CHAPTER-V

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS
The preceding chapter was an attempt to put together a composite picture of the socio-economic characteristics of agricultural labourers on the basis of quantitative data. We have dealt with their identification, numbers, variation; with caste-structure and literacy; and their land-holding and secondary source of earning. This has given us an overview of the differences between three categories of blocks with different developmental levels and helped identify the prevailing material conditions of life in terms of wages, availability of work, period of employment etc.

In order to achieve a degree of detail and to discover the dynamics of socio-economic conditions, this chapter concentrates on two villages only--Bankipada of the backward block and RRpur of the advanced block. At the core of the analysis is qualitative data relating to terms and conditions, employment opportunities within and outside agriculture, mobility and migration, and earnings of agricultural labour households.
TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF WORK:

Different categories of agricultural labourers, i.e., baramasia and sarimulia/petabhatua—who are annual contract labourers (attached labourers); halaparia/langalia—who are employed for part of the year (semi-attached labourers); and finally, upurimulia/alaga (daily wage labourers): exist in our study villages. The conditions of employment of these labourers differ not only in terms of duration of employment but also in terms of wages, modes of wage payment, working hours, freedom to seek alternative works, and so on.

Baramasia is usually a young man and bachelor. He spends the night in the employer's house and is on call any time. There is no fixed working hours for him. He works for the employer on the land and in the house. There is always something for the baramasia to do. For this round-the-clock work, apart from a yearly payment, the employer provides baramasia with board and lodging and daily requirements—a set of clothes (e.g., two gamuchha¹, one lungi,² and one chaddar³), and above that twelve holidays a year.

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1. Low-cost towel cloth which is also used as a lower garment by the rural people.
2. A piece of cloth usually two yards long and forty five inches wide wrapped around the waist; worn by men.
3. Cloth worn as a shawl.
They are also not neglected in times of illness. On days when baramasia falls sick, employer pays for the treatment, at least, in case of minor illness.

For baramasia there is no uniform wage or salary even within a village; it varies from one contract to another. Baramasia's age with experience and expertise play a major role in deciding his wage. He takes an advance, and the remainder form a balance which is usually taken in small amounts at intervals. While wages in some combination of cash and kind (besides perquisites) still exist in our study villages, all three baramasias in village RRpur at the time of our fieldwork, reported being paid cash which amounts to Rs.2,500-5,000 annually.

The following case is typical of a baramasia:

Gada Murmu is a resident of RRpur. He is seventeen and a bachelor who works as a baramasia in a neighbouring village. When I first met Gada, he was on his way to post-office around 2 O'clock in a summer afternoon. His employer's son had sent him immediately after lunch. That was not the first time Gada had been asked to do this sort of household chores during the lunch break. Nevertheless he has an extremely busy working day. He works both on land and in the house of the employer. As he says, "...there is always something for me to do. No fixed working hours. There is no contract with my employer in terms of working hours. Why only me! No baramasia has. We are house servants at the same time... as such my day begins very early. Before I leave for the field, there are many other tasks I hurriedly do. I tend
the cattle--feed them, water them and clean the cattle yard. Milk the cows. Chop the logs into firewood in the odd hours. I'm assigned tasks sometimes in the late evening as well--guarding crops in the field, tending the motor pump, irrigating land.... If no such work is there then weaving a mat is a must...."

Gada was right. Because, later I often saw him late in the evening, with a lantern, going to the field to regulate the water channel or to check on crops.

The other annual contract labourers or attached labourers called sarimulia/petabhatua who have a contract duration of one year and have to work all the days exclusively for their employers, do not spend the night in the employers' house unlike baramasia. They come in the morning and work through until after evening, with a lunch break of about two hours in the afternoon. During the break they are supposed to go to their own residence to have their meal. However, they receive a late morning meal from their employers. These labourers remain busy in and around the farm, but like baramasia they also do household chores. They perform all kinds of small jobs, i.e., tending cattle or chopping the log into firewood, before leaving for the fields and on returning from them. If they work for a longer time, they receive a late evening meal or snacks on that day.

In many cases the working hours of sarimulias/petabhatuas seem to be in no way shorter than those of baramasia.
Staying until late evening (8 or 9 O'clock) is an everyday affair. In village RRpur these labourers do not go for lunch to their residences. In return, they receive meals from the employers so that they can start work early in the afternoon. However, there is no holiday for them. They are not entitled for any assistance in times of sickness. Apart from a yearly payment, only a lungi or gamuchha, or may be a chaddar is given to a sarimulia petabhatua.

