

RESEARCH NOTES

AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS OF BIRBHUM

About 40 years ago, P.C. Mahalanobis carried out a survey on some villages around Sriniketan, Birbhum to study the life and living conditions of the rural people. Since then several attempts have been made in this region to study this problem but virtually no attempt was made to appraise the socio-economic conditions of rural people in a time perspective. Hence, there seems to be a lag in our understanding of the characteristics and behaviour of the rural poor comprising the group of agricultural labourers which is often misunderstood as a homogeneous entity, having similar terms and conditions of employment and living pattern.

This paper makes an attempt to examine some aspects of employment of agricultural labourers in 12 villages of Birbhum with a view to finding out whether these people could be considered as a homogenous group with respect to their terms and conditions of employment as well as standards of living. We shall also try to assess the impact of agricultural development upon them.

The selection of villages was guided by the consideration of the repeat survey of the same villages done by Mahalanobis in 1937. Complete enumeration of all the 889 households was made which form the basis of the present study. For the sake of analytical convenience, we have presented our observations in three sections of which the first deals with the terms and conditions of labour contract; the second section presents the wage rates of agricultural labourers; while the third section analyses the levels of living of the agricultural labour households in this region. It may be mentioned that the present exercise is a part of the larger study which is underway at the moment.

Terms and Conditions of Labour Contract

Generally, the terms and conditions of employment refer to the service conditions like duration of employment, the basis of payment, means of payment, wage amount, nature of work, labourer's dependence on employer and so on: But subtle variations are often discernible in each of these attributes. For example, the duration of employment may vary in terms of a day, month or even a year; employers pay their labourers usually on daily, monthly or annual basis depending on the period of employment of the latter. Similarly, in respect of means of wage payment, we know that it is paid in cash, kind or both or even in the form of a share of the crop. Likewise, one can find that some employers pay the wages as per market rate while others on subjective basis. The variation in the nature of work can be seen whether or not the appointment is made for a certain specified jobs. Then there are different aspects of dependence, namely, through consumption loans, non-consumption loans, employment of other members of the labourer's family by the same employer, etc.

Various combinations of the elements of different aspects of employment will provide us different kinds of labour contract in agriculture. In the light of our *a priori* knowledge on the nature of alignment of different elements in Birbhum, we can identify the following three major types of labour arrangements in agriculture: (a) casual labourer, (b) *Mahindar*, and (c) *Krishan*.

The terms and conditions of employment of the casual labourers in this region indicate that they are employed for a day or for a sequence of days and are paid daily wages in terms of both cash and kind for different kinds of farm and non-farm work in almost all the seasons of an agricultural year. The combination of elements relating to the *Mahindari* system indicates that a *Mahindar* is employed often for a year and is paid daily as well as monthly wages in terms of both cash and kind for doing both the farm and non-farm activities of his employer. The *Krishani* system denotes a labour contract in which a person is employed for a year for all the labour operations of farming in lieu of a share of the produce as his wage remuneration. Additionally, he is often granted consumption loans and found to offer the services of his other family members to his employer. It may be noted that the *Krishani* system of Birbhum cannot be equated with the share-cropping system. Although, the share-croppers live mainly by tilling others' land on a crop sharing basis, they normally have a pair of cattle, a plough, and seeds as infrastructure for production. The *Krishans*, on the other hand, do not have these and so they contribute only their labour to the production. The strength and proportion of these groups, however, reveal some interesting features of the agrarian economy of this region (Table I).

TABLE I—PERCENTAGE OF ALL HOUSEHOLDS IN RURAL SRINDEHTAN BELONGING TO DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR: 1936-37 AND 1976-77

Categories of agricultural labour	Percentage of total households	
	1936-37	1976-77
(1)	(2)	(3)
Casual labour	20-29	28-80
<i>Mahindar</i>		3-37
<i>Krishan</i>		6-30
All agricultural labourers	91-92	58-47

Source: Col. (2): S. P. Bose: *Banglar Chasi* (in Bengali); *Vivva-Vidya Sangraha*, 1356 (B.S.), pp. 3-4. Col. (3): Our own computation from the survey data.

