

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Agricultural labour is one of the most important segments of rural population in India as well as in Assam. In numerical terms, they constitute about one fourth of the total work force. Their number has been rising faster than the rate of growth of rural population. Their contribution to rural economy is highly significant. According to 1951 census, their number was 27.50 million and 1991 census has put them to a staggering figure of 74.60 million in India and 844,964 in Assam. By the term agricultural labourer we mean a person who sells his/her labour power to work to another person's land for wages in money, kind or a share of the crop. According to the 1991 census definition "a person who works on another person's land for wages in money, kind, or share is regarded as an agricultural labourer. He or she has no risk in cultivation, but merely works on another person's land for wages. An agricultural labourer has no right of lease or contract on the land on which he or she works" (Census of India, 1991, paper III of 1991, p. 76). Thus, the census definition clearly excludes tenants as well as marginal farmers and includes only landless labourers. The definition adopted by us would be broader in the sense that it would include all those for whom sale of labour power in the agricultural sector is a source of livelihood.

The living condition and the standard of living of agricultural labourers would mainly depend upon the income earned by them. Therefore, in order to judge the standard of living of agricultural labourers, it is absolutely essential to find out their total income, consumption and indebtedness.

In the early 1970s it was pointed out by a number of economists (Bardhan, 1984, 1986 ; Krishnaji, 1971; Jose, 1974) that in spite of the process of planned economic development having been in existence for quite some

time, the agricultural labourers continued to face a grim situation in most parts of the country. The institutional reforms that were undertaken during the post-independence period largely ignored them (Joshi, 1975, 1987). Results of the various large scale surveys (e.g. Agricultural and Rural Labour Enquiries), on important economic variables relating to agricultural labourers, such as wages, employment etc. revealed that except in few pockets, there had been no perceptible improvement in their material condition. The performance of six to seven major states accounting for almost 75 percent of the agricultural labourers in the country had been particularly dismal in this respect (Bardhan 1984, 1986; Krishnaji, 1971; Jose, 1974; among others). Thus, the existing scenario did not seem to hold much promise for the majority of agricultural labourers. However, not every researcher shared the depressing view on the changes in the economic condition of agricultural labourers (e.g. Lal, 1979). Given the nature of the evidence, based primarily on large-scale data systems, there was lively discussion on the issue relating to the changing conditions of agricultural labourers.

Broadly speaking, the present study hopes to make a modest contribution to the large and growing literature on the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers during the period since 1980s. However, the present study mainly focuses on the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers in contemporary Assam, where agricultural labourers constitute about a one fourth of the total work force. From the existing literature it appears that very few studies have been undertaken in Assam on this problem, although there have been quite a good number of studies in other states of India. Since the eighties till the late nineties vast changes have taken in the rural socio-economic scenarios in Assam also. A large area has come under the new agricultural strategy. Along with bio-technological change in agriculture there has been a perceptible increase in agricultural production and productivity. The new agricultural technology has two types of effect on employment of labour, viz,

labour displacing and labour absorbing effects. Therefore, the pertinent central question that arises in this context is, how the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers are changing under this socio-techno-economic milieu ? To get answer to this question we would like to seek answer to another question : What has been the direction of change in agricultural wage rates and number of days of employment per agricultural labourer, which must have effect on income, consumption, and indebtedness of agricultural labourers in Assam during 1990s and the 2000s ? We focus on this question, as wage rate and employment availability are the most important quantitative factors that determine material condition of agricultural labourers. However, along with this question we shall also try to find answer to several other relevant questions for our purpose of finding answer to the central question.

Since there is a large gap in literature providing answer to these very significant questions related to a vast section of the poor and depressed section of rural population in Assam, we find this point of time, the beginning of the third millennium, very appropriate to make a socio-economic study on their income, consumption and indebtedness. However, given the time and resource constraints of an individual researcher we would like to choose Barpeta district, a predominantly agricultural district of Assam, for the purpose of an in-depth study. The proposed study would be an in-depth analysis at micro level of employment, wages and other factors that affect the income, consumption and indebtedness of agricultural labourers. However, we shall also use some macro level data wherever necessary.

