CHAPTER III

The Growth of Agricultural Labour since 1881

The question of the growth of the agricultural labourer population has been a contentious issue which has received far more attention than the extent of regional variations. The issue, however, remains to be settled either for the last five decades of colonial rule or for the decades since Independence. To a great degree, the controversy is around the nature of available quantitative estimates as the deficiencies of data permit alternative interpretations. This is not to suggest that there is little dispute about the underlying processes either during the colonial era or since 1947.

We attempt in this Chapter a discussion of the many processes underlying a change in the incidence of agricultural labourers in India. Our broader interest is more in spatial variations in the incidence rather than in any rise in incidence. But since the underlying processes are the same, the issue of a rise in incidence over time is of relevance. Our following discussion deals, however, with trends in the country as a whole and not with regional disparities in these trends. Secondly, since we are covering a time span of one century our discussion is naturally broad and sweeping. Thirdly,
the issues regarding the effects of colonial rule on the incidence of agricultural labour are dealt with in greater detail in the next Chapter. We do, however, discuss at some length the alternative theoretical explanations for trends since 1947. Fourthly, we dwell at some length on the nature of available information. This is because in this particular instance, the final seal on the arguments is often not based on an understanding of the underlying processes or the available qualitative evidence but on recourse to quantitative trends. A clarity on what the latter really do reveal must therefore be an integral part of discussions on the 'growth of agricultural labour' in India.

Trends in the Incidence of MAL since 1881

Let us first look at the trends in incidence in our sample of districts in each of the three periods covered (Table 3.1). The data are quite revealing. In the first place, in none of the three periods is there any secular tendency towards a rise. In the colonial period a point to point comparison suggests a rise. Likewise, between 1951 and 1981 a point to point comparison again suggests a rise, a fairly substantial one at that. However, in both periods a 'rise' in incidence masks fluctuations in the years in between. When we examine the longer period between 1881 and 1981, the picture is even more ambiguous. A fluctuating tendency towards a rise between 1881 and 1931, an actual decline in 1951 and then again a fluctuating (though relatively minor) tendency towards an increase in 1981. (Note
Table 3.1: Average Incidence of MAL in the Workforce, 1881-1981

(in percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>26.81</td>
<td>19.97</td>
<td>19.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>23.76</td>
<td>17.97</td>
<td>18.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>24.06</td>
<td>18.30</td>
<td>18.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td></td>
<td>22.12</td>
<td>16.81</td>
<td>18.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td></td>
<td>30.21</td>
<td>22.53</td>
<td>22.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td></td>
<td>18.40</td>
<td>18.60</td>
<td>18.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.98</td>
<td>28.31</td>
<td>27.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of districts</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>98</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: As elaborated in Appendix I, the estimates for 1881-1931 relate to the entire workforce and for 1951-1981 to the rural workforce only.

that the actual magnitudes of incidence for the same year in different periods are different because of the differences in the composition of the sample districts. However, the trends are the same and do not contradict each other in any of the periods).

Table 3.1 in a nutshell illustrates the pitfalls of using Census estimates for making any definitive inferences. The fluctuations could in part or entirely be due to the non-comparability of Census concepts and definitions. But what elements of these trends
are 'genuine' and what elements represent errors in enumeration are clearly impossible to separate. The only alternative is to look for qualitative evidence relevant to this issue and for other quantitative estimates in confirmation of these trends. The former are again often open to dispute and the latter are available for the post-Independence period and not for the colonial era.

The Late Colonial Era

The effects of colonialism on the peasantry and on artisans and workers in traditional industry has been for long a controversial issue, which we discuss in greater length in the next Chapter. To anticipate in brief our discussion there, we highlight three important points. While there now seems little to dispute about the overall detrimental impact of land revenue policies and of commercialisation and market integration on the cultivating peasantry, recent research has increasingly pointed to their multifaceted influences. There was in the first place a regional diversity in the nature of the colonial impact and an obvious difference in the impact on the more well to do and on the more disadvantaged sections of the peasantry. More important, the nature of increasing control over the small and poor peasant was often of a varied kind which did not always result in the peasant turning into an agricultural labourer. Various forms of indebtedness, tenant cultivation and his conversion into a 'peasant proletarian' were as common as loss of formal ownership of land. No doubt, the vestiges of whatever control the small and poor peasant retained over
his land were often little more than 'sham' ownership. But the point is that even this limited ownership over land did make a difference to the extent of his participation as an agricultural labourer.

