

CHAPTER - VII

GROWTH OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS AND THE
CONSEQUENT EFFECT ON THE ECONOMY OF THE
WESTERN DUARS

SECTION 1 : INTRODUCTION

VII.1.1 One of the important facets of the structural changes in the agricultural economy is the growth in the number of agricultural labourers. Agricultural labourers constitute a very important component of the rural population in today's West Bengal and so also in the district of Jalpaiguri, accounting for about one-third and two-fifths of the rural workers respectively. Our data from various secondary sources would show that the district of Jalpaiguri has witnessed a very high rate of growth in the number of agricultural labourers compared to the State of West Bengal as a whole between the census periods 1951 to 1961, 1961 to 1971 and 1971 to 1981. It is necessary to inquire in some detail the causes of this high rate of growth in their number.

VII.1.2 It has been held that in the recent past "most of the leading economists have tried to penetrate the smoke-screen of value neutral econometric measurements of rates of growth of production and productivity over time and space. Attention is given much more towards understanding the changes in the modes of production. The governmental policy was to change the mode mainly through improvement in productive forces through the HYV programme in controlled

irrigation areas and to allow the production relations to adjust themselves to the induced changes in productive forces. The inhibiting and distorting effects of relations of production conducive to unfettered reproduction were discernible to careful observers even in the early period of upswing in the hinterland of the so-called Green Revolution, i.e., Punjab and Haryana. In other words, a large body of economists in India are at no state very much enamoured by the so-called technological solution of the problem of stupendous social transformation of Indian agriculture"¹. Later on, it appeared that the controversy "had bogged down in an exercise of putting labels like 'capitalism', 'semi-feudalism', 'commercial capitalism', etc., on various categories"² of modes of production. Thus it appears that in the debate on the relative importance of the raising of agricultural productivity through technological transformation and attainment of greater economic and social justice and welfare, the balance of opinion was strongly weighed in favour of the changes in the modes and scales of production, modes of surplus realisation and "much less on the social existence form of labour power which is the basic, the decisive factor in the various modes of production"³.

VII.1.3 In regard to the state of growth of agricultural labourers it becomes apparent from table VII.1 that there has been a fantastic growth in the number of agricultural labourers in the Western Duars region of the district of Jalpaiguri as well as in the whole district, compared to the State of West Bengal as a whole. The percentage

growth of agricultural labourers was +582.17% during 1951-61, +264.15% during 1961-71 and +103.5% during 1971-81 in the whole district of Jalpaiguri; while the percentage growth in the State, was +81.85% , +51.08% and +19.10% respectively during the corresponding decades. On an average, the annual addition to the agricultural labour force in the district has been to the order of 58% in the decade 1951-61, 26% in the decade 1961-71 and 10% in the decade 1971-81. While in the State this addition has been at the rate of 5%, 8% and about 2% respectively in the decades under study. In the Western Duars, the corresponding figures were about 108%, 19% and 9% respectively. It is, therefore, necessary to probe into the causes of this phenomenon and to determine as to how far it has been by real changes in the modes of production and to what extent due to the "social existence form" obtaining in the district and region of our study.

TABLE VII. 1 - RATE OF GROWTH OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI, IN THE STATE OF WEST BENGAL AND IN THE WESTERN DUARS REGION DURING 1951-61 TO 1971-81 (PERCENTAGES).

District/State/ Region	1951-61	1961-71	1971-81
Jalpaiguri	+582.17	+264.15	+103.50
West Bengal	+ 51.08	+ 81.85	+ 19.10
Western Duars	+1077.87	+194.44	+ 93.89

Source : Census of India, 1951, 1961, 1971 and 1981.

SECTION 2 : AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

VII.2.1 It would not be out of place if we start with a brief historical background of the origin of agricultural labourers in the district and in the region of our study under the British rule. It would help us to understand as to how the origin and growth of agricultural labourers corresponded with the land-tenure policy of the colonial government and would also show as to how, by the 1930s, the land-man ratio turned against the labourers which led to a worsening of their conditions. We would then examine the development during the recent decades from 1951 to 1981 when the proportion of agricultural labourers among the cultivators in rural areas reached new heights.

VII.2.2 Determination of the possible size of the class of agricultural labourers in the pre-British as well as in the first half of the British rule in the Duars region and in the district of Jalpaiguri is rather difficult, because apart from a few comments here and there, we seldom find data giving any idea about the quantitative importance of this class. It is difficult to say that there existed a class of agricultural labourers during the Bhutta period. Land-man ratio was extremely favourable as most of the lands were filled with jungles and waiting to be brought under cultivation. In the first half of the British rule the situation remained more or less unaltered due to the scarcity of cultivation. In fact, to attract cultivators, lands were leased out to jotedars at very

