

Growth and Economic Conditions of Agricultural Labour

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Summary: This paper will look into the changing economic condition of agricultural labourers in India. We look into some of the characteristics i.e. the type of labour contracts of agricultural labourers in West Bengal, then look into the employment trends both in the farm sector and the non-farm sector in the rural areas over the years starting from the 1970s and look into some of the factors that explains the trend.

Keywords: Agricultural Labour, Employment, Economic Conditions.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper will look into the changing economic condition of agricultural labourers in India. It will look into characteristics i.e. the type of labour contracts of agricultural labourers in West Bengal, then look into the employment trends both in the farm sector and the non-farm sector in the rural areas over the years starting from the 1970s and look into some of the factors that explains the trend.

The objective of literature review is two-fold. First, to look into some of the existing works done in West Bengal to assess the economic condition of agricultural labourers over the years. Secondly, to get an insight of the methodology used to assess the economic condition of labourers and finally, the need for a primary level survey.

This paper is divided into two main sections. The first section deals with the evolution of agricultural labourers in India since the pre-independence period. The second section looks at the employment trends of agricultural labourers. We first look into some of the characteristics i.e. the type of labour contracts of agricultural labourers in West Bengal, then look into the employment trends both in the farm sector and the non-farm sector in the rural areas over the years starting from the 1970s and look into some of the factors that explains the trend.

In the end we look into some of the questions that remain unanswered in the existing literature and the need for a primary level survey to meet the needs of this research.

CAUSES OF EMERGENCE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN INDIA

In 1931 agricultural labourers formed nearly two-fifths of the agricultural population of India, their proportion virtually tripled from nearly 13 percent in the late nineteen century to 38 percent in 1931 (as shown in table 1.1), thus becoming numerically the largest single occupational group in India. Patel (1952) argues that a structural transformation of the traditional agrarian society which led to increasing indebtedness of cultivators and land mortgages from the second half of the nineteen-century led to rise in the number of agricultural labourers. He argues “the agrarian society in the nineteen century India consisted largely of self-sufficient and self-perpetuating village communities. In these communities, the cultivators and artisans working in domestic industries had lived together for centuries on the basis of traditional arrangements regulating the exchange of the cultivators’ products and artisans’ services. Each cultivator carried on the cultivation of his farm with the assistance of his own family. In such a society founded on the integrated unity of agriculture and handicrafts there was no room for the existence of an independent and distinct class of agricultural labourers whose main source of livelihood was work on the land of others for which they received compensation in kind or cash” [Patel. (1952) page 9].

Table1. 1

Occupational Composition of the Agrarian Society in India and the Proportion of Agricultural Labourers in: 1871-1931(In millions)

Occupation	1871-72	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931
Agricultural Labourers of which:	8.2	12.5	25.5	52.4	50.6	27.8	42.2
Farm Labourers	.	.	.	33.5	41.2	21.7	33.5
Unspecified Labourers	.	.	.	16.9	8.3	5.1	7.5
Plantation Labourers	.	.	.	1.0	1.1	1.0	1.2
Proportion of agricultural labourers to the total agricultural population in percentage	18	15	13	25.1	22	26.2	38

Source: Patel. (1952)

“The traditional form of rural society began to disintegrate rapidly after the advent of British rule in India. This disintegration was reflected in the growth of an independent class of agricultural labourers” [ibid. pp 10]. Industrial revolution in England, the construction of the railways in India in 1840 and opening of the Suez Canal 1869 simply ruined the traditional domestic industries in India. “The displaced artisans had to fall back on land as their last resort. Few of them could purchase land. So most of them became tenants or worked as agricultural labourers” [ibid pp 40]. “With the land settlements of the British, the cultivators were made responsible for the payment of land revenue to the government in cash” [ibid]. He further argues that “the fixed and unalterable cash revenue demands of the government compelled the cultivators to seek cash loan from the shopkeepers on the security of their lands. The government not only provided the basis of such credit by making land transferable, but went further by placing the whole authority of its legal system behind the moneylenders to help them recover their loans by a forced transfer of cultivator’s lands”[ibid]. At the same time the expanding export market for commercial crops provided an incentive to grow more commercial crops for monetary needs. This integration with the world markets meant that the value of the crops began to be determined by the movement of prices in the world markets and also that he had to come in contact with the world market through grain dealer who also happened to be the moneylender. “The money lender thus obtained a highly strategic position from which he could take advantages of the peasant’s twin uncertainties, natural and commercial” [ibid pp 55]. As the cases of loan repayment by cultivators was unusual, this meant virtual transfer of land in the hands of moneylenders. “Thus on one hand , the lands of the unprotected proprietors began to be concentrated in the hands of a few moneylenders, whom Max Weber aptly termed “ virtuosos in unscrupulous profiteering” and on the other hand , the large masses of the peasantry began to roll down the social ladder first as tenants at will and then as agricultural labourers . In this historical process the political influence and the power of the British Government played a major role as a protagonist of the moneylenders. Under the aegis of this government, the whole social fabric of the old Indian agrarian society under went a radical transformation” [ibid pp 60]. These factors provided an important explanation for the swelling of agricultural labourers in the early-British period.

