

Research Paper

# Growth of Agricultural Labourers in West Bengal with Special Reference to Uttar Dinajpur District since Independence

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## ABSTRACT

Agricultural Labourers from the poorest section of the rural population in India as well as in West Bengal. In numerical terms, they constitute about one-fourth of the total work force. Their number has been rising faster than the rate of growth of rural population. By the term agricultural labourers we mean a person who sells his/her labour power to work to another person's land for wages in money, kind or a share of the crop. According to the 1991 Census definition, "a person who works on another person's land for wages – in money, kind or share of crop is regarded as an agricultural labourer. He or she has no risk in cultivation, but merely works on another person's land for wages. An agricultural labourer has no right of lease or contract on the land on which he or she works". (Census of India, 1991, paper – III of 1991, p. 6). Thus the Census definition clearly excludes tenants as well as marginal farmers and includes only landless labourers. The definition adopted by us would be broader in the sense that it would include all those for whom sale of labour power in the agricultural sector is a source of livelihood.

At the dawn of independence, the economy of West Bengal was characterized not only by a high percentage of landless agricultural labourers in its rural work force but also by a sizeable class of marginal holding peasants. This paper tries to inquire in some detail the causes of the high rate of growth of agricultural labourers in West Bengal as well in the district of Uttar Dinajpur..

## Highlights

- ① The present article is mainly deals with the causes of growth of agricultural labourers in Uttar Dinajpur District since independence. As the district is the backward in all respect among all other districts of West Bengal and agriculture is the main occupation of the rural people of this district.

**Keywords:** Agricultural labourers, Peasants, Landless labourers

Agricultural labourers constitute a significant portion of the total rural population in today's West Bengal as well in the district of Uttar Dinajpur, accounting for about one-third and two –fourth of the rural workers respectively. Landlessness character of agricultural labourers emerged at the end of the British period. The British Government policies – free import of cheap manufacturers, heavy revenue burdens, rigid collection in cash, application of the laws of distraint of property and imprisonment of defaulting debtors- 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 lowered the land man ratio steadily and raised the share of agricultural labourers in the rural workforce. The decennial Census data are used to determine the size of agricultural labour force in the post-independence period. The census data witnessed a very high rate of growth in the number of agricultural labourers in Uttar Dinajpur

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district compared to the state of West Bengal as a whole between the census periods 1951-61, 1961-71, 1971-81, 1991-2001 and 2001-2011. At the same time, we also inquire in some detail the causes of this high rate of growth in their numbers. Thus, at the dawn of independence, the economy of West Bengal was characterized not only by a high percentage of landless labourers in its rural work force but also by a sizeable class of a marginal holding peasants who sold their labour power on part time basis and the incidence of unemployment was considerable for both these groups.

From the above table (Table 1) we can see that numbers of the farmers are gradually decreasing except 1971, on the other hand the numbers of the agricultural labourers are gradually increasing except 2001. In the year 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011, the percentages of the farmers were 66.06, 66.60, 47.27, 45.92, 29.58 and 23.93 respectively. In the year 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011 the percentages of the agricultural labourers, were 21.17, 30.53, 36.47, 40.89, 39.66 and 41.12 respectively. But in respect of non- agricultural labour it is seen that their numbers are increasing except the years 1971 and 1991.

The annual growth of agricultural labourers was highest during 1961-71 i.e. 8.25 percent at the district level (Table 3) and 8.18 percent at the state level (Table 4). The annual growth of agricultural labourers in subsequent census period declined both at the district level and at state level. At the district level (Table 3), the annual growth of agricultural labourers was 7.15 percentages during 1971-81, which declined to 4.77 percent during 1981-91 and again increased to 6.23 percent during 1991-2001. At the state level, the annual growth of agricultural labourers was 1.77 percent (Table 4) during 1971-81, which increased to 4.15 percent during 1981-91 and again declined to 3.93 percent during 1991-01.

There were many factors contributing to the rise of agricultural labourers since independence. Such factors are enumerated below in order of their importance.

### Decline of Jotedari –Adhiary System

During the British period, the *jotedari-adhiary* system was more popular in the management of land in the most part of West Bengal, leaving little scope for *non-adhiary* hired labour employment. Generally comparatively better placed cultivators' occupied

**Table 1:** Occupation wise Distribution of Rural Workers of Uttar Dinajpur District

Occupation	1961		1971		1981		1991		2001		2011	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Farmer	153290	66.06	177971	66.60	199272	47.27	255040	45.92	276731	29.58	257377	23.93
Agricultural Labourer	49125	21.17	89669	30.53	153766	36.47	227119	40.89	371034	39.66	442328	41.12
Non-Agri, Lab.	29622	12.77	26043	8.87	8554	16.26	10961	13.18	287759	30.76	375921	34.95
<b>Total</b>	<b>232037</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>293683</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>421592</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>591770</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>935524</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>1075626</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Census of India: 1961,1971,1981,1991, 2001, and 2011.