favourable terms compared to their counterpart in the permanently settled portion of the district as well as in the neighbouring districts⁴. It may be reiterated here that the dominant form of land management in the Western Duars was based on jotedari-adhiari system, (or in another common local parlance giri -adhiari system), which left little scope for non-adhiari hired labour employment. Sharecropping in the district of Jalpaiguri differed considerably in its form and extent from those which obtained in other parts of Bengal. "In Central Bengal, share cropping, though prevalent was more adjunct to the dominant form of ownership cultivation"⁵. But in the Western Duars region and in the district of Jalpaiguri share croppers were the mainstay in the continuation and expansion of cultivation. Jotedars and their sub-tenants used to employ adhiars to cultivate their lands in addition to their own cultivation and sub-leasing to sub-tenants. The terms of adhiari contracts were also much favourable to adhiars in the Western Duars part of the district of Jalpaiguri. Here, unlike the permanently settled part of the district, as well as most other districts of Bengal, landowners provided adhiars with all inputs and implements of agriculture and the adhiars only provided actual manual labour, but, the adhiars' share was the same in both cases⁶. Adhiars comprised of people from tribal and semi-tribal communities who came to this area to cultivate lands on favourable terms⁷. These people were lured by the chances of having some land of their own to undertake a totally labour-intensive reclamation of the areas. After reclamation, they were allowed to cultivate as adhiars without any tenancy rights⁸.

VII.2.3 Thus, adhiari or sharecropping as the dominant form of cultivation in the Western Duars region and in the district Jalpaiguri had emerged historically as the result of a combination of circumstances. Firstly, large areas of cultivable unreclaimed land resulted in a favourable land-man ratio which enabled the extension of cultivation through labour intensive methods. Complementary to this was the available sizeable labour force from tribal and semi-tribal population, habituated to low subsistence levels and practising rain-fed mono-crop cultivation with negligible material inputs. In the early part of the British rule, therefore, the main factor behind the non-emergence of a district class of landless agricultural labourers was the system of cultivation by adhiars. The adhiars, in fact, took the position of agricultural labourers though there was an obvious difference between the two. Our discussion on adhiars in Chapter III shows that adhiars were treated as labourers and denied any rights on lands cultivated by them and the produce-share they obtained was regarded as wages in kind paid to them. This is also evident from the earliest account left by Mr. Hunter. He wrote in 1872 : "There is no tendency towards the growth of a distinct class of day-labourers in Jalpaiguri District, neither renting land nor possessing fields of their own. Almost every man in the District till a little plot of ground for himself. Several of the smaller husbandmen, however, in addition to cultivating their own small patches, also tills the fields of others, receiving in return for their labour a one-half share of the crop...."⁹ Hunter further noted, "There are very few regular day-labourers or agricultural labourers in Jalpaiguri District, but men can be obtained when

required at from 3 to 4 annas (4½d to 6d) a day. The small cultivators themselves, when not actually engaged on their own fields, also hire themselves out as day-labourers"¹⁰. It also occurs from further evidence that even in the first decade of the twentieth century, agricultural labourers were extremely few in number. As Gruning in his Gazetteer of the district of Jalpaiguri in 1911 pointed out : "The landless agricultural labourer hardly exists; his place is taken to some extent by the adhiar, who cultivates a piece of land and receives half the produce. Want of sufficient agricultural labour has much retarded the extension of cultivation in the Western Duars"¹¹.

VII.2.4 Indeed, the demand for labour particularly rose very high in the first decade of this century due to the commercialisation of agriculture. The cultivation of jute rose by 113% between 1901-02 and 1907-08, while the cultivation of tobacco rose by about 6% during this time¹². It is a common fact that, the cultivation of jute requires a comparatively larger number of labourers. So also is the case of tobacco cultivation. During this period, it is not improbable that some part of the extension of commercial agriculture took place in the lands cultivated by adhiars who were evicted in the process from these lands thereby reducing some adhiars to the position of landless labourers¹³. Thus, in the process of extension of commercial cultivation, lands were made available by evicting adhiars and at the same time some demand for additional labour was met from this pool of adhiars turned into agricultural labourers. However, the scale of eviction was in all probabilities very small,

due to favourable land-man ratio and as the pace of extension of commercial cultivation did not last long.

VII.2.5 In the latter part of the 1920s and the earlier part of the 1930s, the great event which caused the immiserisation of the peasantry of the district was the Great Depression. Due to the continuous falling of prices of agricultural goods most of the jotedars and chukanidars could not pay their land revenue dues, and their lands were sold in auction by the government for the realisation of revenue arrears. Though no precise figures are available, it appears that many of the landholders were dispossessed of their lands in the process and the lands passed into the hands of the rich merchants and traders¹⁴. It can be reasonably assumed that after the Depression was over, at least some of the dispossessed peasants could not regain their earlier position and hence turned into agricultural labourers. The origin of the class of agricultural labourer in the district can reasonably be traced to this period of Great Depression of the 1930s.