Sen (1962) also argues that the British rule led to a transition in agrarian relations leading to the emergence of agricultural labourers as a class. “The monetization of the rural sector transformed land into a commodity from the very beginning. Now the conversion of produce rents into money rents, the increasing role of money lending and the sale and purchase of land as a commodity – the cumulative effect of all these factors had been the passing of land out of the hands of the peasantry and the emergence of landless labourers as a distinct category in Indian rural society” [Sen (1962) pp. 144]. “Unless land could be alienated from the peasant, the agricultural labour could not emerge as a significant element in the rural society. We know that inalienability of land from the peasant was the dominant characteristics of agrarian relations in ancient India; even in the medieval period, this characteristic continued to remain prevalent in a general way, though its decomposition had already started. It is only in the nineteenth century that the old agrarian relations began to undergo drastic changes, particularly with the growth of commodity economy” (ibid). Sen (1962) also argues that indebtedness among cultivators and land mortgages led to the growth of agricultural labourers. “Since the beginning of the twentieth century, land has been passing out of the hands of the actual tillers of the soil steadily swelling the rank of agricultural labourers. In this way, the proportion of agricultural labourers to the total population supported by agriculture rose from 13 to 25 percent in course of 10 years from 1891 to 1901” [ibid pp 146].

Kumar (1965) however does not confirm with the findings that the rise in the number of agricultural labourers was due to the British rule in India. She argues that “the administrative reports do show that even in the beginning of the nineteenth century in South India there were a sizeable number of farmers with holdings too large to be cultivated by family labour alone. While the very large estate cultivated by several hundred labourers was practically unknown, there were many holdings which required two or three families of labourers, and in Tanjore at least, some holdings were considerably larger. What is more important, there was a group of Brahmin landowners, forbidden most types of manual labour by the rules of their caste, who were letting their lands to tenants or employing hired labourers to do the tasks they might not do themselves. From this evidence regarding the structure of South Indian society, it was clear that there was a need of agricultural labourers even before the impact of the British was felt” [ibid pp. 190]. She further argues that the case of south India was no different from the economies of other Asian societies in similar stages of development [ibid]. According to Kumar only members of a particular caste were slaves and serfs and “it appears likely that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the bulk of agricultural labourers were following their traditional occupation” [ibid]. She further argues that during the nineteenth century proportion of a particular caste in the total population must have been 12 to 20 percent, who for economic and social reason did not have their own land. She further assumes that there is a close connection between castes and occupation, so agricultural labour would constitute at least 10 to 15 percent of the total population. “The data on the strength of the agricultural labour castes at the end of the nineteenth century, coupled with the scattered evidence on caste and serfdom at the opening of the century, suffice to show that at the earlier date there were a large number of persons belonging to the agricultural labour caste who were following their traditional occupation. It is unlikely therefore that agricultural labour was a quantitatively insignificant group at the time when the British rule began” [ibid pp 63]. The main economic reason which led to the growth of

landlessness during the nineteenth century was the change in the land-labour ratio, where population was rising faster than the increase in the land brought under cultivation.

Ghosh (1969) argues that “under the land tenurial system introduced by the British, the actual tillers of the soil lost their proprietary right. The high incidence of land revenue made their position extremely precarious and led easily to dispossession of their holdings” [Ghosh (1969) pp 35]. The commercialization of Indian agriculture changed the face of the rural economy, domestic markets were interlined with the international markets, and cultivator’s dependence on moneylenders increased substantially and became ultimately disposed of the small holdings to find themselves amongst the class of landless agricultural workers [ibid. pp 75]. These were the main reasons which explain the growth of the class of landless labourers.

Others like Patnaik (1983), holds the view that “with conquest by Britain and the incorporation of British India into the worldwide system of colonial trade and direct surplus extraction, the position of the hereditary labourer tended to change, and the class of landless workers was greatly augmented” [Patnaik (1983). pp 6]. She further argues that “free import of cheap manufactures heavy revenue burdens, rigid collection in cash, application of the laws of distraint of property and imprisonment of defaulting debtor led to massive displacement of artisans on the one hand and pauperization of large sections of the indebted poorer peasantry into landlessness on the other. These both lowered the land man ratio steadily and raised the share of agricultural labour in the rural work force” [ibid].