**Table 2:** Occupation wise Distribution of Rural Workers in West Bengal

Occupation	1951		1961		1971		1981		1991		2001		2011	
	Total (000)	%	Total (000)	%	Total (000)	%	Total (000)	%	Total (000)	%	Total (000)	%	Total (000)	%
Farmer	3025	49.67	4431	51.40	3905	43.07	4681	41.28	6290	38.40	5654	19.18	5117	14.72
Agricultural Labourer	1155	18.97	1745	20.24	3173	35.00	3736	32.95	5286	32.27	7363	24.97	10189	29.31
Non-Agriculturist	1910	31.36	2444	28.36	1968	21.93	2923	25.77	4805	29.33	16465	55.85	19451	55.96
<b>Total</b>	<b>6090</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>8620</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>9046</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>11340</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>16381</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>29482</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>34757</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Census of India: 1961,1971,1981,1991, 2001 and 2011.

**Table 3:** Annual Growth Rates of Rural Workers (Occupation wise) of Uttar Dinajpur District in Different Census Decades

Occupation	1961-71	1971-81	1981-91	1991-01	2001-11
Farmer	1.61	1.20	2.80	.85	2.4
Agricultural Labourer	8.25	7.15	4.77	6.23	4.1
Non-Agriculturist	-1.21	16.32	5.99	16.25	3.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.66</b>	<b>4.36</b>	<b>4.04</b>	<b>6.84</b>	<b>3.5</b>

Source: Census of India: 1961, 71,81,91,01.

**Table 4:** Annual Growth Rates of Rural Workers (Occupation wise) of West Bengal in Different Census Decades

Occupation	1951-61	1961-71	1971-81	1981-91	1991-01
Farmer	4.65	-1.19	1.99	3.44	-1.01
Agricultural Labourer	5.11	8.18	1.77	4.15	3.93
Non-Agriculturist	2.80	-1.95	4.85	6.44	24.27
<b>All</b>	<b>4.15</b>	<b>4.94</b>	<b>2.54</b>	<b>4.44</b>	<b>8.00</b>

land in large contiguous clusters (called *jotes*) and brought them under cultivation with the help of their poor neighbours and relatives. These better-placed cultivators become *Jotedars* (landowner and patrons) and providing their poor relations (*adhiars* and their clients) with minimum means of subsistence and production, and developed the institution of *dyotdari-adhary* land management. In 1946-47, the Tebhaga Movement has started against the *jotedari-adhiary* system in various districts of Bengal i.e., Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and 24-Parganas. It is important to note that though the organized movements of the sharecroppers demand for a reasonably higher share of the produce i.e., one-third of the produce instead of half of the produce, this movement would not protect them from eviction by landlords. In order to ensure one-third of the produce and to protect them from eviction, the notification of a Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill was published in the Calcutta Gazette on 22 January, 1947 (Calcutta Gazette Extraordinary, 22 January 1947). The news of Tebhaga Bill, as it came to be popularly known, gave a tremendous fillip to the *adhiar* agitation in North Bengal. The *adhiars* started the policy of forcibly taking the crop away to from the *jotedars kholians* to their houses to exact the (two-third) share (SDO Balurghat Dinajpur to Addl Secretary Bd of Rev., 6 Mar. 1947). *Adhiars* also to catch fish in *jotedar's* tanks and take away bamboos from *jotedar's* bamboo clumps. Echoing the main slogan "*hal jar jami tar*" (land belongs to the man who drives the plough), the new slogan adopted were '*beshal jar bansh tar*,

*pal jar machh tar*. Actually, 'Bambo belongs to the man who has the implements to cut it; fish belong to him who has the fishing net,' (SDO Thakugaon Dinajpur to Addl. Secretary Bd. of Rev., Mar. 1947). The *jotedars* of North Bengal reacted to the looting paddy from their *kholians* by lodging charges of 'dacoity'. The police were sent into villages to make arrest in connection with these paddy-looting cases, and a number of armed clashes between the police and the *adhiars* occurred on 20 February 1947, the villagers of *Khanpur* in Balurghat Thana fought the police with bows and arrows. The police fired 121 rounds and killed 20 people. The following day there was another clash at *Thumnia* in *Baliadanga* Thana in which four people were killed in the police shooting (Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bangle for the second half of Feb. 1947).