We would try to enquire into the above-mentioned questions at two levels. First, at the level of the state, on the basis of the existing literature and the secondary data available to us. Secondly, by undertaking micro-studies in twelve villages from six-development blocks in Barpeta district of Assam.

Socio-economic condition of agricultural labourers depends upon a number of factors, e.g. income consumption, asset holding position, availability

of farm and non-farm employment, wage rates, indebtedness etc. are the obvious crucial quantitative factors which determine their socio-economic condition. In the case of micro study it is possible to take a look at many of these factors, so as to be able to present a relatively comprehensive picture with reasonable confidence. This is one of the objectives of the present study. Our study will make an effort to construct such a picture of the material condition of agricultural labourers, at about the middle of the present decade in the selected villages by focusing on different aspects related to their income, consumption and indebtedness. A comparison between tribal and non-tribal agricultural labourers with respect to income, consumption and indebtedness have been done that forms a special part of the present study.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the present study is to analyse the levels of socio-economic conditions of the agricultural labourers. The aim is to study the sources, composition and pattern of income and consumption of the agricultural labourers. In addition, an attempt has been made to study the assets and liabilities of agricultural labourers. We have also made a comparison of tribal and non-tribal agricultural labourers of Barpeta district in the above respects. We classified the agricultural labourers under two heads : (i) Near landless agricultural labourers and marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers. More specifically the objectives of the study are :

1. To estimate per household and per capita income level of the agricultural labourers.
2. To compare and contrast the relative share of different sources in the composition of the total income.
3. To estimate per household and per capita consumption level of the agricultural labourers.

4. To compare and contrast the relative shares of different items of consumption expenditure in the total consumption expenditure.
5. To study the composition of assets and liabilities of the agricultural labourers.
6. Comparative study of tribal and non-tribal agricultural labourers with respect to income, consumption and indebtedness.

1.3 History of Evolution of Agricultural Labourers

In every period of a particular society there have been two distinct classes – the powerful and the powerless. Historically, socio-economic power was concentrated in the hands of powerful persons in slaveholding age in the hands of feudal lords in feudal period and in the hands of capitalists in the age of capitalism. Mencher (1983) quotes N. Sastri to trace the origin and development of agricultural labourers ; “From casual references in the inscriptions we can dimly perceive the existence of a class of hired day-labourers who assisted in agricultural operations on the estates of other people and received a daily wage, usually in grain. There was no clear line of division between the absolutely landless agrarian labourers and the small peasant hiring himself out in his spare time In several instances a gift of land for some public purpose Is found to include some proportion set apart for the residences of the families of labourers engaged in its cultivation, such labourers were not peasant proprietors by any means, and were nearer the class of hired labourers than tenants; they were entitled to the use of house-site near enough to the place of their work and to get wages fixed in advance, the proceeds of their labour on land being altogether the property of the institution that own the land on which they worked.”

The 'varna' system of earlier times was a mechanism of social differentiation among the masses. The socio-economically advantaged and subjugated groups also denote primitive process of class differentiation. In many places, the working people have been identified by various names. For example, as Raj mentions; At the bottom of the hierarchy were the communities at the periphery of Hindu caste structure such as pulayas, who generally supplied labour for the more arduous-operation involved in cultivation (like ploughing, weeding and harvesting of land under paddy) and were in effect aggressive slaves.

Saradmoni (1980) has also talked about the slow pulayas : "Pulayas in the beginning of the 19th century did not have a life of their own. They never worked or earned a living for themselves. Their entire life was dependent on the master. They did not even own their children. They begetted children so that the master could have a continuous supply of workers. Naturally they did not make decisions or plans either for themselves or for their children. Their time was wholly their master's and they had no particular hours, which they could call their own. Not a day in a week was granted them either for rest or for prayer."

In India and other parts of the world the social origin of agricultural workers as a proletariat class is an outcome of the process of property differentiation, which had its roots in the class domination by the ruling class. Thus, the social origin is an economic issue, which could be seen, in various socio-economic structure. This point is highlighted in the following quote of Mencher : "There were those who were absolutely indigent in the fullest sense, the landless labourers, members of the depressed castes not only undertook work considered abhorrent by the caste peasants, such as tannery, scavenging, etc. but were also in a large measure agricultural workers. Thus chamars and Dhanuks who had their own prescribed occupations, worked as agricultural labourers..... The caste system seems to be have worked in its inexorable way to create a fixed labour reserve force for agricultural production. Members of the

low caste, assigned to the most menial and contemptible occupations, could never aspire to the status of peasants holding or cultivating land on their own.”

