

CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The National Commission on Labour has said that an agricultural labourer is one who is basically unskilled and unorganized, has little for his livelihood other than personal labour. As such, the major part of the income of such a worker is derived from wages for work on land. The advantage of this definition is that it brings out the characteristic features of agricultural labour, i.e., (i) that it is unorganized, (ii) that its source of income is mostly wages and (iii) that it is neither landless nor made up of very small farmers.

The growth of landless labour is not a recent phenomenon. We had our experience about the landless labourers even in the pre-colonial period. Bhowani Sen writes, "It will be incorrect to state that, before British conquest, there was no landless agricultural labourers in India; but their number was so insignificant that its impact on rural economy was almost negligible. Unless land could be alienated from the peasant the agricultural labourer could not emerge as a significant element in the rural society"¹.

Surendra J. Patel has made some interesting observations showing how this category of rural population has grown. He quotes Thomas Munro to establish the truth that, as late as 1842, landless elements were very insignificant in Indian villages. He

1. B. Sen, Evolution of Agrarian Relations in India, New Delhi, 1962, p. 144.

refers to such an eminent authority as Sri George Campbell who substantiated the same conclusion by observing that 'as a rule, farming is not carried on by hired labour'¹.

In 1842 Munro reported that there were no landless peasants in India. But Siddiqui had discarded the validity of this report².

/Towards the close of the nineteenth century the agricultural labourers had become a rising category. In 1882, the Census returned a total number of 7.5 million agricultural labourers, the number rose to 21 million in 1921 and 33 million in 1931. Bhowani Sen relates this rapid increase in the number of agricultural labourers to the depression that set in from 1922 onwards, broken by bursts of recovery that proved to be transient³.

It appears from Patel's investigation of the social composition of the peasantry in 1931 that agricultural labourers formed about 35 per cent of the agricultural population and bonded labourers 2.7 per cent⁴.

Between 1921 and 1931 the number of agricultural labourers increased by 49 per cent. In 1940 they constituted 28.7 per cent of the total agricultural population⁵.

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1. S.J. Patel, *Agricultural Labour in Modern India and Pakistan*, Bombay, 1952, pp. 9-10.
 2. A. Siddiqui, *Agrarian Change in a Northern Indian State (1819-1833)*, 1975, p. 50.
 3. B. Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
 4. S.J. Patel, *op. cit.*, pp. 148-149.
 5. Report of the Land Revenue Commission, 1940, Vol. 2, p. 117.

According to the Report of the Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee (1951) 30 per cent of the rural population in India are agricultural workers. They constitute the largest occupation group, i.e., 22.7 per cent of the entire population. There are 17.6 million families of them. Though 50 per cent of them have tiny holdings, yet even these 50 per cent cannot but be considered as propertyless workers because 64 per cent of the income of all the agricultural workers are derived from labour performed in land owned by others; only 14 per cent of the income is derived from their own land¹.

An official enquiry in 1950 and 1951 revealed that in "East India" 58 per cent of the agricultural labour families owned some land². But the situation has changed at the close quarter of the 20th century. Dalip S. Swamy in analysing the landless labour points out that, this category includes only those households who primarily derive their livelihood from working in agricultural, either as day labourers (who are 'free'), or as attached permanent labourers (who may be bonded labourers) for particular landlords, or as share-croppers owning no land of their own; but some of these landless households may own a pair of bullocks, working as share-croppers. They comprise 27 per cent of the total

1. Cited in B. Sen, op. cit., p. 154.

2. Cited in Dharma K. Kumar, The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol. 2, C. 1757 - C. 1970, Longman, 1984.

rural households but own only 5 per cent of total cattle, 3 per cent of buffaloes and 2 per cent of wooden and iron ploughs. This implies that most of them do not own implements and other assets and have no option but to sell their labour power¹.

According to a number of surveys (Reserve Bank of India, National Council of Applied Economic Research), in the early 1960s some what over half of the total number of rural families in India were selling their labour in varying proportions and on various terms to the producers in return for a wage².

The growth of a distinct section of agricultural workers was conditioned primarily by the increasing indebtedness of the peasantry and land mortgages. Between 1911 to 1938, the indebtedness of the peasantry rose from Rs. 3000 million to Rs. 18,000 million. The Indian Famine Commission (1901) reported that 80 per cent of the peasantry in the Presidency of Bombay were indebted. From indebtedness to landlessness was straight descent. Land began to pass into the hands of the moneylenders. In the opinion of the Famine Commission (1901) 25 per cent of the cultivators (80 per cent of whom were indebted) lost the possession of their land³.

In this way, year after year, ever since the beginning of the twentieth century, land had been passing out of the hands of the actual tillers of the soil steadily swelling the ranks of

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1. Dalip S. Swamy, *Differentiation of Peasantry in India*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1976, 11(50).
 2. All-India Rural Debt and Investment Survey, 1961 - 62; All-India Rural Household Survey, Vol. III, New Delhi, 1966.
 3. Cited in B. Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

agricultural labourers. Thus the proportion of agricultural labourers to the total population supported by agriculture rose from 13 to 25 per cent course of 10 years, from 1891 to 1901¹.

The growth of agricultural labourers, who had to live on wages in cash or kind, and the growth of rent-paying tenants proceeded hand-in-hand and represented the same process of the proportion of the small peasants. What peasants who had mortgaged their land were generally resettled on it as a share-cropper or under-ryot, and these categories, had no security of tenure and were separated from the means of production. Much land was also sold during the land transfer, and in such cases the expropriated owner-cultivators swelled the ranks of agricultural labourers. In the nineteenth century the agricultural labourer was a growing category among rural population².

Throughout India the agricultural labourers were paid low wages, which ranged from 3 to 6 annas for men, 2 to 4 annas for women and 1½ to 2 annas for children per day. They were paid often in kind³. Mukherjee says that the real wages of the agricultural labourers had fallen with the price of rice ; in Bengal the price of rice increased eight times while wages rose four to six times between 1852 and 1922⁴. During the second world war wages increased, and new avenues of employment opened, but there was a sharp

1. B. Sen, op. cit., p. 146.

2. Sunil Sen, Agrarian Relation in India (1793 - 1947), New Delhi, 1979, p. 33.

3. Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee, 1949, p. 117.

4. P.K. Mukherjee, Land Problems in India, London, 1933, p. 222.

rises in the prices, thanks to the operations of hoarders and traders. The Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee noted that, "the war has not brought about any substantial rise in the real income of the labourers"¹. Apart from low wages, they suffered from acute unemployment or underemployment, and had to turn to the money-lenders for loans to subsist during the period of unemployment. They were mostly employed in agricultural work as ploughmen, reapers, sowers, weeders, transplanters and differed radically from wage workers of capitalist farms². Thorner argues that much of the labour force is "unfree" and "unfree labour" is the result of indebtedness, allotment by the employer of a plot of land, traditional attachment to family³.

