. But both the Muslim and the Hindu farmers do not hesitate to appoint a tribal farm servant.

Not only the absentee land owners but also a number of rich farmers keep farm servants. This is dependent upon a number of factors like : (1) size of holding - the need for one or more permanent labourer begins at the level of the rich farmers, i.e., those with holdings of 5 acres and above; (2) family composition i.e., if there is no adult male in the household to look after cultivation; (3) outside employment i.e., necessity of keeping farm servant appears if the household head is employed outside the village either in service or in business; (4) caste factor sometimes appears an important consideration for keeping farm servant.

The trend of keeping farm servant has developed due to decline of the share-cropping tenancy especially among the absentee land owners. Now the farmers, both local and absentee land owners, are reluctant to lease-out land to share-croppers. In such cases they arrange to cultivate the land with the help of hired labourers which often includes a farm servant.

But numerically the farm servants are very few in the studied villages. The land-ownership pattern is such that majority of the farmers do not need the service of a farm servant throughout the year. Most of them cannot afford to keep a farm servant because of high cost. There are a few households who own more than 10 acres of land, and is mostly of those among them that the practice of keeping a farm servant is seen. In a farm of this size the diversity of the cropping pattern and intensity of agricultural activity make it necessary to have a dependable person to work for the land-owner constantly.

In Bamangram, in the 10 households who keep farm servant, 6 are in the size-class owning more than 10 acres of land, 3 in the size-class 5 to 10 acres, and one in the size-class 2.5 to 5 acres. Households in the top two land-owning groups sometimes keep more than one farm servant. For example, one of the six households owning more than 10 acres of land keeps 3 farm servants.

In Batla-Bhita, two households in the size-class 5 to 10 acres keep farm servant. They keep one farm servant each. One of them gets Rs. 800 and the other Rs. 600 annually. The former is 26 years old and the latter is 21 years old.

In Alokjhora also it is the top two landed groups, i.e., the groups holding 5 to 10 acres, and above 10 acres need the service of farm servants. Out of a total of 11 households who keep farm servants 9 belong to the top two landed groups.

The employer and the farm servant generally go for a verbal annual contract. There is only one household in Alokjhora which has contracted a labourer for 3 months. Along with cultivation this householder is also a petty grain merchant. He has to move from one village market to another to purchase crops during the harvest season. For this, he has made a contract with a worker for 3 months to look after his cultivation. When the harvest season is over he becomes free to look after cultivation himself. In Bamangram, the contract between the employer and the farm servant has been made for 10 months. Whereas, in the other two villages the contract is made for the whole year. In Bamangram, the labourers go for contract in the month of Magh (January-February) and continue until the end of Kartik (October-

November). During the months of Agrahan (November-December) and Pous (December-January) they work in the harvesting and threshing of Aman paddy as free labourers.

Annual wages generally vary from Rs. 300 to Rs. 600, depending upon worker's age, physical strength, skill and efficiency, integrity and continuity of employment under the employer. Along with cash payment the farm servants are entitled to two meals and breakfast or tiffin. Besides they get the facilities like clothing and lodging. Payment is generally made in several instalments. One half is paid within a month or two of the contract and the rest is paid in the month of Aswin (September-October) and Kartik (October-November) after harvesting jute.

An Agricultural labourer generally does not like to work as farm servant. The reasons they put forward are as follows:

- (i) a casual labourer is able to earn more than a farm servant;
- (ii) a farm servant has to work for 12 hours while a casual labourer has to work for 8 hours in a day; and
- (iii) the employers often address the farm servants in derogatory terms which may not be possible in case of a casual labourer.

The following two tables show the nature of landholding position of the employers who keep farm servant and the wages the farm servants receive in Bamangram and Alokjhora.

Table -25

Farm-servants and wages by size-classes of household ownership of agricultural holdings in Bamangram

Size of holding (acres)	No. of HHS	No. of farm servants	Wages of the annually contract farm servants (in Rs.)		
			300-400	400-500	500-600
2.5-5	1	1	-	1	-
5-10	3	4	1	2	1
Above 10	6	9	2	5	2
Total	10	14	3	8	3

Table - 26

Farm-servants and wages by size-classes of household ownership of agricultural holdings in Alokjhora

Size of holding (acres)	No. of HHS	No. of farm servants	Wages of the annually contract farm servants (in Rs.)		
			300-400	400-500	500-600
2.5-5	2	2	-	1	1
5-10	3	3	2	1	-
Above 10	6	6	4	2	-
Total	11	11	6	4	1

Casual labourer

Most of the agricultural labourers in all the three villages are casual labourers, i.e., they have no permanent employer. In the above discussions we have seen that only a few agricultural labourers work as farm servant on annual basis.