From the above delineation we get a glimpse of the origin of agricultural workers in India.

1.4 Justification of the Study

The fundamental issues of the study deal with the income, consumption pattern and indebtedness of agricultural labourers of Assam and comparative study of tribal and non-tribal agricultural labourers in the same respects which has full justification due to several reasons. Prior to this nobody has done any research work on the subject or akin to this. In fact this will be first attempt to deal with and explore in to the various aspects of the agricultural labourers of Barpeta district of Assam.

Moreover, the present study will provide ample scope to realize the real position of the agricultural labourers in respect of the pattern of their income, consumption and indebtedness and also comparative study of tribal and non tribal agricultural labourers. This will lead us to justify whether their income levels are sufficient enough to meet the basic expenditure. Generally, there is always a deficit in their income compared to the required level of consumption. Therefore, in the present study, suggestions will be made to make the income and expenditure commensurate by increasing their wages and other means of income, so that their living standard may be improved. In this way, the present study appears to be quite justified.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

Every investigation and study has certain limitations. Similarly the present study about the income, consumption and indebtedness of agricultural labourers has certain limitations of time, study area, sample and other investigation facilities. But to make the variables as objectives as possible considerable care and thought have been exercised. The present investigation

was conducted in a limited geographical area consisting of particular agro-climatic and socio-economic conditions of Barpeta district of Assam. Therefore, the finding emanating from the study may not be applicable in all types of socio-economic condition of our country. Of course the findings of the present study would be applicable in Assam and elsewhere having similar socio-economic condition while the general conclusion arrived at may be of value of other spheres subject to adjustment.

1.6 Methodology

The present study is partly based on aggregated data about the agricultural labourer of Barpeta district collected from government and semi-government sources. But this macro level data and the study based on it cannot provide proper insight into the real factors existing in Barpeta district. It is micro level studies i.e., village level studies that can properly describe the present state of affairs in the rural labour sector of Barpeta district. In our Macro level studies we have given only origin and growth of agricultural labourer in Barpeta district as well as Assam. But it cannot answer satisfactorily the question such as – which factors are responsible for differences in income, consumption and indebtedness of the agricultural labourers in the district. To obtain answer to such questions it is necessary to make a comparative analysis of the sources of income, pattern of consumption and indebtedness of the agricultural labourers at the household level. This in turn calls for field study with individual household as unit of observation and accordingly a field survey was carried out as a part of the study in a few selected villages of the district. The ultimate aim of the field survey is to find out the source, composition and pattern of income and consumption of the agricultural labourers and comparison of tribal and non-tribal agricultural labourers of rural areas in the Barpeta district of Assam.

1.6.1 Selection of Area for Field Study

There are twelve Community Development Blocks in the Barpeta district. We classified the blocks in three strata according to their level of development. These three strata represented highly developed, moderately developed and less developed blocks respectively. After then two blocks were selected randomly from each strata i.e., altogether six blocks have been chosen which we believe, mostly represent the entire district.

From each block two revenue villages, and from each village. 20 households have been selected for field study i.e., 10 households for near landless agricultural labourer and 10 households for marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers. Again two big farmers from each village has also been selected for study. Altogether we selected 264 households from the categories of near landless agricultural labourers, marginal farmer-cum-agricultural-labourers and big farmers from each of the villages.

1.6.2 Selection of the Sample

A multi-stage random sample method was used. In the first stage of selection from each community development blocks two revenue villages were selected at random. In the second stage 10 households for near landless agricultural labourers and 10 households for marginal farmers-cum-agricultural labourers and two households for big farmers from each selected village was selected at random from the list of the agricultural labour household for detailed study. Therefore, in all 264 households from 12 villages were selected for study as ultimate units of observation.