It is found from Table I that the strength of agricultural labourers has increased significantly within a span of 40 years, suggesting possibly that agriculture in this region is highly dependent on landless labourers. It is also interesting to note that the proportion of casual labour households has increased with a corresponding decline in the proportion of *Krishani* households. The assessment of the *Mahindar* households is not possible for obvious reason. One can, nevertheless, take it certain that the proportion of *Mahindar* households has not changed significantly from the 1940s figure of 4.9 per cent as shown by Bhattacharjee.¹

What explains these rather striking changes in the employment of different kinds of labourers? It may be suggested that due to the agricultural development (in terms of irrigation, cropping pattern, intensity of cropping, etc.) in this region during the recent years, a significant transformation of labour use has possibly taken place resulting in the virtual elimination of a particular mode of cultivation (*Krishani* cultivation) and a subsequent replacement of another mode of cultivation (owner cultivation with daily and annual wage labourers). In the multiple cropping areas, owner cultivation with purely wage labourers appears to be more profitable than either share-cropping cultivation or cultivation with the *Krishans*.

Though the absence of irrigation facilities has impeded the spread of multiple cropping in this region, it has nevertheless been possible now-a-days to sow more than one crop in some portion of the cultivated holdings. This is a phenomenon quite absent in the pre-Independence years. Viewed from this angle, a shift of cultivation from *Krishani* to wage labour, at least in certain areas of this region, is natural.

For understanding the nature of changes in the modes of employment, a close look at the terms and conditions of different kinds of labour contract may also be useful. Surprisingly, except in regard to the dependence or attachment of the labourers to their employers, there seem to be no appreciable differences in the terms and conditions of employment of these three categories of labour between the two points of time.

It is usually known that the labourer's dependence on the employer is associated with taking consumption loans or reinforced by other members of his family working for the same employer. It was quite common for a *Krishan* in the pre-Independence days to take consumption loan with exorbitant rate of interest from his employer, as revealed from Bhattacharjee's study. We gather that the principal and interest on such loans were deducted from the share of the grains which a *Krishan* got. The little that he used to get seemed to be too small to maintain him and his family members all round the year and he was thus forced to approach his employer again for more loans. In this way, the loan used to circulate year after year which a *Krishan* could not repay and thus get-off. Loans taken by the *Krishans* in the 1940s did, in general, lead to a long-term bondage relationship.

1. J. P. Bhattacharjee, "Agricultural Labour and Wages in Birbhum", *Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Vol. III, No. 1, April 1948.

Our present study reveals that not only the *Krishans* but the *Mahindars* also have taken consumption loans from their employers which are repaid occasionally in several instalments during the tenure of their service with no interest. Contextually, it may be noted that the appointment of a *Mahindar* ensures himself a fixed monthly income (either in cash or in kind) and other perquisites in the form of daily food, etc., for a specified period. But not unoften a *Mahindar* requires wage in advance to maintain his family. The advance provided by the employer is usually deducted from his monthly wages in several instalments.

Consumption loans to the *Krishans* are, however, not interest free; a nominal interest is charged (at the rate of 10 per cent per year) which is usually repaid during the harvest period either in grains or through labour given by the other members of their family to the employers. The employer usually provides consumption loans (about 30 maunds of paddy) to each *Krishan* who cultivates 15 to 20 *bighas* of paddy land. Such paddy advance may be slightly higher if the *jote* (*Krishani*-cultivating land) is higher. Since the advance paid by the employer is not often sufficient enough to meet the contingent expenses for medical care of the members of their family, social functions, etc., the *Krishans* are naturally compelled to seek for additional loan from the employers even by paying 40 to 50 per cent of annual interest for such additional loans. It is obvious therefore that the crop share due to a *Krishan* does not finally reach him because this gets neutralized through adjustments of loans. Sometimes, the loan taken by him is higher than what he actually gets as a crop share due to the failure of crops in the region, etc. In such cases, a *Krishan* is compelled to serve the same employer for another agricultural year for repaying the loan. Thus, it is clear that although some *Krishans* are formally appointed for one year, their services are continued actually for more than one year.

