INTRODUCTION
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Agrarian issues occupy a prominent place in India’s political economy because agriculture employs a large section of the rural population, providing employment to almost two-third of the work force directly. The ownership of agricultural land and other assets in rural areas is highly skewed. A vast section of the population engaged in the agricultural sector constitutes agricultural labourers, both landless and small cultivators, who work on other person’s farm for wages. A change in the well being of the rural population can come about through technological improvement accompanied by institutional reforms. But as studies show, despite the institutional reforms introduced after the post-independence period, the economic condition of agricultural labourers did not change much except for a few pockets in terms of wages and the availability of employment (Bardhan 1970, 1973, Jose 1974, Krishanaji 1971). The economic condition of agricultural labourers showed a grim situation till 1970s. The liberalization period brought about a fresh spell of misfortune for the rural labour force in terms of wages and availability of employment as various studies show that the liberalization period was marked by a decline in growth rate of rural wages for agricultural/rural labour and falling growth in farm and non farm employment in all most all states of the country.

Questions relating to the economic condition of agricultural labourers continue to occupy a significant place among researchers. A number of studies have come up which provide an understanding of the movement of agricultural wages and availability of employment. The main theme of our thesis is to carry forward the research on the economic condition of agricultural labourers and contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the issue. For this purpose, we concentrate on agricultural labourers in the state of West Bengal and assess how agrarian change has influenced a change in the material condition of agricultural labourers in the state.

The economic condition of agricultural labourers will depend primarily upon the real earnings; which are affected by a) availability of employment, b) agricultural wages and c) price of wage goods consumed by members of the household. These three factors together with the ability of the labour force to sell labour power freely in the market determine the economic condition of agricultural labourers.
Rise in agricultural wages may not necessarily mean a rise in the earnings of agricultural labourers, if this rise in rural wages is accompanied by a fall in agricultural employment or a rise in the price of the wage goods consumed by members of the household. Similarly if a rise in employment is accompanied by a fall in wages/rise in the price of wage goods then real earning of agricultural labourers will decline. So no single economic variable is an indicator of the real earnings of agricultural labourers.

Besides looking at the trends in the three factors mentioned above, we will also attempt to look into the factors that affect demand for labour and wage rates:

- Agricultural growth, which is often accompanied by technological change, shifts the demand curve for labour upward due to multiple cropping which will lead to a rise in the demand for labour. This will lead to labour market tightening and put an upward pressure on wages rates.

- Diversification of rural employment, i.e. expansion of non-farm employment will reduce the number of people dependent on agriculture for livelihood. This will lead to labour market tightening and increase the bargaining power of agricultural labourers.

- Level of organization among the agricultural labourers to bargain for higher wages. Here the role of the peasant organizations is important.

- Level of indebtedness. It is often argued that agricultural labourers take consumption loans from landlords to meet their current consumption. This sort of dependence often leads to unequal bargaining power where bargaining power of the labourers is weakened. This process also leads to appropriation of surplus in the form of unpaid labour services by landlords. Thus we have to assess to what extent indebtedness leads to interlocking of labour market with the credit market and to what extent do such relationships affect the employment conditions and bargaining power of agricultural labourers. So while assessing the economic conditions of agricultural labourers we have to look into the kind of labour relations that prevails in the rural economy.

No study on the economic condition of agricultural labourers is complete until we look at the aspect of the employer employee relation. Agricultural activity is
accompanied by both peak season when agricultural activity is at the highest, as well as lean season, when agricultural activity is almost absent. Given the fact that agricultural labourers have no past savings and in the near absence of alternative employment opportunities during the lean season, agricultural labourers resort to borrowing. Due to absence of borrowing from institutional sources they resort to borrowing from non-institutional sources. Hence, is often seen that they take consumption credit in the form of wage advance from employer against future commitment of labour. This often leads to adverse terms and conditions and weakens the bargaining power of the agricultural labourers. The weaker party often loses the option to exercise a choice in the other markets.

Hence, in our study, we propose to study the economic conditions of agricultural labourers by analyzing the employment availability in farm sector and non-farm sector, wages rates, extent of indebtedness, levels and patterns of consumption and employer-employee relations.

DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTENTS OF VARIOUS CHAPTERS

The first chapter begins with a brief overview of the pre-1947 period; we take a look at the existing literature, based on data available from various sources, at the national level and at the state level in order to understand the economic conditions of agricultural labourers. While analyzing the economic condition of agricultural labourers from the existing data sources, we focus on the changes in the size and composition of agricultural labour force, the trends in the wage rates and employment availability in the farm sector and non-farm sector from 1950s to the present. Finally, we analyze the rural labour relations both at the state level at the national level.

In chapter two, we take a look at the broader aspects of the agrarian structure in West Bengal. We take a closer look at the agrarian relation in the West Bengal in the pre Independence and Post Independence period. The implication of Operation Barga and pattern ownership and operational holdings is analyzed since its institution during late 1970s to the present. Finally we have tried to analyze the determinants of agricultural growth in terms of the institutional factors and technological factors.
In Chapter three and four we analyze the trends in wage rates and employment pattern in West Bengal in comparison with all India figures from the existing data source like the Agricultural wages in India, Rural Labour enquiry, NSS on employment and unemployment survey.

Chapter five explores the economic condition of agricultural labourers from the primary level survey in the two districts of West Bengal. In this chapter we look at the availability of employment in the farm and non-farm sector and wages for casual daily agricultural laborers at the village level. The aim is to provide a detailed account of the living condition of agricultural labourers. It explores the dynamics of the rural economy and how this transforms into employment availability and wage rates for agricultural labourers. It also looks at the consumption pattern and indebtedness of agricultural labourers. Finally we analyse the factors that determine wages in the surveyed district and link it up with some of the theories of wages.

Chapter six explores the rural labour relations in West Bengal. In an attempt to understand the rural labour relations we focus on the credit in the labour market and to what extent agricultural labourers who take credit from their employers have the freedom to work for different employers and finally, the concluding chapter summaries the main findings of the thesis.