

Record of Discussions at Burdwan (West Bengal)

BURDWAN: 22nd May, 1968.

On our arrival at Burdwan, we held discussions with District Agricultural Officer. In the afternoon we also attended the meeting of the officers of Intensive Agricultural District Programme (IADP) Project at the District and reviewed the achievements of Intensive Agricultural Production Programme and its impact on agricultural labour. The IADP has been in progress in the district since August 1962, though high-yielding varieties of paddy and wheat were introduced a couple of years ago. The main consideration which weighed with the authorities in selecting this district for introduction of IADP was availability of irrigation from one of the D.V.C. canals. Out of total cultivable area of 12 lakh acres, the area under irrigation is 5.5 lakh acres in kharif and about 1 lakh acres under Rabi crops. The principal crops in the district are rice (11 lakh acres), Jute (39 thousand acres), potato (35 thousand acres), wheat (10 thousand acres), sugarcane (9 thousand acres) and pulses (80 thousand acres). It will thus appear that the cropping pattern is still dominated by paddy and that winter crops have not made much headway.

2. Out of 33 Blocks into which the district has been divided, 2 Blocks are covered under IADP. The statement furnished to us showed a perceptible and marked increase in the consumption of improved seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, etc. So far as the main strategy and structure of intensive agricultural development are concerned, these are similar to those obtaining in other parts of the country. Cooperative credit has also gone up. The area under rabi crop shows some increase, to the extent of 10.7% over the acreage in 1961-62. There are, however, a few bottlenecks to the full development of agricultural programme. Important among these are inadequate irrigation facilities during the rabi season which account for slow rate of extension of winter crops. This is being made good by a large scale sinking of tubewells and installation of river pumps, and there are about 180 tubewells and 55 river pumps. There are also complaints about inadequate supply of rabi seeds.

3. A table showing achievements and production of principal crops shows a progressive increase in area under cultivation under different crops, such as, rice, jute, paddy, sugarcane, wheat and vegetables from 1962-63 to 1967-68. Correspondingly production in terms of tonnes also showed an increase from 1962-63 to 1965-66. Though there were successive droughts for following two years, there has not been any marked fall in production. This is in a way an index of the success of irrigation schemes. Another redeeming feature has been the increase in yield per acre despite two successive droughts. From the statements placed before us it appears that all principal crops show an increase in the yield per acre.

4. The principal beneficiaries of these development programmes are the socially and economically advanced sections of the society, the Jotdars and traders. They have been able to take advantage not only of irrigation facilities and available inputs but also of rising agricultural prices. That the Jotdars and big cultivators are getting affluent is brought out by the fact of the sale of eight thousand transistor sets and twelve thousand bicycles from local dealers during last year. Another

sign is the large number of cold storages for preservation of potato which shows that agro-industry is making rapid progress.

5. There are a few facts about Bengal agrarian situation which deserve to be stated.

- (i) First, Bengal was known or notorious for the permanent settlement. It led to a large measure of absentee landlordism on which the great poet, Tagore, sadly commented during his times. The State Acquisition Act led to the abolition of zamindari interests but the landlords managed to circumvent its provisions of the land ceiling by distributing the landed property among their relations or disposing of the property under different names. The fear of share croppers acquiring an interest in their lands, however, to some extent, stimulated direct interest in their lands, and some of the absentee landlords became direct cultivators and owners. But, by and large, the rural power structure remained intact and, in fact, it has been fortified by the agricultural affluence; it has acquired more power, influence and wealth in the countryside.
- (ii) The share croppers called "Bhagchasi" are still a force, roughly 20% of the cultivating class, even though they are changed every year or every three years to avoid development of occupancy right in the lands.
- (iii) Thirdly, agricultural labour constitutes the lowest stratum of the agrarian society. The population of agricultural labourers is 1.85 lakhs and they belong mostly to the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe of the section. There is a significant difference in the traditional mode of payment to agricultural labour in Bengal as compared to that in Bihar. While agricultural labour in Bengal like his counterpart in Bihar gets wage both in kind and in cash, he does not, like his counterpart in Bihar, gets a share in the harvest or the produce. His lot, therefore, is infinitely worse.
- (iv) Fourthly, ethnically the rural society in Bengal is composed of certain distinct elements. The upper crust of the population who own lands consist mostly of Brahmin, Ugra Khatriya, Muslims and Sadgoaps. A recent sociological study reveals that Ugra Khatriya are cultivators par excellence; some of the muslim cultivators are also good cultivators. Agricultural labour come mostly from the poorest and most backward ethnic groups, tribes, scheduled caste or backward classes.