According to the Agricultural Labour Enquiry Report, 15.4 per cent of the agricultural labourers are classified under the heading 'attached labour', the chief feature of this category being permanency of employment. The bulk of them are of course worse paid than the casual labourers. Total salaries (cash and kind) paid to the permanent farm servants per year, per family is only Rs. 32.7, against Rs. 117.5 paid to a family of casual labourers⁴.

Daniel Thorner has given a vivid description of the social conditions of the agricultural workers in India in the following

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1. Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee, 1949, p. 120.
 2. Report of the Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee, 1949, p. 120.
 3. D. Thorner, *Agrarian Prospect in India*, Delhi, 1956, pp. 34-38.
 4. Report of the Agricultural Labour Enquiry, 1951, No. 2, p. 65.

passage : "The Kishans are drawn primarily from cultivating or artisan castes; the mazdoor-log primarily from Harizans, Sheduled, Depressed or 'Backward' classes. Certain types of work locally considered degrading, such as ploughing in the eastern U.P., are reserved for these lowly servitors To a considerable extent, the belief that low castes are born to labour with their hands, and high castes to enjoy the fruits of others' labour, is accepted by the former as well as the latter. The separation between proprietorship and physical cultivation both draws sanction from and serves to reinforce the caste structure of rural society"¹.

Thus we can see that the agricultural labourers have been steadily increasing beginning from the pre-colonial times. We shall discuss more about this in the subsequent chapters. We may note that the growth of agricultural labourer has not only put added pressure on agriculture but at the same time pauperization and exploitation of this class of workers have continued unabated.

Origin and growth of agricultural labourer in West Bengal

The agricultural labourers were numerically insignificant in the pre-British days. Biplab Dasgupta states that, "the proportion of 'labouring castes' alone was less than one per cent, but even including the so-called 'village servants' the various 'personal service castes', such as barbers, washermen, sweepers and so on, their proportion was less than five per cent in all but two districts in West Bengal"².

1. D. Thorner, op. cit., p. 11.

2. B. Dasgupta, Agricultural Labourer under Colonial, Semi-Capitalist Conditions - A Case Study of west Bengal, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XIX, No. 39, September 29, 1984, p. A-133.

While the proportion of labourers was very low during the pre-British period, by 1872 it had increased to between twenty and thirty per cent in various districts of West Bengal. What were the causes of this increase? There were several factors which contributed to the demand of labourers. First, an increase in the area under cultivation following the incentives offered by the Permanent Settlement of 1793. While even by the 1790's more than one-third of the erstwhile Bengal was covered by forests, over the next eight decades a large part of it was cleared. By the time the British left only about one-tenth of the land area remained under forests¹. Secondly, the development of tea plantations in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri, and such other commercial crops as indigo, poppy and jute which were either more labour-intensive, or were associated with processing activities requiring more labour, or were grown in the off-season, or in areas where no cultivation took place before, or a combination of these required large number of labourers². Thirdly, the growth of the mining industry, particularly coal mining in Burdwan, made considerable demand. Fourthly, the growth of towns and industries - including the jute industry which necessitated a transfer of population from the village to the towns³. Fifthly, other activities such as road and rail building usually employed people on a seasonal ad hoc basis. And lastly, the demand for labour outside India,

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1. B.B. Chowdhury, *Agricultural Production in Bengal : 1850-1900 - Coexistence of Decline and Growth, Bengal Past and Present*, 1969, January-June, p. 174.
 2. H.R. Ghosal, *Economic Transition in Bengal Presidency, 1793-1833*, Calcutta, 1931; *Report of Royal Commission of Labour in India*, London.
 3. H.R. Ghosal, *op. cit.*

for work in other parts of the British Empire in Kenya (for rail construction), Sri Lanka (for tea plantation), Malaysia (for rubber plantation), West Indies (for sugar plantation) and so on - the main recruitment centre for which was Calcutta¹.

It was impossible to meet the growing demand of labour with a virtually static population, whose ability to supply labour power was further crippled by the frequent occurrence of famines and epidemics. According to an estimate made by the Census of India in 1951, population of the part of India now known as West Bengal (excluding Purulia) remained stagnant around 13.6 million between 1801 and increased to only 13.8 million in 1881. A major reason for this was famines of 1837, 1860-61, 1865-66, 1874, 1891 and 1896-97 which occurred frequently following the great famine of 1770, which took six lives out of sixteen². It is probably not out of place to note that until the British take over famines were virtually unknown in this part of the country³. Another factor was the malaria epidemic which, beginning in the late 1850s, ravaged a number of districts and reduced their population by one third⁴. In the years following the famines, agricultural production was hampered by two other factors - the weak

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1. O.C. Gowford, *A Brief History of the Hoogly District*, Calcutta, 1902; G.M. Broughton, *Labour in Indian Industries*, London, 1924, Chapter III.
 2. W.W. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal*, London, 1897, pp. 19, 23, 32.
 3. Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, London, 1963, pp. 20, 45-47.
 4. B.B. Chowdhury, "Agrarian Relations in Bengal : 1853-1885", in N.K. Sinha (ed), *The History of Bengal: 1757-1905*, Calcutta, 1967, pp. 243-245.

physical conditions of the survivors, and the propensity to migrate, mostly towards the eastern part which is now known as Bangladesh. In other words, there was a growing need for labour, the available manpower was not even capable of maintaining their level of cultivation¹.

The imbalance in the demand-supply conditions is reflected in repeated reports of labour scarcity in official reports, and in attempts to mobilise labour for areas and activities which needed them². In the case of industries and plantations, the firms were forced to recruit labourers from outside Bengal or from among the marginal tribal or semi-tribal population. In the case of coal, more than three-fifths were Bauries³. The local Bengali settled agriculturists were not interested in these jobs, as there was no shortage of land or work in the countryside, and they considered remuneration and working conditions in those jobs unattractive⁴.

Migration as a factor behind the genesis of agricultural labourer

A similar dependence on migrant labourers also characterized the rural scene during this period. For clearing forests, the local labour was unwilling or inadequate in number, or incapable because of the loss of vitality they suffered due to famine and epidemics.

1. B.B. Chowdhury, op. cit., pp. 20, 45-47.

2. W.W. Hunter, op. cit., pp. 59-61.

3. Report of the Royal Commission of Labour in India, 1931.

4. G.M. Broughton, Labour in Indian Industries, London, 1924, Chapter III.

Attempts to mobilise forced (begar) labour for this purpose with the help of Zamindars (landlords) also failed. It was largely through the efforts of the migrant tribal labourers that this very difficult and physically taxing work was accomplished, particularly in Malda, Dinajpur, Birbhum, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Sundarbans¹. Tribal labourers also played a major role in the development of commercial crops, particularly poppy and indigo, in cases where production was directly undertaken by capitalist enterprises². Lastly, they were also brought into villages by Zamindars who offered them generous terms, in order to compensate for the loss of labour power during famines and epidemics, to cultivate land which had been left fallow and grown wild following such disasters³.