Apart from indebtedness, there are many other reasons which have compelled a *Krishan* to remain attached to his employer year after year. For example, a *Krishan* normally creates confidence by putting in sincere efforts to cultivation and rendering domestic services to the employer. In the process, an informal relationship develops between him and his employer which tends to last even after the death of either of them. This mutual trust finds its expression through reciprocal interest. The employer confides to his labourer for services; the labourer to his employer for looking after his pain and pleasure. It may be noted that Bhattacharjee's study did not mention this kind of informal relationship. What we find in his work is an unique relationship, *i.e.*, perpetual debt-bondage relationship between the employer and a *Krishan*.

Our study, however, suggests that loans taken by a *Krishan* do not generally lead to long-term bondage relationships, at least in the current decade. Thus, we see a significant change in the attribute of dependence described above during the period of 1940s and the 1970s. It follows therefrom that a new labour alignment has taken place in the changed

conditions of agriculture, thus causing a transformation in the modes of employment of different kinds of labourers.

In order to interpret the phenomenon more clearly, an examination of the relative economic position of these three groups of labourers by their daily earnings or wage rates may be useful in the present context.

Wage Rates of Agricultural Labourers

The results of our analysis are presented in Table III. Prior to their interpretation, the procedure adopted for the computation of wage data under each category of agricultural labour is described below.

(a) From the average daily wage rates of the casual labourers, the average wage rate per month was computed. In turn, the average annual wage rate was computed from the average monthly wage rates. The data on wage rates have been collected from each agricultural labour household for each village under study. As we did not find any significant variation in the wage rates of casual labourers among these villages, a single wage rate of a casual labourer has therefore been calculated for the region by taking all the villages together (Table II).

TABLE II—MONTHWISE DISTRIBUTION OF DAILY WAGE RATES OF MALE CASUAL LABOURER IN AGRICULTURE IN THE SURROUNDING VILLAGES OF SRIKRETAN, BIRBHUM: 1976-77

Month	Average daily wage rate (Rs.)
(1)	(2)
January	3-79
February	3-54
March	3-25
April	2-83
May	3-13
June	3-46
July	4-17
August	3-96
September	2-67
October	2-67
November	3-25
December	3-96
Average	3-39

(b) We have data on total annual payment (in Rs.) to a *Mahindar*. This includes the payments made in cash, kind and perquisites. The value of payments made in kind has been computed with the help of the retail prices of the commodities under payment. We have computed the daily wage rate (in Rs.) of a *Mahindar* by dividing the total payment (in Rs.) by 365 days. The wage rate per farm servant has been calculated by taking 365 days as divisor on the ground that a *Mahindar*, being an annual farm servant, would work on all the days in a year.

(c) The wage rate of a *Krishan* has been worked out by dividing the average value of the share of crops earned by a *Krishan* by 365 days. The value of the crops has been calculated on the basis of the village prices of the cereals at harvest. Since a *Krishan* is an annual contractual labourer, 365 days is assumed as his period of employment for an agricultural year.

It is observed from col. (3) of Table III that the daily wage rate of a casual labourer is lower than that of a *Mahindar*, and the daily wage rate of a *Mahindar* is lower than that of a *Krishan*. That is, the daily wage rate of a *Krishan* is the highest among the three categories of labour. But, according to Bhattacharjee's study, the daily wage rate of a *Mahindar* was lower than that of a casual labourer. Thus, an interesting change is noticed in the case of daily wage rates between a casual labourer and a *Mahindar*.