They receive a yearly payment. They are variations across villages in respect to the amount they receive. Within a village there is hardly any uniformity in the present situation. However, in the earlier times there was remarkable uniformity in respect to annual wages for these labourers within the village. It is quite common for these labourers to receive wages in some combinations of cash and kind. In RRpur they reported being paid cash which amounts to Rs.6,000-6,700 annually. These labourers receive their payment partly at the beginning of their contract and partly in irregular instalments (whenever they require) spread over the contract period--a calendar year.

Both baramasia and sarimulia/petabhatua are annual contract labourers. They work under one year contract with their employers, and are in continuous employment throughout
the year. For both of them the freedom to work for any other employer does not exist during the contract period. It is important to note that in the present situation, being a baramasia or sarimulia/petabhatua does not involve a long term commitment towards indefinite extensions of contract.

None of them in our study villages reported to have a hereditary or outstanding long-term debt as the reason of his employment. They had accepted the contract out of their own choice. They may become daily wage labourers after their one year contract period. Hence, their personal status is liable to change. Advance wage from the employer and a secure source of income attract these labourers to enter into this kind of employment. These labourers sometimes receive even other kinds of help from the employer, e.g., a small piece of arable land for sharecropping, or thatching materials--straw and bamboo for the hut roof at a cheaper rate--which sometimes get adjusted in their wages.

The bulk of the agricultural labourers in our study villages are upurimulia or alaga. They are the daily wage labourers who work under a single day contract, and are paid on daily basis. They have no permanent employers, but may not change the employer everyday. However, their relationship with the employers are basically formal.
For them, the usual working hours are from 8 O'clock in the morning until 6 O'clock in the evening with a break of about two hours in the afternoon. As it is observed, the working hours is little shorter in the study villages of the backward block compared to the villages of the advanced block. It may be noted that in the latter the employers provide some snacks--mudhi (puffed rice) to daily wage labourers. This perhaps explains relatively longer working hours of the daily wage labourers in the villages of the advanced block.

Sometimes daily wage labourers are required to work at a stretch without any rest. This system is otherwise known as teenpaharia or ekabelia in our study villages. During winter when the day is shorter and the harvesting is due, or during monsoon when the agricultural operation is likely to be interrupted by frequent rains, the employer usually demands that the agricultural labourers work without any break. This is specially so, during rainy season, at the time of transplantation and/or weeding. Since they cannot afford changing their clothes twice, they also prefer to work at a stretch. Moreover, the daily wage labourers who seek work outside the village--not in the immediate neighbourhood--have to devote considerable time in going to and
coming from the working place. They have no choice but to work under the system of teenpaharia or ekabelia so that they can come back to the village before it is too late in the evening.

It may be noted that when the agricultural work is interrupted by rain the annual contract labourers are, usually, taken off the farm and are assigned some indoor jobs rather than set free. As against this the daily wage labourers who are under threat of losing their wages if the work is abandoned, are compelled to remain in the field.

These daily wage labourers--upurimulia or alaga--are paid on daily basis. At the time of fieldwork these labourers reported being paid at rate of Rs.20 in our study villages. It was below the official minimum--Rs.25 per day. However, they obtain a little higher wage during the peak, i.e., transplanting and harvesting. They do not get any kind of help that an annual contract labourer usually enjoys. There is a gender discrimination in the wages paid to the labourers. The females are paid lower wages (by Rs.2 to Rs.5), as compared to men even though the work performed by them is sometimes better than their male counterpart. For instance, women are preferred over men for transplantation because of their dexterity, but are paid less as compared to
Suni Malik, 38, is a resident of Bankipada. She is the only bread earner of her family. She does all kinds of work that a man can do except ploughing. As Suni says, "...it is true that a woman cannot do equal amount of work to that of a man. But in transplantation women are more efficient. It is really a back-breaking job, continues for a long time, and requires a lot of patience. But we are still paid less than a man!"

In between two extremes--annual contract labourers and daily labourers--there are some labourers who are employed under a contract for part of the year. They are known as halaparia or a langalia, and we have classified them as semi-attached labourers. In principle a halaparia or a langalia must do the ploughing work for the employer that is required for mainly paddy in kharif. As ploughing usually begins in the month of Baisakha (middle of April to middle of May) and continues till the month of Ashadha (middle of June to middle of July), the contract period is of roughly three months. During the contract period on those days when ploughing is not to be done in employer's field, the halaparia/langalia may work for any other employer.