6. Burdwan is also unique in combining both industrial and agricultural progress. The Eastern part is agriculturally developed and Western part is industrially advanced. There is a measure of labour shortage which is acutely felt during the peak period of agricultural operations. This necessitates import of seasonal labour migrants from adjoining districts of Santhal Pargana in Bihar, Murshidabad and Bankura. The Santhal labour is preferred because it is very good at transplantation and harvesting.

7. While the Acts have led to the break up of large scale farms which existed in the past on paper, the largest holdings in the district are of the size of 25 acres. The average holding is 4 acres: the cultivating community accounts for a population of 3 lakhs against the total cultivable area of 12 lakhs. According to 1961 Census, 65% of agricultural labour are wage earners without lands and only 35% of them own some lands.

8. The political movement involving agricultural labour has not grown beyond a certain stage. The Communist-controlled Kisan Sabhas are fairly militant and effective in some areas in the district. But the demands of the kisan sabhas are limited to the distribution of lands among the landless, security of land for small share croppers and sharing produce. I was told that the last demand has not yet crystallised in the district. The kisan sabha has not been able to organise agricultural labour into a disciplined body all over the district. They have not been pressing for an increase in wages of agricultural labour. However, the United Front Government appointed a Minimum Wages Committee for revision of minimum wages for agricultural labour in August 1967. The Committee has submitted its report. The Committee divided the State into seven zones and the minimum wages have been suitably revised upward. On an average, the wage for a male worker stands at Rs.3.20, for a female at Rs.2.78 and for the child at Rs. 1.77. This revision is based on an assessment of need-based monthly wage which could enable a labourer and his family to live on an improved diet. The total monthly expenditure on food, clothing, house rent, etc. comes to Rs.279.19 which an average family of three members can earn during a month.

9. The machinery to enforce and implement the Act and its provisions is almost non-existent in the district. There is no field labour officer posted in the district. A Labour Inspector is, however, posted at Durgapur which lies, however, in the heart of industrial area.

10. The two areas in which the IADP has made some impact are (i) increased employment opportunities and (ii) a marginal increase in wages both in kind and cash. If the impact of the production programme has not been as extensive and rapid as was expected, it is largely because of the fact that areas under double or triple cropping have not expanded owing to lack of irrigation facilities. Only when more and more areas are brought under double or multiple cropping will agricultural labour get employment all round the year and also higher wages. The second important constraint is the absence of tradition of conceding the labourer a share in the produce which has made such a difference to conditions of agricultural labour in Purnea in Bihar. The Project Executive Officer, however, corrected the impressions set out earlier that there was no tradition of conceding labourer a share in the produce. He pointed out that about 10 years ago, before the implementation of the State Acquisition Act, labourers as share croppers and not as labourers got one-third of the produce. The labourers as such did not get any share. Only during the last 10 years the Jotdars out of fear of crop sharers have switched over to system of wage payment though share croppers continue to get 50% of the produce off the record.

11. I find a very interesting system of collection of weekly wage rates existing in the State under the Farm Management Study. It studies the cost of production. A statement showing weekly wage rate for the year from April 1967 to April 1968 for village Rangpara were shown to me. It is prepared by Investigators who are posted in these areas. Wages are inclusive of both cash and kind, the kind component having been converted into money wage at local rate. This shows that wage variations range from 1.50 to Rs.2 from April to July and from Rs.3 to Rs.3.50 from July to September and again from Rs.2.75 to Rs.2.50 from October to February. Labour, however, takes advantages of general scarcity of labour during the peak period to claim a higher wage which goes upto Rs.7 including the price of meals. Migrant labour are paid some advance, railway fare, wages both in kind and cash and are given clothes, etc.

12. It will thus appear that there has been no perceptible increase in real wages though there has been some marginal increase in money wage.

13. There is no incidence of bonded agricultural labour in the district but there are a large number of permanent labour attached to some jotdar families.

14. The officers also complained that the efficiency of agricultural labour has gone down over last two or three years. For instance while transplantation in an acre required 9 labourers per day sometime ago, the requirement of labour has now gone up from 12 to 15 labourers per acre. This is generally due to the interplay of many factors which include rise in prices, physical deficiency, growing discontent, worsening environmental conditions, general agitation and dissatisfaction all round.

15. Rural indebtedness reveals a similar pattern as in other States because of the precarious and subsistence withered economy. Tribal agricultural labour live in perpetual debt. During the slack and lean periods, they approach Jotdars and money-lenders for loans in kind or in cash to eke out their living. At harvests they repay the debt in kind but the interest, by and large, remains unpaid.

Village Sonakur (Distt. Burdwan) - 23rd May, 1968.