However, in post-Independence a number of reasons has been put forward to explain the rise in agricultural labourers. Tenancy legislation have led to the eviction of the poorest and joining the ranks of agricultural labourers [ibid]. “The net effect of the implementation of land reform laws on the labouring poor, so far, has been to perpetuate the old, semi-feudal forms of bonded and attached labour on an increasingly more monetized basis while providing an impetus towards capitalist production for profit. The ranks of the landless were swollen by the evictions of the poorer peasants, to a much greater extent than they were reduced by meager allotments of homestead land in few areas” [ibid pp 11]. The second factor which led to the swelling of agricultural labourers is the new agricultural strategy, which led to increased demand for labour due to multiple cropping [ibid].

Bardhan (1976), (1977) arguing along the same lines put forward that tenurial legislation and technological changes have pushed small peasants and tenants out of self-employment into wage labour i.e. the push and pull factors explains the increase in the level of agricultural wages. Again, due to part of surplus generated through cultivation is used to widen the range of economic activities by better off households leading to the withdrawal of some of the family members from cultivation, this increased the ratio of hired to family labour on such farms. Moreover, increase in the importance of education during the post-independence period have contributed to a decline in the share of family members working on their own farms, thus increasing the demand for hired labour [Bardhan (1976)].

“Even in some or most areas landowning peasants still managed to cling to their cultivation and artisans and craftsmen to their traditional occupations, their incomes from self-employment got increasingly inadequate for supporting their families, more members of which were as a result now taking up wage employment” [Bardhan: 1977].

Table 1. 2
Proportion of Agricultural Labourers to Total Workers in Major States of India: 1951-2001
(Rural)

States	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
Assam,	3.3	3.5	9.6	-	12.9	13.2
Bihar	23.9	23.0	38.9	35.4	37.2	39.6
Orissa	18.5	17.0	28.3	27.2	28.9	48.0
West Bengal	15.3	15.3	26.5	25.1	24.5	24.3
Rajasthan	7.6	4.1	9.3	7.4	10.1	15.3
Gujarat	18.3	14.8	22.5	22.8	23.0	26.5
Maharashtra	30.4	23.8	29.3	26.8	27.0	15.8
Punjab	11.4	7.6	20.1	22.8	23.3	26.3
Haryana	-	-	16.2	16.4	19.5	35.0
U.Pradesh	7.5	11.3	20.0	16.3	19.2	16.3
A.Pradesh	33.4	28.6	37.9	36.7	40.8	10.6
Kerala	25.6	17.4	30.7	28.2	25.7	31.0
Karnataka	19.6	16.4	26.7	23.0	28.8	24.8
Tamil Nadu	23.2	18.4	30.5	31.5	34.2	25.0
All India	19.5	16.7	26.3	25.2	26.2	26.5

Source: Computed from Census 1981, 1991, 2001

Bardhan (1983) argues that the upsurge in rural proletarianization arose from a combination of three factors:

1. Rapid population growth on a slower growing land base.

2. Agrarian structural changes concurrent with population growth.

3. The push-pull effects of the increasing regional disparities.

The increased scope for profitable farm investment led to land owners to increasingly resort to farming with hired labour instead of leasing out.

In West Bengal, [Bandyopadhyay (1975), Rudra and Newaj (1975)] reported from their field study that, technological change having a bias towards the large farmers led to a decline in self-employment and an increase in the demand for wage employment in rural labour force. A survey conducted by Bardhan and Rudra (1983) in Eastern regions, show that sharecropping was on decline and owner cultivation with hired labour was increasing. Thus, eviction of tenants seems to be a major cause, which explained the swelling of agricultural labourers.

Thus, in essence, tenancy legislation and new agricultural strategy to a large extent explain the rise in agricultural labourers from 19.5 percent in 1951 to 26.5 percent in 2001 at all India level and from 15.3 in 1951 to 24.3 percent in 2001 (as shown in table 1.2). The factors which explain the cause of growth of agricultural labourers is the same both for India as a whole and rural Bengal.

In the following part we will first discuss the pattern of employment and trends in wage rate in rural Bengal. As already discussed, that apart from employment, the economic condition of agricultural labourers also depends upon the aspect of employer-employee relations. The last section looks up at some of the important studies which try to analyse the employer-employee relations in India.