VII.2.6 In the late forties, another important event which touched the peasantry of the district and that of the Western Duars was the Tebhaga movement as noted earlier in Chapter III. We have come to know that agricultural labourers also participated in this movement, though it was primarily a movement organised by the adhiars. This uprising of a large section of the peasantry has an important bearing on the growth of agricultural labour class. Although the movement took the most violent form in this district during 1946-47,

the background was actually prepared a few years ago. At the early 1940s the usual cordial relationship that was there between land-owners (giris or jotedars) and share croppers (adhiars) started to deteriorate. Adhiars began to protest against the oppression of their giris. Giris could smell the advent of such a movement. In consequence some of the adhiars were evicted from land and turned into landless labourers. That some of the adhiars had been evicted is borne out by the fact that, total land under adhi during 1931-35 settlement of the Western Duars fell by 21.69% compared to the 1906-16 settlement. Moreover, despite the fact that the number of adhiars were not recorded in the 1931-35 settlement, it is still discernible from the figures of area operated by them that their number had fallen due to eviction¹⁵. These adhiars turned out from land, had no alternative but to become agricultural labourers.

SECTION 3 : AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

VII.3.1 After independence and partition of India in 1947, large number of refugee peasants, many belonging to the Scheduled Castes from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) immigrated into the comparatively less densely populated Northern districts of West Bengal¹⁶. One of the largest recipients of refugee population was the district of Jalpaiguri. The large influx of refugees from East Pakistan was reflected in the significant growth of population in this district and in its Western Duars region in the decade 1951-61 compared to the later decades as is evident from table VII.2 below. Density of

TABLE VII.2 -RATE OF GROWTH OF TOTAL POPULATION, RURAL POPULATION AND DENSITY OF POPULATION IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI, IN THE WESTERN DUARS REGION AND IN THE STATE OF WEST BENGAL DURING 1951-1981 (PERCENTAGES).

District/Region/ State	Rate of growth of population			Rate of growth of rural population			Rate of growth of density of population		
	1951-61	1961-71	1971-81	1951-61	1961-71	1971-81	1951-61	1961-71	1971-81
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Jalpaiguri	48.63	28.76	26.55	45.63	28.05	20.33	47.65	27.27	27.14
Western Duars	41.56	27.49	29.80	42.79	25.15	22.21	41.89	26.19	31.32
West Bengal	32.77	26.87	23.17	31.79	26.38	20.36	33.11	26.63	22.02

Source : Census of India, 1951, 1961, 1971 and 1981.

population increased significantly as is exhibited in this table. The pace and pressure of population growth began to disturb the low level equilibrium of the system prevailing in the district. It is quite reasonable to believe that a certain percentage of the immigrant refugee peasants undertook the job of agricultural labour as a full time occupation, since not all of them came to India with enough money and capital. The continuous immigration of refugees resulted in a very sharp rise in the number of agricultural labourers in the decade as is evident from table VII.1. In this decade, agricultural labourers increased by 1077.87% in the Western Duars region and by 582.17% in the whole district of Jalpaiguri. It was a very high rate indeed, compared to the 51.08% rate of growth of agricultural labourers in the State as a whole. Thus, the local, regional and demographic factors once favourable to sharecropping as a form of cultivation in the district now began to turn adverse. Proportion of agricultural labourers to total rural population and to total rural workers gradually rose as shown respectively in tables VII.3 and VII.4.

TABLE VII.3 - PERCENTAGE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS TO TOTAL RURAL POPULATION IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI, IN THE STATE OF WEST BENGAL AND IN THE WESTERN DUARS REGION FROM 1951 TO 1981

District/State/ Region	1951	1961	1971	1981
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Jalpaiguri	0.26	1.20	3.41	5.77
West Bengal	5.77	6.72	9.51	9.41
Western Duars	0.17	1.42	3.35	5.31

Sources: Census of India, Jalpaiguri District Handbook, 1951, 1961, 1971 & 1981.

TABLE VII.4 - PERCENTAGE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS TO TOTAL RURAL WORKERS IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI, IN THE STATE OF WEST BENGAL AND IN THE WESTERN DUARS REGION FROM 1951 TO 1981

District/ State/Region	1951	1961	1971	1981
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Jalpaiguri	1.29	3.05	10.83	17.78
West Bengal	18.97	20.24	35.00	32.95
Western Duars	1.63	3.68	10.45	16.12

Source : Census of India, 1951, 1961, 1971 & 1981.

VII.3.2 We have now made an attempt to analyse the major changes that took place in the agrarian society of Western Duars together with the district as a whole since the 50s of the present century. We have also tried to delineate the consequences of these changes on the economy of the Western Duars as well as on the economy of the district as a whole. First, there occurred an adverse change in land-man ratio due to the growth of population. No new job opportunities either in the agricultural or in other sectors were created. This affected the relationship between the agricultural labourers and their employers. The usefulness of the "patron-client relationship" declined from the point of view of the employer with steady and regular supply of labour. They were now less willing to carry the burden of an attached hired labourers, permanently tied on him, whom

he fed, provided shelter or looked after, when he had the option of hiring labour power as much or as little as he needed from the market"¹⁷. The growing landlessness and joblessness, on the other hand, now meant that the ethnic composition of the agricultural labourers changed, as a large number of non-tribals and those from not so low castes entered the rural job market. Secondly, landlessness now turn to be a serious problem. "Hiring out labour was no longer supplemented by cultivation on one's own account. It was a full time occupation, as the labourer became free from any control over land, his means of production"¹⁸. Under the circumstances, it is quite obvious that labour relations could not be the same any more. One major point of departure from the earlier situation, as a consequence of the development may be that among the hired labourers the proportion of casual labourers which was very small until now, grew, while the proportion of attached workers or farm servants permanently tied to the employer declined¹⁹.