The two major sources of supply of agricultural labour were the so-called 'semi-Hinduised aborigine group', and the migrant labourers who came from outside the State. The former, were in the process of being absorbed into Hinduism, and at least in the initial period of their contact began with a very low social position in the Hindu hierarchy. The second were the tribals from the Chota Nagpur plateau who, ... took an active part in clearing the jungles and extending cultivation, in cultivating indigo, and in keeping agriculture going in the years following a major famine

1. Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931.

2. B.B. Chowdhury, op. cit., pp. 20, 45-47.

3. W.W. Hunter, op. cit., pp. 59-61.

or epidemic, and who also manned the plantation and mines. It was from these two groups that vast majority of the rural proletariat were drawn; this provided the basis for the strong class-caste correspondence we have among them even today¹.

Landlessness as a characteristic of agricultural labour began to emerge with the large-scale entry of these two groups in the settled agriculture of Bengal. In pre-British Bengal the agricultural labourer was usually a small farmer making some additional earnings from field work or responding to the summons of the Zamindars to work in his field. Even after the severe dislocation of rural life caused by the famine of 1770, the agricultural labourers continued to maintain their own account². In his account of the conditions of agricultural workers in 1904, Colebrooke mentioned that even farm servants possessed land of their own, and it was customary among agricultural labourers to work for half a day for the owner, and then to spend the other half of the time on his tenanted land which was probably leased out by his own employer³.

In the detailed district-wise statistical investigation undertaken by Hunter in 1870's, largely based on the 1872 Census data, he frequently mentioned the fact that the proportion of landless was quite small, and the vast majority of the agricultural labourers possessed a certain amount of land. With reference to

1. B. Dasgupta, op. cit., p. A-133.

2. B. Dasgupta, op. cit., p. 136.

3. H.T. Colebrook, Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal, Calcutta, 1804, p. 105.

Darjeeling, he mentioned that the landless were generally immigrants, most of whom have recently joined the tea gardens¹. In the case of Jalpaiguri he observed that "almost all castes have land", and that "there is no tendency towards the growth of a distinct class of day labourers" who did not possess their own land or rented from others. The report on Cooch Behar also mentions the absence of a class of landless people, but notes the presence of migrant workers from Bihar and Chota Nagpur who worked on the roads and in excavation. In the case of Dinajpur he noted the temporary immigration of workers from Raj-mahal who were engaged in rice-husking by the grain merchants, and of the Dhangars who worked on the road. All of whom returned to their native villages in April-May². The report on Murshidabad talked of Santal migrants in the mulberry fields as day labourers, but of no local landless³. Only rarely is there any reference to landless labourers emerging as a class excepting in a district like Hooghly (including Howrah) with a large factory worker population, or nearby Nadia where the tendency towards the creation of a class of landless workers was noticed. Whatever landlessness we come to hear of from this account is associated with migrant labourers belonging to low caste or tribal groups⁴.

Another major document, which provided detailed information on the conditions of the lower classes in the late 1880's, also

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1. W.W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Bengal, London, 1876, p. 103. Various volumes on the districts were published in the 1870s.
 2. W.W. Hunter, op. cit., p. 376.
 3. W.W. Hunter, op. cit., p. 114.
 4. Cited in B. Dasgupta, op. cit., p. A-136.

mentioned the fact that both labourers and non-labourers held agricultural patches¹. The conditions of course varied from one district to another, for example, in land-scarce out-migrating Bankura the day labourers were usually without land².

The labour supply was not abundant in the factories, in the towns and in construction and other non-agricultural activities in the villages until the 1920's, after which the growing population made its impact. The population of present day West Bengal (minus Purulia) increased from 14.65 million in 1891 to 16.40 million in 1921—that is an increase of less than two million in thirty years, but between 1921 and 1951 it increased by 8.41 million to reach a figure of 24.81 million. In other words, the rate of growth was four times faster after 1921. There was lot of improvement in public health following the development of effective measures against epidemics such as malaria, cholera and small-pox.

The increase of population brought out a dramatical change in the land-man ratio, whereas the land-man ratio was highly favourable to man during the nineteenth century because of huge tracts of fallow lands were cleared for cultivation and the depletion of population due to the periodical famines, in the beginning of the twentieth century the situation was completely reversed. For west Bengal as a whole, the population density increased from 452 persons per square mile in 1901 to 610 in 1951.

1. Government of Bengal, Report on the Conditions of the Lower Classes of Bengal, Calcutta, 1888, 24 Parganas.

2. Government of Bengal, op. cit., Burdwan.

In addition to this, in explaining why there was labour abundance from labour scarcity, Biplab Dasgupta states that, "the population increase took at a time when opportunities for work outside agriculture had stopped expanding, due to the world wide recession which continued from the late twenties until the beginning of the Second World War". He also states that, "in addition to the demographic factor, the eviction of the under-raiyats, particularly the share-croppers following the 1928 enactment of the Tenancy Bill, increased the number of those offering their labour power in the rural market". Moreover, "the pauperisation of peasantry through land fragmentation to eventual landlessness was then another factor contributing to the supply of agricultural labourers in addition to eviction of tenants and the natural increase of the labouring population"¹.

The penetration of capitalistic mode of production, different land reform measures by the free Indian government, heavy population pressure and many other factors have accelerated the process of the emergence of agricultural labourers as a separate category from the rent-paying tenants. Throughout the colonial rule in India there was hardly any difference between the agricultural labourers who had to live on wages in cash or kind and the rent paying tenants. The tenants in the colonial period were considered as labourers because they had no control over the means of production².

1. B. Dasgupta, op. cit., p. A-137.

2. S. Sen, op. cit., p. 33.

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The Indian villages consisted not only of land owners, traders, money-lenders and farmers but also of numerous artisans. Deindustrialisation had started since the introduction of colonial rule in India and made many artisans workless. It is possible that many of these workless artisans became absorbed in the army of landless labour. Their participation had made agriculture over crowded and produced surplus rural population. There was hardly any complaint on the dearth of labour in this country. Since surplus labour was plentiful, the millionaires could pay low wages to the labourers¹. Industrial development was sluggish and the agricultural labourer had to seek employment in the village he was a village labour.

By 1901 the agricultural labourers had become a large group in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa; they formed 17.5 per cent of the agricultural population². Mukherjee notes the simultaneous growth of rent-paying tenants and agricultural labourers in Bengal since the closing decades of the nineteenth century : "the number of transfers of occupancy holdings effected by registered deeds have risen from 4300 in 1884 to 2.5 million in 1913. This implies the displacement from the soil of a highly desirable class of cultivators who... must swell the ranks of the landless proletariat. The labourers, however, do not go into the mills, factories

1. Morris, *Emergence of a Labour Force in India*, 1965, pp. 199-204.

2. B.S. Chowdhury, *op. cit.*, pp. 320-321.

and plantations of Bengal, which are mainly fed by up-country labour. They work either as under ryots or as hired farm hands¹.