EMPLOYMENT PATTERN

Agricultural labourers can be broadly divided into totally attached labour, totally unattached labour and semi attached labour. By totally attached labour or permanent labour we mean one who has usual contract duration of one year or slightly less than one year. The permanent labour works exclusively for his employer. Totally unattached labour or casual labour is one who enters into an agreement or a contract with a particular employer for just a single day at a time. Different contracts are negotiated on different days, in principle with possibly different employers, the contract for one day with one employer not having any influence on the contract with another employer on another day. Apart from these two types of labour contract there is yet another one as argued by Bardhan (1983) known as semi-attached labour.

Contracts of semi-attached labour usually have the following characteristics. [Bardhan,(1983)].

- a) He has or is expected to have some continuity of association with a particular employer.
- b) The contract duration is no more than just a few days.
- c) He has the freedom to work for other employers.

Apart from the above there exists another category of labourers in some pockets of Bengal, these category of labourers are similar to fully attached labourers and get paid in terms of the share of the produce.

Over the years the importance of permanent /attached labourers is declining, and casualization of labour force is gaining importance. Various studies have reported this trend in their field work area; moreover these studies also show that casual labour is the most important type of labour contract. (Srivastava 1989, Dreze and Mukherjee 1987, Bardhan and Rudra 1980 and Jha 1995)¹

EMPLOYMENT TRENDS

The empirical data sources of size composition of work-force and economic activity rates are mainly Decennial Census, Agricultural Labour Enquiry/ Rural Labour Enquiry (ALE/RLE) and various rounds of employment and unemployment conducted by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO).

According to the NSSO definition a person reporting “gainful work” (i.e. working for direct or indirect remuneration) during the reference period is considered to be employed, and a person reporting “seeking work” or available for work is to be treated as unemployed. According to the latest 61st round of NSS report on Employment and Unemployment, in rural areas about 64.8 percent of the male workers and 79.5 percent of the female workers are employed in the primary sector. Hence, primary sector is the most important source of employment in the rural sector.

WEST BENGAL

Looking into the scenario of West Bengal, Rawal and Mishra (2002) provides evidence from Rural Labour Enquiry, to show that the number of days of wage employment available in a year for landed and landless agricultural labourers increased substantially in West Bengal in the immediate post land reform period. Their study shows that “the increase in wage employment between 1983 and 1987-8 for all categories of rural labourers

¹ Srivastava did a field work in the eastern and western U.P Dreze and Mukherjee did their field work in Palanpur district in Western U.P, Bardhan in 110 villages in West Bengal and Jha in Purnea district of Bihar.

except women belonging to landless households was considerably higher in West Bengal than in India as a whole” [Rawal and Mishra (2002)]. Overall employment growth rate in rural Bengal was declining in the eighties. NSS data show that compound annual growth rate of agricultural employment declined in rural Bengal, (by usual status) from 2.08 percent during 1977/78-1983 to 2.02 percent during 1983-1987/88 and to -0.36 during 1987/88-1993/94. Non- farm employment in West Bengal was expanding since the early 1980s both for males and females [Chadda (1994)]. By usual status, growth of non-farm employment in rural Bengal increased from 4.04 percent 1977/78-1983 to 6.36 in 1987/88-1993/94. The rise in non-farm employment was due to improved agricultural growth in Bengal which triggered off a process of non-farm growth, through diverse inter-sectoral linkages, supported by state intervention and increasing agrarian democratization at the grass roots level (Chadda 1994).

The post liberalization period has seen stagnation in employment generation in West Bengal as in rest of India. According to the NSSO report on employment and unemployment, there has been a secular decline not only in overall employment during the post reform period (1993/94-1999/00) but employment in the primary and secondary sector also declined in the same period. According to the West Bengal Human Development Report (2004), employment figures from NSSO show that there was a secular decline in employment opportunities in agricultural sector both by usual status and daily status. According to the report, in the period of the 1980s and early 1990s, the positive changes in the country side brought about by land reforms and increased agricultural output had their impact on generating more rural employment. However in the more recent period since mid-1990s ² there has been a severe negative effect on employment generation. According to the same source rural non-agricultural employment as a share of total employment has been constant in the recent period (1993/94-1999/00).

In terms of the condition of employment for rural men, the most significant changes according to NSSO are the decline in regular employment and increase in casual work. Employment in the rural non-agricultural sector had also declined during 1993-94 and 1999/00, in the aggregate well above one third of all employment in rural West Bengal was in non-agricultural activities by the end of 1990s. One aspect that needs to be emphasized here is that the connection between farm and non-farm employment, there is a strong inter-relationship between the two. Employment availability outside farm will firstly ease employment pressure on the farm sector, secondly off farm employment also means that in case of scarcity of employment on farm, the economic condition of agricultural labourers can be prevented from falling and finally it can put an upward pressure on farm wages.