SECTION 4 : CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE GROWTH OF
AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN THE POST-
INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

VII.4.1 Many other factors also contributed to the rapid growth in the number of agricultural labourers in the district of Jalpaiguri. Such factors may be enumerated as follows in order of their importance.

(i) The decline of the giri-adhiari system of cultivation and the growing immiserisation and landlessness, (ii) The enactment of the WBLR Act of 1955, and its implementation. (iii) The ravages of the floods of 1968-70 in Tista and its tributaries that turned large

tracts of fertile cultivated areas into barren sandy areas. (iv) Spillover of tea labour into agricultural jobs, mainly in the Western Duars part of the district. (v) Growth of comparatively more intensive farming methods. (vi) The adoption and execution of the programme of OB and the consequent eviction of sharecroppers. (vii) Lack of sufficient employment opportunities in non-agricultural sectors of the economy and (viii) the demographic factors.

VII.4.2 It may be recalled that in the British period, comparatively better placed cultivators occupied land in large contiguous clusters (called jotes) and brought them under cultivation with the help of their poor neighbours and relations. These better placed cultivators became giris (land owners and patrons) providing their poor relations (adhiars and their clients) with minimum means of subsistence and production, and developed the institution of giri-adhiari land management. In the changed situation of increasing population pressure (after independence) which raised the nominal value of lands to levels beyond their expectation, and the politico-legal attack on the rationality of the system, giris acted as one of the chief instruments of dislodging adhiars from their traditional positions²⁰. Many of the giris were in possession of lands larger in size than the average size of holdings possessed by jotedars in other areas of West Bengal. But they were less thrifty than their counterparts in other areas in circumventing the legal provisions and had lesser entrenchment in the administrative machinery. Given these hurdles in operation, the giris resorted to large-scale eviction of their adhiars and indiscriminate sale of their lands, leaving lesser scope for continuation of the traditional adhiars in the new owners' farms²¹.

VII.4.3 The "proletarianisation process" was reinforced and gained momentum after the enactment of WBLR Act, 1955. A large scale eviction of sharecroppers took place at the passing of this Act and at different stages of its implementation²². As a result, the ranks of agricultural labourers were swelled during the sixties and recorded a very high rate of growth of 264.15% in the district and 194.44% in the Western Duars region in the decade 1961-71, as shown in table VII.1. The agricultural labourers in 1971 formed as large as 11% of the total rural workers both in the district of Jalpaiguri and in the Western Duars region of the district which were only 3% and 4% respectively in 1961. As in other parts of West Bengal there was a shift away from share cropping, which was a dominant form of land management, in favour of agriculture based on hired labour. In many cases this did not involve any change of personnel, the sharecroppers were turned into agricultural labourers and denied his legal rights - but the relationship changed²³.

VII.4.4 It is important to note that though the organised movements of the sharecroppers demanded for a reasonably higher share of the produce, these movements did not pay adequate attention to the need to develop an economically viable mode of production for the farms of adhiars which are generally very small in size. Developing the economic viability of the small farms of adhiars was more necessary in the changed situation (after the decline of the giri-adhiari system) in view of the fact that the adhiars were well assured of getting at least the means and inputs of cultivation from their giris

under the earlier giri-adhiari system. Such lack of attention for an alternative mode largely nullified, within a comparatively short period, almost all the benefits of occupation and legal redistribution of surplus lands among the landless and semi-landless agricultural labourers and poor peasants. An investigation on the agricultural labourers in this district revealed that in 1976 in more than 60% cases the recipients of vested lands had already lost effective possession to others²⁴.

VII.4.5 The incidence of damage due to floods in 1968-70 was more heavy in the sadar sub-division of the district of Jalpaiguri²⁵. Cultivated land in this area got thick layer of sand deposits converting one of the most fertile areas of the district into sandy barren lands for quite sometime. Reclamation attempts were made with the help of CARE aid. But it could be found by the investigation mentioned above that holdings of poorer owners of that area were passing away out of their hands at throw away prices²⁶. The floods not only affected the rural poor of the area but also a large number of middle and rich peasants who were turned into near destitutes. It may be reasonably believed that the Census of 1971 included some of these affected persons as landless agricultural labourers.