The point worth mentioning here is that the number of share-croppers increased in Bengal since 1931, jotedars had a tendency to rely more on share-croppers than on agricultural labourers. Nevertheless, agricultural labourers constituted a large group; they formed 22 per cent of the agricultural population of West Bengal in 1951².

A number of researchers engaged in this field like Visaria (1976); Vyas (1976); Bardhan (1977) have shown an absolute rise of agricultural labourers during the recent decades³. M. Chattapadhyay after considering different explanations of the researchers has put forwarded four main reasons to the phenomenal growth of the agricultural labourers, which are as follows⁴:

1. Natural increase in the population of the labourers' households and lack of employment opportunities for them.
2. The eviction of tenant operators due to the enactment of tenancy legislations.
3. Workers do not get enough employment in their traditional occupation and therefore join the ranks of agricultural labourers.
4. The influx of surplus labourers from the small and marginal farmers' households.

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1. R. Mukherjee, *The Economic History of India (1600-1800)*, Allahabad, 1967, p. 157.
 2. S. Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
 3. P. Visaria, "Employment : A Trend Report" in a survey of Research of Economics, Vol. II, ICSSR, New Delhi, 1976; V.S. Vyas, *Structural Change in Agriculture and the Small Farm Sector*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 10, 1976; K. Bardhan, *Rural Employment, Wages and Labour Markets in India: A Survey of Research*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 25, July 2 and 9, 1977.
 4. M. Chattapadhyay, *Condition of Labour in Indian Agriculture*, Calcutta, 1985, p. 8.

Those explanations are not mutually exclusive, but the relative importance attached to these explanatory factors is different with different research workers. Thus, some [e.g., Visaria (1976, 1977); Vyas (1976)] have consistently argued that the mutual increase in the population of the labourers' households as well as the disintegration of village and small scale industries have facilitated the swelling of the ranks of agricultural labourers¹.

Similarly, other scholars [e.g., Bandyopadhyay (1975); Rudra and Newaj (1975); Raj (1976); Bardhan (1976)] have argued that the decline of share-cropping partly due to land reform legislations and partly due to the technological innovations have led to a major decline in the proportion of the self-employed and rise in the proportion of the wage-employed in the rural work force. This change indicates a polarisation within the agricultural sector ; a fast-growing sub-sector of medium and large farms is generating much of the increased demand for wage employment

1. Cited in M. Chattapadhyay, op. cit., p. 5;

P. Visaria, op. cit.;

P. Visaria, Trends in Rural Unemployment in India, Economic and Political Weekly, Review of Agriculture, January 29, 1977;

V.S. Vyas, op. cit.,

that is being supplied by the previously more self-employed poor peasant households along with landless labour households¹.

A recent survey on the terms and conditions of land, labour and credit contracts in Eastern region of India, shows that in most of the agriculturally advanced areas, share-cropping or tenancy is on the decline and owner cultivation with field labour is rising². Thus, eviction of tenant seems to be a major cause in swelling the numbers of agricultural labourers in this region. M. Chattapadhyay states that, "... it would be wrong to treat the phenomenon of growth of agricultural labourers as indicating a process of proletarianization of the rural poor. Various factors (e.g., eviction of tenants, new farm technology, natural increase in the population of agricultural households, disintegration of village industries and lack of employment opportunities to them etc.) are operating differentially in different regions of India leading to the swelling members of agricultural labourers"³.

1. Cited in M. Chattapadhyay, op. cit., p. 8;

N. Bondapadhyay, Changing Forms of Agricultural Enterprise in West Bengal, Economic and Political Weekly, April 26, 1975;

A. Rudra and K. Newaj, Agrarian Transformation in a District of West Bengal, Economic and Political Weekly, Review of Agriculture, March 29, 1975;

K.N. Raj, Trends in Rural Unemployment in India : An Analysis with Reference to Conceptual and Measurement Problems, Variations in Extent and Forms of Agricultural Tenancy, Economic and Political Weekly, September 11 and 18, 1976.

2. P.K. Barchan and A. Ruda, Interlinkage of Land, Labour and Credit Relations : An Analysis of Village Survey Data in East India, Economic and Political Weekly, Annual Number, February, 1978.

3. M. Chattapadhyay, op. cit., p. 9.

According to the Census of 1891 and 1971, the number of agricultural workers was 18.7 and 47.5 millions respectively. In terms of percentage it has increased by $2\frac{1}{2}$ times. It is worthwhile to indicate that census figures from 1891 to 1971 are not comparable (change in pattern) but they do indicate relative magnitude of the changes.

Growth of agricultural labourer
(in million)

<u>1891</u>	<u>1901</u>	<u>1911</u>	<u>1921</u>	<u>1931</u>	<u>1951</u>	<u>1961</u>	<u>1971</u>
18.7	21.6	25.0	20.5	29.9	27.5	31.5	47.5

Now the question arises : why is the increase so rapid or what are the factors responsible for this significant growth during the last 80 years?

These factors in brief are:

1. Disintegration of village communities during the British rule.
2. Growth in population (specially in rural areas).
3. Decline in cottage and rural industries.
4. Disintegration of peasantry.
5. Growth in absentee landlordism.

Every one acquainted with rural conditions will agree with what Dr. Mukherjee has said : "Every circumstance which has weakened the position of the small holder has increased the number of agricultural labour"¹.

1. P.K. Mukherjee, op. cit., p. 215.

While the proportion of small and marginal holdings was quite high in the whole of the country in 1970-71 (69.6 per cent), in West Bengal it was 82.2 per cent. By 1976-77 the process of marginalization of holdings was on the increase in the whole of the country. In West Bengal it was more so. It is very interesting and also instructive that the area covered by marginal and small holdings in West Bengal was as high as 56 per cent while in the country as a whole it was 23.5 per cent. At the other pole the area covered by holdings shows 10 hectares was four per cent in West Bengal and 26.2 per cent for India¹. Further the agricultural labourers, whose number increased from 1.8 million to 3.9 million between 1961-81 in West Bengal, represent the poorest strata in the rural economy.

The scope for bringing new land under the plough was receding for the whole country. It was more acute in West Bengal with the proportion of the net sown area of cultivable land reaching a near saturation point. All these were reflected in rural West Bengal recording one of the highest incidence of poverty. Population below the poverty line in 1977-78 by head count was 58.4 per cent in West Bengal as against 51.2 per cent in the country². So a small farmer with a small farm and a small crop, subjected to the hazards of rainfall, with little scope to migrate to towns on a non-farms job such was the typical problem facing rural West Bengal.

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1. Agricultural Census - 1970-71 and 1976-77; cited in S. Sengupta, West Bengal Rural Scene - A Review, Science and People, Vol. 1 August 1989, p. 15.
 2. National Sample Survey (32nd Round); cited in S. Sengupta, op. cit., p. 15.

A good number of sociologists and economists [e.g., Thorner (1956); Mukherjee (1957); Joshi (1958); Beteille (1974)] have shown the relationship between caste and occupation. The inferior social status of agricultural labour draws sanction of the caste structure which helps to perpetuate the domination of the upper castes in rural society¹.

