

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

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7.1 Summary

Agriculture forms the backbone of the State's economy. A majority of the people of Assam is engaged in this sector. Agricultural labour in Assam constitute the poor in rural areas. According to 2001 Census about 68 percent of the total working force are being engaged in agriculture and allied activities. In Barpeta district of Assam, according to 2001 Census, there were 40.6 percent cultivators to total workers. The contribution of agricultural sector in Net State Domestic Product (NSDP) of Assam at constant (1993-94) prices was 34.79 percent and at current prices, it was 36.09 percent in 2000-01 (Economic Survey, Assam, 2001-02). Making optimum and efficient use of available resources, so as to maximize production of various agricultural products, have always been assigned high priority in the successive plan period of the state. But, compared to other states of the country, the pace of development of this sector has not been upto the exceptions. Due to the strategies adopted by the State Government for attaining self sufficiency in foodgrains, there is a growing awareness among the cultivators for the use of improved inputs like seeds, manure etc. However, it has been observed by some researchers that the benefit from the awareness among the cultivators for the use of improved inputs like seeds, manure etc have not reached the weaker sections of the rural areas of Barpeta district of Assam. The main objectives of the present study was to analyse the socio-economic condition of agricultural labourers in rural areas of Barpeta district of Assam. The main aim was to study the sources, composition and patterns of income and consumption of the agricultural labourers in the selected 12 villages in the Barpeta district. In addition, an attempt has been made to study their assets and liabilities. Another aim was to make a comparison of income, consumption and

indebtedness of tribal and non-tribal agricultural labourers in Assam. We have also examined the extent of poverty that prevails among these poor strata of society in the country side of the Barpeta district of Assam. In our study we classified the agricultural labourers under two classes namely, near landless agricultural labourers and marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers.

Shaping the economic life of vast majority of rural population and providing the means of livelihood, agriculture has been not only a way of life of the rural people of the district, it also contributes significantly to the employment of the rural people. Though agriculture is the mainstay of Barpeta districts' economy, the agriculture sector has remained backward. The traditional psychology, peculiar village customs, individual decision and plough cattle techniques overwhelmingly dominates its production. In Barpeta district, the average number of mandays for male wage employment, in agricultural sector was about 8 months and in the case of female about 5 months. It is more or less the same in the case of both of tribal and non-tribal agricultural labourers. The agricultural labourers as a whole have been engaged for longer hours at a lower rate of wages than fixed under Minimum Wages Act, 1948. It is found that the employment of agricultural labourers in agricultural operations is arranged by personal contact and the terms and conditions of employment greatly differ between areas and individuals as well as between casual and attached labourers. Moreover, their employment depends upon the availability of works. There is much similarity in the income pattern of the agricultural labourers across the income categories and the villages and also across the tribal and non-tribal agricultural labourers. By virtue of their being agricultural labourers, the main source of their income is agricultural wages, they boost their income by resorting to subsidiary occupations like assistance of carpenter, fish sale and trade on a small scale. However, there is a qualitative difference in the form of income earned as wage workers in agriculture. The highest income category earns relatively large income by getting assured employment as permanent labourers. On the other

hand, the two lower income categories earn the bulk of their income by hiring out casual as well as permanent labour in the agricultural sector.

The analysis of per capita income of the agricultural labourers suggest that although an increase in the household income is accompanied by an increase in family size, the per capita income shows an increasing trend. However, the level of per household income or the per capita income of agricultural labourers are not very closely related with the agricultural development in the study area.

In general, there is much similarity in the consumption pattern of agricultural labourers (near landless agricultural labour household and marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers) in the rural areas of Barpeta district. They spend on the major part of their income on rice, cloths, m.oil, sugar and potato. However, there are considerable differences in the relative shares of the consumption expenditure on some items across the income categories and the villages. The agricultural labour households spend small proportion of the total consumption expenditure on services, marriages and other social ceremonies and durable commodities. As far as services are concerned the agricultural labour households spend an insignificant amount on the education of children and entertainment.

Both tribal and non-tribal agricultural labour (both near landless agricultural labourer and marginal-farmer -cum agricultural labour households earn daily wage income as cash and kind as parts of total income i.e., sources of income in cases both are the same. But the average income of tribal agricultural labour households are little lower than the non-tribal agricultural labourers.

Consumption patterns slightly differ among the tribal and non-tribal agricultural labourers, e.g., consumption of non-durable goods and consumption of durable goods respectively. Expenditure on services in the case of tribal agricultural labour households are lower than the non-tribal

agricultural labourers. Average propensity to consume for tribal agricultural labourers comes to 1.02 and non-tribal labourers marginal propensity to consume is 0.99. Basically due to more consumption expenditure than income both tribal and non-tribal agricultural labour households are under debt, i.e., 90 percent of tribal and 23 percent of non-tribal agricultural labour households are under debt according to our study.

From the study we can say that the agricultural labourers constitute the lowest stratum of the rural society both economically and socially. They are the most depressed section of the rural society. The per capita consumption expenditure pattern of the agricultural labourers is closely associated with household consumption expenditure pattern across the income categories. The level of per capita consumption expenditure is positively correlated with the income level of agricultural labourer households, across the villages in the Barpeta district. Majority of agricultural labourers are either owners of small land holdings or are landless. Moreover, they do not get regular employment. These strata of agricultural labourers have hardly managed to meet their both ends together from the little amount of wage income. Due to this inadequacy of income they have to incur debt. During the period of our investigation, it was observed that more than three fourth of the agricultural labourers were fully burdened with indebtedness in the Barpeta district of Assam. The household durables account for the major proportion in the value of total assets of agricultural labour households across the income categories and the villages. Among the constituents of the household durable assets, the value of dwelling house accounts for the major proportion for an agricultural labour household. The burden of outstanding loans is considerably high in all the income categories and the villages. This is likely to continue in the coming years on account of current loans. The aggregate effect may turn out to be very adverse because of exorbitant rate of interest charged by the money lender and village landlords and predominant dependence of agricultural labourers on them.