VII.4.6 In the district of Jalpaiguri, there is a large overlap between non-permanent plantation labour (locally called bigha labour) and casual agricultural labour. The total labour force employed in the tea plantations of Jalpaiguri being very large (1.71 lakh in 1961), any shift in its size can not but affect the pool of

agricultural labour. Since 1965, Indian tea, especially Jalpaiguri tea started facing adverse conditions in the international market. This unfavourable market situation continued through the quinquennium, 1965-70. It had its after effect in the form of lower production targets and consequent shrinkage in the employment of seasonal labour which constituted about 40% to 50% of the total labour force²⁷ in the plucking season. There occurred a large scale transfers of ownership of tea gardens (particularly the foreign ones) and speculative and trade interests intruded on a large scale. Considerable erosion of capital resources occurred due to inefficiency in the management of the gardens²⁸. In total, there was perceptible slump in the tea industry during the decade 1961-71. Moreover, in this period, the State Government had to impose an area-wise ceiling on employment of permanent labour in tea gardens. In consequence, tea plantations not only lost their pull on the growing surplus labour force in the district, they even started pushing out a growing number of unemployed members of tea garden labour families. There was a considerable spill over from the plantation into agricultural occupations during the second part of the decade 1961-71. It may be recapitulated here that from a considerable earlier period, there was tendency amongst the plantation workers to purchase cultivable land in the fringe of tea gardens and settle down as cultivators or agricultural labourers after their retirement or retrenchment from the gardens²⁹. The above factors acted conjointly to help the swelling in the number of agricultural labourers in the district.

VII.4.7 It is often held that "the process of relative impoverishment of small peasants and the swelling rank of agricultural labour are complementary to the process of capitalist and large-scale production"³⁰. It needs to be examined in the present context of our analysis as to how the capitalist production in agriculture and the growing force of agricultural labour has been complementary to each other in the district and region of our study. The period of our analysis would approximately be between mid-sixties (when the "New Strategy" in agriculture was launched) to mid-eighties of the present century.

VII.4.8 In the past, the major interest of intreprenurial activity of the Jalpaiguri gentry was centered around tea. Like in any other small town gentry, the babus of Jalpaiguri also possessed some landed property which were usually cultivated by adhiars. Cultivation used to be undertaken for the fulfilment of domestic consumption needs rather than as an economic venture and having little market orientation. The creation of new potentials in agriculture at the discovery of High Yielding Varieties (HYV) of seeds and due to slump in tea business, the attention of the town gentry turned towards high yielding food crops cultivation. Moreover, with the steady rising prices of food crops, the landed gentry began to undertake agriculture more as a business proposition rather than an element of a semi-feudal life-style. The introduction of cultivation of HYV food crops gradually spread in other blocks of the district and began to be practised mainly by well-to-do farmers and efficient and hard

working small farmers in the seventies and the eighties. This would be evident from the figures of various tables presented below to highlight the different aspects of the progress of modern cultivation in the district. From these tables, the increase in the use of various inputs which are concomitant features of the HYV programme will also be clear. New entrepreneurs, who adopted the HYV programme of crop raising, evicted the traditional sharecroppers either through mutual agreement or under duress. The above mentioned investigation revealed that a part of this dispossessed labour force was engaged as agricultural labourers in the modernised farms of the new entrepreneurs³¹.

VII.4.9 In this district a fast increase in the number of agricultural labourers has also been associated with more intensive land use and comparatively more capital-intensive forms of cultivation. A marked rise in wheat production and considerable diversification of crops can also be noticed during the period as is evident from table VII.5 and VII.6 above. There has been a steady increase in the consumption of fertilisers (table VII.7). Area under irrigation appears to be not so high (table VII.8) but the number of irrigation installations has risen considerably. Productivity of crops has also increased steadily as shown below in tables VII.9 and VII.10.

TABLE VII.5 - DISTRIBUTION OF AREA (IN HECTARES) UNDER HYV OF MAJOR CROPS IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI AND IN THE WESTERN DUARS REGION DURING 1972-73 TO 1986-87

Crop/Year	1972-73		1982-83		1986-87		Percentage increase between 1972-73 & 1986-87	
	JAL.	W.D.	JAL.	W.D.	JAL.	W.D.	JAL.	W.D.
(10)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Aus paddy	4,798	4,106	14,315	11,245	23,633	18,658	392.56	354.41
Aman paddy	7,611	7,039	30,892	24,260	54,189	40,617	611.98	477.03
Wheat	331	686	31,453	22,473	25,335	21,020	2621.26	2964.14

Note: HYV - High Yielding Variety; JAL. - Jalpaiguri; W.D. - Western Duars.

Sources: (i) A Note on Agricultural Activities of Jalpaiguri District, District Agriculture Office, Jalpaiguri, 1979.

(ii) Annual Plan on Agriculture, 1983-84 and 1987-88, Jalpaiguri, Principal Agricultural Office, Jalpaiguri, 1985 and 1989.