The second point about the colonial impact is regarding the effect on the workers in traditional industry. We shall argue in the next Chapter that the evolution of the caste system in India has historically led to the maintenance of a landless labourer population whose prescribed occupations included largely or mainly working on the fields belonging to the superior castes. So much so that Irfan Habib goes as far as to suggest that on the eve of colonial rule, menial castes in North India formed as much as a fifth to a quarter of the rural population, and they formed "a reserve to be called upon to work in the fields during harvests". Colonialism led slowly to the destruction of 'traditional' arrangements within village society and made more explicit the dependence of these menial castes on agricultural labour. This is regarding the menial castes. On workers in traditional industry per se, there is again little to question the view that all over India colonialism led to an increasing undermining of traditional sources of income and these workers had to turn more and more to other forms of labour - of which agricultural labour was one of the most important.

These two aspects we discuss in Chapter IV. The third point is that many of these processes (on the peasantry and on artisans) are generally considered to have taken place before the first all-India
Census of 1881. The effects of the universal levy of land rent payable in cash and the high incidence of land rent in gross produce were felt more in the first five decades or so of the 19th century. Likewise, the import of British goods and its impact on the workers in traditional industry were also felt in the same period. In other words, before the first all-India Census of 1881, the larger part of the impact of colonialism on the 'growth of agricultural labour' may have already taken place. This is not to suggest that little happened afterwards, but to point out that trends between 1881 and 1931 must be seen as indicating little more than conditions in the closing decades of colonial rule.

This point needs emphasis because Surendra Patel's study of agricultural labourers in India where he argues in terms of a sharp rise in incidence of agricultural labour between 1872 and 1931 was based on the 'destruction of the self-sustained village economy' by colonialism. Secondly, although his estimates have been shown to be faulty they continue to be cited to show a rise in incidence during colonial rule.

Before attempting any definitive inference from the Census estimates, we discuss the estimates of Patel and Krishnamurthy. Table 3.2 presents Patel's estimates which on the face of it indicate an increase which can not be disputed. Or in his own words "... during the course of six decades from 1872 to 1931, the proportion of agricultural labourers to the agricultural population in India increased from a meagre one-seventh to more than one-third".
Table 3.2: Surendra Patel’s Estimates of the Incidence of Agricultural Labour in India: 1871–72–1931

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adult Male workers 1871-72</th>
<th>Male workers 1881</th>
<th>Population Supported</th>
<th>Working Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1891</td>
<td>1901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural Labourers as a proportion of the Agricultural Population (in percent)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Reproduced from Surendra Patel, Agricultural Labourers in Modern India and Pakistan, op.cit., Table 1, p.14.

It is well-known and requires little reiteration that Patel’s conclusion stems from major indefensible errors in collating Census statistics. As Krishnamurthy has pointed out, these errors are (i) disregard of substantive changes in geographical coverage in the Censuses under review, particularly between that in the 1871/72 Census and the later Censuses (ii) the use of differing categories of the population in the various Censuses, even when a single comparable category in almost all Censuses is available i.e., Patel’s use of male workers in 1871–72 and 1881, male and female workers in 1921 and 1931 and total population (workers plus dependants) in 1891, 1901 and 1911 and (iii) the incorrect use of 'general' labour alone as agricultural
labourers in 1881 when both 'general' labour and agricultural labour are separate occupational categories in that Census.

Furthermore, as Krishnamurthy again points out, the extent of rise between 1871-72 and 1931 may be exaggerated also on account of (i) a possible over-estimate of the agricultural working force in 1881 due to the inclusion of workers in pastoralism, plantation and forestry, who were not included in the agricultural work force in subsequent Censuses and (ii) the absence of a separate category of agricultural labour in 1871-72 which "may have led to a number of persons reporting themselves as cultivators who would otherwise have been deemed agricultural labourers".

Reworking Patel's estimates, Krishnamurthy arrives at a set of estimates which suggest that if the fault ridden 1871-72 Census is excluded the incidence of agricultural labour in the agricultural work force fluctuates between 21-30 per cent between 1881 and 1931. We reproduce in Table 3.3, Krishnamurthy's estimates for male workers, which as we argued above, is the most identifiable population category to look at.

While Krishnamurthy's estimates present a more correct picture as found in the Census occupational returns, we need to have a larger series of estimates to cover both pre and post-1947 decades, a series only partially compiled by Krishnamurthy. Secondly, we also need a fully comparable geographical area and one which covers India alone and not the larger India and Burma under colonial rule. Thirdly, the trends
Table 3.3: Krishnamurthy's Estimates for the Incidence of Agricultural Labour in the Agricultural Work Force in India

(Males only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Incidence (in percent)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Incidence (in percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1871-72</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>29.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


2. Estimates cover a varying geographic area in 1871-72, 1881 and 1901-1931. In 1901-1931 they cover all of present day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma.