The 'proletarianization process' was reinforced and gained momentum after enactment of WBLR act, 1955. A large-scale eviction of sharecroppers took place at the passing of this Act and at different stages of its implementation (Dasgupta, B1984; P A 142-143). Under this, the landlords were allowed to resume land for personal cultivation up to a certain ceiling limit, evicted tenants in the process, demanded full ownership right on it. The ceiling level was high enough and ceiling surplus land was vested in Government. *Jotedars* converted into big landlord and they accepted the changed form of their domination, from indirect cultivation through *bargadars* to direct cultivation through hired labour. At the same time, they were paid generous compensation for that portion of their feudal estate,

which was taken over by the Government. They did use compensation money to increase productivity of land from which tenants were mercilessly evicted and they constituted an emerging trend of landlord capitalism (or semi-feudal capitalism). The impact of eviction on a mass scale on the poor peasants was that they joined ranks of agricultural labourers or of unrecorded tenants-at-will. The period between 1965 to 1971 witnessed the most acute tensions in the rural body politics of West Bengal. The surplus vested land was distributed among landless farmers and labourers. A very small proportion of surplus land was distributed among landless farmers and labourers and some of this was found to be unfit for cultivation or cultivable only after heavy capital expenditure. Often marginal landowners, not to speak of *de facto* share-croppers, felt encouraged to declare themselves as agricultural labourers because of the prospect of entitlement to portion of vested land. As a result, the ranks of agricultural labourers were swelled during 1961-71 and recorded a very high rate of growth of 8.25 percent in the district and 8.18 percent in West Bengal as shown in Tables 3 and 4. It may be worth mentioning here that the North Bengal districts yielded a larger share of land to the vested pool; redistribution was comparatively more vigorous in this region (Bandyopadhyay, 1977).

### **Marginalization of Peasantry**

The marginalizations of smallholdings have contributed to the growth of agricultural labourers both in Uttar Dinajpur district and in West Bengal. The average area owned by marginal farmer in 1995-96 was 0.59 hectares in Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur districts and 0.48 hectares in West Bengal can hardly be considered viable to support even a family of two. Clearly, a significant number of such households need to take up wage employment for their survival. The positive and negative impact of various agrarian legislations on operational holdings, tenancy status and land transfers would have possibly contributed to this proliferation of small and marginal farm (Dandekar Kudanpur, 1957; Rao, 1972; Sharma, 1994; Rajsekhar, 1996). In addition, increase in rural population and dependence of rural work force on agriculture for their livelihood coupled with technological development enhance the pressure on land by increasing the intensity of cropping and as a result

the combined effects of institutional, technological and demographic factors (*Raja Sekhar*). The major institutional changes that entailed the increase in the number of operational holdings are breaking up of joint family system and tenure system (*Zamindari*). Government adopted measures for abolition of *zamindari* system and legislation for supporting small farm and tenants.

The two important sources of national data on operational holdings are the National Sample Survey Reports (NSS) and Agricultural Census Reports conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India, first in 1970-71 and subsequently on sample basis in 1976-77, 1980-81. We have used the Agricultural Census because it gives data both at the district level and state level. The data from different sources, or even from the same source, are not strictly comparable, due to the changes in their scope and coverage as well as the changes in the underlying concepts (Dantwala, in Dantawala, ed, 1966). Tables 5 and 6 show the relevant Agricultural Census data at the state level and district level.

The number of marginal operational holdings increased over the years, from 43.33 percent in 1970-7, 69.07 percent in 1995-96. At the state level, the number of marginal holdings constitute 59.97 percent in 1970-71, it increased to 76.42 percent in 1995-96 at the state level the no of marginal holdings increased by 97.88 percent between 1970-71 and 1995-96. The annual growth rate during this period is 3.92 percent. At the district level, the number of marginal holdings increased by 183.38 percent during this periods and the annual growth rate during this period is 7.34 percent. Therefore, the growth rate at district level is greater than the growth rate of state level. At the district level, the average size of marginal holding is only 0.49 hectare in 1970-71, which declined to 0.41 hectare in 1985-86 but marginally increased to 0.59 hectare in 1995-96. At the state level, the average size of holding is only 0.43 hectare, which declined to 0.40 hectare in 1980-81 but marginally increased to 0.48 hectare in 1995-96. So, the average area owned by marginal farmers can hardly be considered viable to support even a family of two. Clearly, significant numbers of such households need to take up wage employment for their survival. Of course, this conclusion is based on the reasonable assumption that there has been