TABLE VII.6 - DISTRIBUTION OF AREA (IN HECTARES) UNDER LOCAL VARIETY OF MAJOR CROPS IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI AND IN THE WESTERN DUARS REGION DURING 1972-73 TO 1986-87

Crop/Year	1972-73		1982-83		1986-87		Percentage Increase/Decrease between 1972-73 and 1986-87	
	JAL.	W.D.	JAL	W.D.	JAL	W.D.	JAL (8)	W.D. (9)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Aus paddy	32,363	24,522	63,268	50,988	23,633	18,658	-26.98	-23.9
Aman paddy	1,55,072	1,20,449	1,29,147	95,281	1,26,163	90,673	-18.64	-24.7
Oil seed	3,104	2,791	13,861	9,302	14,035	9,273	+352.16	+232.25
Pulses	1,606	1,372	6,458	5,108	14,688	12,239	+814.57	+792.05
Jute	19,953	13,235	26,568	16,518	31,626	21,411	+58.50	+61.7
Tobacco	1,601	1,536	2,914	2,782	3,131	3,064	+95.57	+99.4

Notes: (i) It is reported that no area was put under local wheat since 1975-76. A Note on Agricultural Activities of Jalpaiguri District, District Agriculture Office, Jalpaiguri, 1979, p. 43.

(ii) JAL. - Jalpaiguri, W.D. - Western Duars.

Sources : As mentioned in table VII. 5 above.

TABLE VII. 7 - CONSUMPTION OF FERTILISER* (IN M.T.) IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI AND IN THE WESTERN DUARS REGION IN 1972-73 AND 1986-87

District/State	Consumption of fertiliser		Percentage increase
	1972-73	1986-87	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Jalpaiguri	1,414	10,606	650.07
West Bengal	1,018	7,424	629.27

Note : M.T. - Metric Ton

* Nitrogen, Potassium and Calcium taken together

Sources: As mentioned in table VII.5

TABLE VII.8 - EXTENT OF IRRIGATION FACILITIES CREATED IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI AND IN THE WESTERN DUARS REGION DURING 1981-82 AND 1986-87

Items/year	1981-82		1986-87		Percentage increase	
	JAL.	W.D.	JAL.	W.D.	JAL.	W.D.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Net irrigation potential created(hec.)	43,401.00	31,377.00	58,294.35	44,303.71	34.32	41.20
Gross irrigated area (hec.)	22,727.20	15,981.00	31,987.00	23,670.38	40.74	48.12
Percentage of cropped area irrigated	7.61	8.37	8.70	10.33	35.74	36.44
Total number of irrigation installations	1,905	1,448	3,658	2,780	92.02	91.99

Note: JAL. - Jalpaiguri; W.D. - Western Duars

Source : As in table VII.5 above.

TABLE VII.9 - INDEX NUMBER OF AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY IN THE STATE OF WEST BENGAL AND IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI (BASE : TRIENNIUM ENDING CROP YEAR 1971-72)

District/ State	1981-82 Cereals	All combined	1982-83 Cereals	All combined	1983-84 Cereals	All combined	1984-85 Cereals	All combined	1985-86 Cereals	All combined
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Jalpaiguri	78.03	102.02	62.87	101.68	86.99	111.25	85.67	111.82	86.88	113.71
West Bengal	89.14	101.22	82.89	99.78	118.57	130.59	123.99	135.14	125.37	138.12

Source: Economic Review, 1987-88, Statistical Appendix, Government of West Bengal.

TABLE VII.10 - YIELD OF SELECTED CROPS IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI AND THE STATE OF WEST BENGAL
(YIELD IN KGS PER HECTARE)

State/District	Rice	Wheat	Other Cereals	Total Cereals	Pulses	Total food grains
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Jalpaiguri						
1960-61	1044	600	622	1035	282	1606
1970-71	1126	889	775	1119	410	1109
1980-81	1113	1866	774	1131	570	1115
1984-85	1009	1731	1224	1041	473	1028
1985-86	1028	1703	1377	1086	542	1054
West Bengal						
1960-61	1184	743	556	1166	505	1073
1970-71	1239	2410	781	1305	564	1224
1980-81	1442	1672	902	1443	455	1358
1984-85	1557	2418	1243	1602	586	1538
1985-86	1573	2421	1373	1617	628	1546

Source : Govt. of West Bengal, Economic Review 1987-88, Statistical Appendix, pp. 66-67 & pp. 68-69.

VII.4.10 It has been found that mainly two sets of entrepreneurs brought about these changes - "the very hard working and efficient refugee cultivators (mainly belonging to Namasudra community of West Bengal) cultivating on a small but intensive scale, and (b) the gentlemen farmers using their better command over private and public resources"³². It is to be noted that in the main, the agencies responsible for these latest changes in the agriculture of the district, were not, however, the communities which had been traditionally entrenched in this particular sphere of production³³ (viz., the Rajbansis, either jotedars or adhiars). Since these changes were brought about by replacing, rather than by transforming the earlier traditional mode, and people practising that mode, a large number of Rajbansis, have been reduced to the position of a surplus agricultural labour force. Thus, it can be found that the development of capitalist mode of production in agriculture is associated with a high rate of growth in the number of agricultural labourers. The additional employment demand created by the new entrepreneurs is failing to absorb the growing bulk of displaced adhiars and small farmers and hence swelled the number of agricultural labourers.

VII.4.11 There can be no denying the fact that the growth of employment in non-agricultural sector has not been commensurate with the growth of agricultural labourers, where the latter can find employment for a reasonable time. The result was that in the occupational distribution of rural workers in the district of Jalpaiguri and that in the Western Duars region, the percentage of agricultural labourers increased rapidly while the percentage of

cultivators steadily decreased and that of non-agriculturists slowly decreased. These changes would be evident from Table VII.11 below.