Investigations carried out in other parts of West Bengal have also noted the existence of a higher percentage of casual labourers. Bardhan and Rudra in their report of a survey of 110 villages in West Bengal have stated that more than half of the agricultural families (i.e., cultivating plus agricultural labour families) are reported as labour families. Of these labour families 84 per cent are purely casual and the rest are attached or "semi-attached" (some members of the latter families may be working as casual labourers)¹.

They have also noted that the proportion of day wage earners has undergone a sharp increase during the preceding decades. This is a definite indication of the transition to a labour system in which contractual short-term relationships predominate. In a situation where there is surplus labour supply the employers think it advantageous to employ labour on day-to-day basis.

The casual labourers sometimes resemble the farm servants in the sense that, the former work for a restricted number of employers who sometimes secure their labour in advance by providing them with small loans in their times of need. Of course, this type of relationship is dependent upon a number of factors, like, if they belong to the same political party, especially when

1. P.K. Bardhan and A. Rudra, op. cit.

his employer is a local political leader, his working capacity, kinship relations and his informal relationship with the employer.

The employer and employee generally begin their relationship with the idea of an eight-hour working day, but there are mutual complaints that neither keeps to this. On the one hand the labourers are very emphatic that the employers make excessive demand and on the other hand, the employers say that the labourers do not work full time.

The casual labourers avoid the extra little jobs performed by the farm servant in and around the employers house. If they are asked to do the extra work after the scheduled time, they demand extra wages which may be fixed between the two in advance. But there are some casual labourers who are attached with some employers for whom they do some extra work without demanding any extra wages from their employers.

The female casual labourers receive lower wages (as we shall see later) inspite of the fact that they are to remain at work for the same time or the work they do is comparable with and sometimes even more strenuous than that performed by the male casual labourers.

Payment generally takes place at the end of the work. After work the labourers go straight to the employers house for payment. While making the payment some employers show as if they are making a favour to the worker by paying his due wages. Sometimes employers do not make the full payment. This happens especially in the slack season.

Contractual labour relation

The casual labourers sometimes work on contract basis. A price is agreed in advance or paid after the work done for a particular job, like, harvesting a plot of land, digging or making embankments, clearing roots from a plot of ground, constructing or repairing access roads and field channels etc. The contractual type of labour employment is observed not only in these villages but also in other parts of West Bengal as well as in India. Of course, the nature and extent of it vary very widely from one region to another. Breman has noted that, "its application is greatest in villages with new irrigated crops - a clear indication that this labour employment practice is connected with the transition to a more capitalist mode of production"¹.

The necessity of using contract labour emerges under certain special circumstances. The most important are : when the cultivators want to complete a given task within a short period and he cannot supervise the work of the wage labourers. In the contractual system, the employer need not supervise the work. Sometimes customary rules are responsible for contractual work. As for example, in Bamagram, workers are reluctant to work on daily basis at the time of harvesting. So they go for contract work which is locally called dini system. But such a system is not found in Batla-Bhita or in Alokjhora. Another factor tipping the

1. J. Breman. op. cit., p. 279.

balance in favour of contract work is that farmers can dodge the minimum wage legislation which stipulates payment on a daily basis in this way¹. This may be relevant in other places of India, but in the present villages both employers and employees are least bothered about the minimum wage legislation. The employers very often raise the charge of carelessness against the contract work resulting into lower harvest yield.

The carelessness is observed primarily due to two factors. Firstly, the labourer who has taken a contract try to complete the task as quickly even overlooking the quality of work. And further, in the piece rate all the family members irrespective of age, sex and skill participate in the work which sometimes leads to an unsatisfactory completion of the work.

The workers are benefitted economically in the contractual work. While in the non-contractual work, workers are hired independently but in the contractual work there is the scope for all the family members to be engaged in work. This provides them a better scope of earning. In the contractual work they start working from very early morning and continue till sun-set. In this way they can complete the work very quickly. The contractual system has some social consequences as well. For example, farmers and labourers safeguard themselves against direct and personal interference from one another.

1. J. Braham, op. cit.

There are of course different kinds of contractual labour relations in the villages. Sometimes, the payment is made in cash, and at other time in kind. In Bamangram, payment in kind (grain) is practised during harvesting of paddy, which is locally termed as dini system. A labourer under this system has to perform all sorts of harvesting operations from harvesting, carrying and threshing. The labourer generally gets 3 out of 20. Kathi is used as an unit of measurement - a sort of bamboo basket, which contains grains equivalent to 10 Kg.

Payment usually takes place in cash for clearing roots and weeds from a plot of land, harvesting of jute etc. If a labourer works alone generally he needs 3 days to complete the weeding for one bigha (0.33 acre) of land. The wage ranges from Rs. 30 to Rs. 50 for weeding one bigha (0.33 acre) of land. The wage-rate is dependent upon a number of factors like, (a) bargaining power of the labourer; (b) distance of land and (c) density of roots and weeds.