16. Visited village Sonakur in Burdwan Block. The first pleasant impression was about a large acreage of land brought under summer paddy. The Block Development Officer explained that following the failure of rains in 1966-67 and the damage to Amon crop the cultivators took to cultivation of summer paddy known as Boro paddy of high-yielding variety. Last year the area under cultivation was 30 acres. It has grown to 4 hundred acres during the year under review. So far as agricultural labour is concerned, it is getting employment during this season which used to be normally a slack season in previous years.

17. I spoke to school teachers about the education of the children of landless agricultural labour. It

appears that their children account for 40% of total students. They are regular in their attendance. Children upto 10 years of age cannot help their parents in their agricultural work.

18. I spoke to a few boys in Santhali. Raboti Manji told me that his father did not have any land. He was wearing a tattered shirt. He has taken stale rice and sweet pumpkin. He aspires to be a paid Government employee. His house does not stand in own land.

19. I spoke to Ram Krishna, a Santhal labour. He does not own any land. His house does not stand in his own land. He gets a wage of Re.1/- and $1\frac{1}{2}$ seers of rice during this period which is supposed to be slack period. He gets Rs.2 plus $1\frac{1}{2}$ seers of rice during the rainy season which is normally a peak period. His children study in school. He has four sons and one daughter. Only the eldest son is going to school. He has been in the village for the last 7 or 8 years. He is apart-time labourer and part-time a share cropper. At present he is a share cropper for four bighas of land. He gets half of the share of produce. As a share cropper he supplies the entire required seeds and ploughs. It is interesting to note that non-chemical manure is entirely supplied by him. Artificial manure which has become popular is shared both by him and the landowner. He does not want his son to do an agricultural labourer. In the months of Chaitra and Baisakh they don't get even full meals. The produce of the land as a share cropper lasts only for two months.

20. It appears that about 50% of the landless labour are share-croppers also.

21. I met Anbujaksha Samant, a Jotdar. He is an Ugra Khatriya. He owns about 16 bighas of land and has 15 members in his family. He produces paddy, potato, sugarcane and the produce lasts throughout the year. There is a variation in the wages paid to labour employed by him. He pays Re.1 and $1\frac{1}{2}$ seers of rice, oil, tobacco, fuel, salt, curree and vegetables, etc. during the lean period. A family of 3 labourers is permanently attached to his household - one to look after the cattle and others to look after cultivation. During peak agricultural operations he pays Rs.1 $\frac{1}{2}$ to Rs.2 in cash and $1\frac{1}{2}$ seers of rice in kind with the complement of vegetables, fuel, oil, etc. by way of wages to his attached labour. In Bengal there is no system of payment of a share in harvested crop. The contract with permanent agriculture labour is normally on an yearly basis. A cow-boy gets Rs.120 yearly plus food and clothing, and the ploughman gets Rs.180 and two maunds of paddy per month plus clothing. The head labourer gets an yearly wage of Rs.240 in cash, two maunds of paddy per month and the produce of one bigha of the land at the time of harvest.

22. Abusatar Malik, another Jotdar, owns 16 bighas of land and has 10 members in his family. He has four labourers. The rate of payment during the lean season is the same. During peak agricultural operations

wages go up to Rs.2 - Rs.3. He has no agreement with labourers to give one bigha produce to the labour. He pays on daily basis only and has no yearly contract. A Jotdar also said that as long as the labourer had money and food in his house he would not go out for work. He would spend his earnings over drinking country liquor. He works for 6 hours in a day. I find that rice beer has been replaced by toddy for a drink.

23. Jagannath Manji, a Santhal labourer is a daily wage earner. He is not a share cropper. He does not own his house. He does not have his family.

Village Paharhati (Distt. Burdwan) - 23rd May, 1968.

24. We visited the village of Paharhati and attended a meeting of the members of the Anchal Panchayat Parishad. Most members of the Panchayat Samiti happened to be well-to-do cultivators, a fact which reflects the existing power structure in the village. I explained the purpose of my visit and sought their views regarding the impact of production programmes on rural economy in general and on agricultural labour in particular. All were unanimous in pointing to the advantages of irrigation which converted mono crop area into double crop area in many places. Their panacea for providing employment for labour round the year was to further extend irrigation facilities for double or triple cropping. That the area now grows bumper potato and pumpkin crops which were piled up at some places we passed through was evident. The extension of irrigation could be possible by tapping river Banka and plugging some loopholes in D.V.C. irrigation schemes. Consolidation of holdings will also ensure better utilisation of irrigation facilities. The existing term of installation of tubewells which involves a surety of four to five acres of compact area is unworkable and impracticable because few cultivators have their lands at one place. Resort should be had to sources of irrigation other than shallow tubewells as at present. The water level is about 12 to 14 feet in the district.