TABLE VII.11 OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF RURAL WORKERS
(PERCENTAGES) IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI AND
IN THE WESTERN DUARS REGION DURING 1951-1981

Occupation/ year	1951		1961		1971		1981	
	JAL.	W.D.	JAL.	W.D.	JAL.	W.D.	JAL.	W.D.
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Cultivators	50.68	86.31	46.34	55.77	42.77	39.86	36.94	34.94
Agricultural labourers	1.29	1.63	3.05	3.68	10.83	10.46	17.78	16.12
Non- agriculturists	48.03	12.06	50.61	40.55	46.40	49.68	45.28	48.94

Source : Census of India, Jalpaiguri District Hand Book,
1951, 1961, 1971 and 1981.

It can be found from this table that the proportion of non-agricultural workers in total rural work force has recorded a continuous decline from 1961 to 1971. The fall in this proportion has been higher in this decade than the latter decade of 1971-81. These changes over decades indicate that in the last decade more job opportunities have been created rural areas of Jalpaiguri in non-farm sectors. But, the fact which should

be taken into consideration is that in the same decade the number of agricultural labourers has recorded a growth of about 104%. That the demand for labour from non-agricultural sector is not adequate is evidenced from a finding in 1976 that "the level of wage rate in the agricultural sector was not allowed to rise anywhere near the stipulated legal rate of Rs. 7.50 per day even in busier seasons of the agricultural year"³⁴. Table VII.12 below shows that though compared to 1976-77 an increase of 33.6% in the average daily wage rates was recorded in 1979-80, still it did not reach the stipulated minimum. This low rate of wages indicates that the rural employment

TABLE VII.12 - MINIMUM WAGES FIXED AND ACTUAL AVERAGE DAILY WAGES OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI AND IN THE STATE OF WEST BENGAL DURING 1969-70 TO 1979-80

District/ State	1969-70		1976-77		1979-80	
	Minimum wage	Actual wage	Minimum wage	Actual wage	Minimum wage	Actual wage
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Jalpaiguri	5.50	3.50	8.10	5.18	8.10	6.95
West Bengal	5.60	3.29	8.10	5.63	8.10	6.75

Sources : (i) Economic Review, 1982-83, Statistical Appendix, Govt. of West Bengal.

(ii) Land Utilisation and Other Statistics, Department of Agriculture, Govt. of West Bengal, 1981.

creation programmes of the State Government such as NREP, RLEGP, IRDP etc. could not create sufficient demand-pull for employment of agricultural labourers and hence failed to make any perceptible dent on rural poverty. As was noted earlier even in agriculture the intensive cultivation by new entrepreneurs could not absorb sufficient number of growing agricultural labour force. As for tea industry, which has been the biggest employer of labourers in the district, it can be found that labour employment is actually falling since 1952³⁵.

VII.4.12 In the above delineation effects of demographic changes on the growth of agricultural labour and rural poverty have already been taken into consideration. Some further points may be added here on this issue. Demographic factors induce changes in the distribution of land, and also bring about a change in the ratio of agricultural labourers to cultivators. The growth of population often forces a peasant family with land to undertake agricultural labour as a secondary occupation, which after a certain period of time leads some members of a family to perform agricultural labour as the main occupation. Demographic pressure, therefore, generates and therefore accentuates the pauperisation process. Table VII.13 shows the growth of population and that of net cultivable area in the district of Jalpaiguri and in the Western Duars region, from 1951 to 1981. From the table it becomes obvious that the land-man ratio has definitely deteriorated over the period due to the fact that the rate of growth of net cultivable area is very small while the rate of growth of population is very high.

TABLE VII. 13 - GROWTH OF POPULATION AND GROWTH OF NET CULTIVABLE AREA IN THE DISTRICT OF JALPAIGURI AND IN THE WESTERN DUARS REGION DURING 1971-81

Item/District/ Region	Jalpaiguri	Western Duars
Growth of net cultivable area	+1.95%	+15.30%
Growth of population	+26.55 %	+29.80 %

Sources: (1) Census of India, Jalpaiguri District Hand Book, 1951, 1961, 1971 and 1981.

VII.4.13 The decline in land-man ratio contribute directly to predictable changes in the distribution of land. It may be safely inferred that it is the decline of this ratio in the district of Jalpaiguri and in the Western Duars region that has led to proliferation of marginal and small holdings and a steady fall in the average size of holdings. The question of size of holdings is of obvious relevance to the determination of households which have to seek wage work within agriculture outside their own farms or in non-agricultural activities³⁶. The more important point that is to be taken into consideration is certainly not the size of holding but whether it can generate subsistence for the peasant. The issue of increases in agricultural productivity, that could compensate for a declining average size of holdings is, therefore, crucial to the pauperisation process. It may be maintained that the ability of the small and marginal farmers to survive is, no doubt, derived in part

from the support the agricultural sector receives through various measures, including those specifically meant to benefit the small farmer, but it is also derived from their participation in markets as sellers of produce. The earlier debates on the relatively higher productivity of land in the small farm sector have clearly shown both higher labour intensities and higher valued crop-combinations as two of the most important features of small farm agriculture. However, whether it is the extent of family labour use or the crop-combination, the choices at the household level are dictated by a largely unchanging resource base and constraints upon its use. But, as Krishnaji points out, "when families grow in size, as they surely do, and the resource bases do not expand, wage work is the only option left"³⁷. It follows, therefore, that demographic pressure has also contributed substantially to the growth of agricultural labour force in our region of study.