3. 1871-72 estimates refer to adult males only and 1891 estimates for male workers are unavailable.

in incidence of agricultural labour must be based on the entire work force and not just on the agricultural workforce as in Patel's and Krishnamurthy's estimates.

Our own estimates (Table 3.1) therefore constitute the most comparable series in terms of both geographical coverage and category of workers considered — the fact that the sample of districts does not
cover the entire country does not reduce their accuracy.

An inference of a 3 percentage point increase between 1881 and 1931 (our sample of 98 districts, 1881-1981) hinges on the quantum jump in 1931 alone, the years in between showing only fluctuations.

It is possible that the data for 1931 do not reflect any long-term trend but are particular to the Depression era. But then the full impact of the Depression was felt in India only by the mid 1930s. Even if the Reports of the Banking Enquiry Committee of 1929-30 indicate that in various provinces the peasantry was hard hit by declining prices (especially for commercial crops) and credit had become a problem, it would be difficult to argue that either widespread abandoning of cultivation by the small peasantry or large-scale dispossession of this class had taken place by 1931.

That the 1931 estimates need to be viewed with some caution is obvious when we look at trends beyond 1931. If one were to go by the Census estimates alone, then when we compare the 1931 estimates with those for the decades after Independence we have to perforce admit a sharp decline between 1931 and 1951. The decline would be even greater if we had estimates for rural India in both years and not for 1951 alone. Now it is true that there is general agreement that in concept and administration the 1951 Census was a poor one, with Alice Thorner going as far as to say that one should "bury"
once and for all" the 1951 workforce data.\(^{7}\) In many states the earning dependants are believed to have been grossly under enumerated.\(^{8}\) And a comparison with the estimate of the 1950–51 Agricultural Labour Enquiry show that the latter provides a higher estimate of the proportion of agricultural labour households in all rural households.

Even then, the 1931 estimates have to be seen as an aberration.\(^{9}\) For if the 1951 Census is faulty, then in the 1961 Census (considered not only a better designed and executed Census but also one with a liberal definition of a worker) the incidence of agricultural labour was still below that in 1931, the latter being exceeded only in 1971.

All this leads one to conclude that if the low estimates of the faulty and essentially non-comparable 1871–72 Census are ignored and the unusually high estimates of 1931 treated with scepticism then there is little in Census data to suggest that in the last 50 years and more of colonial India there was any increase in the overall incidence of male agricultural labour in the workforce. All one can say with confidence is that at least in our sample districts this incidence fluctuated between 17–22 per cent of the workforce.

**Trends in Post-Independence India**

To begin with, an examination of various quantitative estimates of the incidence of agricultural labourers. Fortunately, the Census is not the only source for quantitative information.
Referring to Table 3.1, we can see that the trends between 1951 and 1981 are again non-linear. There has been a substantial debate over the implications of changes in Census concepts and definitions between 1951 and 1981, and one can make only speculations about the veracity of the Census estimates. We have already referred to the problems of the 1951 Census. The 1971 Census was a particularly problematic one and the resurvey carried out in 1971-72 to make the 1961 and 1971 occupational returns comparable did not make any appreciable difference to estimates of the incidence of agricultural labourers.10/

However, if we accept that the 1951 Census under-enumerated agricultural labourers and the 1971 Census over-enumerated them and that the 1981 concepts are somewhat close to those in 1961, one can argue that there has been an increase in the incidence of agricultural labour between 1961 and 1981. Table 3.1 also shows that, in general, the incidence in the decades after 1947 has been higher than the average between 1881 and 1931.

In a careful analysis of different estimates of agricultural labourers in rural India, Nirmal Chandra in a paper written in 1979, came to the conclusion that there was no evidence of either an increasing alienation of the rural poor from land or a rise in the proportion of either agricultural labourers or employees in the labour force.11/

But sufficient data has since been made available to indicate that there has been a definite rise in the incidence of both agricultural
### Table 3.4: Employees in the Rural Labour Force - NSS Estimates of Usual Status Rates (1952-1983-84, males only)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year (Round)</th>
<th>Employees</th>
<th>Agricultural labourers</th>
<th>Year (Round)</th>
<th>Employees</th>
<th>Agricultural labourers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952 (4th Round)</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>1960-61 (16th Round)</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953 (6th Round)</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>1961-62 (17th Round)</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954 (7th Round)</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>1964-65 (19th Round)</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955 (9th Round)</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1966-67 (21st Round)</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956-57 (11/12th Round)</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1972-73 (27th Round)</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958-59 (14th Round)</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>1977-78 (32nd Round)</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>28.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959-60 (15th Round)</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>1983-84 (38th Round)</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