It is to be noted here that, in the contractual labour relation, a group unity is formed among the agricultural labourers. The farmer who gives the contract generally expects quick completion of work. In some contracts, it becomes necessary to engage additional workers besides the members of the family. Some additional hands are obtained usually from close kins and friends.

The employer cannot take the liberty of behaving improperly with his labourers as he does towards his farm servants. Here the relationship is less strenuous even cordial at times.

Some instances

(1) One large cultivator in Bamangram, made contract with four male labourers of different families for clearing roots from a plot of 0.33 acre jute field. He had to pay Rs. 40 for this work. The labourers started working at 7 a.m. and finished at around 2.30 p.m. without any break. The employers did not have to give any meal or tiffin to the labourers. Each labourer received Rs. 10 in this contract. The same employers also made contract with three married couples for weeding 0.66 acre jute field. The total amount of money in this contract was Rs. 80. The money was paid in two phases, half at the end of first day's work and the rest after finishing the work. The amount of money was comparatively lower in this contract than the former one. The most important reason was that female labourers were also engaged in this work. Each couple received Rs. 13.30 daily. They worked from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a break of one hour at noon and completed weeding after two days' labouring.

In an another contract in Bamangram, six labourers (all were males and of different families) received Rs. 250 for clearing roots from 0.66 acre jute field. They began working from early morning and continued till sun-set. In this way they finished the work after four days of labouring. Each labourer received marginally over Rs. 10 per day. During this period the wage rate for a male casual labourer was generally Rs. 9. Another four labourers jointly took a contract for weeding 0.66 acre jute field. They completed the work within a day and received Rs. 40.

(2) Three members of a family (husband, wife and their daughter) in Bamangram, made a contract for transplanting 0.33 acre paddy land. They had to work for two days from early morning till sunset and received Rs. 60. Another four labourers in this village worked for transplanting 0.66 acre paddy land and received Rs. 100. The work took two full days' labour. As we shall see in our later discussions that during the transplantation season in Bamangram, the overall wage rate for a male labourer was Rs. 11 and Rs. 8 for a female labourer.

(3) A labourer in Bamangram took the contract of harvesting and threshing a plot of 0.33 acre wheat land. His wife and children also helped him in this work. They received 10 kilograms wheat at the end of the work. In an another contract, three males and three females worked together for harvesting, carrying and threshing 1.66 acres paddy land. They received 200 kilograms paddy against this work.

The conclusion may be drawn from the above discussions that, in the contractual work, wages vary from one kind of work to another. Even in the same kind of work wages are not equal. In weeding, the wage rate primarily depends upon the density of roots and weeds. Payment in weeding is made in cash, whereas in harvesting, payment is given in kind. If female labourers are included the wage rates go down. In the contractual work, the labourers are not generally given any meal or tiffin. The labourers are marginally benefitted economically in this work.

Employment in non-agricultural work

The present study is concerned with labour relations in agriculture, but in order to understand rural dynamics we can not

restrict our enquiry to the agrarian sector alone. Outside employment opportunities are important to a agricultural labourer because of non-availability of work during the agricultural off-season. The access to the non-agricultural work can enhance both the bargaining power and the wage rate of the labourer. For example, the wage rate in Batla-Bhita is higher than the wage rate in Alokjhora. This is simply because, in the former village, the labourer has better access to non-agricultural work. If sufficient work is not available in the agricultural sector the labourers move to other areas, urban centres, industries etc. in search of livelihood. Thus scope and nature of non-farm work vary widely from village to village depending upon location, economy and social composition of the village. Roads and transportation have removed the isolation of a village. The expansion of small town has extended the employment opportunities in construction and a host of unskilled jobs in the urban centres. Our data show that in Alokjhora, most of the agricultural labourers are confined within the agrarian sector, while only a few have opportunity to work outside agriculture, whereas in the other two villages the agricultural labourers have comparatively better access to employments in the nearby urban area.

As there is no big industry in the region, the opportunity of employment in the industrial sector is highly restricted. They get work mainly in construction in the urban centres.

In Bamangram, out of 40 labourers interviewed 13 do not go outside the village to take up some non-agricultural work even in the lean agricultural season. They are not efficient in

the construction work. During the lean season of agriculture they remain in the village looking for such jobs as constructing thatching huts, digging channels and such odd jobs. However, of the sample interviewed 21 take up work in the construction sites, 3 take up rickshaw pulling and the rest 3 catch fish.

The agricultural labourers who seek employment in construction do not get work throughout the non-agricultural season. The average working-days range from 15 to 20 in a month. These labourers have to work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. The wage they receive in the construction work ranges from Rs. 11 to Rs. 12 with a tiffin at noon. The wage-rate is higher in the construction work than the existing wage-rate at village during the non-agricultural season but lower than the seasonal wage-rate of agriculture. The female labourers hardly go outside the village to work as construction labourer. This is primarily due to the poor communication system between the village and the town.