25. There has been some increase in wages of labourers as compared to those that prevailed about three years ago. For instance, a labourer during the lean period three years ago received 0.50 paise and 1 k.g. of rice as wage per day. Now wages stand at Re.1.00 and 1 k.g. of rice per day (equivalent to Rs.3/- per day). During peak agricultural operations previously, he used to receive a wage varying from Rs.1.25 to Rs.1.50 including one k.g. of rice. Now it has gone up to Rs.2.50 plus 1 k.g. of rice. 45 per cent of the landless labour are share croppers and 15% of small farmers owning three to four acres of land also work as share croppers and daily waged labour.

26. The efficiency of labour has deteriorated largely because of political reasons. They now work for hardly five hours instead of eight. The propoganda started by

political parties aims at distracting them from their work by pointing to their low wages and the big gain made by landowners. In some cases, the labour adopt a deliberate go-slow so that he may remain employed over a longer period. It is not a fact that the deterioration in efficiency during the last five to six years, and which was particularly marked during last two years, had anything to do with physical deficiency. The health of the worker has perceptibly improved. Epidemics have been controlled, T.B. has been wiped out (in this area only) and the labourer is physically more fit but is easily taken in by political propaganda.

27. It appears that the permanent labour attached to the households has some advantages over casual labour. He gets the produce of 1 bigha of land which is tilled by himself.

28. I called for suggestions for improving the lot of agricultural labour which does not compare favourably with the lot of his counterpart in Bihar and U.P. I made two suggestions, one with regard to the strengthening of grain golas, i.e. to give out loans to agriculture labour during lean period, and the other to give him a small share, say a bundle out of 20 bundles from actual produce at the harvest. The latter measure would build up an interest in the produce and involve him in production programmes. The first was immediately accepted and the second proposal was accepted only in favour of permanent labour.

Village Kenna (Distt. Burdwan) - 23rd May, 1968.

29. In the afternoon we visited the village of Kenna in Memari Block and attended a meeting with the members of Anchalik Parishad.

30. Labourers are paid the same wages i.e. Re.1 in cash and 1.25 k.g. (5 pawas) of rice along with oil, beedis, vegetables etc. during the lean period. During peak agricultural operations, while kind component remains the same, money wage goes upto Rs.2.50. Most of the children of labourers go to primary schools but, primary education, which is compulsory, is not rigorously enforced.

31. There are three categories of labourers, apart from migrant labourers. The first category consists of those who own some land. The second category consists of Bhagchasi or share croppers who constitute, according to an estimate 50 per cent of labour (though unrecorded). The third category consists of landless labourers and wage earners. The permanent labour has an advantage over others in as much as he gets an yearly wage of one bigha produce which he tills himself or 24 maunds of paddy and Rs.250 in cash by way of money wage along with clothing, chadar etc. More than 50 per cent of

labourers have their houses in their own lands. Others have their houses in other's lands. But this does not adversely affect the wages. Those who allow them to build houses in their lands do so because labour is readily available.

32. Labour is uneducated and unconscious of its rights and duties. He throws away his earning over drinks. Some cultivators pointed out that they do not send their children to school or attach any significance to education. A medical practitioner observed that about 50% of labour particularly Santhal labour suffer from Tuberculosis because of unhygienic living conditions in the area. There is also some incidence of leprosy.

33. Santhal labour is preferred because both male and female labour work. Their conditions are better than those of other categories of Scheduled Caste and tribe labour because in these categories only male labour works.

34. We visited private farms of some of the local cultivators. About 40 acres of lands have been brought under boro paddy - a highly-yielding variety of paddy which is harvested in 120-150 days.

35. On our way to Burdwan we visited village Chakuara to look into the records of Farm Management Study which bring out weekly wage rates and the cost of farm production for different crops.

BANKURA DISTRICT (WEST BENGAL)

24-5-1968.

36. On our arrival at Bankura we held discussions with District Magistrate, his two Sub-Divisional Officers and the District Tribal Welfare Officer.

37. Bankura is one of the most backward districts in Bengal. It has a population of about 15.64 lakh out of which the Scheduled Tribes account for 1.75 lakh and the Scheduled Castes 5.1 lakh. The tribals are mostly Santhals; the Scheduled Castes consist of Bouris and Bagdis, among others. About 50% of tribals have no land of their own and 48% of Bouris have little or no lands. These sections of the tribal and scheduled caste population constitute landless agricultural labour. The number of such labour is put at 4.60 lakh. There is no industry in the district; agriculture is carried on in primitive fashion. Plucking of kendu leaves, rope-making and sheep breeding etc., provide subsidiary occupation. The Kangsbati project now in execution engages a number of labour. Because of lack of employment opportunities labour migrates

to Burdwan and Hooghly Districts during transplantation and harvesting seasons. These include both santhals, who are in great demand, and Bouris. Another attraction to these districts is high wage rates prevailing there. No survey has been undertaken of wage rates in the district.