Income and wages

The income of agricultural labour is low on the one hand while on the other, it varies from one operation to another and also from season to season. He is not gainfully employed throughout the year but remains idle for a number of days. Besides unemployment, higher wages and better living is a more serious matter with the agricultural workers than the workers employed in organized industries. On this question Dr. B. Rammurthy of the Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee (1951) made the following observations : "The total income of the agricultural labour families in the Indian Union could be estimated at Rs. 790 crores. According to the final Report of the National Income Committee (1954) the national income for 1950-51 was Rs. 9,530 crores. The income of agricultural families who formed 20.7 per cent of the total number of the families in the Indian Union, accounts for only 8.3 per cent of the National Income"².

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1. D. Thorner, op. cit.;
R. Mukherjee, *The Dynamic of a Rural Society*, Beslin, 1957;
V.R. Joshi, *Growth of Agricultural Labour with Special Reference to UP*, *Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, April-July 1958;
A. Beteille, *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure*, New Delhi, 1974.
 2. B. Rammurthy, *Agricultural Labour*, pp. 29-30.

According to the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee, the annual per capita income in 1950-51 was Rs. 104. Wages formed 73 per cent of their total income. The payments are usually made either in cash or in kind. It is also noted that the per capita income which was Rs. 104 came down to Rs. 92.7 during 1956-57. The average income of agricultural labour households during this period fell from Rs. 497 to Rs. 473.5. The Rural Labour Enquiry Committee in 1963-64 estimated the annual average income at Rs. 660.19. The 25th Round of the National Sample Survey has revealed that during July 1970 to June 1971 the average wage per day for the country as a whole was Rs. 2.03 for the landless labourers and Rs. 1.80 for small farmers.

According to the Agricultural Labour Enquiry Report, 15.4 per cent of the agricultural labourers are classified under the heading 'attached labour', the chief feature of this category being permanency of employment. The bulk of them are of course worse paid than the casual labourers. Total salaries (cash and kind) paid to the permanent farm servants per year, per family is only Rs. 32.7, against Rs. 117.5 paid to a family of casual labourers¹.

1. Agricultural Labour Enquiry Report, No. 2, p. 65.

Table - 1

Average daily wage rates of agricultural labouring
in West Bengal in 1976-77 and 1979-80

District	1976-77	1979-80	Per cent Increase
Darjeeling	5.90	7.25	22.8
Jalpaiguri	5.20	6.95	33.6
Cooch Behar	5.05	6.25	23.0
West Dinajpur	4.70	4.95	5.3
Malda	4.50	4.35	-3.4
Murshidabad	5.80	7.80	34.4
Nadia	4.80	5.40	12.5
24 Parganas	5.75	7.62	32.6
Howra	6.50	8.15	25.3
Hoogly	5.60	7.55	39.8
Burdwan	5.70	7.15	25.9
Birbhum	5.55	7.30	31.5
Bankura	7.10	8.00	12.6
Purulia	7.00	5.15	-26.5
Midnapur	5.40	7.15	32.4
	5.65	6.75	19.4

Source: Government of West Bengal, Economic Review, 1982-83,
Calcutta, 1983.

Quite a good number of studies have been done on the temporal and spatial variation in wage rates for agricultural labourers [e.g., Rath and Joshi (1966); Bardhan (1970); Krishnaji (1971); Jose (1973); Fonseca (1975); Lal (1976)]. The general conclusion arrived at by most of these studies is that while the money wage rate increased over time in most of the States in India, the real wage rate did not increase significantly. Agricultural development has thus not been significantly helpful in raising the agricultural wage rates in real terms¹.

Minimum Wages

The Minimum Wages Act which was passed in 1948 empowers the state governments to fix the minimum rates of wage payable to employees. Though this step of wage fixation was taken during the First Plan, not much could be achieved because of the following reasons:

1. The Act did not clearly distinguish between various operations and wage to be fixed for each operation.

1. Cited in M. Chattopadhyay, op. cit., p. 43;

N. Rath and R.V. Joshi, Relative Movements of Agricultural Wage Rates and Central Prices : Some Indian Evidence, Artha Vijnana, Vol. b, No. 2, 1966;

P.K. Bardhan, Green Revolution and Agricultural Labourers, Economic and Political Weekly, Special Number, August 1970;
N. Krishnaji, Wages of Agricultural Labour, Economic and Political Weekly, Sep. 25, 1971;

A.V. Jose, Wage Rate of Agricultural Labourers in Kerala, Economic and Political Weekly, Annual Number, February 1973;

A.J. Fonseca, Wage Issues in a Developing Economy : The Indian Experience, Calcutta, 1975;

D. Lal, Agricultural Growth, Real Wages and the Rural Poor in India, Economic and Political Weekly, Review of Agriculture, June 26, 1976.

2. Child labour was not separated from adult labour.
3. Unorganized labour or absence of any organization or union to ensure proper implementation of the Act.
4. Scattered nature of agricultural operations and variation in working hours from season to season, and
5. The wages fixed under the Act were very low.

The notable point here is that, in West Bengal, the wages fixed was Rs. 1.50 in 1953.

The Labour Enquiry Committees conducted surveys during 1950-57 in order to ascertain the implementation aspect but could not get any material gains. Besides these, several surveys were conducted in different States in different years - e.g. Assam 1959, Haryana 1973, Orissa 1972, Maharashtra 1970 but the real break through in this regard came only in 1975. Not only were minimum wages raised but more emphasis was placed on the implementation aspect. On 1st October, 1975 in West Bengal, the wages fixed was Rs. 5.60-8.10 per day for an adult labour¹.

Problems of agricultural labour

The British rule in India resulted into the economic stagnation (if not decay) and at the time of their withdrawal made India one of the poorest countries in the world. When India got Independence in 1947, the founding fathers of the Indian republic aspired to relieve this crushing burden of poverty. Over the years, five-year plan documents, political speeches and

1. Report of the Ministry of Labour for 1977-78, pp. 177-78.

electoral slogans have reiterated this primary goal in endless litany, yet, after more than three decades, India remains one of the poorest countries of the world, in fact probably the largest single country contributing to the pool of the world's poor. It is not the fact that there has been no progress over the years. There has been some general progress in the field of public consumption and welfare measures for the poor in the form of health and sanitation, drinking water, nutrition, housing, education, transport, roads, communication and electricity. But the facilities created remain woefully meagre in the proportion to the total minimum needs, even though the fund earmarked for such programmes constitute a significant fraction of the government budget every year.

The small farmers and agricultural labourers, artisans and the self-employed in household enterprises, petty traders and casual non-agricultural workers constitute the bulk of the poor. Organized group actions on their part, or agitations for their basic social and economic rights are still highly fragmentary, localized and infrequent. So they are forced to remain more or less where they were. It seems that in their social world the rural people are physically and structurally handicapped to come out of their present socio-economic state.