1.6.3 Tools and Techniques of Data Collection

Data have been collected by the researcher through questionnaire by personal interview with the relevant respondents. Data on farm and non-farm employment and wages, other sources of income, consumption level and pattern, indebtedness, asset holding position, education, health etc. have been collected.

Various books, journals, bulletins, articles, reports, documents etc have been consulted together for relevant data and information.

1.6.4 Data Collection

Two types of questionnaire are used, viz., the labour questionnaire which contains specific research questions as noted above and the cultivator questionnaire that contains research questions regarding production, productivity, income, labour employment and wages, mode of cultivation etc. Replies to questions of this cultivator questionnaire has helped us to compare and tally the replies to some of the questions given by agricultural labourers.

These schedule of questionnaire was prepared in consultation with the supervisor of the study and finalized after a number of tests and checks in the field.

1.7 Concepts and Definitions

Although we have used standard concepts and definitions, a brief account of these are given below :

Agricultural Labourers : A labourer who mostly hires out labour in the agriculture sector and whose major source of income is agricultural wages.

Unit of Analysis : Either an individual or a household could be taken as a unit of analysis. In the present study the latter has been preferred :A household consists of members of a family who partake of meals from the same kitchen. All members of the family share responsibility equally in the household affairs. However, since the size of a family varies from household to household, per capita estimates have also been used for meaningful interpretation.

Income of Agricultural Labourers : Income consists of wages (in cash and in kind) of the members of a household working as casual workers in and

outside agriculture. The receipts in kind are converted into cash by using the prices of commodities, taking into account average price level. The kind wages are mainly in the form of meals.

In addition to wages, the household also report income from other sources. Income from dairying and poultry is not of intermediate inputs used in the production process. A few household reported some income from small business. This income is taken up in the net form.

1.7.1 Consumption Expenditure : It consists of expenditure on non-durable and durable consumption items, services (education, health care, conveyance and entertainment) and marriage and other social ceremonies.

1.7.2 Income Categories : We have formed three categories for a cross category comparison of income and consumption levels and their composition for the agricultural labourers. The three categories have been drawn up on the basis of income levels. The three income categories of the agricultural laborers are :

- (i) First category : It includes those households which have an annual income less than Rs. 20000/-.
- (ii) Second category : Consists of households having income more than Rs. 20000 but less than Rs. 25000.
- (iii) Third income category : All the households having income above Rs. 25,000 are included in this category.

The average values for a household have been calculated after pooling together all the households in the sample. Likewise per capita values are worked out on the basis of the total number of members of an average family.

State : Assam , the land of Red Rivers and Blue Hills, lies in the heart of the North eastern zone of the Indian sub-continent and is situated within the longitude 90°E to 96°E and latitude 24°M to 28°M . The area of the state is

78,523 sq. kms as against the country's total area of 2,280,483 sq. kms. Thus, the state constitutes 2.39 percent of the total land area of the country. Assam ranks 14th in respect of area among all the states. Population of Assam stood at 26,655,528 as per 2001 census and Assam ranks 13th in respect of population among all the states of the Indian Union. According to 2001 Census, 3,439,240 resides in urban areas while 23,216,288 lives in rural areas. In 2001 census, the density of population per sq.km. was 340 in Assam against national density of 324. Assam has at present 23 districts, 48 sub-divisions, 149 revenue circles and 23,101 villages.

District

Barpeta district is one of the districts of lower Assam, surrounded by Nalbari district to the east, Bongaigaon district to the west and Goalpara and Kamrup district to the south. The mighty river Brahmaputra flows through this district. According to 2001 Census, total population of Barpeta district was 1,647,201 and rank of Barpeta district was 4th in respect of population among all the districts of Assam.

1.8 A Brief Review of Literature

A large volume of literature has been developed on agricultural labour in India. We have reviewed below some of the literature relevant for our study.