38. To the primitive and undeveloped character of the economy may be added the fact that the district has been visited almost every year by a drought in some area or other, and therefore test reliefs are an annual feature. Last year, about Rs.50 lakh were spent on these relief measures. As in other parts of the country drought affects landless agricultural labour and drives them to the point of starvation and death.

39. Share cropping was practised in the district as in other parts of the district on a large scale till 1954-55 when following the abolition of zamindari and settlement operations the landlords either evicted the share croppers or compelled them not to get their names entered in revenue records. The high yielding variety programme may give, it is apprehended, the last blow to share cropping system. It may do so because this production programme is capital intensive and the labour component of production cost is very low (?). It has been reported in some areas that share cropper confines himself only to traditional paddy cultivation and that other crops of the high-yielding variety are grown directly by landowner.

40. There has been some thinking about mixed farming which is suited for areas like this, but there has been no progress in this direction. Providing employment for agricultural labour round the year and starting such industries as poultry farms, goat and sheep rearing, etc., are of crucial importance. The little development work which has been done in the field of irrigation or construction of kachha road owes its impulse to famine relief works and development programmes.

41. There is no incidence of bonded agriculture labour or agriculture serfdom. The most popular form of engaging labour is yearly contract which is entered into at the end of the harvest and which holds good for a year. The cultivator undertakes to pay a certain quantity of paddy, some money, clothing and allows labour to cultivate a bigha or so of land and enjoy its produce in lieu of his services.

42. There are areas where 50% of agriculture labour suffer from leprosy and, therefore, special measures have to be undertaken to improve the nutrition standard and extend medical relief.

43. In the afternoon we visited two villages where primitive conditions prevailed, at a distance of about 30 miles from the District Headquarters, one inhabited predominantly by landless Bouris and the

other by Bhumi and Santhals. The first village was Dusatina. We interviewed two workers, one Namai Bouri and the other Kalipada Bouri. The first is working at the canal and gets a wage of Rs.0.88 paise per day at the rate of Rs.6 per 100 sq. ft. of earth cutting. When he works in the village he gets three pal ($3\frac{3}{4}$ seers) of paddy. During agricultural operations while the kind component remains the same he gets in addition one meal from the cultivator. His children go to school. Some of the agriculture labour own land too. In quite a few cases, their houses stand on others' land.

44. Kalipada Bouri owns neither a home nor land. He is a daily wage worker. He works in the canal or with a cultivator and does his cultivation (longal pongal). When the owner cannot afford to pay paddy, he pays Rs.1.25 per day. During peak agricultural operations he gets 3 pals ($3\frac{3}{4}$ seers) of rice one seer of murahi (fried rice) but no cash.

45. The labourers who are engaged on yearly basis are called 'Nagarria' or 'Gotania' labour and they get 3 pals of paddy every day and two meals per day for 4 months during peak agricultural operations. In addition, they get two or three or five rows of paddy produce from every field. When they work with their wives then only they get three or five rows of produce. They are not happy with the conditions and they want more opportunities for employment. Bouris, unlike Santhals, have been Hinduised and they do not drink.

46. We then visited Khandarani, a village close by Dusatina. Here also the same rate of wages prevailed, i.e., 3 pals of paddy per day or those who could not pay the paddy paid Rs.1.00 or Rs.1.25 by way of wages. During peak agricultural operations the labour gets meals also. There is local primary school in the village which their children attend. At harvest or transplantation when paddy is not available they get 25 paise for every 80 plants transplanted.

47. Conditions in these two villages are primitive and the village economy has not yet been monetised. Therefore, the conditions of the labour are more distressing. They look emaciated. They want more and more work to be opened in the village to give them an opportunity to work. In a tribal village we, however, found that there was a greater homogeneity, the reasons being that both labour and landowners came from the same stock.

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A note on discussion with Shri Harikrishan •
Konar, ex-Revenue Minister and C.P.I.
Krishak Sabha Leader, on 28th May, 1968 at
the Central Government Hostel.

The purpose of observation visits to Burdwan and Bankura, which was to study conditions of agricultural labour, was explained within the framework of terms of reference of the National Commission on Labour to Shri Konar. It was observed during the visits that land reforms had not improved the plight of agricultural labour. In fact, in some areas eviction of share croppers was on the increase. Secondly, the Intensive Agricultural Development Programme appear to have strengthened the position of jotdars who appear the main beneficiaries of it. No doubt, the programme had created more employment opportunities but the gains of agricultural labour from it were only marginal. While these developments were common to all States in the country, there were certain other developments in this State which assumed alarming proportions so far as agricultural labour was concerned. A few queries relating to these developments were posed to Shri Konar and the following discussion ensued.