The present state of helplessness of the agrarian mass has evolved out of our historical courses. Over two hundred years of colonial exploitation has severely damaged the rural economy of India. It had resulted into the underdevelopment of rural economy. The British land policies made large scale differences among the

different agrarian classes. Even in the pre-Independence period there was massive state exploitation of the agrarian labour class. There was overall deterioration of the situation with the destruction of small scale cottage industries which was at times the backbone of rural economy.

The agricultural labourers in India are facing numerous problems. The most important of them will be discussed here.

1. Unemployment and surplus labour

The landless agricultural labourers constitute the inferior group in the village society who are entirely dependent on others for work and frequently remain unemployed for long periods of time. The Indian Government from time to time has made several attempts to raise the socio-economic condition of the agricultural labourers. But the outcome of such efforts are not satisfactory. Unemployment and underemployment as a result of sharp increase of this rural category, low wages which is bringing them below the poverty line, poor working conditions, mass illiteracy are very much acute in India.

Various estimates have been worked out to calculate the number of workers unemployed but there is not one estimate free from criticism. The reason is unavailability of reliable data and the nature of agriculture itself. At times there is shortage of labourers while at other times no work is available. This is so because agriculture is largely governed by nature. But whatever may be the case, there are estimates dealing with disguised under-employment.

The Report of the Agricultural Labour Enquiry revealed that the agricultural workers remain unemployed for 100 days in the year and self-employed for 50 days. For 189 days in the year, they are employed in the land owned by others. For 29 days they earn some money through non-agricultural work. It means that for about five months in the year (150 days) they are either unemployed or self-employed. But 50 per cent of the agricultural workers have no land of their own, hence they can not be self-employed at any time. These facts reveal the problem of acute unemployment from which 30 per cent of the rural population suffer and it also shows what a tremendous waste of labour-power is inherent in underdeveloped economy¹.

Patnaik has noted "... in the peasant holding family labour is employed for a certain number of days annually; if it could find employment for the same number of days on a daily wage basis, the total income from labouring for wages would be higher than the income after meeting all other costs of cultivation on own account. Why then does the peasant family not sell its land and start working as agricultural labourers? Clearly because it is not certain of finding employment for the same number of days which is ensured by the possession of land. The explicit unemployment among full-time agricultural labourers, the lower quantum of employment they obtain on average and their consequent lower incomes, makes them the poorest class in the entire population"².

1. Cited in B. Sen, op. cit.

2. U. Patnaik, Development of Capitalism in Agriculture, Social Scientists, September 1972, p. 22.

2. Landless labour and non-farm sector

According to 1971 census landless labourers in India numbered 47.5 million representing 26.73 per cent of the total work force in the country. The corresponding figures for 1961 were : 31.5 million and 16.71 per cent. One of the major problem faced by this sector is that the high seasonal variations, particularly by those whose contractual agreements are not for the entire season. Opportunities in non-farm sector of the economy are meagre for two basic reasons: (1) there is in general a lack of employment potential, and (2) the skill required for the jobs available are beyond the capacity of unskilled farm workers.

The Draft Five Year Plan 1978-83 provides some indications of the magnitude of unemployment, poverty and inequality. It sums up the gravity of the employment problem as follows: "Between 1971 and 1978, when the labour force increased by 35 million, non-agricultural activities absorbed only 9 million, about half in the organized and half in the informal sector. The general pattern of manpower deployment in the country is such that only 10 to 11 per cent of the increase in the labour force find employment in the organized sector, while the rest drifts into part-time employment in the organized sector, while the rest drifts into part-time employment in the rural areas or in the informal sector of urban industry or trade or becomes chronically unemployed. This lack of employment obviously reflects the waste of a potentially productive source"¹.

1. Govt. of India, Draft Five Year Plan 1978-83, Vol. 1, Planning Commission, New Delhi, 1978b, p. 5.

The Draft takes account of some "fundamental failures" of planning in the following words : "We must face the fact that the most important objectives of planning have not been achieved, the most cherished goals seem to be almost as distant today as when we set out on the road to planned development. These aims are universally accepted by the Indian people ; they are the achievement of full employment, the eradication of poverty, and the creation of a more equal society"¹.

3. Low-standard of living

The low standard of living of the agricultural labour households is the direct result of under-employment, low-wages and lack of opportunities in the non-farm sector. An idea of this can easily be earned by going through the findings of the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee : "the annual average expenditure of the household was Rs. 617 in 1956-57 while the average annual income in that year was only Rs. 437". Thus there was a deficit of Rs. 180 on one hand, while on the other, according to the same committee 77 per cent of the income was spent on food grains only. This situation had not changed substantially even though the average annual income per household had increased to Rs. 1671 during 1974-75. The diet of these workers mostly includes cereals only. Such items essential for maintaining good health like fruits, vegetables, milk, meat etc. hardly figure in their diet. A substantial number do not even have houses. The result is that the efficiency of workers is badly affected which

1. Govt. of India, op. cit., p. 4.

in turn, affects the earning power and ultimately the standard of living.

If we want to gain a full picture of the standard of living of the agricultural workers, we must compare it with that of the other rural families. On this question B. Sen made the following observations ; "The per capita annual expenditure of the rural families in general is Rs. 204 while that of the agricultural labour families is Rs. 107. Rural families spend 74 per cent of their income for food and 26 per cent for other requirements, while the agricultural labour family spends 85 per cent for food and 15 per cent for other amenities. On clothing the rural families in general spend 13.4 per cent of the total expenditure, while on the same item the agricultural labour family spends only 6.5 per cent"¹.

According to B. Sen, the lower living standard of the agricultural workers relatively to other rural families, arises out of several factors. The most important of them are as follows²;

1. Agricultural production is so outmoded and backward that production for private profit does not generally offer great prospects. So the wages paid to agricultural workers is very low.

1. B. Sen, op. cit., p. 162.

2. B. Sen, op. cit., p. 163.

2. Industrial backwardness despite five year plans and development projects, condemns the rural surplus population to perpetual unemployment so that in the agricultural labour market, supply always remains exceedingly preponderant over demand.
3. The agricultural workers are mostly employed by rich and middle peasants whose farms are much worse off than landlords' farms.
4. The agricultural workers being unorganised have failed to improve their working conditions by taking advantage of the trade union movement.
5. Remnants of feudal or semi-feudal exploitation are so strong that there is no upsurge in agricultural production.
6. They are often members of Scheduled Castes or untouchable communities suffering from social disabilities not yet substantially removed.

The agricultural labourers have more additional problems, like, the problems of better environment. The environment includes the regulation of work, improvement in the conditions of work and provision of amenities. The labour sometime has to work more than the prescribed hours (8 hrs.). Overtime work should not be allowed without additional payment for such work. Besides the hours of work, another problem is the conditions of work. The nature of agricultural work is such that the labourer sometimes has to work in torrential rains or in scorching heat during summer. Their living conditions are highly unsatisfactory. Proper steps towards improvement should be taken and properly implemented.