no substantial expansion of alternative livelihood options for these people. Various studies have reported that the percentage of marginal small farmers becoming at least part-time labourers has been on the rise (Sanyal, 1988). At the district level, the share of smallholdings decreased from 25.91 percent in 1970-71 to 21.28 percent in 1995-96, will in respect of area their share increased from 21.80 percent in the 1970-71 to 30.12 percent in 1995-96. At the state level, the similar picture is observed where small holdings lost their share in number from 21.34 percent in 1970-71 to 16.81 percent in 1995-96 accompanying with and increased share in area from 25.72 percent in 1970-71 to 29.06 percent in 1995-96. In the case of semi-medium, medium and large holdings, both at the district and state levels under study recorded decrease in share in number as well as in area operated. Thus the undergoing change in the pattern of size distribution of operational is characterized by shifts in the relative importance of marginal and small sized holdings at the expense of medium and large sized holdings. This has happened both at district level and at state level.

### Population Growth

High growth rate of population leads to subdivision and fragmentation of land holdings. This has rendered a large number of holdings uneconomic. As a result, peasant family with small size of holding are forced to undertake agricultural labour as secondary occupation, which after a certain period of time leads some members of a family to perform agricultural labour as the main occupation. Demographic pressure, therefore, generates and accentuates the pauperization process. Table 5

shows the growth rate of population of Uttar Dinajpur district and West Bengal. Due to slow rate of development in this district, it was not possible to provide employment to the increasing population in the study area other than agriculture.

At the district level, the annual growth rate of population was highest (4.30) during 1961-71. After that period, the annual growth rate of population marginally declined but remains above 2 percent at the district level. We also find that the declining trend of growth rate of population is not sufficient to control the growth of agricultural labourers. The growth rate of agricultural labourers has been higher than the growth rate or rural population in recent decades. For instance, during 1981-91 and 1991-01 the rural population registered an annual growth rate of 2.33 percent and 2.26 percent at the district level; the annual growth rate of agricultural labourers has been 4.77 percent and 6.34 percent during this period. The annual growth rate of labour exceeds the annual growth rate of population. Table 7 shows the density of population per square kilometer of West Bengal and Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur districts. For a West Bengal as whole, the population density increased from 299 persons per square kilometre in 1951 to 1028 persons in 2011. In the case of West Dinajpur district, the density has more than doubled over this fifty years period.

With this population increase, the land-man ratio changed dramatically. Where during the nineteenth century, with extension of cultivation and the depletion of population because of famines and epidemics, the land man ratio was highly favourable to man, in the first half of the twentieth century, the situations was reversed in West Bengal (Dasgupta, 1984). Table 6 shows the land man ration of West

**Table 5:** Annual Growth Rates of Population both in Uttar Dinajpur District and in West Bengal

District/State	1951-61	1961-71	1971-81	1981-91	1991-01	2001-11
Uttar Dinajpur District	3.97	4.29	3.01	2.33	2.26	2.3
West Bengal	3.28	2.69	2.32	2.47	1.78	1.34

**Source:** Census of India : 1961,1971,1981,1991, 2001 and 2011.

**Table 6:** Land Man Ratio in West (Uttar and Dakshin) Dinajpur and West Bengal

District/State	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
Uttar Dinajpur	—	.34	.26...	.19	.14	.12
Dakshin Dinajpur						
West Bengal	.18	.16	.12	.10	.08	.07

**Sources:** Various Issues of Statistical Abstract, Government of West Bengal.

Bengal and West (Uttar and Dakshin) Dinajpur district. From table 7, it is clear cropped area and high growth rate of population. The decline of this ratio has led to proliferation of small and marginal holdings and a steady fall in the average size of holdings is of obvious relevance to the determination of households, which have to seek wage work with agriculture outside their own farms or non-agricultural activities (Krishanji, N 1990, P 1041). It follows; therefore, that demographic pressure has also contributed substantially to the growth of agricultural labour force in our study area.

### Overall Findings on Growth of Agricultural Labourers

Growth rate of agricultural labourers did not maintain steady high growth rate throughout the period but fluctuates over the decades. The growth rate of agricultural labourers is highest during 1961-71 both at the state level and at district level as compared to other census decades. This may be partly due to the elements of a definite underestimate in 1961 (Bandyopadhyay, 1977). Other factors like the decline of jotedare-adhiary system, land reform programme –Operation Barga programme, new agricultural technology and high population growth – falling land-man ration etc. further accentuated the process of immiserization of a large section of peasantry and greater landlessness. This situation could have been viable if there had been other avenues in the economy, which could fully absorb the growing agricultural labour force into some other productive enterprise, either within or peasantry are now burning problems of rural Bengal and of Uttar Dinajpur district. In order to provide employment to landless labourers and marginal farmers, it is necessary to put emphasis on generation of non-agricultural employment opportunities in rural areas. These problems cannot be solved through the establishment of small scale

and cottage industries, handicraft industries and agro-processing industries in rural areas.