1. In the early years of the NSS, the category of "employees" is a separate one in itself. From the 1960s in the place of this all embracing category estimates of disaggregated categories have been made. In the 27th round e.g. (i) salaried wage labour in farm enterprises, (ii) salaried wage labour in non-farm enterprises, (iii) working as casual labour. Or, as in the 32nd round (i) wage/salaried labour and (ii) casual wage labour. The estimates provided above are the aggregates of such relevant categories.

2. The concepts and definitions have been different until the 11th round, the "gainful occupation" approach was the basis for estimating employment, unemployment as well as the activity status. Thereafter, the "labour force approach" was used. Even within each of these two approaches, the reference period varied e.g. one month in the 6th and 7th rounds but one year in the 9th round and one day in the 10th round. In all respects the following rounds would constitute comparable sub-periods (i) 6th and 7th rounds, (ii) 14th and 15th rounds, (iii) 16th to 21st rounds, and (iv) 27th, 32nd and 38th rounds. See Visaria, *op.cit.* and Appendices by Sudhir Bhattacharya and Pravin Visaria in *Report of the Committee of Experts on Unemployment Estimates* (Planning Commission, New Delhi, 1973).

3. Visaria argues that owing to the presence of non-sampling errors, the 16th and 17th schedules of the 19th round should be considered separately. Visaria *op.cit.* pp.139-140. Nirmal Chand also argues that the small sample sizes in the initial rounds should be kept in view. Nirmal Chand *op.cit.*

4. In the 4th and 7th rounds there are separate estimates of the agricultural labourers. Visaria refers to somewhat corresponding categories for the 16th and 17th rounds and on certain assumptions, also estimates that they would constitute 21.5 to 22.1 of the male rural workforce in 1972-73 *(ibid. p.142).*
Footnote continued

5. 32nd and 38th round estimates relate to main workers (5+ years) and the 38th round estimates are for the first two subrounds only.

6. Sources: (i) NSS Reports No. 14, 62, 52, 85 and 103 for up to 1961-62.
   (iv) Sarvekshana (Vol. 5 Nos. 1 and 2, 1981) for 1977-78.
   (v) Sarvekshana (Vol. 9 No. 4 1986) for 1983-84.

and all rural labour in the work force.

Consider the estimates from various rounds of the NSS (Table 3.4). The NSS estimates like those of the Census are beset with problems of comparability in concept and definition.

Yet, given all the ifs and buts governing the estimates in Table 3.4, if we do make the assumption that the proportion of other rural labourers in all employees has not changed substantially, then one could say with some certainty that from the 1960s onwards there is an increase in the incidence of agricultural labourers in rural India.

The third source of information which also points to an increasing incidence of agricultural labourers is the Agricultural/Rural Labour Enquiries. Estimates from these enquiries and corresponding
estimates from the 32nd round of the NSS are presented in Table 3.5. Here again we are faced with not just fluctuations but an

Table 3.5: Agricultural Labour Households in All Rural Households
(1950-51 - 1977-78, in per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Agricultural Labour households in all rural households</th>
<th>Percentage Distribution of Agricultural Labour Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>with land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950-51</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956-57</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964-65</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974-75</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977-78</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1. In 1950-51, an agricultural labour household was one where the head of the household spent a major part of his time on agricultural wage labour, in subsequent years it was one which drew the major part of its income from agricultural labour.

actual decline in the proportion of agricultural labour households in all rural households until 1964-65. Only in part can this be explained by the non-comparability of the 1950-51 estimates with those for the later years. However, more important and more unambiguous is the substantial rise between 1956-57 and 1977-78. This rise is much more than the "barely one-and-a-half points" increase between 1956-57 and 1974-75 which, among other things, led Nirmal Chandra to deny the presence of any systematic rise in the incidence of agricultural labour in rural India.

For the decades since Independence then, the estimates of three different but related variables from three different sources - agricultural labourers in the workforce from the Censuses, 'employees' and agricultural labourers in the workforce from the NSS, agricultural labour households from the Agricultural/Rural Labour Enquiries - show no clear-cut pattern for the 1950s. But they do reinforce each other on trends since the early-mid 1960s: an increasing importance in the relative magnitude of agricultural labourers in rural India.