Special programmes for agricultural labourers

Being motivated by the principle of a welfare democracy the Indian Government since Independence in 1947 has adopted several measures to better the conditions of the rural poor. All these programmes have been only marginally successful to their objectives. This is clearly evident from the growing rate of agricultural labourers and landless population in the rural society.

Immediately after coming to power in West Bengal in 1977 the Left Front Government identified land-distribution, reform of the share-cropping system and the reorganization of the Panchayats as their thrust areas. The important measures adopted for the rural poor are as follows:

1. Small Farmer's Development Agency (SFDA).
2. Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labourers (MFAL)
3. Crash Scheme of Rural Development (CSRDP).
4. Abolition of Bonded Labour.
5. Food for work.
6. Integrated Rural Development Project (IRDP).
7. National Rural Employment Programme (NREP)

The last programme now forms a regular part of the Five Year Plans from the year 1981-82.

P.C. Joshi has noted, "The key to rural immiserisation is provided by the fact that on the one hand the inequality in the distribution of land ownership has not been substantially altered in favour of the rural poor through land reforms; on the other, qualitative changes have been taking place in the mode of operation

of land as a result of commercialisation of agriculture and penetration of new technology into the countryside which not only do not improve but in many cases worsen the position of the rural poor in the agrarian structure. These changes which are impelled by the growing rationalisation of the productive system take the form of shift from subsistence tenancy by poor peasants to business tenancy or self-cultivation based on hired labour by the erstwhile landlords"¹.

Gunner Myrdal shows how the population explosion tends to push the rural masses down the economic ladder : "The growth of labour force in agriculture has an inherent tendency to increase fragmentation of land holdings. More generally it will tend to force people down the economic and social ladder making owners tenants and tenants landless workers, while the size of the small farms will decline. Population increase is thus in itself one of the forces that work for increasing social and economic inequality in agriculture"².

The present thesis seeks to emphasis especially the social, economic and political life of the agricultural labourers which constitute a very important component of the rural population in West Bengal today, accounting for two-fifths of the agricultural population. Improvements in their living and working conditions are directly connected with the development of agriculture. These also help them to improve their productivity, material well-being and cultural life.

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1. P.C. Joshi, Poverty, Land Hunger and Emerging Class Conflicts in Rural India in "Rural Poverty and Agrarian Reform" (ed) by Steve Jones, P.C. Joshi, Miguel Mursis, 1982, p. 73.
 2. G. Myrdal, The Challenge of world Poverty, Harmondsworth, 1970, p. 361.

Agricultural labour and politics

We lack published materials on the organized agricultural labourers movement in the villages of West Bengal. The organized movements of the agricultural labourers have achieved some ground in other parts of India in the short span of three decades, the fifties to seventies. Many social scientists have warned considering the numerical strength and potentiality of the so-far-ignored basic sections of society, the impact they can make once they are organized at a national level will be tremendous. Social scientists have made attempts to find out the objective conditions of the agricultural labourers' movements, the extent of success and failure of the movements, attitudes of the different political parties mainly the left political parties towards their organization.

John P. Mencher has studied the agricultural labourers' movement covering a large part of India especially in Kerala. With respect to the Karshaka (agricultural) movement in north Kerala, she states, " It is clear that the reason the Karshaka Thozhilali Union is not very successful in this area is that there are too many workers and not enough jobs. In addition, there are a few large landowning families (all belonging to two or three traditional taravads) and a large number of small landowning families who do not employ much labour except under special circumstances. Furthermore, there is only small amount of land given over to paddy cultivation possibilities for employment in the non-agricultural sector"¹.

1. J.P. Mencher, Agriculture and Social Structure in Tamil Nadu, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 318-319.

In Central Kerala, "In part, the slowness in organizing the agricultural labourers in this region can be related to the fact that many of the Marxist leaders in the villages are themselves small landowners of high or middle castes who are at least partly dependent on agricultural labour"¹.

Reflecting the feelings of many observers of this area, Panikar has suggested that it was almost inevitable that the situation in kuttanad would lead to union activity: "... labouring under unfair institutional set-up for generations and acute for employment, unionism is the only bulwork against employers driving wages below the subsistence level. Agricultural labour, it must also be borne in mind that, compares very unfavourably with other classes of workers, like civil servants and factory workers, "they have no leave with salary, pensions, gratuity, provident fund, bonus, etc., which are the normal benefits of other categories of workers; they have no regular employment or income during their normal working life; they have no compensation in the event of death in harness.... Naturally, they try to get the available work and drive a hard bargain on wages. Demands for wage increase must be appreciated as a desperate effort to ensure a minimum annual income for their family where employment is so limited and uncertain"².

1. J.P. Mencher, op. cit., p. 321.

2. P.G.K. Panikar, Dissension to Report of the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, Trivandram, 1972, pp. 37-38.

Oommen suggests that political rivalry and competition among the unions has not always been necessarily beneficial for the workers. He reports that the Union officials he contacted agreed that they have often working at cross-purposes : "In their attempt to project themselves as "progressive, each union is trying to out-do the others by demanding more and more for agricultural labourers We have been told that agricultural labourers, said to be Marxists are willing to work for lower wages in certain areas where non-Marxist Unions are strong in order to discredit the rival Unions. The non-Marxist labourers indulge in precisely the same kind of activity elsewhere"¹.

Mencher has stressed, "... unionizing is more likely to succeed in places where labourers feel that they have something to gain from a strike. The places where this is true are primarily places where:

1. There are alternative sources of employment for villagers within commuting distance;
2. For one reason or another there is a labour shortage;
3. The labourers have for one reason or another broken from their feudal attachments and are willing to go far afield (sometimes sizable distances) in search for work...;
4. It is imperative that paddy be harvested during a relatively short period of time. If the land owners are not willing to harvest the paddy themselves, strike active are more likely to succeed ...;

1. T.K. Oommen, Agrarian Tension in a Kerala District: an Analysis, Indian Journal of Industrial Relations, New Delhi, 1971, p. 248.

