

CHAPTER II
AGRARIAN STRUCTURE

CHAPTER II

AGRARIAN STRUCTURE

In the next chapter, we are going to study the level of agricultural enterprise in select villages. Before discussing the aforesaid problem, it is considered that a study of the base on which the economy is operating is desirable for the better understanding of the problem at hand. Problems important to it are : (1) how are the farmers of different zones distributed by their size of holdings or to make it more clear, whether the economy is dominated by very small farmers, or small farmers, or middle farmers etc. ; (2) the nature of concentration of ownership, and (3) extent of share-cropping which dominates the economy.

After one is able to scan the economy in terms of its group (meaning sizegroup) and class (referring to the nature of right in the land operated) configuration, we will use the sizegroups and classes as twin controls for our subsequent analysis of enterprise.

Zone I, which comprises the unirrigated area shows wide divergence from the Zone II and Zone III which represent newly irrigated and old irrigated areas respectively in terms of sizewise distribution of holdings.

The unirrigated areas show some 12 per cent of the farming households in the sizegroups 0.01-2.00 acres and 2.01-4.00 acres, whereas, these are 53 per cent and 39 per cent in the Zones II and III respectively. This only shows that in a non-irrigated and relatively dry region where soil is largely laterite, farming operation on a very small holding becomes a below subsistence venture. This has driven a large number of semi-landless farmers of this region to somewhat industrial belt of Siliguri, Darjeeling district.

If, while defining a small farmer, the nature of the soil, availability of irrigation or otherwise are taken into account along with the size of the farms, then 4.01-8.00 acres sizegroups of Zone III can be safely placed at the same level as farmers within 2.01-4.00 size in the more fertile and irrigated regions of Jalpaiguri.

This would mean that for these three zones of Jalpaiguri small farmers dominate the scene ranging between 55 per cent and 82 per cent of all farming households.

What is more, in the two irrigated zones on either side of rivers of Jalpaiguri (Teesta, Torsa, Jaldhaka etc.) farmers upto 2.00 acres account for more than 45 per cent in one instance (Zone II) and 23 per cent in another Zone (Zone III). 1971 Census accounts of operational holdings (based on 20 per cent sample) show 74 per cent of the cultivating households in Jalpaiguri below 5 acres.

Our findings would indicate for Zone I - 73.52 per cent, for Zone II - 85.80 per cent and for Zone III - 74 per cent of the households in the sizegroups upto 4.00 acres.

Alongside, this dominance of dwarf holdings in the agricultural economy of Jalpaiguri, the land distribution pattern reveals a perceptible skewedness - more prominently in Zone II and Zone III. In Zone II, 7 per cent of the farming households having land above 8 acres account for some 33 per cent of the total operational area.

On the other extreme, 39 per cent of the households in the sizegroup upto 2.00 acres have 10 per cent of area under them. In fact, 4 acres and above farmers constituting 25 per cent of the households control some 64 per cent of land resources in the area under Zone II.

The distribution pattern is more or less the same in Zone III. Nearly 12 per cent of the households in the above 8 acres' group, control 40 per cent of the resources, while on the other extreme, only 5 per cent of land are operated by 24 per cent of the farming households. 28 per cent of households, operating 4 acres or more, are having under them 64 per cent of the operated areas.

It is quite clear that a distribution picture of the ownership holdings would reveal a more acute concentration, since arrival at a particular operational holding includes the processes of leasing-in and leasing-out which by itself has an effect of re-distribution.

Zone I reveals the distribution pattern much less skewed than the other two zones. 32 per cent of the households in the category 4.01 and above, have under them 53 per cent of the operated land and 14 per cent of the households upto 4.00 category have under them 5 per cent of the total land. This distribution of contrast is not marked by much unevenness.

Aster looking at the farmers sizewise, we may turn our attention to them in terms of their relationship with land. Accordingly, farmers are divided into four classes viz. self-cultivators, bargadars, self plus bargadars and self plus bargadars plus hired labours.

Seen in that context, 63 per cent of the farmers in Zone I, 84 per cent in Zone II and 55 per cent in Zone III belong to the self category. On the other extreme, some 13 per cent in Zone I, 9 per cent in Zone II and 20 per cent in Zone III belong to the category of bargadars (wholly tenants). Lumping the first two and last two into 2 broad divisions of self or bargadars and bargadars or bargadar plus hired labour classes we have 27.51 per cent, 16.18 per cent and 31.74 per cent of the households belonging to the self or bargadar category in Zones I, II and III respectively.

In terms of area 26.32 per cent, 14.16 per cent and 21.65 per cent of the operated areas consisted of leased-in area in Zones I, II and III respectively.

A sizewise analysis indicates that leasing-in features in all sizegroups including group above 3 acres.

In Zone III, the region of the old irrigation, the proportion of leased-in areas to total operational areas is as high as 56 per cent in the sizegroup upto 2.00 acres and remains as high as 52 per cent in the sizegroup upto 4.00 acres wherefrom it has a steep decline and then it climbs down to 4.98 per cent in the sizegroup above 8 acres. For Zone II, the trend is erratic, though the highest proportion of leased-in areas occurs in the sizegroup upto 2.00 acres in Zone I, proportion of leased-in areas is 74 per cent but its overall implication is very little since this group itself accounts for a very small proportion of all the households (1.85 per cent).

But for Zone III, which is the largest zone, we have a group of farmers who have operated land not more than 2.00 acres of which 56 per cent is leased-in. This group accounts for 24 per cent of all cultivating households who have land between 2.01 and 4.00 acres and 52 per cent of this land represents leased-in areas.

The small farmers cum bargadars suffering from size, as well as, tenurial disincentive constitute a very sizeable class in the present economy of Jalpaiguri and if one were to include all farmers upto 5.00 acres in the category of small farmers, the Jalpaiguri rural economy can be described as an economy overwhelmingly dominated by the small farmers (72 per cent to 73 per cent for the three zones).

While emphasising the institutional bottlenecks, one may be careful about such basic constraints as the land-man ratio itself which set a limit to any programme of institutional reforms.

We have a very interesting picture of land ownership distribution pattern in one of the prosperous areas in Zone III.

The data show, 72 per cent of the individual owners of land own 13 per cent of the total area of land. On the other extreme, above 25 acres of land are possessed by 0.5 per cent of the landowners which account for 9.6 per cent of the land.

While the land distribution is terribly skewed, 2.9 per cent of all owners account for more than 31 per cent of the total area i.e. more than double the area held by 72 per cent of the owners, the basic constraint is set by the very fact that even a perfectly equal distribution will not yield more than 2.00 acres per raiyat (total areas divided by total number of raiyats).

Data further show that after a rigorous fixation of the ceiling at 25 acres and after securing all surplus land and making proper re-distribution (9.6 per cent of the total area) of the land, 72 per cent of the owners will be owning 13.6 per cent of the total land while on the other extreme, 0.6 per cent of the owners will be occupying 7.8 per cent of the land. Even a more rigorous ceiling at 15 acres will not be able to release a little more than 5 per cent of the total area which would be exhausted over a programme of re-distributing land among owners

of 0.01-2.00 acres. Under such a re-distribution, 33 per cent of the raiyats will be owning 34 per cent of the total land as against 22 per cent before any re-distribution. On the other extreme, 2.9 per cent of the owners will be owning more than 23 per cent as against 31.9 per cent before re-distribution.

The above information may be subject to revision if, more extensive and meaningful data become available ; though, through cross-verifications, utmost care has been taken to make the analysis flawless as far as practicable under the limitations mentioned earlier in section 1.3 in chapter I.