VII.4.14 Thus, in the Western Duars region and in the district of Jalpaiguri as a whole, there are two facets of agriculture today; on the one hand, a slow but steady diversification on modern lines, and on the other, greater landlessness and immiserisation of ^a large section of the peasantry. The situation could have been viable if there had been other avenues in the economy which could fully absorb the growing agricultural labour force into some other productive enterprises, either within or outside the agricultural sector. In

the absence of any modern institutional arrangement based on co-operative endeavour of the poorer peasantry in order to build up labour-intensive production units in agriculture, this accentuation of the problem of rural poverty has become a major issue in the entire course of agricultural development in the region of our study.

1. Bandopadhyaya, N., "Causes of Sharp Increase in Agricultural Labourers, 1961-71 - A case study of Social-Existence Forms of Labour in North Bengal", Economic and Political Weekly, Review of Agriculture, December 1977, p. A-111.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Chaudhury, H.N., The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlement, Cooch Behar, 1903, pp. 555-56.
5. Bandopadhyaya, N., op. cit., p. A-111.
6. Hunter, W.W., A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. X, 1872, p. 280.
7. The largest section of such share croppers belonged to the broad ethnic group called Rajbansis in Jalpaiguri, Bandopadhyaya, N., op. cit., p. A-113.
8. Our discussion in Chapter III shows this. Milligan, J.A., Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the Jalpaiguri District, 1906-16, Calcutta, The Bengal Secretariat Book Dept., 1919, pp. 88-93.
9. Hunter, W.W., op. cit., p. 279.
10. Ibid., p. 278.
11. Grunning, J.F. Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers, Jalpaiguri, Allahabad Pioneer Press, 1911, pp. 96-97.
12. Ibid., p. 59.
13. Roy Chowdhury, T.K., "Land Control : Class Structure and Class Relations in Western Duars (1871-1905)" in Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Vol. XXX, No. 1, June, 1987 (off print), pp. 39-40.

14. Barman, U.N., Uttar-Banglar Sekal O Amar Jibansmriti (in Bengali), published by Shri Bijoy Kumar Barman, Jalpaiguri, 1392 (B.S.), pp. 50-61. Barman writes : ".... In this way tens of thousands of people dependent on land were ruined in the Depression of the 30's decade. Its memory was, no doubt, more miserable, than the blow of socialism of the present day". Ibid., p. 57.
15. This fact has been elaborated in Chapter III of this dissertation.
16. Bandopadhyaya, N., op. cit., p. A-113.
17. Dasgupta, B., "Agricultural Labour under Colonial, Semi-Capitalist and Capitalist Conditions - A Case Study of West Bengal", Economic and Political Weekly, Review of Agriculture, Vol. XIX, No. 39, September 1984, p. A-142.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Bandopadhyaya, N., op. cit., p. A-115.
21. Ibid.
22. Dasgupta, B. - op. cit., pp. A-142-43.
23. Ghose, A.K., Agrarian Reforms in West Bengal- Objective, Achievements and Limitations, ILO, Geneva, 1980.
24. The investigation was undertaken by Prof. N. Bandopadhyaya in the first half of 1976, at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, under the auspices of the Planning Commission, Government of India.
25. Wide tracts of Berubari - Mandalghat and Ranghamali-Moamari regions were severely affected.
26. Bandopadhyaya, N., op. cit., p. A-115.
27. Ibid.
28. This trend continued upto 1981. Please see, Chakrabarti, H.K. & Bagchi, K.K., "The sick Tea Industry of North Bengal", Paper No. 4, Group II, 3rd Annual Conference of Bangiya Arthaniti Parishad, Jadavpur University, March 1983.

29. We have already mentioned about this trend in Chapter IV.
30. Krishnaji, N., "Land and Labour in India - The Demographic Factor", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXV, Nos. 18 & 19, May 5-12, 1990, p. 1037.
31. Bandopadhyaya, N. - op. cit., p. A-117.
32. Bandopadhyaya, N., op. cit., p. A-117.
33. Ibid.
34. Bandopadhyaya, N., op. cit., p. A-117.
35. Labour employment in tea industry, ^{had}fallen from 3,22,679 in 1952 to 2,13,000 in 1980. Cited in Chakrabarti H.K. & Bagchi, K.K., op. cit., p. 4.
36. Krishnaji, N., op. cit., p. 1041.
37. Ibid., p. 1042.