Jose (1974) has attempted to present the data that seem to support the new 'orthodox hypothesis' that wage rates of agricultural labourers are directly determined by the supply demand conditions in the rural labour market and that changes in the market situation, can be measured by the movement of wage rates in the process. He raises some questions on the validity of the hypothesis, implicit in all such studies. He looks into the relative merits and demerits of the different sources of agricultural wage data. To him the real earning of the agricultural labour household primarily depends on three variables; namely, the agricultural wage rates, the quantum of employment per year available per

worker and the price of wage goods consumed by the members of the household. Making use of the information available in the various enquiries, the author attempts to explain how in Indian context factors other than wage rates might be crucial in the determination of real earning of agricultural labour households. He also examines the relative changes in the real earnings of agricultural labour households derived from wage employment in different states between 1963-64 and 1970-71. A comparison of those indices of income with that of agricultural wage rates indices for the same period bring out clearly that the latter are inadequate to explain trends in the income of agricultural labourers in different states.

Bardhan's (1977) work covers studies on labour demand and the implications of agricultural growth with technological change, focusing on the respective employment effect of the seed-water-fertilizer innovation and for the tractor technology depending on the composition of its operational uses. She shows that HYV seed fertilizer technology increases employment slightly but mechanization particularly of the labour intensive operation of harvesting and threshing would bring down the share drastically, particularly for hired labour. Average wage rate for agricultural labour appears as positively responsive to irrigated proportion of sown area (or cropping intensity) and negatively to the production variability index.

Chattopadhyaya (1977) has discussed some important aspects of employment and unemployment and surplus labour in Indian agriculture. According to the author there are two separate concepts in the expression of surplus labour – static and dynamic. Static concept refers to that amount of population in agriculture, which can be removed from it without leading to any reduction in output. Dynamic concept refers to that amount of population which can be removed from the agriculture without its output falling, assuming a change in the method of cultivation through reorganization in fixed and variable capital and a re-arrangement or reallocation of work or through change in the

cultivation, including additional use of both fixed and variable capital. Moreover, as the farm size increases, the importance of the farm servants also goes up, and employment pattern of farm servants vis-à-vis casual labour conform to general expectation.

Pandey (1976) in his paper analyzes the trends in wages and income and pattern of consumer expenditure and indebtedness of agricultural labourers in India. He also identified some policy measures for development. According to him, the real wages of agricultural labourers must not be allowed to fall, especially, when wage, income is the most important component of their household income. However, any suggestion for linking agricultural wages with consumer price index through legislative measures would be an exercise in artificial oversimplification of the problems involved. The experience of the working of Minimum Wages Act in the agricultural sector has been far from encouraging. The statutorily fixed wages are lower than the prevailing market wages or, where they are higher, there is no proper enforcement of the same. Also the relative absence of strong organization of landless agricultural labourers is likely to frustrate any legislative action aimed at improving the wages of agricultural labourers.

Acharya (1976) has showed that there are two possible ways of improving the economic conditions of these households within the framework of the farm sector. First, to provide them land for farming and, secondly, to increase the demand for use of hired labour on the existing farms. The first solution falls in the realm of land reform policies and the second needs examination in the light of new agricultural technology.

Singh and Sidhu (1976) showed that there have been some possibilities of improvement in the economic lot of agricultural labourers through increase in real income and expenditure of the agricultural labour households. However, in view of the mounting pressure of population on land it would be useful to

explore the possibilities of creating more employment opportunities in the rural areas.

Bondyopadhyaya (1977) has investigated the causes of sharp increase in agricultural labourers from 1961 to 1971 in Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and Malda districts of North Bengal. He has found different districts for the rapid increase in the number of agricultural labourers.

Panikar (1978) has made an attempt to study the level of employment, income and food intake among selected agricultural labour households in Kuttanad, the 'rice of Kerala'.

Bardhan and Rudra (1979) have made an attempt to focus on different categories of agricultural labourers. On the basis of a survey of 110 villages in West Bengal, they have attempted to assess the relative numerical importance of the categories. To the authors, there exist a variety of labour relations in agriculture, not only in different regions of India but also in the same area. These different relations differ because of different combination of a certain number of attributes, such as, (a) duration of contract, (b) basis of payments, (c) frequency of payments, (d) specification of the nature and hours of work, (e) medium of payment, (f) interlinkage with other contract on credit or land relation with employer and (g) freedom of work for different employer. In their survey not a single labour respondent in any of the 110 villages reported any ancient debt as the basis of attachment, to any employer. Only 2, out of 138 fully attached labour families in their sample villages are reported to have consumption loan as the basis of attachment.