He is paid on daily basis at the market wage rate, and receives a payment only for those days of work when the employer requires his service. He normally works for 7 to 8
hours like a daily wage labourer. A halaparia/langalia is entitled to take wage in advance. He is given a morning meal since he comes very early in the morning during ploughing.

Nevertheless, it is observed that all halaparias or langalias have some continuity of association with the same employer beyond their contract period. All of them reported being given some land by the employers for share-cropping. This strengthens their attachment with their respective employers. As a result they continue to work with the same employers. As payment is made on daily basis, neither employer nor the labourers make any commitment about the duration.

At the time of fieldwork they reported being paid Rs.20 per day which was a normal wage rate for daily wage labourers. They do not get an enhanced wage rate during the peak periods, i.e., harvesting and transplanting.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES:

As we have seen in the previous section, the annual contract/attached labourers, both baramasia and sarimulia/petabhatua, remain employed throughout the year. As against this, the daily wage labourers who form the bulk
of agricultural labour force (ranging from 65.2% to 89.5% of the total agricultural labour population of the study villages), are employed from time to time according to the exigencies of work. Even the semi-attached agricultural labourers are not different from daily wage labourers in terms of extent of wages. During the non-contract periods they too seek work on daily wages like daily wage labourers. They are not necessarily provided work regularly by the employer as even during the contract period, they are laid-off when work is not available with the employer.

Employment for wages besides age, sex and health status, depends to a considerable extent upon availability of self-employable resources such as land. While the young but experienced have greater chances to get employment, the young and inexperienced and women are not always that lucky. Only for transplantation women are preferred. The labourers who cultivate land are restricted from taking up employment for wage in agriculture because of the work on their land. As already stated in the preceding chapter, a majority of such landed labourers in our study villages own very small strips of land, and from their subsistence point of view the pressure on them to join agricultural wage labour are no less important.
As witnessed elsewhere in agricultural societies, employment in agriculture is characterised by seasonal variations. Agricultural operations has its peak and slack seasons. During the peak period, operations like transplanting and harvesting, require maximum labour. During the lean phase agriculture offers very little employment particularly in agriculturally backward areas with 1-2 crops and traditional technology. Thus agriculture does not provide regular and adequate wage employment throughout the year. As a result, both daily wage and semi-attached labourers, irrespective of their land holding status (which are largely insignificant) are vulnerable in terms of the employment opportunities within agriculture. As may be noted, these labourers even in village RRpur of the advanced block, manage to get employment for wages in agriculture at best for 7 to 8 months spread over a year. The situation is even more precarious in village Bankipada of the backward block, where it is only for 5 to 6 months.

Table 5.1: Average number of days worked by Agricultural Labourers* on wages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Blocks</th>
<th>Name of the Village</th>
<th>Agriculture</th>
<th>Non-Agriculture</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Backward</td>
<td>Bankipada</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>RRpur</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* excluding annual contract labourers.
On an average, an agricultural labourer in RRpur (of the advanced block) is reported to have worked for 215 days as a hired labour in agriculture (Table 5.1). The corresponding figure for Bankipada (of the backward block) is as low as 159 days. It is obvious that multi-cropping farming system provides employment opportunities for a longer period in the areas of the developed block than that of the backward block.

Due to inadequacy of employment opportunities within agriculture, these labourers seek employment outside agriculture. The non-agricultural pursuits such as roof-thatching, hedge-cutting, woodcutting etc. that are available within village or in close vicinity do not generate much of employment. Secondly, of these, thatching and woodcutting require specialisation. The most important non-agricultural activity in terms of both extent of employment opportunities and levels of earnings, is earth moving. This is related to digging wells and ponds, construction of roads, and buildings etc.

Earth-moving generally begins in the month of middle Pousa (early January) and continues till the month of Jyesththa (May-June). This is generally carried out on piece-rate
basis, thus providing an opportunity to the labourer to enhance their earning. Earth-moving is a very strenuous job, and requires a lot of energy. Consequently, those who are not young and energetic are unable to take advantage of such work. Moreover, so far as entry into these works is concerned, agricultural labourers face stiff competition with non-agricultural labour force already working in that sector.

It is important to point out that the lack of work within agriculture is not sufficiently counter-balanced by the demand for labour in the non-agricultural sector, particularly works related to earth-moving. As a result, during the period from beginning of September to early November when there is virtually no work within agriculture, agricultural labourers experience a very tough time in both the villages.