TABLE III—COMPARISON OF DAILY WAGE RATES AMONG DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN RURAL SREKSHETA, BIRSHUM: 1976-77

Categories of agricultural labour	Number of households	Average daily wage rate (Rs.)
(1)	(2)	(3)
Casual labour	256	3-39
<i>Mahindar</i>	30	3-54
<i>Krishan</i>	56	3-99
All agricultural labourers	342	3-50

We may ask: why this difference in the daily wage rates among the different categories of agricultural labour? The higher wage rate of a *Krishan* can be readily explained by the fact that his wage rate depends upon the output of agricultural products, on the one hand, and the size of the *jote*, on the other. Since a landowner always tries to produce maximum output from his land, he utilizes the labour of a *Krishan* intensely and also applies non-labour and non-monetized inputs with maximum intensity. A *Krishan* in this situation will contribute his maximum effort so that he get a share of the produce as his remuneration. It seems to us that a *Krishan* gets a higher wage rate compared to others in so far as the share of output and the prices of the crops are concerned.

As regards the difference in the wage rate between a *Mahindar* and a casual labourer, it may be pointed out that the very nature of work to which each is entrusted upon usually creates higher economic position for the former than for the latter. For example, there is a better scope for landowners to utilize the services of the *Mahindars* throughout the year for different types of operations connected with cultivation. They often press the *Mahindars* to undertake painstaking farm jobs like lift irrigation, manuring, carrying and threshing operations, etc., which are not usually entrusted to a casual labourer due to economic reasons. Since a variety of farm work is entrusted to a *Mahindar*, it is economical for a landowner to consider a higher wage for him.

From the above discussion, it is quite clear that the daily earnings of the *Krishans* are still higher compared to the wage labourers. We cannot, therefore, vouch for certain that the changes in the modes of employment in the recent decade have taken place due to economic pressure faced by the *Krishans*. The employer's need for increasing production and profit by adopting wage labour-based owner cultivation possibly provides the major motivation of this transformation.

Now, given the kinds of agricultural development attained so far and considering the changes in the modes of employment obtained in this region, it would be interesting to assess the extent of poverty among the agricultural labour households for understanding the impact of development upon the weaker section of the rural society. This problem is examined in the next section.

Levels of Living of Agricultural Labour Households

Economic conditions of agricultural labourers have been measured here with the help of two major indicators: per capita income and per capita expenditure of each labour household.

We have some detailed information on cash receipts and cash income and also receipts of consumer goods from wage earning for each agricultural labour household. Income from other sources by any other member of the household has been counted properly. On the basis of this information, we have computed the annual income of each labour household, and accordingly, the per capita income of each household has been calculated.

Furthermore, from the information on household expenditure items such as expenditure on food items (both home produced and purchased) as well as non-food items in terms of both quantity and value, we have calculated the annual consumption expenditure of each household of different categories of labour and accordingly arrived at the per capita expenditure figures.

Disparities in the levels of living of agricultural labour households in particular, and rural labour households in general, have been studied by different research workers in recent years.² They have used different indicators and different methods, but arrived at somewhat similar conclusion that inequality has increased or at least not decreased among the different agricultural occupational groups since the country has launched itself on the course of 'planned development'. We do not want to question these findings for the reality of this phenomenon is undeniable. But at the same time, we think that the disparities vary widely not only between the occupational groups but also within a group. This is an issue which has not received due attention from the research workers so far. We, therefore, focus our attention on that point below.

2. (a) Pranab Bardhan, "On the Minimum Level of Living and the Rural Poor", *Indian Economic Review*, Vol. V (New Series), No. 1, April 1970 and "On the Incidence of Poverty in Rural India of the Sixties", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. VIII, Nos. 4-6, Annual Number 1973; (b) B. S. Minhas, "Rural Poverty, Land Distribution and Development Strategy: Facts and Policy", *Indian Economic Review*, Vol. V (New Series), No. 1, April 1970; (c) V. M. Dandekar and Nilakantha Rath: Poverty in India, Indian School of Political Economy, Poona, 1971; and (d) M. L. Dantwale: Poverty in India—Then and Now: 1897-1970, The Macmillan Company of India Ltd., New Delhi, 1973.