In Batla-Bhita, out of the total 21 respondents except 2, all others work in construction during the agricultural off-season. Here both men and women work as construction labourer. A male labourer generally receives Rs. 12 and a female labourer receives Rs. 10 for a day's work. Like the agrarian sector here also a female labourer is paid less than a male labourer. They do not face any major difficulty in getting work in construction.

In Alokjhora, out of 45 respondents 33 do not go outside the village during the agricultural off-season. It is not the fact that they do not need to go out of the village for work but

the opportunities to get outside employment is very meagre to them. Only one respondent in the village said he gets work in construction at Dinhata. Seven respondents said, they get work in the Marawari Bhavan at Dinhata on daily basis with a day-wage of Rs. 10 to Rs. 12 per day. The other one said, he goes to work as the assistant to a truck driver with a salary of Rs. 300 per month. Three respondents get work at other villages. This is not the fact that the neighbouring villages are agriculturally developed but these labourers get work due to personal connections with the employers of the neighbouring villages.

Table - 27

Sample households according to the nature of work in the non-farm sector in the three villages

Nature of work	Name of the villages					
		Bamagram		Batla-Bhita		Alokjhora
	No.	Avg. wage/ income per day (in Rs.)	No.	Avg. wage/ income per day (in Rs.)	No.	Avg. wage/ income per day (in Rs.)
Construction	21	12	19	12	1	10
Rickshaw puller	3	15 to 30	-	-	-	-
Fish catching	3	-	-	-	-	-
Assistant to truck driver	-	-	-	-	1	10
Other villages	-	-	-	-	3	7
Marawari Bhavan	-	-	-	-	7	10 to 12
Nil	13	-	2	-	33	-
Total	40		21		45	

Labour-time and employment

The working-day of an agricultural labourer generally begins at 8 a.m. and continues till 5 in the evening with an interval of one hour at noon for lunch. During the summer months (April-May to August-September) in Bamangram, the working-day begins at 6 a.m. and continues till 2 p.m. without any interval. There is no difference in the working hours of a male and female labourer. But the men normally do not work after returning home in the evening. Whereas before and after work in the fields the women work for five and six hours in and around the house. In the contractual work there is no fixed working hours.

The agricultural labourers in the studied villages are not able to obtain work for the whole year. In Bamangram, most labourers said that they have regular daily work in the following months : Baisakh, Jaistha, Asar, Bhadra, Agrahan and Magh (April-May, May-June, June-July, August-September, November-December and January-February). They do not get work for the full months of Falgun (February-March), Chaitra (March-April), Sravan (July-August) and in the first 15 days of Kartik (October-November). They get hardly any work in the month of Aswin (September-October) and Pous (December-January). The agricultural labourers particularly the women in Alokjhora do not get work for the full months even in the peak season. Wage labour in the fields are available for about 3 to 4 months in a year to a woman and for about 7 to 8 months in a year to a man, though not for all men and women. Most labourers in Batla-Bhita said when they do not get work in the field they get work in the construction

sites. Some illustrations will help us to understand the annual cycle of employment of male and female labourers in the agrarian sector in the villages.

Some illustrations

(a) Md.Nurul , Bamangram, 30 male agricultural labourer

Details of Nurul's employment throughout the year (1988)

Month	Activity	No. of days worked
Baisak (April-May)	Weeding jute and HYV paddy	30
Jaistha (May-June)	Weeding jute and harvesting HYV Paddy	30
Asar (June-July)	Transplanting Aus paddy, weeding jute and harvesting HYV paddy	30
Sravan (July-August)	Transplanting Aman paddy and harvesting jute	20
Bhadra (August-September)	Weeding Aman paddy, harvesting and extracting jute, harvesting and threshing Aus paddy	30
Aswin (September-October)	Weeding Aman paddy, harvesting and extracting jute	10
Kartik (October-November)	Manuring the pulses field, sowing wheat etc.	15
Agrahayan (November-December)	Harvesting and threshing Aman paddy	30
Pous (December-January)	Harvesting and threshing Aman paddy	10
Magh (January-February)	Harvesting pulses and transplanting HYV paddy	15
Chaitra (March-April)	Weeding HYV paddy, harvesting wheat etc.	20
Total days		270

(b) Anima Barman, Bamangram, 26, female agricultural labourer
 Details of Anima's employment throughout the year (1988)