Singh (1986) analyses the level of living of the agricultural labourers and the marginal farmers in rural Punjab. His aim was to study, the sources, composition and patterns of income and consumption of the agricultural labourers and marginal farmers in differentially developed districts of Punjab. In addition, an attempt has been made to study their assets and liabilities. And he

also examined the extent of poverty that prevails among these poor strata of society in the countryside of this state.

Dev (1988) viewed a rise in the real wage through increase in labour productivity in agriculture to be an essential condition for poverty reduction among the agricultural labour households in many states till the target group programmes made a significant dent on the majority of the rural poor or till the unorganized poor, organize and demand for the redistribution of assets.

Ahlawat (1988) pointed out that the economic development due to green revolution in India removed rural poverty to some extent, but could not reduce the poverty of the landless agricultural labourers. Without large measures of conscientisation of the rural poor, no plan or strategy could uplift them.

Sarap (1991) has analysed the mechanism of contractual arrangement between the employers and agricultural labourers in the specific context of some east Indian villages (in Orissa) by taking into account the type of crops grown, prevailing technology and other characteristics of economic and social environment including external intervention, such as in-migration of labour, enterprising farmers and state intervention.

Rogaly's (1995) study revealed that variation in remuneration within hired labour arrangement is economically and socially embedded in wealth differences among labourers, in gender and caste ideologies and in party politics.

Pandya (1996) analysed the problem of labour absorption in Indian agriculture. The problems are studied using farm level, 'cost of cultivation' data. He points out that the farm size has negative impact on labour use and fragmentation of land holding has positive impact on labour use.

Nath (1998) made an attempt to compare and contrast the agrarian labour situation in the advanced regions with that of the backward regions.

Tripathy (2000) makes an attempt to examine the socio-economic features of contractual agricultural labour in India with special reference to Orissa with the help of both primary as well secondary sources of data. Analysing the genesis of the agricultural labour from the historical perspective, the study has focused light on the various types of labour prevalent in India viz, bonded labour, attached or contract labour, migrant labour, casual labour etc. The farm size has negative impact on labour use and fragmentation of land holding has positive impact on labour use.

I. 9 Research Questions

In order to study the stated problem we have tried to find out answers to the following research questions.

- i. What factors have contributed to the steady growth in the number of agricultural labourers in the post-Independence period ?
- ii. How many employment days are available in the agricultural labourers in a year ?
- iii. What are the terms and conditions of employment ?
- iv. What is the relationship between growth of agricultural productivity and employment ?
- v. How much non-farm employment is available to the agricultural labourers ?
- vi. What is the prevailing pattern of wage rate for male, female and child labourers in the study villages ?
- vii. What are the factors influencing the wages of the agricultural labourers in the study area ?

198545

29 AUG 2007



- viii. What accounts for the wage differentials with respect to sex, age and space ?
- ix. Do the labourers get the minimum wages fixed by the government?
- x. What is the nature and pattern of non-farm wages and employment in the study area ?
- xi. How much indebted are the agricultural labourers in the study villages?
- xii. What is the nature, causes and consequences of indebtedness of agricultural labourers ?
- xiii. Is the level of income of agricultural labourers from all sources sufficient to maintain a reasonable standard of living ?
- xiv. What is the consumption pattern of agricultural labourers ?
- xv. Do the agricultural labourers migrate outside ? If so, what factors affect the out-migration?
- xvi. What is their asset holding position ?
- xvii. What is the relative level of poverty of agricultural labourers ?
- xviii. What major conclusions can be drawn from the whole study about the socio-economic conditions of agricultural labourers ?
- xix. What suggestions can be made to improve the levels of living of agricultural labourers ?

1.10 Research Hypotheses :

We have tested the following hypotheses in our study .

- (a) That majority of agricultural labour households live below poverty line.

- (b) That there is no significant difference in the consumption level of agricultural labourers across specified income categories and villages.
- (c) That agricultural labour households are generally highly indebted to local money lenders.
- (d) That in recent years there is an increasing trend of outmigration of agricultural labourers in search of better employment.
- (e) That there is significant difference between tribal and non-tribal agricultural labourers in respect of income, consumption and indebtedness in the investigated villages.