Pauperisation of the Small Peasant and the Rising Incidence of Agricultural Labour

If a careful sifting of available data indicates a rising incidence of agricultural labour over the past two decades what are the underlying processes which have led to this phenomenon?

We have in the main the two contending hypotheses of differentiation and what can very broadly be termed as pauperisation of the small peasant.
The classical model of differentiation of the peasantry as postulated by Lenin and Kautsky is well known.\textsuperscript{12} The development of capitalism "resolves" the direct producers into capitalists and workers, the means of production and subsistence are both transformed into commodities, the technical superiority of large farms over small farms leads to the former expropriating land of the latter, and "the same development which on the one hand creates a demand for wage labourers, creates, on the other hand, these wage labourers themselves. It proletarianises masses of peasants, cuts down the size of the peasant family and throws the redundant members on the labour market".\textsuperscript{13}

While this is the 'model' in its most abstract form, it is also well known that both Lenin and Kautsky clearly emphasised the distinction between the development of capitalism in agriculture and in industry. Particular attention was drawn to the fact that (Lenin) "capitalism penetrates into agriculture particularly slowly and in extremely varied forms"\textsuperscript{14} and that (Kautsky) "agriculture does not develop according to the same process as industry; it follows laws of its own".\textsuperscript{15}

Much has been written about why capitalism has not developed more rapidly in Indian agriculture. In retrospect one can hardly dispute the observation that the debate over the mode of production in Indian agriculture did not "sufficiently" deal with the "process or dynamics of change".\textsuperscript{16}
The relevant question for us is whether the rise in incidence of agricultural labour in post-Independence India follows from large scale dispossession of the small and poor peasant; whether, in short, this is the result of the 'classical' process of differentiation. The processes at work and available evidence, however, suggest otherwise.

As early as the early 1950s, land ownership in India was already highly differentiated. The top ten per cent of land owning households owned as much as 47 per cent of the available land while the bottom 30 per cent possessed as little as 1 per cent of the total land.17

It is beyond the scope of our limited concern about the rise in incidence of agricultural labourers to provide a comprehensive understanding of the processes at work in Indian agriculture since 1947. But there are several relevant characteristics over which there can not be much dispute.

Firstly, did the Tenancy Reform of the 1950s lead to large scale eviction of the small cultivating tenant? In a preliminary analysis of that NSS data Baj concluded this was the case,18 but Sanyal and Visaria have pointed out that the data in question do not permit such conclusions.19 However, one must not gloss over the fairly commonly reported practice of benami registration of land as landowners sought to evade first the Tenancy Laws and then the Ceiling Laws. Whether there was large scale eviction of tenants must therefore remain an unsettled question.
There are other aspects of Indian agriculture which go against any large scale dispossession of the small and poor peasantry. We have the uneven development of the land, credit, product and labour markets as also the more contentious question of inter-locked markets preventing the fuller development of capitalism.\(^20\) (Note, however, that the dispute over the latter is more over the extent to which inter-locked markets prevent the growth of capitalism in the 'classical' sense. There is little dispute that such inter-locking has hindered the transfer of land from the small and poor peasant to the larger landowning classes).\(^21\)

More important is what can be termed as the ability of and compulsions leading to the survival of small landowning households. The ability of the small landowning household to survive even with market penetration is a fact acknowledged even in the Lenin-Kautsky model.\(^22\) The 'size-productivity' debate in India brought out how a higher productivity on small holdings is achieved: more intensive cultivation of land, a diversified cropping pattern and even production of cash crops.\(^23\) A degree of 'self-exploitation' underlies this process. And the sale of produce even by the small land owning households need not be indicative of any 'forced commerce' but instead a market participation where high valued cash crops are sold and inferior cereals bought for consumption.\(^24\) Finally, one must not minimise the effect—however limited it may be—of State intervention in ensuring the survival of the small landowning households. We therefore have "the seemingly incongruous roles of the small peasant
as a wage labourer, an employer of labour, a producer for the market
and one who lives at the borderline of subsistence.\(^25\)