The macro-economic forces which contributed to the slowdown in employment are reduced public investment and expenditure on public services, effects of import competition on manufacturing activity and inadequate flows of bank credit to small producers in all sectors explains the cause of the decline.

According to the census estimates in West Bengal between 1991 and 2001, there has been a decline in agricultural employment for both men and women.

Table 1.3
Occupation of Main Workers in West Bengal according to the Census (Rural)
(As a percentage of total main workers)

	Males		Females	
	1991	2001	1991	2001
Cultivators	30.2	20.8	16.2	13.4
Agricultural Labourers	22.7	22.6	37.9	32.4
Household Industry	2.8	4	11.3	18
Other workers	44.3	52.7	34.7	36.2

Source: Computed from Census of West Bengal. 1991, 2001.

From the table 1.4, we can see that there has been a decline in the share of cultivators while the proportion of male agricultural labourers has remained broadly stable. The percentages of agricultural workers have declined both for rural male and female in West Bengal. This means that employment opportunities in the farm sector are shrinking in rural Bengal. Percentage of other workers both male and female has increased between 1991 and 2001. It is argued that since a situation as those who have stopped cultivating have not become agricultural labourers they have rather become self-employed people or engaged in other forms of rural paid labour.

The occupational diversification, district wise in rural West Bengal is given in table 1.5. According to table 1.5, more than 40 percent of total rural workers are engaged in non-agricultural activities. Census shows

² Mid 1990s, when broader macroeconomic processes such as economic liberalization and reduced per capita government expenditure had their effects in terms of employment cut. (World Development Report on West Bengal.)

very rapid rural non-farm diversification taking place in almost all the districts of West Bengal. In particular, districts where the rate of urbanization is high saw a high diversification in non-agricultural activities.

In the post liberalization period, there was a countrywide decline in rural employment, as far as the scenario in West Bengal is concerned there has been a decline in not only in the growth rate of aggregate employment but also a decline in the growth rate of agricultural employment. This was coupled with a decline in off farm employment (according to the NSS).

Table 1. 4
Occupational Diversification by District in rural West Bengal Percent of Total
(Main + marginal) Workers in Rural Areas

District.	Cultivators.		Agricultural Labourers		Non-agricultural workers	
	1991	2001	1991	2001	1991	2001
Darjeeling	33.5	20.6	16	14.4	50.5	65
Jalpaiguri	33.3	23.6	19.5	20.4	47.2	56
Cooch Behar	51.8	40.4	28.2	31.8	20	27.8
North Dinajpur	42.9	38	38.6	43.7	18.5	18.3
South Dinajpur	46.4	34.3	33.4	40	20.2	25.7
Malda	35.6	21.9	36.7	32.5	27.7	45.6
Murshidabad	33.9	21.3	34.6	32.3	31.5	46.4
Birbhum	36.5	24.9	40.7	39.7	22.8	35.4
Bardhaman	30.1	20.4	36.9	41.9	33	37.7
Nadia	36.3	24.7	33.1	29.1	30.6	46.2
North 24 Paraganas	34.2	21	32.4	24.5	33.4	50.2
Hugli	29.2	20.9	36.5	34.1	34.3	45
Bankura	43.2	32.6	36.5	37.1	20.3	30.3
Purulia	52.2	33.3	30.7	38.4	17.1	28.3
Medinipur	47.4	30.4	26.1	33.9	26.5	35.7
Howrah	21.6	9.9	27.7	19.6	50.7	70.5
South 24 Paraganas	33.1	18.8	33	30.4	33.9	50.8
West Bengal	38.4	25.4	32.3	33	29.3	41.6

Source: Census of West Bengal. 1991, 2001.

However as far as the data source for trends in employment are concerned there are some broad differences between Census and NSS as have been pointed out by Bardhan. Census only makes a distinction between agricultural labourers and cultivators and does not have a time framework, in turn missing on the seasonality pattern in rural sector and the various distinctions between agricultural labourers. These large-scale survey data however do not capture the heterogeneity in labour contracts and the employment conditions of each of these labour contracts which exists in rural Bengal.

II. CONCLUSION

We have looked into some of the studies to assess the economic condition of agricultural labourers in India as a whole and in West Bengal. After analyzing the literature, some conclusions can be derived;

- a) Growth of employment declined in the post reform period (1993/94-199/00).
- b) The factors which explain this decline are a decline in agricultural growth and falling public investment in rural areas.

Existing data sources do not provide the data needed to analyse some of the intricacies of the labour market, like employment conditions.

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