The poor socio-economic condition of rural wage labourer particularly agricultural labourer in the district of Barpeta has slightly changed for the better since a decade ago. These changes have been brought about through the efforts of different agencies and associations. Changes through land reforms has a significant role among the landless rural wage labourers in the district. Under the land reforms programme the some paltry amount of surplus land has been distributed among the landless labourers. State Government has provided cash assistance to the poor agricultural labourers for house site and livestock at subsidy basis. Apart from this, Government has adopted a number of rural development programmes for changing the rural structure. Yet it has not been able to change the economic condition of agricultural labourers satisfactorily.

7.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that in the state of Assam the rate of growth of agricultural labourers since 1961 has been increasing at diminishing rate. It was 116.63 percent during 1961-71, and during 1971-91 it stood at 108 percent, whereas during 1991-2001 there was 50 percent growth of agricultural labourers in the State. But in our study area, i.e. the Barpeta district, since 1951, the decadal growth rate of agricultural labourers had been increasing at increasing rate but during 1991-2001 the agricultural labourers increased at decreasing rate.

The income from money wages of agricultural labourers are not uniform because it varies significantly due to individual contracts, dissimilarities of rural operations, purpose of agricultural works in peak season, non-availability of work in the slack season etc. From our studies, it is observed that about 46 percent near landless agricultural labour households and 35 percent of marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labour households are living below the poverty line in the rural areas of Barpeta district of Assam.

There is much similarity in the consumption pattern of near landless agricultural labour households and marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labour households in the rural areas of Barpeta district. They spend their major part of income in rice, cloths, masur dal, m. oil, potato, etc. However, there are considerable differences in the relative shares of the consumption expenditure on some items across the income categories and the villages. The agricultural labour households spend small proportion of the total consumption expenditure on services, durables and other social ceremonies.

The household durable assets account for a major proportion in the value of total assets of near landless agricultural labour households and marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labour households across the income categories and the villages. About 86 percent of near landless agricultural labourer households and 87 percent marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labour households in the rural areas of Barpeta district are under debt. Indebtedness will keep on growing in the case of agricultural labour households if their income remain static and no efforts are made to strengthen their economy.

We have made a comparative study of tribal and non-tribal agricultural labour households. From the study we may conclude that the average per capita income of tribal near landless agricultural labourers are higher than the non-tribal near landless agricultural labourers and the average per capita income of tribal marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers are lower than the non-tribal marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers. But the pattern of consumption expenditure are the same both in the case near landless agricultural labourers and non-tribal marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers. As a whole, the deficit incurred by the tribal agricultural labourers are higher than the non-tribal agricultural labourers. Finally, in addition to meager wage income, both tribal and non-tribal agricultural labour households have a small resource base, especially land, and therefore, they have to take recourse to borrowing

inevitably to meet the deficit incurred by them from time to time. As a result, a part of the deficit remain unpaid and they remain are under debt perpetually.

7.3 Suggestions

To improve the socio-economic condition of agricultural labourers the following policy agenda may be suggested.

First, land reform and redistribution of ceiling surplus lands among the landless is the first guarantee to build up the asset structure to improve the entitlement and capability of the poor workers. Then necessary inputs should be provided in order to make the near landless agricultural labourers and marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers viable against natural odds and exploitation of money lenders.

Secondly, improvement in agriculture sector must be brought about by a consolidation of holdings, the spread of irrigation, the use of better seeds, fertilizers and other inputs, better transport and marketing facilities, double and multi-cropping and the development of the rural tertiary sector together with a large reduction in indebtedness and an increase in productivity of near landless agricultural labourers and marginal farmer-cum agricultural labourers that will provide employment to them all the year round. Livestock production is another area which is free from the constraint of limited land resource and which can help most of the near landless agricultural labourers to improve their socio-economic condition. Piggery is also another important activity which, by augmenting income may improve the socio-economic condition of agricultural labourers. But to bring about the necessary improvements Governmental helps are needed.

Thirdly, labour absorption in agriculture and generation of rural non-farm employment may go a long way in increasing the capability of the agricultural labourers. Any strategy for reducing poverty has to concentrate

both on employment intensity as well as on labour productivity. Effective measures are needed for raising agricultural labour productivity without compromising on the employment intensity of agriculture.

Fourthly, the traditional welfare and employment programmes of the Government such as various rural development programmes, wage employment programmes, self employment programmes, targeted public distribution system and nutrition programme should continue.

Fifthly, educational standard, social awareness and economic status are to be developed among the agricultural labourers in order to organize them.

Last but not the least, the 'second generation reforms' in India should give emphasis on agricultural and rural infrastructure from which agricultural labourers will benefit directly and indirectly. Agricultural labourers are socially depressed and economically poor. However, they should not live in abject poverty for ever. Because it has unpleasant socio-political and humanitarian implications. Governmental and non-governmental organizations should come forward sincerely to help them achieving a decent living and self-esteem. Agricultural labourers should not be left with the market forces alone. It is only through concerted efforts from all corners that they may attain freedom from bondage and servitude.