If these are indications of the many ways in which the small
peasant is able to survive, there are on the other side compulsions
which force such attempts to hold on to land. One must note that in
the classical Marxist framework, dissolution of the peasantry accompanied
the capitalist transformation of industry. Capitalist development of
industry and agriculture were 'symbiotically' linked to each other.\(^26\)
'Expropriated' peasants were now wage workers in industry and in
agriculture. The development of industry was able to provide
employment to the proletariat. Or as postulated by Lenin: "The
increase in the number of peasants thrown into the ranks of the
industrial and rural proletariat, and the increase in the demand for
wage labour, are two sides of one medal".\(^27\) Conditions in India
have clearly not been of that kind. A sectoral shift in product
distribution has not been accompanied by a corresponding shift in the
occupational distribution: 70 per cent of the workforce remains
dependent on agriculture. In a situation of inadequate growth of
the non-agricultural sector the compulsions to hold on to whatever
land is available are obvious. Land also remains the only form of
security in rural India. In short, "the self-exploitation of family
labour on small farms ...inhibits tendencies towards a concentration
of landed property on the one hand and the emergence of capitalist
wage labour on the other".\(^28\)
In any case available data on the distribution of land in rural India do not show, even if we were to give some consideration to the presence of benami holdings, any sharp increase in inequality in land ownership.\(^{29}\) Table 3.6 presents two summary measures of land inequality between 1961-62 and 1981-82.

Table 3.6: Land Inequality in Rural India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lorenz Ratio of ownership inequality</th>
<th>Percentage of land owned by top 10% of land owning households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1961/62</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971/72</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>49.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981/82</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1. Sources: Computed from relevant NSS Reports.
2. Lorenz Ratio computed by excluding the '0' class (landless).

The absence of any large scale transfers of land from the smaller landowning households to the larger landowning households and the associated characteristics of the survival of small peasant households should hardly be interpreted to mean an unchanging stability of the small peasant households.

In a recent study of the landholding structure in Bangladesh, Amit Bhaduri and others put forward an interesting analytical hypothesis to explain 'persistence and polarisation'.\(^{30,31}\) There have been transfers towards the upper landholding size classes, yet those small landowning
households who have been able to retain land have 'survived'. The suggested explanation is that (i) the enlargement of land in the larger landholding size classes augments the demand for wage labour and this provides a source of supplementary 'stabilizing' income for those owning miniscule plots of land and (2) supplementary wage income earned outside agriculture is another 'stabilising' factor.

Such land transfers augmenting the demand for labour have not taken place in India. And employment in the non-agricultural sector has not grown to an extent capable of affording a 'stabilising' influence, though the growth of this sector in recent years has been seen as a 'residuary' growth absorbing the growing casual labourer population.\(^{32}\)

The 'stability' of the small peasant is actually more his 'survival' as a pauperised peasant. A satisfactory explanation for the recent rise in incidence of agricultural labourers can be had from the hypothesis of the pauperisation of the peasantry.\(^ {32}\) At times wrongly termed (and confused with the Chyanovian 'family cycle') as 'demographic differentiation', the central process in this model is the ability and compulsions of the small peasant to survive in a land scarce and land hungry rural society. The 'survival' is not of an unchanging character. On the contrary, increasing population pressure and stagnant productivity on small farms eventually turn the small and poor peasant household into a landed agricultural labourer household.

To put it very simply, this hypothesis of pauperisation of the small and poor peasant suggests that, firstly, in the absence of
alternative sources of income small and poor peasant households cling to their land through the survival strategies described. However, increasing pressure on land leads to sub-division of holdings and the rates of partitioning are arguably higher in the small and poor peasant households. Thirdly, side by side with the growth of smaller and smaller landholdings is the fact that land productivity is unlikely to have grown fast enough to compensate for this decline in landholding size. As Vaidyanathan has argued, it is a moot point whether the productivity of land has risen fast enough for income from cultivation alone to sustain households operating land of 1 ha or less. The net result is that these landowning households have to increasingly turn to wage employment for their subsistence, so much so that what we have now is a growing class of petty landholders who are more dependent on agricultural wage income than on income from cultivation.

There is sufficient evidence to indicate the operation of this phenomenon. Consider, first, the evidence presented earlier in Table 3.5. An increasing proportion of agricultural labourer households comprises households owning land. Given the poor implementation of Ceiling laws, it is unlikely that this follows from land reform legislation. It is more likely that this reflects the effect of partitioning of small holdings, the owners of which were earlier only deriving a part of their income from wage labour but now increasingly draw the major part of their income from this source. On the average these holdings were 0.5 ha in size in 1974-75.
The inadequacy of such miniscule holdings to sustain the households is apparent from the fact that in 1974-75, on the average they drew only 12% of their annual income from cultivation. In fact, agricultural labour households with land had an average annual income only marginally higher than that of households without land. Furthermore, their larger household size resulted in a per capita income which was over 10% less than that of landless households in 1974-75.