5. There are several agricultural labour unions all competing for members and trying to show that they can do more for their members than any other union..."¹

Many observers have put forward the arguments that political awareness among the landless proletariat can only be augmented by organized action. Breman states that, "... even if such actions were provided from outside, social emancipation would not follow as a matter of course". He admits that, "Their inability to find a way out of the misery and insecurity of their daily life leaves most of them no scope at all for any ulterior that or action". The most important reasons he emphasizes for their weak organization are : unemployment and underemployment because of the fact that the labour supply far exceeds the demand. Secondly, mass illiteracy even after introduction of compulsory education. "About nine out of ten caste members are illiterate". Thirdly, although the earlier autocracy of the land owners have been reduced, but that does not mean they are now politically emancipated. "They lack the awareness that, collectively they generate power". It is evident from the fact that their names are not registered in the voting lists, they have no idea of the difference between the parties, their votes are for sale at a few rupees, and especially among the higher castes colourful tales are told about it. Fourthly, "The Halpatis' passivity is losely bound up with their ignorance. They often turn out to be only vaguely, if at all, aware of slogans such as 'Garibi Hatao'

1. J.P. Mencher, op. cit., pp. 331-332.

although these were raised in their name. Illiteracy deprives them of a great deal of information. The combination of indifference and ignorance, both indissolubly bound up with poverty, underlines their exclusion from society. Those of them who have the greatest trouble have the least capacity to explain their point of view". Fifthly, the "... drawbacks are partly due to the fact that the members of caste of landless labourers are not accustomed to function within frameworks which stress collective aims. Their experience with group activities is very limited". Sixthly, "The halpaties themselves explain their backwardness due to a lack of leaders". Seventhly, the landless agricultural labourers do not form a homogenous mass as such. There are various types of agricultural labourers with their divergent interests. "Moreover, all of them are, to varying extents, dependent on land owners and jobbers, their principal employers. The competition for the few favours to be had in a situation of continuous scarcity in each and every respect invalidates any strengthening of horizontal solidarity"¹.

Bremen has stressed the question, "Does the above suffice as an explanation of the passivity among agricultural labourers"? According to him, "Apathy, ignorance, and feelings of inferiority fit too well into theories of a culture of poverty to be altogether acceptable as the sole or even the main reasons"².

1. J. Breman, *Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers : Rural Labour Circulation and Capitalist Production in West India*, Delhi, 1985, p. 36.

2. J. Breman, *op. cit.*, p. 366.

Mencher asserts, "One of the ways in which Kerala has been distinguished from other parts of India has been its relatively high rural literacy rate, varying in 1971 from a high of 75 per cent (Alleppey District) to a low of 53 per cent (Palaghat District) for males. Not only is the extent of newspaper reading. Even back in 1958, it was struck by the fact that in remote villages daily news-papers (both Congress and Communist oriented) were read aloud to small groups of people. Thus, within a few hours after the papers had arrived in the village, important political news could reach most of the people in the widely dispersed village area where I was working"¹.

Main research questions

The problem we have studied for the present thesis thus reads : Land, Labour and Politics : A Study of Agricultural Labourers in North Bengal. As the title suggests there are three broad aspects of the research topic ; the land management system ; the demographic, social and economic features of the agricultural labourers; and the nature of their political activities. The most important research questions are noted below:

1. The first important question which has been dealt with, what is the nature of land management system? Although "land" cannot be considered as the sole criterion of differentiating the rural people into various categories still it has

1. J. Mencher, op. cit., p. 313.

remained as the most important criterion in differentiating the people who are dependent on land. The other related questions have been dealt with are, how the land management system affect production organization? How it affects the participation of different landowning groups in the agricultural production process? How it affects the technological innovation and high-yielding varieties in agriculture? How it considers the age-old share-cropping system? How it affects the labour relation? Moreover, the questions like, impact of the land reform measures by the India Government and penetration of the capitalistic farming have also been dealt with.

2. Organisation of agricultural work and its linkages with different aspects of the social organization like, family composition, socialization process, literacy and how they are interrelated to each other.

3. How the internal and external forces generate to the growth of the agricultural labourers and how these forces affect the labour relations.

4. While studying the political life of the agricultural labourers the following questions have been taken into consideration : how they react to and at times modify the external and internal forces; how they participate in political activities; to what extent they are politically conscious; how far their class position guides their political activities; is there anything which is liable to be called proletarian class? If there is nothing like that how do they see politics as a means for earning individual benefits or community benefits?

Methodology

The whole problem has been looked into historically. This is because the history of the evolution of agricultural labourers closely corresponds to the evolution of the mode of production in the countryside of West Bengal. The whole agrarian society has undergone changes in different periods; pre-Colonial period, British period and post-Independence period. But one thing is common to all the periods i.e., they all had exploitative structure.

So far as the question of class consciousness is concerned the phenomenon has been studied in relation to the prevalent mode of production of agriculture. Unless the nature of the modes of production is determined one can not get a clear perspective to look at the processes of pauperization and proletarianization.

For the purpose of the present study we have chosen to conduct field work in three villages in three districts of West Bengal. The selection of the villages has been done on the basis of purposive sampling. The main criterion has been the existence of different sets of agrarian relations during the colonial period though in the present context of agrarian structure in West Bengal this is not relevant. The selected districts are West Dinajpur, Darjeeling and Cooch Behar, where the Zamindari, Ryotwari and Feudatory systems respectively prevailed prior to 1955 when the Zamindari System was abolished. This may be taken as the cut off point of new agrarian relations in West Bengal.

After selecting the field, field work was started which continued for a period of about 9 months in three villages. Of course, there was some variation in the duration of field work in these villages because of their different sizes and other related factors. As for example, Bamangram has a total of 252 households. Batla-Bhita has 57 households and there are 640 households in Alokjhora. In the first round of field work primary census was taken and thus we came to know about the detailed socio-economic aspects of the villages. In the census forms emphasis was paid to know about the total population, their age, sex, caste, religion, language, occupation, agricultural implements, land-holding and nature of participation in the production process etc.

Then keeping the scope of the work, a sample was drawn from the total households in the villages. Stratified random sampling was followed in selecting the households for interviews. An uniform method of sampling could not be followed due to uneven sizes of the surveyed villages. For example, in Alokjhora, there are a total of 136 agricultural labourer households of which 45 or one-third households were interviewed. In Bamangram, the total number of agricultural labourer households are 94 of which 40 or marginally below than 50 per cent households were interviewed. While in Batla-Bhita, there are a total of 23 agricultural labourer households of which 21 or 91.30 per cent households were interviewed. In order to select the households for indepth study all

the religious, caste/community groups except those who do not work as agricultural labour were taken into consideration.

In the second or third round of field work the sample households were interviewed with a schedule followed up by open ended questionnaires. Besides, case histories of some families were also recorded. Group discussions with a number of agricultural labourers were very helpful to understand the nature of their problems and difficulties they face in securing employment.

Limitations

The researcher is not unfamiliar with the language, culture and economy of the region. This is for the very understandable reason that he was born and brought up here in a semi-rural environment. Many of his class-mates came from the rural society of this region. Still there were certain difficulties which could not be overcome. The most important of these was that the number of villages sampled for the present study was perhaps not enough to satisfy the sampling factor. But considering the time available for field work we had to restrict the sample to three villages. There were some other problems the researcher faced with at the time of field work. Even in a known field situation field work does not proceed as satisfactorily as the researcher may desire. In our part we faced difficulties in meeting with the respondents in the day time, as most of them had gone to work. So the interviews had to be taken in the evenings and on days when they were at home. Another problem was to contact the absentee

land owners who seldom visited the villages. The people in the villages initially was somewhat suspicious about my activities, but once this ice was broken an excellent rapport could be established with them. The people also expected, particularly the landless labourers, that something good for them will come out from the enquiry but the researcher regretfully had to belie their expectation.