The first point which struck an observer of the rural scene in Bengal was that while the State was the scene of militant political movement the krishak sabhas consisting of landless labour hardly showed any activity and organisation. Shri Konar explained that the cause for this could be traced to character of leadership of revolutionary movement in Bengal which was essentially of middle-class origin. This middle-class had a dual character which emerged from its simultaneous interests in rural and urban areas, as the small property owners in villages and as workers and salaried employees in the latter. The Member of this Bhadrak community fought for the democratic rights as teachers, low paid employees, bank employees as petty bourgeois in towns and cities. But they had to supplement their income with the returns from the landed property however small in the village. Therefore, this class from which most of the field workers of krishak sabhas were recruited both in urban and rural areas became exploiters and defenders of landed rights in villages. This explains why kisan movement is not strong in rural areas. The same workers who fight for higher wages in urban areas hesitate to fight for higher wages for their agricultural labour in rural areas.

They cultivate their small holdings through hired labour or crop sharers. This fact also explains the constraints on the attitude towards land reforms adopted by these progressive sections. While big landed estates are to be broken up and ceiling Act to be enforced, the small landed property measuring three to four acres owned by these petty bourgeois elements who are the workers of krishak sabha have to be left untouched. All these facts add up to the sorry plight of kisan sabha movement in rural areas in Bengal which exist only in patches.

The second point posed to Mr. Konar was about the generally low wages paid to agricultural workers in Bengal and about the absence of an effective bargaining power among them. Shri Konar gave a lucid explanation of the agrarian situation prevailing in Bengal. Agricultural labour constitute 25 to 30 per cent of the population. During last 15 to 20 years their population is growing. While this is partly due to rise in population, it is also due to the growing pressure on land following eviction of share croppers after the enactment of land reforms and the growing practice of cultivation by jotdars through hired labour. Secondly, unemployment is becoming more acute. A landless worker gets only 150 days employment. Thirdly, for all development measures only 10% of the land is double cropped and the scope for employment in agricultural sector is very restricted. Irrigation canals in Bengal are not perennial and field channels have not been constructed in large scale to utilise every ounce of water. Fourthly, the famine of 1943 generated new influences in rural social structure. Over and above, the traditional landlords and money-lenders, a new class of profiteers and hoarders emerged. This class perfected the art of hoarding and by hoarding for 3 months, they could hold the entire village community to ransom. The old landlord class lived on realisation of rent. They did not resort to money-lending. When this rent collecting landless class was abolished by Land Reforms Act, direct cultivators called jotdars held the centre of the stage. These jotdars consisted of some members of the old zamindar families, money-lenders, profiteers and hoarders. Unlike zamindars ten new class also practised money lending in various forms, particularly dadans, i.e. advancing money for crops. This class controls all rural institutions, panchayats, cooperatives etc. While in other States a similar social phenomenon is in evidence only now, it is about 25 years old in Bengal. The extent of hold of this class on rural economy will be evident from the fact that it manages to buy and hoard surplus food produce in the countryside and release it for sale at high price during three or four months before the monsoon, which are hungry months. The price fluctuation is as high as Rs. 40 during this period. This places share-cropper and landless agricultural labour at the mercy of this class. They starve or they go into debt with this class to obtain a morsel of food. Debt slavery is, therefore, the most stressing phenomenon in the countryside. Labour is engaged on an early contract and this class of permanent labour which constitute about 10% of labour population enjoys some advantages over daily labour; the first gets some produce of the land, regular food supply and better wage rate. The condition of daily labourer is worse. He takes loans and in turn he has to offer his services when there are required at the wages which are fixed by the creditor.

Minimum Wages Act is a dead letter. Nobody knows about it. Moreover, agricultural wages fluctuate and most time of the year these are wide of the minimum wages fixed by

the Government. For instance, wages during test relief, which has become an annual feature in Bengal, are around Rs. 2.25. During agricultural operations wages shoot to Rs. 5 to 7. It is only during lean months that wages fall to Re. 1 or Rs. 1.25.

Unlike industrial labour which is concentrated and better organised agricultural labour is dispersed and unorganised. He has to face 200 days of unemployment and only 150 days of employment while the position of industrial labour is relatively satisfactory in respect of security of employment.

Land reforms have failed to improve conditions of agricultural labour. By fraudulent means estates as large as two thousand acres have survived. Gods have suddenly multiplied in Bengal since the enactment of land reforms. Deottar lands, orchards and plantations which are exempted from ceiling are numerous. The following suggestions were made to improve conditions of agricultural labour.