On the other side, an examination of the land distribution data reveals among other things an overall fall in the average size of ownership holdings and a sharp rise in the relative number and proportion of area under holdings belonging to the smallest size classes (Table 3.7)

Table 3.7: Trends in Average Size of Holdings and Area under Small Holders (1953-54 to 1981-82)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Average area/landowning household (in ha)</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Proportion of owned area in holdings of less than 2.02 ha (%)</td>
<td>16.32</td>
<td>19.98</td>
<td>24.44</td>
<td>28.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Proportion of ownership holdings with less than 2.02 ha (%)</td>
<td>67.14</td>
<td>71.95</td>
<td>75.78</td>
<td>78.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Computed from NSS data, relevant rounds.
We have then a rapid rise in the relative number of small land holdings — without doubt a result of the partitioning of holdings under growing population pressure. Note, as Sanyal has pointed out, side by side with this phenomenon is an actual decline in landlessness (at least until 1971-72).\footnote{36/}

The information from the Agricultural Censuses regarding the operational distribution of land confirms this process. Based as they are on village records, the data need to be viewed with some caution. But the trends are unambiguous (Table 3.8).
Table 3.8: Size Class wise Distribution of the Operational Holdings and the Average Size of Holdings (1970-71, 1976-77 and 1980-81)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size Class</th>
<th>Distribution of Number of Holdings (%)</th>
<th>Share in Operated Area (%)</th>
<th>Average Size of Holdings (in ha)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Marginal (&lt; 1 ha)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Small (1-2 ha)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Small Medium (2-4 ha)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Medium (4-10 ha)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Large (10 ha and above)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


2. These Agricultural Censuses were based on the complete land records in some states and on varying sample records in other states. In addition, based as they are on village land records, the problem of benami transfers, subdivision to evade land ceiling laws etc. should not be discounted.
The average size of holding has shown a 20 per cent decline between 1970-71 and 1980-81. Even if the average holding size has declined only in the larger size classes, the proliferation of the marginal holdings in both absolute and relative terms seems to indicate the pressure of growing population on land. Here again, sub-division of holdings in the small and small-medium size classes must have contributed to this increase in the marginal size class. That the average size of holdings in this class has remained more or less the same and not declined is an indirect suggestion that holdings in the next two size classes have been sub-divided and now fall in the smallest size class of holdings.

All this evidence - a declining average size of holdings, proliferation of holdings in the smaller size classes, and an increasing proportion of agricultural labourer households with land, not only substantiate our observation that at least from the 1960s there is definite evidence of a rising incidence of agricultural labourers in the rural work force, but also suggest that this is largely if not wholly the result of a pauperisation of the small and petty peasant. Finally (if only to reiterate) all this is not to suggest that the growth processes generated by the Green Revolution have not led (in certain areas and for certain crops) to attempts at further concentration of output and wealth. On this there is broad agreement. In pockets it may even have lead to 'dispossession' of sections of the small and poor peasantry, but on the whole it would appear that 'reverse leasing'
is the more common form of concentration of cultivated land in the larger land holdings. 40/

Our discussion in this Chapter has looked at macro level trends in the incidence of MAL. Needless to add (as suggested in Chapter II) there have been differences across regions in longer term trends (1881 onwards) as well as in the decades since Independence. We have discussed the macro trends in order to deal with an issue which has hitherto been clouded and open to dispute. In the following Chapter we return to the question of inter-regional variations in the incidence of MAL.
Chapter III: Notes


2. Surendra Patel, Agricultural Labourers in Modern India and Pakistan (Current Book House, Bombay, 1952). We examine his arguments in Chapter IV.

3. Thus as recently as 1983, Utsa Patnaik would refer to Patel and say; "allowing for all problems of comparability of the Censuses, the trend of sharp increase is unmistakable and is repeated in every region of British India to varying degrees. The percentage of agricultural labourers in population supported by agriculture in British India nearly doubled to 25 per cent in 1901 compared to 13 per cent in 1891.... declining slightly to 22 per cent in 1911, then rising steadily thereafter to 30 per cent in 1931 ..." Utsa Patnaik, "On the Evolution of the class of Agricultural Labourers in India" Social Scientists, Vol.XI, No.7, 1983.p.7.