Month	Activities	No. of days worked
Baishak (April-May)	Weeding jute and HYV paddy	20
Jaistha (May-June)	Weeding jute and harvesting HYV paddy	20
Asar (June-July)	Transplanting Aus paddy, weeding jute and harvesting HYV paddy	30
Sravan (July-August)	Transplanting Aman paddy	15
Bhadra (August-September)	Weeding Aman paddy, harvesting and threshing Aus paddy	30
Aswin (September-October)	No work	-
Karti (October-November)	No work	-
Agrahayan (November-December)	Harvesting and threshing Aman paddy	30
Pous (December-January)	No work	-
Magh (January-February)	Harvesting pulses and transplanting HYV paddy	30
Falgun (February-March)	Transplanting and weeding HYV paddy	15
Chaitra (March-April)	Weeding HYV paddy	15
Total days		205

(c) Sambaru Barman, Alokjhora, 32, male agricultural labourer

Details of Sambaru's employment throughout the year (1988)

Month	Activities	No. of days worked
Baishak (April-May)	Weeding jute and Aus paddy	20
Jaistha (May-June)	Weeding jute	15
Asar (June-July)	Transplanting HYV paddy and harvesting jute	22
Sraavan (July-August)	Transplanting HYV paddy, Aman paddy and harvesting jute	25
Bhadra (August-September)	Extracting jute	15
Aswin (September-October)	Manuring the tobacco field	10
Kartik (October-November)	Manuring and transplanting the tobacco field	10
Agrahayan (November-December)	Harvesting HYV and Aman paddy	25
Pous (December-January)	Harvesting, threshing Aman paddy and irrigating the tobacco field	20
Magh (January-March)	Harvesting and binding tobacco	18
Falgun (February-March)	Harvesting and binding tobacco	12
Chaitra (March-April)	Weeding Aus paddy, jute, pulses	20
Total days		219

(d) Fuleswari Barman, Alokjhora, 31, female agricultural labourer

Details of Fuleswari's employment throughout the year (1988)

Month	Activities	No. of days worked
Baishak (April-May)	Weeding Aus paddy, jute and pulses	15
Jaistha (May-June)	Weeding jute	10
Asar (June-July)	Transplanting HYV paddy	18
Sravan (July-August)	Transplanting Aman paddy	15
Bhadra (August-September)	No work	-
Aswin (September-October)	No work	-
Kartik (October-November)	Harvesting HYV paddy	15
Agrahayan (November-December)	Harvesting Aman paddy	12
Pous (December-January)	No work	-
Magh (January-February)	No work	-
Falgun (February-March)	No work	-
Chaitra (March-April)	Weeding Aus paddy, jute and pulses	10
Total days		95

Discussion

From a comparison of the above illustrations we can draw the following tentative conclusions and implications :

- (1) The employers in general do not prefer a woman labourer in the work like preparatory tillage and ploughing, harvesting and peeling jute from stalks, manuring, irrigating and binding tobacco.
- (2) The agricultural labourers as a whole do not get work in the agriculture throughout the year.
- (3) The male labourers have more opportunity to get work than the female labourers in the agriculture.
- (4) The male and female labourers in Alokjhora face more difficulty in getting work than the male and female labourers in Bamagram.

Wage

The whole agricultural operations have been divided into four broad categories. They are : preparatory tillage and ploughing, transplanting, weeding and harvesting, carrying and threshing the harvest. The employment of the female labourers remain relatively high during harvest, transplentation and weeding seasons; whereas the male labourers are employed throughout the agricultural operations.

Table - 28

Operation-wise cash wage per day for casual labourers
in the three villages (1988)

Operations	Wages for casual labourers by sex (in Rs.)					
	Male	Bamangram Female	Male	Batla-Bhita Female	Male	Alokjhora Female
Preparatory tillage and ploughing	10.00	-	11.00	-	7.00	-
Transplantation	11.00	8.00	13.00	9.00	8.00	5.00
Weeding	9.00	6.00	11.00	7.00	7.00	4.00
Harvesting, carrying and threshing	Payment is made in kind	-	12.00	8.00	8.00	5.00
All operations	100.00	7.00	11.75	8.00	7.50	4.66

The above figures show substantial variation in the wage rates between different operations. The wages remain high during the two peak seasons: transplantation and harvesting. The wage rate also varies widely from one village to another. It is further seen that a female labourer gets low wages than their male counterparts throughout the agricultural operations.

The preparatory tillage and ploughing work is done only by the male labourers. In Bamangram, the overall wage rate for a male labourer is Rs. 11.00 while for a female labourer it is Rs. 7.00. In Batla-Bhita, the overall wage rate for a male labourer is Rs. 11.75 and for a female labourer is Rs. 8.00. In Alokjhora, on an average a male labourer gets Rs. 7.50 as against

Rs. 4.66 for a female labourer. Moreover, the labourers in all the three villages get meal at noon

If we make a comparative analysis of the existing wage rates in all the three villages, it is evident that the wage rate vary from one village to another. The average wage rates for both male and female labourers in Batla-Bhita remain comparatively higher than that in other two villages throughout the agricultural operations. This is primarily because, here, access to the outside employment opportunity is high. The labourers option for urban jobs creates a kind of labourer crisis and this in turn keeps the labour price high. The wage rates vary for other reasons also. The most important contributing factors are : labour supply, cropping pattern, agricultural development, availability of urban jobs, etc.