Referring back to Table 5.1, we find that the number of man-days (as wage paid) in non-agricultural activities is significantly higher in the village Bankipada (of the backward block) than in the village RRpur (of the advanced block) which reduces the gap of overall man-days (as wage-paid) between the two villages. On an average an agricultural labourer is reported to have 255 days and 224 days in
and outside agriculture as wage labour in RRpur and Bankipada, respectively.

MOBILITY AND MIGRATION:

As it is observed in both the study villages, more often than not the agricultural labourers seek employment in the neighbouring villages. Sometimes the work place is very far off from their residences. In RRpur (of the advanced block) these labourers assemble at a common place which is 3-4 kms from the village, and wait until a farmer comes and takes them with him. In case of Bankipada of the backward block, such mobility is related with non-agricultural activities, mainly earth-moving. They seek out work in regularly changing locations.

Some labourers are forced to migrate to the urban area to seek work. This is specially among the landless agricultural labourers in Bankipada of the backward block. This out-migration generally takes place during the rainy season, soon after transplantation and weeding operation. It is striking to note that they return to the village as soon as harvesting begins. The following case is typical of many such migrants of Bankipada:

Bidyadhar Biswal, 30, is a landless agricultural labourer. He has two children. The eldest one is
seven. "...life becomes very hard when I don't have work. We are four. How can I feed them if there is no work for me. It is very difficult to survive here in the rainy season. After transplantation, there is hardly any work to be done till harvesting. Who will lend us for so many days? How will I repay it? There are many from this village who work in Calcutta. One of my uncle is there who works as a gardener. I leave my family here, and go to Calcutta during this period. Somehow manage to stay with my uncle. He understands my problem. I work as a porter. Carrying a load on the back is very painful. Can not earn much. But everytime when I return to my village just before harvesting I'm in a position to repay the debt...."

EARNINGS:

An agricultural labour household cannot be categorised according to the criterion of labour types, viz., annual contract or daily wage labour households. This is mainly because of the fact that a household may consist of more than one earning member who may belong to different categories. Moreover, the status of an agricultural labourer is liable to change from time to time. Therefore, we have only attempted to assess households in terms of per capita income groups.

The per capita household annual income has been worked out by taking into consideration the economic value of agricultural produce (in case of those who own and/lease in land), total earnings as wage labour (of all working members
and income generated through any other secondary occupation. Thus per capita household annual income can be defined as the total income of the household divided by the total number of its members. It may, however, be kept in mind that an agricultural labour household supplements its income in various ways which cannot possibly be quantified always.

There exists large range of variation in the annual per capita household income in both the villages. In the case of Bankipada of the backward block, it varies from a low of Rs.738 to a high of Rs.2,666. Similarly in RRpur of the advanced block, the lowest and the highest income figures are Rs.625 and Rs.2,470, respectively. It is important to note that the range of variation in the per capita household income of agricultural labourers is not found to be in tune with the actual differences in the life-style of different households because majority (75% to 80%) of the households fall in a much smaller range (discussed later).

Barring few exceptions at the two extremes, majority of agricultural labour households in both the villages are homogeneous in terms of their quality of life--the food they eat, the clothes they wear and the type of house they live in--which will be discussed in the forthcoming chapter. Keeping this in mind, the households have been grouped under
three broad income categories where the 'upper' and 'lower' income groups represent two extremes in the distributions of the households (Table 5.2). The 'medium' income which varies from Rs.1,200 to Rs.1,800 represents the largest share of households in both the villages--more than three quarters of the total agricultural labour households.

Table 5.2: Distribution of Agricultural Labour Households by Per Capita Annual Income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Category</th>
<th>RRpur (of the advanced block)</th>
<th>Bankipada (of the backward block)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Landed*</td>
<td>Landless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 1,800</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6.4)</td>
<td>(3.6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,200-1,800</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(80.8)</td>
<td>(77.8)</td>
<td>(79.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1,200</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12.8)</td>
<td>(22.2)</td>
<td>(16.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages.
* Also includes which does not own but leases in.