TABLE IV—ECONOMIC POSITION OF DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR IN RURAL SIKHETAN, BIRBHUM: 1976-77

Categories of agricultural labour	Number of households	Per capita annual income (Rs.)	Per capita annual expenditure (Rs.)	Per capita annual debt (Rs.)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Casual labour	256	332-84	354-15	21-31
<i>Mahindar</i>	50	354-57	363-38	28-81
<i>Krishan</i>	56	444-00	494-87	50-87
Total	342	351-19	378-00	26-81

An analysis of Table IV reveals some interesting patterns. Judging from per capita incomes of the three categories of labour, it would appear that a *Krishan* is relatively better off than either a *Mahindar* or a casual labourer (col. 3). However, examining the extent of indebtedness one gets a reverse picture (col. 5). Therefore, on the face of it, it is difficult to conclude at this stage as to whether a *Krishan* or the other two categories of labour are better off.

It appears from these data that not all agricultural labourers of Birbhum are poor. Poverty being a relative term, its extent naturally varies from one group to the other, if not between individuals. Our Birbhum experience is no exception to this. The extent of poverty we see varies from one group to another. Let us examine this phenomenon on the basis of minimum need that a family may have for its survival. It should be mentioned in this context that different scholars have laid down different norms for minimum level of living. From these, we may choose an average figure (norm) of private consumption of Rs. 360 (at 1970-71 prices) per capita per year as a bare minimum for life and living.³ One may also draw this poverty line at a somewhat lower per capita level, say, Rs. 300 to avoid the controversies that might occur in the estimation of poverty line.

The results of our analysis are presented in Table V, which shows the extent of poverty among the labour households on the basis of the minimum consumption norm described above.

3. See Deepak Lal, "Agricultural Growth, Real Wages and the Rural Poor in India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XI, No. 26, June 26, 1976, for an extensive discussion of this point.

4. See, for details, Mishra, *op. cit.*

TABLE V—PERCENTAGE OF 'WEAKER SECTION' HOUSEHOLDS BELOW THE POVERTY LINE IN RURAL ANDHRA PRADESH, 1976-77

Categories of 'weaker section' households	Below Rs. 360 per annum expenditure (per cent)	Below Rs. 300 per annum expenditure (per cent)
(1)	(2)	(3)
Casual labour	61.72	46.10
<i>Mahindars</i>	46.67	33.34
<i>Krishans</i>	25.00	17.86
All agricultural labourers	54.39	40.55

According to our analysis, nearly 38 per cent of the casual labour households, nearly 53 per cent of the *Mahindars* households, nearly 75 per cent of the *Krishans* households and 46 per cent of the combined agricultural labour households are above the poverty line, i.e., in the "not-so-poor" category, with the consumption norm exceeding Rs. 360 per person per annum. The percentage of poor households is thus higher among the casual labourers and it is the lowest among the *Krishans*. Also, it is seen that nearly 60 per cent of all agricultural labour households are above the poverty line if we assume the minimum consumption at a somewhat lower level, i.e., at Rs. 300 per person per year.

From the foregoing discussions following conclusions emerge:

1. It is somewhat misleading to consider agricultural labourers as a 'homogeneous group'. In terms of their conditions of employment, wage rates, income level and consumption pattern, they represent different groups with dissimilar characteristics.

2. Inter-group and intra-group variations in the distribution of income and expenditure relating to agricultural labourers are a patent fact. It is fallacious, therefore, to treat every group of agricultural labour as a 'poor class'. There is a good percentage of agricultural labourers which may be categorised as 'not-so-poor class'.

3. It is now clear that among the different groups of agricultural labour, the economic conditions of the *Krishans* are relatively better than that of the casual labourers and the *Mahindars*. It would now appear that the greater indebtedness of a *Krishan* vis-a-vis the other two categories is on account of his more proximate relationship with the landowner. Thus, presumably the finite lending capacity of the landowner is more favourably apportioned to a *Krishan* than to the others, although the latter's need for borrowing may be more than that of a *Krishan*.

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