Income and expenditure

The socio-economic status of the agricultural labourer families is more or less same. Most of them are landless and the main means of production is their physical labour. The factors which can create some differences in the socio-economic status of the agricultural labourer families living in the different villages and sometimes within the same village are : (i) the wages; (ii) the opportunity to work as wage labourer in the agricultural and non-agricultural fields, (iii) the number of working members in a family and (iv) whether the family still own or cultivate some land.

The agricultural labourer household consists of the husband, his wife, their children and sometimes the husband's parents and their unmarried children, although the latter case is not common. The usual practice is that after marriage a man puts up a separate shelter for himself, his wife and future family.

Most of the agricultural labourers in the villages are completely landless. Those few families who own land is too small, or too bad or both, to be a viable source of income. Thus the bulk of the income is undoubtedly income from cash wages.

It is difficult to assess the time for which men and women are employed during the years. Only the farm servants have more or less permanent employment, but their wages is just enough to guarantee their survival. The employment of men and women as casual labour is irregular. This makes it difficult to ascertain their income correctly.

The following accounts of income and expenditure in three households of the three villages give an idea about the total income and expenditure. These accounts, however, should not be taken as accurate accounts of all income and all expenditure of these households. It is not possible to make accurate accounts in monetary terms, since production for home consumption is usually not calculated in monetary terms.

Some case studies

(a) Manoranjan, Alokjhora, 31, male

His family consists of four members: Manoranjan, his wife and two children. His wife is a casual labourer and the eldest

daughter is a maid servant. The eldest daughter lives in her employers house and gets only food and clothing for herself. Besides the homestead land the family is landless. During the non-agricultural seasons, Manoranjan, tries to find work in the urban areas. The wages they get are not sufficient even when they have work. They cannot save anything for the lean months. They consume 1.5 kg of rice per day (Rs. 4.00) and spend Rs. 3.00 on other items. Annually they spend Rs. 150 on clothes.

A. Annual income

<u>Wages</u>	<u>In cash (Rs.)</u>
Husband: Rs. 7.50 per day (219 days)	1642.50
Wife : Rs. 4.66 per day (95 days)	442.70
<hr/>	<hr/>
Total	2085.20

B. Annual expenditure

Rice : 1.5 kg per day (365 days)	1641.00
Other items : Rs. 3 per day (365 days)	1095.00
Clothes :	150.00
<hr/>	<hr/>
Total	2886.00

C. Difference between income and expenditure -Rs. 800.80

In this family only the most essential requirements for the satisfaction of the basic needs, namely food and clothing, are included in the family budgets because they use practically all their income for their sustenance. Still the family has a

deficit of Rs. 800.80 per year. If the income from non-agricultural work (Rs. 300 to 400) is counted the deficit will not be so high. Even if it is included still the income is insufficient to cover the basic annual consumption needs. The continuing deficit between consumption needs and income is made up partly by reducing consumption and partly through other subsistence work like, selling dung-cakes, grass etc.

(b) Sishu, Batla-Bhita, 28, male

Sishu's family has five members : himself, his wife and three children. Sishu and his wife work as agricultural as well as construction labourers. He does not face much difficulty in getting work throughout the year. He normally takes leave for a day (in a week) to take rest. He takes himself off usually on Tuesday, which is the local market day. Along with many other food items he normally buy fish on this day. Sometimes he cannot work for illness or other reasons. On an average he works for 9 months in a year.

A. Annual income

<u>Wages</u>		<u>in cash (Rs.)</u>
Husband	: Rs. 11.75 per day (9 months)	3172.50
Wife	: Rs. 8.00 per day (9 months)	2160.00
<hr/>		
Total		5332.50
<hr/>		

B. Annual expenditure

	<u>in cash (Rs.)</u>
Rice : 2 kg per day (365 days)	2190.00
Wheat : 1 kg per day (365 days)	822.00
Other food :	800.00
Clothes :	400.00
Transport :	400.00
<hr/>	
Total	4612.00
<hr/>	

C. Difference between income and expenditure

+Rs. 720.50

The family budget shows that it has a surplus of Rs. 720.50 per year which they spent on recreation (mainly smoking). The family has no deficit because it has more or less regular employment and the wage rate is comparatively high. In this family transport cost is an important part of expenditure. Both Sishu and his wife has to go to Siliguri for work in the construction sites. For this, they have to spend Rs. 4 per day on transport and Rs. 2 on tiffin.

(c) Nabin, Bamangram, 38, male

Nabin's family consists of five people : his wife and three children (one boy and two girls). Nabin and his wife work as casual labourers and their eldest son works as a farm servant. The eldest son gets Rs. 200 per year along with food and clothes. They consume 1.5 kg of rice and 1 kg of wheat per day and spend Rs. 4.00 on other food items, that is, for food they spend Rs. 10.75 per day. Per year they spend Rs. 300 on clothes.