Another important point that emerges from the table is the fact that 'upper' income level in both the villages are represented by only the landed households. Such households also cultivate including the land on share-cropping. The lowest income category is equally represented in the two.
villages. Table 5.2 further offers two valuable insights. The distribution of landed agricultural labour households in the middle income group shows only a marginally higher proportion in the village of the advanced block. However, in the village of the advanced block more of the landless (about 78%) are able to stay in the middle income group compared to the village of backward block (70%). This is obviously because of greater opportunities to augment their incomes through farm work in the fields of the farmers. While the households of the landed in the poorest section are comparable in the two villages (12% to 13% in each village), of the landless in Bankipada (of the backward block) 30% are in the lowest income group compared to 22% of RRpur (of the advanced block) poorest households. The lack of agricultural facilities, specially irrigation, and poor earning in non-agricultural work explains why the village of the backward block has higher proportions of landless who cannot break out of their dependence on wage labour and are trapped in their poverty.

The variation in the income levels (Rs.1,200-1,800) among the households in the 'medium' category is because of two reasons. Firstly, as already stated in the beginning, a household usually adopts various means of supplementing household incomes some of which could not be quantified and
measured in pure economic terms, like selling a hen or a 
goat and sometimes even a tree. Secondly, the age 
composition of household has direct bearings on its 
sufficiency of the income. Since consumption levels of 
children is generally lower than that of adult, an average 
sized family with two or three children will be better 
placed than one with all adults. In addition the fact that 
landed includes those who lease in land also adds to income 
variation.

The following case study may throw some light into 
this:

Baishnoba, sixty, is a native of Bankipada. He 
has a large family consisting of ten members. His 
two married sons along with their children stay 
with him. There are four children in the family, 
and the eldest one is 6 years old. His two sons 
work as daily wage labourers. Baishnoba and his 
wife hire out their labour during peak seasons. 
Though, landless, they cultivate some land on 
share-cropping. However, the per capita household 
annual income is Rs.1,257/-. Baishnoba has a 
small pond. Grow some vegetables around it. 
Besides, they have a few hens and some goats. 
They sell the lambs off during periods of hard-
ship. Once his youngest son fell sick. Within a 
few days the condition became so serious that he 
was taken to the district hospital, and remained 
their for two weeks. By the time he was dis-
charged from the hospital a lot of money was 
borrowed and spent. The family had already gone 
into heavy debt. It became too difficult to 
arrange any further loans. Baishnoba's family had 
an old mango tree. Finally, they sold it off to 
repay the loan.
Our data thus reveals that the conditions of employment of different categories of agricultural labourers vary, for the majority economic insecurity is the central issue. These differences do not alter the fact that they remain vulnerable throughout the year in varying degrees.

Both Baramasia and sarimulia/petabhatua work under one year contract, and remain unfree for the whole year and cannot supplement their earning by working elsewhere. Even though, a sarimulia/petabhatua goes back to his house after work, the working hours for both of them are irregular and longer. Upurí-mulia/alaga (daily wage labourers) who form the bulk of the agricultural labourers, have no security of employment. So they have to be on constant search of work. Sometimes these daily wage labourers are required to work at a stretch without any rest break. They remain under threat of losing their wages if the work is abandoned due to bad weather. Further, these daily-wage labourers are not paid at the official minimum. Women are paid lower wages as compared to men. A halaparia/langalia (semi-attached labourers) who is in principle employed under a contract for part of the year, does not have any security of work even during the contract period. They continue to work with the same employer beyond their contract period, however, on a
beck-and-call basis. *halaparias/langalias* are paid on daily basis; and for them there is no enhanced wage rate during peak period.

The demand for labour in agriculture is irregular and inadequate. Both *alaga/upuri-mulia* (daily wage labourers) and *halaparia/langalia* (semi-attached labourers) are vulnerable in terms of employment opportunities within agriculture. The situation is more vulnerable in Bankipada of the backward block. Labourers from both the villages (of the backward and the advanced block) seek employment outside agriculture. The most important non-agricultural activity in terms of both extent of employment opportunities and levels of earnings, is earth-moving. Those who are not young and energetic are unable to take advantage of such work. The lack of work within agriculture is not sufficiently counter-balanced by the demand for labour in the non-agricultural sector. As a result, beginning of September to early November remains the most slack period in both the villages.

Some labourers are forced to migrate to urban areas to seek work. This is specially among landless agricultural labourers in Bankipada of the backward block.
There exists large range of variation in the annual per
per capita household income of agricultural labourers in both
the villages. The range of variation in the per capita
household annual income is not found to be in tune with the
actual differences in the life style of different house-
holds. This is because, more than three quarters of total
agricultural labour households remain in the middle income
group and have very similar existence. The other two rea-
sons are: firstly, a household usually adopts various means
of supplementing household incomes some of which could not
be quantified and measured in pure economic terms; and
secondly, the age composition of household has direct bear-
ings on its sufficiency of the income.