In the pre-British Bengal, agricultural labourers was usually a small farmer making some additional earnings from hired work or responding to the summons of the *Zamindars* to work on his field. Under the Permanent Settlement introduced by the British, the proprietary right in the soil was declared to be vested in *zamindars* which was never before formally declared. The actual tillers of the soil lost their property right. The right incidence of land revenue made their position extremely precarious and led easily to dispossession the rate of growth of the class of landless labourers.

The policies of the colonial state –free import of cheap manufacturers, heavy revenue burdens, rigid collection in cash, application of the laws of distraint of property and imprisonment of defaulting debtors-led to massive displacement of artisans on the one hand and pauperization of large sections of indebted poorer peasantry into landlessness on the other. In Bengal, the mode of production was based on the relationship between the *jotedar*-rich farmer and *adhiar* –agricultural labourer. The *adhiars* will provide half of produce to the *jotedars* in Dinajpur district even if *adhiars* supply plough, cow, seeds, fertilizers and own labour. Moreover, the *jotedars* collect different charges from *adhiars* like *mahaltri*, *barkandaj*, *golapuja* etc. In some cases, after giving all charges, the nothing are left for *adhiars* and back home with zero crops.

The ‘proletarianization process’ was reinforced and gained momentum after enactment of WBLR act, 1955. A large –scale eviction of sharecroppers took place at the passing of this Act and at different stages of its implementation. The viability of the *jotedari-adhiary* system broke down with the ascendance of the left alliance (United Front) Government in the state in the late 1960’s. The decline of the *adhiary* system had wide effects on the whole of the economy of North Bengal. Vast numbers of

**Table 7:** Density of Population Per Square Kilometer in West Dinajpur (Uttar and Dakshin) and West Bengal

District/State	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Uttar Dinajpur	321	429	550	461	604	778	958
Dakshin Dinajpur				448	555	677	755
West Bengal	299	398	504	615	767	903	1028

Sources: Various Issues of Statistical Abstract, Government of West Bengal.

*adhiars* were converted to the status of agricultural labourers. The performance of Operation Barga programme was not satisfactory in the state up to March 1980. The marginalizations of smallholdings have also contributed to the growth of agricultural labourers both in Uttar Dinajpur district and in West Bengal.

The average area owned by marginal farmer in 1995-96 .59 hectares in West (Uttar and Dakshin) Dinajpur district and .48 hectares in West Bengal can hardly be considered viable to support even a family of two. Government adopted measures for abolition of *zamindari* system and they turned into big landlord. New entrepreneur who adopted the HYV programme of crop raising, evicted the traditional sharecroppers either through mutual agreement or under dispossessed labour force was engaged as agricultural labourers in the modernized far, of the entrepreneur. The decline in household industry works also increased the annual growth rate of agricultural labourers.

## CONCLUSION

Land reform and redistribution of ceiling surplus lands among the landless is the first guarantee to build up the asset structure to improve the entitlement and capability of the poor workers. Then necessary inputs should be provided in order to make the marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers and the landless agricultural labourers viable against natural odds and exploitation of money lenders. Improvement in agricultural sector must be brought about by a consolidation of holdings, the spread of irrigation, the use of better seeds, fertilizers and other inputs, better transport and marketing facilities, double and multiple cropping and the development of the rural tertiary sector together with a large reduction in indebtedness and an increase in productivity of landless agricultural labourers and marginal farmer-cum-agricultural labourers, that they will provide employment to them all the year round. Livestock production is another area which is free from the constraint of limited land resource and which can help most of the landless agricultural labourers to improve their socio-economic condition. Piggery is also another important activity which by augmenting income may improve the socio-economic condition of agricultural labourers

among the tribal community. But to bring about the necessary improvement government supports are needed. Labour absorption in agriculture and generation of rural non-farm employment may go a long way in increasing the capability of the agricultural labourers. Any strategy for reducing poverty has to concentrate both on employment intensity as well as on labour productivity. Effective measures are needed for raising agricultural labour productivity without compromising on the employment intensity of agriculture.

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