<u>A. Annual income</u>		in cash (Rs.)
Husband	: Rs. 10.00 per day (270 days)	2700.00
Wife	Rs. 7.00 per day (205 days)	1435.00
Son	: Rs. 200 per year	200.00
Total		4335.00

<u>B. Annual expenditure</u>		
Rice	: 1.5 kg per day (365 days)	1641.00
Wheat	: 1 kg per day (365 days)	822.00
Other food	: Rs. 4 per day (365 days)	1460.00
Clothes	:	300.00
Total		4223.00

C. Difference between income and expenditure + Rs. 112.00

The family has a surplus of Rs. 112 per year after covering its consumption requirements which Nabin spends usually on smoking.

From a comparison of the above family budgets it is seen that in all the three families the wage income of the women is always less than that of the husband. Nonetheless, the woman's wage income constitutes a substantial part of the family income. The income of the husband alone is not enough to cover all their consumption needs. The family in Alokjhora faces great difficulties in meeting their consumption needs because of low wage and irregular employment. Comparatively, the families in Bamangram

and Batla-Bhita perhaps are more assured of two square meals a day because of regular employment and a little better wages.

Distribution of income within the household

From the above discussions it may be said that the agricultural labourer families can only survive if the income of all the members are put together and used judiciously. In a male dominated society one can easily notice that the income is not equally distributed within the family. Usually, the distribution of the income within the family follows the patriarchal pattern, that is, the men get or keep to themselves a bigger share of the cake.

The usual practice is that, the men consider their wages as their own income, particularly if it is in cash. Women have no control over the husbands' income. Men often use a share of their income for drinking, smoking or whatever they like. The women, on the other hand, spend all their earnings on the immediate family consumption needs, their daily wages being used to buy the daily food. The supplementary income from their non-wage work is also used immediately for day-to-day family consumption.

There seems to be an ongoing struggle between men and women on income distribution within the family over the question of who would exercise keeps control over the money. In most workers' families, the men control the money. In few cases, men and women control the money jointly, that is, men have the responsibility for certain expences, the women for others. Bigger items of expenditure are usually decided by the men. The wives have control over money in those families where the men is

jobless or old or sick, and therefore the responsibility for the family income and expenditure dwells upon women. The unquestionable dominance of men in the management of family economy seems to be unavoidable at the moment. But this might lead to greater dissatisfaction among the women in the long run.

Employer-employee relationship and other consequences

In the agrarian sector the working conditions are completely different from those in the large scale industrial or organized sector. In an organized sector, the workers generally work under the same employer. Hence the attitude of the employer towards the workers remain more or less same. Here, the working hours and working place are predetermined, though in some cases, the working conditions may vary from one industry to another. On the contrary, in the agrarian sector, all the agricultural labourers of a village do not work under the same employers. Even a given agricultural labourer does not work for a particular employer throughout the year. If a labourer is employed for a year by an employer he is an exception to this general practice. A labourer changes his employer either for better wages or for getting employment elsewhere because his employer does not need his services throughout the year. Besides, the attitude of all the employers to the labourers is not very friendly, which might also be the cause of changing an employer.

These differences in attitude definitely affect the agricultural labourers unity and organized movement. The agricultural labourers today under the present production relations mostly work as casual labour. A casual labourer is generally employed on daily

basis. He has the option to change his employer after the completion of the day's work. But in some cases it is found that some of the labourers have been working under the same employer throughout the year. In such cases the employer advances small amount of consumption loan to the labourer during the off-seasons when employment is less available. The labourer comes at master's house on occasion and takes his meal. He is mentally prepared to do a extra work for his master outside the scheduled work without any extra payment. Neither the employer nor the employee try to break this kind of informal relationship, as one needs the cooperation of other. If this kind of relationship is developed, the employer does not have to go outside whenever he needs to hire labourer even in the peak agricultural season. On the other hand, the labourer is also assured of work and periodic loans which he needs very badly during the lean seasons.

The impersonal relationship between employer and employee is dependent upon a number of factors. This primarily depends upon the extent to which the labourers are subservient and obedient to their employers. The loyalty of the labourers also depends upon a number of factors, i.e., unemployment, outside employment opportunities, political factors etc. We have observed that the employers bear different attitudes towards different labourers in these village.

In Bamangram and in Batla-Bhita, there is no organized movement among the labourers against the employers for better wages or on occupation of vested land. It is important to mention

here that, this kind of movement must affect the non-conflicting informal relations between employer and employee. In Alokjhora, a few years back, a section of the agricultural labourers tried to organize a wage movement and tried to occupy the land of a village land owner. These movements no doubt affected the attitude of the employers towards the labourers.