I. 11 The Conceptual Framework

Over the last several decades a large number of village studies have been done by social scientists and analysts dealing with Indian rural reality. Besides the well established tradition of village studies, India has a long history of large-scale statistical surveys of rural areas. The votaries of these different ways of understanding and analyzing rural economic change have been engaged in a lively debate for a considerable period of time. The basic argument for favouring village-studies approach is that the intense localized examination by a participant observer not only offers a better understanding of various processes and relations (i.e., the qualitative dimensions), but may also give better quantitative results. The contrary view of course, would contest this claim and in addition, point to the limited relevance of the wisdom gained from micro-studies, without adequate statistical controls, for the macro-contexts.

The debate is quite rich, as scholars have investigated the advantages and pitfalls of these alternative methods of studying rural economy and society.

Obviously there is little sense in trying to prove the superiority of one method over the other, in an overall sense while counterposing them. What gets obscured in such a process is the complementarities between different methods.

The extent that the underlying objectives are different at different levels of aggregation, village studies approach and large-scale surveys can play very useful complementary roles.

Our motivation for understanding village studies is primarily due to our interest in some issues, related to the socio-economic conditions of income, consumption and indebtedness of agricultural labourers, for which large scale data systems may not be particularly useful. While providing the possibility of appropriate contextualisation of quantitative information, the village-studies approach is likely to yield better results when one is attempting to understand the various economic processes influencing the material conditions of agricultural labour households, such as the evolution of labour market, the process of wage formation, the strategies of control used by the employer and the labourers' responses to it, or more generally the relational attributes underlying a host of economic variables. We choose to undertake village studies with the hope that such studies would facilitate a better understanding of some of these critical issues, compared to what the large scale surveys permit. However, to get a comprehensive and a more complete picture of the different issues of the phenomenon under study we shall also use state, district, block and even village level data (to be obtained through Gaon Panchayats). Secondary data will be collected to compare and tally with the collected primary data.

1.12 Chapterisation

The present study consists of seven chapters as follows :

Chapter I : Introduction

In this chapter, we have made a statement of the problem, the justification of the study, objectives of the study, research questions and hypotheses, research methodology, review of literature, and short description of the region of our study.

Chapter II : Origin and Growth of Agricultural Labourers in Assam since 1961.

In this chapter we have delineated the trends of growth of agricultural labourers in Assam since independence along with an analysis of the trends in their level of income, consumption and indebtedness since 1980s. The chapter is based on secondary data.

Chapter III : Levels and Pattern of Income of Agricultural Labourers

In this chapter, we have made an attempt to estimate the total and per capita income; analyse the composition of income of different income groups and to compare and contrast the differences across the villages, and to estimate the extent of poverty among the agricultural labourers.

Chapter IV : Consumption Pattern of Agricultural Labourers

In this chapter we have estimated per household and per capita consumption expenditure and to analyses the consumption pattern of agricultural labour households across the income categories and villages, to compare and contrast the relative share of different items of consumption in the total consumption expenditure of the agricultural labourers, to estimate the extent of poverty prevailing among the agricultural labourers on the basis of per capita consumption expenditure.

Chapter V : Indebtedness of Agricultural Labourers

This chapter is devoted to ascertain whether there is any marked difference in the composition of assets and liabilities of agricultural labour households across different income categories and the composition of assets and liabilities of agricultural labour households across the villages.

Chapter VI : Comparison between Tribal and Non-Tribal Agricultural Labourers with Respect to Income, Consumption, Indebtedness and Out-Migration

In this chapter, we have made a comparison of the patterns of income, consumption, indebtedness and also the out-migration of tribal agricultural labour households with those of non-tribal agricultural labour households. The analysis would be carried out across the income categories and the villages.

Chapter VII : Summary, Conclusion and Suggestions

This chapter has brought together the conclusions drawn from the study and also brought out the possible suggestions for the betterment of the socio-economic conditions of the agricultural labourers.

KEY MAP SHOWING BARPETA DISTRICT IN ASSAM