6. Krishnamurthy has compiled a series for present day India between 1901 and 1961. In this case he adopts a procedure for allocating 'general' labour which is different from that in Table 3.1 but similar to that discussed in Appendix I i.e. on a pro-rata basis among some sectors, of which agricultural labour is one. Below are his estimates of the share of agricultural labourers in the agricultural workforce (for males, in per cent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1911</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1931</th>
<th>1951</th>
<th>1961</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Alice Thorner, "How to use the 1961 Census working Force Data" Economic and Political Weekly Vol.1 No.12. The 1951 Census has been faulted on many grounds. Thus Daniel and Alice Thorner point to the use of a framework of economic classification which was inappropriate to Indian agriculture, which tended to exaggerate the number of owner-cultivators at the expense of tenant-cultivators.
and cultivating labourers. See their "Agrarian Revolution by Census Redefinition" and "Economic Concepts in the Census of India, 1951" reprinted in Land and Labour in India (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962). Krishnamurthy highlights the under-enumeration of earning dependents in that year (op.cit., p.26) and Nirmal Chandra points to the sharp fall in participation rates between 1931 and 1951 as suggestive of "flaws in enumeration". Nirmal Chandra, "Proletarianisation in Rural India?" (mimeographed, 1979).

8. In the 1950-51 Agricultural Labour Enquiry, agricultural labour families constituted 30.4% of all rural families. This is much higher than the incidence of all agricultural labourers in the workforce according to the 1951 Census. Differences in the definition may have contributed to part of this variation. In the ALE, an agricultural labourer family was one where the head of the household spent the major part of his working time in agricultural labour, while in the Census an agricultural labourer was a worker whose major part of income came from agricultural wages. In light of the succeeding estimates of the Labour Enquiries of 1956-57 and 1964-65, it is possible that the ALE estimate of 1950-51 was on the high side and the actual estimate may lie between that of the Census and the AIE.

9. It is also not clear that the sharp increase between 1921 and 1931 arose from changes in concept and definition. There was no such change between 1921 and 1931. The only difference between 1921 and 1931 was that in the latter year, the earlier 'workers' were split up into 'workers and working dependants', working dependants being unpaid family helpers. This bifurcation of the working population alone could have led to an increase in 1931 only on the argument that (a) it led to a confusion resulting in an undercount of 'working dependants' and therefore of the total workforce and (b) since there are few working dependants amongst agricultural labourers, there was an overestimation of the incidence of agricultural labour.

10. The very sharp increase between 1961 and 1971 in the incidence of male agricultural labour is present whether one compares the original estimates of 1961 and 1971 or the original 1961 with the adjusted 1971 estimates or the adjusted 1961 with the original 1971 estimates:
Incidence of Agricultural Labourers in the Rural Work Force:
1961-1971 (All India, males in per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Original</th>
<th>'Adjusted'</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


17. Computed from land holding data of NSS (8th Round).


23. See Krishna Bharadwaj, Production Conditions in Indian Agriculture (CUP, Cambridge, 1974).


27. Lenin, op.cit. p.584.


29. Needless to add the absence of any sharpening of land inequalities does not imply the absence of growing inequalities in income, asset or crop output. It is also obvious that inequalities based on `surface area' alone may not indicate the differences in intensity of cultivation and productivity, i.e. the scale of output, as suggested by Lenin, is the more relevant variable.


31. This article has generated considerable comment. The more relevant criticism are those relating to the statistical base of the comment made by Bhaduri et al. "Persistence and Polarisation: Comments", Journal of Peasant Studies, Vol.14 No.4 1987.

33. This hypothesis has not been concisely formulated any where. But elements of it can be found in the works of N. Krishnaji, Krishna Jharadwaj and Nirmal Chandra referred to above. See also N. Krishnaji, "Notes on Agrarian Structure and Family Formation", CDS Working Paper No.85" (Trivandrum, mimeographed, March 1979).

34. N. Krishnaji, op.cit.

35. A. Vaidyanathan, "Impact of Development on Rural Wage Labour in India" (Trivandrum, Mimeo, 1983) p.5.

36. One exception could be Kerala with its relatively greater success in conferring ownership rights on "hutment land".

37. Average annual income of agricultural labourer households with land and without land was Rs.1,591 and Rs.1,565 respectively, the corresponding household size 5.15 and 4.38 and per capita income Rs.309 and Rs.357.


40. Its occurrence is attested to in NSS data as analysed by Sanyal for Punjab and Haryana. In those two states while there was an increase in ownership holdings in the less than 1 acre class from 14% of the total (1954-55) to 41% (1961-62) and to 49% (1971-72), there was a fall in the proportion of operational holdings in this class from 11% (1954-55) to 4% (1971-72). Sanyal op.cit.