INTRODUCTION

The main intention of the present study is to make a fresh inquiry as to whether there is underemployment in the agricultural sector in the State of West Bengal at present and also to make a statistical assessment of the extent of this underemployment, provided it exists. In this case, the two main aspects of underemployment, namely, 'disguised unemployment' and 'seasonal unemployment' have been studied on an empirical basis. It may be mentioned here that the two major problems of underemployment are the seasonal one of unemployment and the structural one of disguised unemployment. An attempt has been made in what follows to take up both the major types of underemployment with reference to the agricultural sector in two districts of West Bengal.

On the score of 'disguised unemployment' in the context of the Indian economy, there are two different types of findings. Some findings or field investigations strongly support the view that 'disguised unemployment' exists in the Indian economy and that the dimension of the problem is considerable. There are again some other findings, as revealed through some recent farm management investigations, which go against the hypothesis of disguised unemployment in the case of the Indian economy. In view of the rather unsettled condition about this important matter,
fresh studies are necessary. The main object of the present project is to make such a study. Our problem in the present study is therefore to make an empirical verification of the nature and extent of disguised unemployment, in particular. Apart from the problem of over-all disguised unemployment, there is a question of seasonal unemployment of both family and hired labour. The extent of this type of unemployment has also been studied in the present project. The study also includes an examination of the conditions of landless labourers in agriculture of the State of West Bengal. Proper explanation of different economic implications of the problem of underemployment, based on an empirical study, has also been aimed at in the present project. The nature of relationships among various economic factors like family size, the size of holding and the use of man-days on the holdings for farming operations has been examined and explained in the context of our field investigations, based on a sample survey. Field investigations were made on an extensive basis in two districts of West Bengal.

The field survey in our case was conducted during 1970 and 1971. Two principal districts of the State of West Bengal have been chosen for our case-study. These are the districts of Midnapore and 24-Parganas. The reasons for the selection of these two districts for the present project are not far to seek.
As regards population and geographical coverage, these districts of West Bengal have some special significance. In point of area and population the district of 24-Parganas ranks first in the State of West Bengal, while Midnapore stands only next to it in these respects. Both the districts taken together cover about one-third of the total area of the State. Of all the fifteen districts in West Bengal, the district of 24-Parganas is the largest one claiming 16% of the total area of the State, and the most populous one. In the entire subcontinent of India the district ranks first in order of population size. The district of Midnapore is the second largest, covering a little over 15% of the total area of the State, and the second most populous district in the State of West Bengal. In the whole of India, as regards the population size, Midnapore district has the distinction of occupying the third position, the second place being occupied by Darbhanga district of Bihar.

Now, for these districts of Midnapore and 24-Parganas we can get two complete different pictures of economic, industrial and urban development. The district of 24-Parganas is getting increasingly urbanised and on the score of urbanisation it ranks next to Calcutta. As a blend of rural and urban ways of living, this district has got to be mentioned first in a list of all the districts of the State. It is to be observed here as to how the agricultural pursuits and the occupational
pattern in this district have been significantly influenced by the intrusion of urban and industrial civilisation. What is more, its nearness to Calcutta has given a good deal of mobility to the agricultural population of this district and enormously influenced both the ways and means of living of its unwieldy population. It may be pointed out here that during 1961 to 1971 in West Bengal, the percentage of urban population to the total population has registered an increase, though small, only for the two districts of this State - 24-Parganas and Hooghly. (Source: Paper I of 1971, Provisional Population Totals, Census of India). But much to our interest, we can notice how within the district of 24-Parganas there is a picture of 'dualism', the northern part of it being economically and industrially much more developed than the backward region of its south.

In the field of industrial - urban development, the district of Midnapore presents a very poor picture. For this district (along with Cooch Behar &Murshidabad) during 1961 to 1971, the proportion of urban population to the total population has actually fallen, though very slightly. (Source: Paper I of 1971, Provisional Population Totals, Census of India) Hence, Midnapore, so to say, remains relatively untouched by the wave of industrial - urban civilisation. This district is a purely agricultural district. About three-fourth of its total area
is under cultivation. In this district as high as 74% of its total area is the total sown area. For the district of 24-Parganas, which is the largest district in the State, this percentage is only 53. More than 90% of the total population in the district of Midnapore live in its rural sector. Hence, this district plays a vital role in the agricultural sector of this State.

Another point of note is that according to 1961 Census Report, as the contributors of agricultural income, these two districts — Midnapore and 24-Parganas, topped the list of all the districts of the State of West Bengal. Midnapore in this case made the maximum contribution of agricultural income (14.2% of the State income) to the total agricultural income of the State. On this score, 24-Parganas stood second to Midnapore (24-Parganas contributed 12.3% of the State income). The two districts, taken together, accounted for more than one-fourth of the total agricultural income of the State. This points to the significance of both the districts in the field of agricultural activities.

Hence, the two most large and populous districts of the State of West Bengal — 24-Parganas and Midnapore, each playing a significant role in the field of agriculture of the State, but each differing from the other in matter of industrial urban development, are apt to serve best the purpose of exposition of the problem under study. It is quite likely that the
picture of the employment of labour in agriculture varies as between the districts having different rates of urbanisation and industrial development. Naturally, the extent of both disguised and seasonal unemployment must vary as between such districts. The districts of 24-parganas and Midnapore are two such districts where we have two different rates of development, the former being much affected by the industrial-urban development and the latter acutely lacking in such development.

Therefore, in our case, the selection of these districts must serve a very useful purpose.

Finally it may be pointed out that as it is next to impossible, with limited time and resources, to undertake a survey of the whole State, or even a large number of districts within it, these two principal districts, namely 24-Parganas and Midnapore, in the State of West Bengal have been selected for the study.