(i) Ceilings should be imposed on family rather than the individual and there should be no exemption under it. This will yield surplus lands which may be distributed among landless agricultural labour at the rate of optimum holdings of 2 acres per family. There are also three lakhs acres of land under the Government and large number of tanks which have ceased to be tanks; these may be suitably distributed. Such a distribution of land will increase the bargaining power of landless agricultural labour, secure the position of share-cropper and lead to an increase in agricultural wages. Similarly tea gardens also have surplus lands. There are tea gardens owning 5 thousand acres of land whereas they can put only 20% of the lands to use.

(ii) Immediate steps should be taken to stop further eviction of share cropper. They do not enjoy any tenancy right.

(iii) Permanent development schemes, a list of which should be maintained at Block Offices, should be taken up during the slack season to provide employment for agricultural labour. These should include improvement of existing irrigation scheme, construction of field channels, installation of lift irrigation scheme, land reclamation, soil conservation, construction of roads and buildings etc. Test relief work, which is taken up during the famine has become an annual feature, along side gratuitous relief and the State Government incurs an expenditure of five to twelve crores every year.

(iv) The United Front Government had set up a Committee to work out minimum wages for agricultural labour. Its report was not considered by the Government. A part of the wages should be paid in kind at the rate of 1.29 k.g. of rice per labourer per day.

(v) The machinery to implement minimum wages is non-existent. Some Officers may have to be posted at the Sub-Divisional or Block level to enforce the wages. It may not be safe to entrust enforcement of minimum wages to indirectly elected panchayat both at Block and District levels, but it may be safe to entrust it to the village panchayat which is directly elected and which has the landless labourers as its members.

(vi) The Homestead Tenancy Act which provided for the ownership of lands on which the houses of landless agricultural labourers stood was dropped. A large number of landless agricultural families do not own the land where they live.

Out of 5,21,000 workers in the unions controlled by C.P.I. (M) 20 per cent of workers are agricultural labour.

RC/

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT CONDITIONS OF AGRICULTURE
LABOUR AND IMPACT OF LAND REFORMS AND AGRICULTURAL
PRODUCTION PROGRAMME ON THEM, HELD AT CALCUTTA
ON 31ST MAY, 1968.

I held discussions with Deputy Secretary, Agriculture and Community Development Department and Director of State Farms, Secretary to Relief Department, and Secretary to Board of Revenue about agricultural labour.

The Deputy Secretary to Agriculture and Community Development Department explained that there was only one I.A.D.P. district in Bengal. Rural Works Programme was functioning in a few districts, and a detailed note on employment for agricultural labour under it will be sent later. Even in mono-crop areas, use of intensive inputs and consequent intensive cultivation have led to increased employment in some areas. For instance, the labour input in Japanese method of cultivation, weeding and transplantation is high. The wages have gone up to the extent of 50 per cent, cent per cent or even more than cent per cent, through my experience in the field did not prove it. Mechanisation of farms and agricultural operations is progressing at a slow rate. It is in evidence only in respect of ploughing and to some extent threshing; and these two mostly on Government farms. Mechanisation of other agricultural processes is not much in evidence. Wage increase would have been more marked but for seasonal migration of labour from Bihar. There was a seminar on agricultural labour in 1965-66 and its proceedings are interesting. Wages are being normally paid above the minimum wages prescribed under the Act.

Secretary to the Relief Department pointed to the distressing fact that during the last 11 years the State Government spent Rs. 5 crores per year on an average over providing employment for agriculture labour during the slack season in areas ravaged by drought. A proposal to integrate relief with permanent development schemes is under consideration. A five-year plan, a District Magistrate can enforce at times of crisis, is being prepared. The District Magistrate is authorised to increase wages under certain conditions. At present the average rate of Rs. 2.25 per hundred c.f.t. No power has been delegated to Sub-Divisional Officers and Block Development Officers, and it is not considered necessary to do so. Wages in kind are also paid when grain is available in a Government shop on workers producing a token given by the Work Sircar on the basis of the work done by him.

The Secretary to Board of Revenue described the progress of land reforms in the State. There were 8 lakh families of land-less agricultural labour and about the same number of families of small land owners owing 2 acres of land or thereabout. 7 lakh acres of land have been recorded in the name of share croppers (Bhagchasi). There will probably be another 3 lakh

acres of unrecorded share cropping. The pressure on land has not been relieved in spite of the industrialisation which has taken place in some areas. The West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act was passed on 15th April, 1955. The one good result of the Act was the confirmation of Bhagchasis or share croppers in possession of their lands which were declared surplus lands after wasting all the intermediary interests. 4.30 lakh acres of land were thus settled with Bhagchasis. The land revenue went up by about 28 lakhs. It is not possible to get any surplus land from tea gardens. Small tea gardens utilised as much as 50 per cent of their lands and big estates about 25 per cent of their lands. The remaining lands are kept by them for future extension of tea cultivation. Even with the surplus lands in the State, according to some as much as 4 lakh acres, it will not be possible to settle them with agriculture labour because it will lead to uneconomic fragmentation of holdings. A detailed note on progress of land reforms in Bengal will be sent later.