The credit relations between employer and employee differ from one village to another as we shall see in our later discussions. But some other sorts of obligations like social (i.e., they belong to the same caste/community), neighbourhood and political (i.e., in some cases both employer and employee belong to the same political party) exist. This is reflected in the recruitment of labourer. A cultivator generally finds labourer within the hamlet and within his caste/community. The political affiliation is also taken into account in recruiting the labourer.

In the organized sector, the contract between employer and employee is written. In contrast, in the agrarian sector the contract is always oral. Here, a given employer makes contract with a given employee individually. This personal and oral type of contract contributes to the differential attitude of the employers in the agricultural sector. We have seen that, the wage rates vary not only from one village to another but also within the village. Not only that, the wage rates vary from one season to another and not all the labourers of a village get equal wage in a given season. Of course, the wage rate is largely dependent upon the physical ability of the labourer.

Hence we find that the employers in different villages possess different attitude towards the employees as it is dependent upon a number of factors. Even the employers of a particular village do not treat all the labourers equally. As a result of which all the labourers do not look at their employers with the same eye. This differential treatment may be the root of division among the agricultural labourers. When a labourer is victimized other labourers do not come forward to support him. The differential state of existence stands as a hindrance in the way to forming a working class movement.

The working conditions not only affect the attitudes of the employers but also affect the physical (i.e., health), mental and cultural aspects of their life. They have to work with primitive technology under primitive working conditions.

To the agricultural labourer, working place is not specified. They have to work in the land of a number of owners. If the land is located away from the village he has to start his journey early in the morning in order to reach at the working place in time. Moreover, we have seen during the non-agricultural season, they have been going to the nearest town for seeking non-agricultural work. In Bamangram, we have seen a labourer has been reaching at working place in the non-farm work before 8 a.m. after crossing around five kilometres by walk. In Alokjhora also, the workers to avoid the transport cost going to the working place at town crossing around four kilometres by walk. When the labourers find work within the village they get some extra time for leisure or other kinds of work.

The working day begins at 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. with an interval of one hour at noon. When the labourers go outside the village for work in the construction sites they have to wake up at around 5 a.m., cook and eat their meals and to appear to the working spot before 8 a.m. When the work is not sure they have to reach there before 7 a.m. in search of work.

In the contract system there is no specific hours of work. They start their work before the sun shine and continue till the late evening due to the urgency of its quick completion. During the harvesting season, which is strictly contractual in nature, we have seen in Bamangram, labourers have been working even at night with kerosin light.

In the organized sector, workers have specified number of holidays. In contrary to this, to the agricultural labourer there is no specified holidays. Here, if a labourer does not like to work for a day, it simply means that there will be no payment for the day. Hence, the agricultural labourer has to work throughout the year under all season. These includes hot, humid weather along with heavy rains and cold weather. We have seen them to work under brazen heat to heavy showers without an umbrella. In the winter season, one can see them to work without sufficient hot clothes. They have to work under sub-human conditions, even some of them are savage. We have also seen that during peeling jute from stalks, a labourer has to spend hour after hour in the stagnant water.

The wage they receive for their works is not even sufficient to meet their subsistence needs. With the present rate of earning they can neither increase the standard of nutritional intake or cultural life. We have seen that not only the parents are engaged in earning but also their children are pushed into work for wage.

The sub-human working conditions must affect the social and cultural life of the labourers. They adopt themselves to these sub-human conditions which prevail, because they know it very well that there is no alternative for them to seek work in other places. They also know it that, one just cannot aspire to possess a few luxuries of life which could make one more human. The primitive nature of work also affects their health and the healthy growth of their children because of poor nutritional content of their diet, where more emphasis is given to the quantity of food consumed rather than the quality, and the inadequate medical facilities.

The primitive working conditions force them to go out for work early in the morning and return only at late evening. As there is no specified holidays to them, they hardly find any free time to devote to raise his cultural standards taking part in recreational activities, political activities etc. It is generally expected that, one's mental ability can increase through consulting books, news-papers, journals, or with other personnel and participating in the different occasions. We have seen almost all the labourers are illiterate or "semi-literate". On the day when they remain unemployed, they are so bothered about collecting their subsistence that they hardly find any

mental strength to give a thought to all these activities. Their whole thinking is centred around how to keep themselves and their family members alive.

Hence, we find that the prevailing working condition has kept the agricultural labourers isolated from the changing taking place in the outside world and leaves little scope for improving their present state of existence. A change in the working condition like better wage, assured employment, reduction in the working hours can lead to some improvement in their standard of life. Normally, an agricultural labourer does not have to work more than eight hours a day during the agricultural season. But during the non-agricultural season, the employers take an edge over the demands of the agricultural labourers. During the lean season an agricultural labourer is compelled to work for a larger period and at a lower wage.