RC/

Appendix

Four Statements are enclosed showing the magnitude of relief provided for agricultural labour in Bengal during last 10 years or so. These also exemplify the distressing conditions of agricultural labour.

APPENDIX I

STATEMENT SHOWING EXPENDITURE INCURRED UNDER MAJOR HEADS OF RELIEF DURING LAST TEN YEARS

Year	Gratuitous Relief	Relief Works	H.B. Grants including clothings	Relief contingencies	Agricultural Loans
(FIGURES IN LAKHS OF RUPEES)					
1958-59	168.71	483.78	10.84	36.82	211.75
1959-60	272.10	157.14	58.63	39.43	129.77
1960-61	296.58	360.20	26.27	42.39	113.86
1961-62	372.11	67.77	7.72	40.16	65.42
1962-63	284.94	114.87	6.26	40.55	67.85
1963-64	292.65	146.55	5.30	34.59	76.15
1964-65	241.03	57.52	4.84	29.19	61.49
1965-66	284.32	69.29	5.85	28.50	68.11
1966-67	364.35	288.57	5.38	27.16	84.70
1967-68	462.15	164.97	25.05	37.18	219.45

APPENDIX II

STATEMENT SHOWING TOTAL EXPENDITURE INCURRED ON ACCOUNT
OF GRANTS AND LOANS FROM 1956-57 to 1967-68.

YEAR GRANTS LOANS TOTAL
(IN LAKHS OF RUPEES)

1956-57	613.34	209.54	822.88
1957-58	266.28	168.33	434.89
1958-59	700.62	135.12	919.95
1959-60	508.64	110.70	643.76
1960-61	727.85	68.61	838.55
1961-62	489.68	69.31	558.29
1962-63	427.80	77.01	497.11
1963-64	491.07	61.62	568.08
1964-65	344.89	69.92	406.59
1965-66	393.54	84.69	463.46
1966-67	698.39	219.51	783.08
1967-68	787.76		1,007.27

APPENDIX - III

STATEMENT SHOWING DETAILS OF RELIEF WORK SCHEMES EXECUTED IN DIFFERENT DISTRICTS OF WEST BENGAL DURING THE YEARS FROM 1956-57 TO 1967-68.

YEAR	ROADS REPAIRED		NEW ROADS CONSTRUCTED		CANALS RE-EXCAVATED		EMBANKMENTS REPAIRED/ RECONSTRUCTED		NUMBER OF TANKS RENO- VATED	OTHER ITEMS OF WORK
	Number	Mileage	Number	Mileage	Number	Mileage	Number	Mileage		
1956-57	NR	521	NR	3,666	51	NR	619	NR	30	700
1957-58	114	320	3,200	7,835	72	137	195	1,114	132	160
1958-59	1,494	3,089	8,998	19,449	739	1,012	2,312	6,025	2,941	1,868
1959-60	182	436	1,895	4,440	259	399	347	656	481	1,210
1960-61	278	344	4,292	7,087	391	809	1,424	1,664	112	680
1961-62	1,763	2,602	405	855	167	111	326	219	257	365
1962-63	2,200	3,198	477	466	131	101	194	149	155	462
1963-64	2,740	5,576	392	626	152	199	226	202	140	266
1964-65	814	1,749	151	177	62	58	60	27	107	901
1965-66	742	1,611	157	840	14	16	75	48	62	364
1966-67	5,293	9,576	1,313	1,977	202	359	294	1,198	463	3,781
1967-68	1,450	754	95	101	75	68	271	131	1,011	262
TOTAL :	17,070	29,776	21,375	39,330	2,315	3,267	6,743	11,433	5,891	11,013

APPENDIX - IV

STATEMENT SHOWING TOTAL NUMBER OF MANDAYS OF EMPLOYMENT
CREATED THROUGH RELIEF WORK SCHEMES DURING THE YEARS
FROM 1961-62 TO 1967-68.

<u>Y E A R</u>	<u>Total number of mandays of employment created through execution of R.W. Schemes in the districts of West Bengal.</u>		
	(FIGURES IN LAKHS)		
1961-62	73.71
1962-63	70.53
1963-64	155.71
1964-65	51.80
1965-66	32.56
1966-67	267.78
1967-68	93.18

SA/-
