CHAPTER IX IMPACT OF CHANGES IN RURAL SOCIETY ON AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS

9.1 The two most important changes in rural society that have impinged on agricultural labourers since independence are land reforms and rural economic development. The rural economic development through agricultural and community development programmes and allied measures have led to creation of additional employment and income opportunities and led to transformation of social and economic life of the villages. It is maintained that as the rural development through changes in agrarian structure and community development would break up the traditional way of agricultural production and living of millions of people in the country-side, the agricultural labourers who constitute an important segment of the rural population would also be affected by these changes. It is by achieving rapid and intensive development in the rural areas as part of the process of economic development for the country as a whole that the landless sections of the population can be substantially benefited in the ultimate run.

9.2 Land reform programmes which are given a place of special significance in the Five Year Plans are to remove impediments in the way of agricultural production arising from the traditional character of agrarian structure and speedily create conditions of evolving an agrarian economy with high level of efficiency and productivity. The policy of land reforms seeks to remove all elements of exploitation and social injustice within the agrarian
system, to provide security for the tiller of soil and assure equality of status and opportunity to all sections of the rural population.1

With the objectives of transformation of agriculture, the programme of land reforms aims at creating conditions for evolving an agrarian economy with higher levels of efficiency and thereby benefit agricultural labourers and other underprivileged sections. The pattern of village development envisaged in the Five Year Plans "clearly assumes that the distinction within the village community between those who have land and those who are landless must disappear and there should be equality of status and opportunity." The resettlement of landless persons, land to the tillers, ceiling on land holding and the distribution of surplus land to the landless labourers, are the main proposals to benefit the agricultural labourers through land reform. As held by the Planning Commission, "To an extent when the proportion of agricultural workers who own some land increases, certain benefits in terms of social status and economic opportunity will, no doubt, accrue."2

9.3 The main constituents of the programmes of land reforms undertaken in the Five Year Plans in India are: abolition of intermediaries, tenancy reform, ceiling on land holdings and reorganisation of agriculture including consolidation of holdings, prevention of fragmentation and co-operative farming. In the

1. Third Five Year Plan, p. 220.
in an independence period, the Government of Assam
introduced two bills, one relating to abolition of intermediaries
and another relating to regulation of share-tenancy. A number
of land reform Acts enacted in Assam have been subject to
amendments from time to time in order to bring them in the line
with the all-India land reform policy. The important land reform
Acts enacted in Assam since independence are (1) The Assam
Adhiars Protection and Regulation Act, 1948, (2) The Assam State
Acquisition of Zamindaris Act, 1961, (3) The Assam Fixation of
Ceilings on Land Holdings Act, 1966, (4) The Assam State Acquisition
of Lands Belonging to Religious or Charitable Institution of
Public Nature Act, 1959 and (5) The Assam Consolidation of
Holdings Act, 1960.

The Assam State Acquisition of Zamindaris Act, 1961,
sought the elimination of intermediaries and establishment of
direct relation between the State and tenants, so as to simplify
the existing tenures of land by bringing the Zamindari land in
the line with the raiyatwari system to have a uniform revenue
administration all over the State as well as rise in the amount of
revenue to the government. An important step in the land reforms
from which the agricultural labourers can be directly benefited
is The Assam Fixation of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1956. This
Act which sought to impose a limit on the individual land holding
was to reduce the inequalities in the ownership and redistribute
the surplus land to the landless persons. Under the Fixation of
ceiling on Land Holdings Act, 1956, no person was entitled to
hold as owner or tenant lands beyond the limit of 150 bighas for all classes of land. The Act was amended in 1970 and the ceiling limit was reduced to 75 bighas.

9.4 The programme of land reforms has received country-wide importance in recent years both as an instrument of social justice and as an important factor for agricultural development and the Chief Ministers' Conference on various problems of land reforms in September, 1970, emphasised immediate implementation of existing legislation on ceiling on holdings and other programmes by different States.

But the land reform programmes which wanted to transform traditional agricultural production and to remove social inequalities and injustices have made very slow progress and the quantitative benefits of agricultural labourers from land reform programmes have not been up to expectation. Even the Bhoodan movement which also sought redistribution of land to the landless labourers with voluntary land gift movement, has not been successful to bring settlement of landless labourers though the movement brought initially prompt moral recognition.

The resettlement programme, however, has benefited the agricultural labourers though to a little extent, but in regard to other measures the gains of the labourers were too little to count. The abolition of Zamindari system has not made an end of


the ills by which the Zamindari system suffered as the exploitation of small cultivators by the Zamindars and their appointed officials and by jotedars has taken a new shape in the hands of non-cultivating land owners and government officials. The land reforms, on the other hand, have not provided provision to check the land hunger of non-cultivating owners, local money lenders, mahajans or big cultivators who by taking poor economic condition, debt obligation and other helpless condition of agricultural labourers try to get the labourers' land in their name.

The reform measures have not been able to remove social injustices and inequalities and even when Zamindari system was abolished, the Zamindars were allowed to retain a vast area under their possession permitting revenue free land of 50 bighas. This discriminating allowance against the landless cultivators and agricultural labourers could not help to bring an even distribution of land in the villages and, on the contrary, widened the gap between non-cultivating owners and poor peasants. In Assam where about 80 per cent of rural households own land below 5 acres including landless agricultural labourers it is unrealistic to fix a high ceiling limit which can cover only small proportion of the total cultivable land and of the rural households. It is, again, when the land reform measures were taking spearhead with socialist ideas, the case of eviction of small cultivators and agricultural labourers is not infrequent in the rural areas. The land reform

programmes of the Government have not been able to protect the interests of the agricultural labourers except to a little extent and the whole policy which was designed to make an end of feudal society and to bring the whole system in democratic line with even distribution and more justice to the underprivileged sections of society through suitable policy of land revenue, transfer of ownership, land to the landless, control of eviction, granting of house plots etc. has met with very poor progress. The programmes have not been able to minimise the uneven distribution of land and ownership of land is still concentrated in the hands of few persons in the villages. During the years since independence when the number of small holders was on an increase in the rural areas, the number of landless agricultural labour families also did not mark any declining trend despite government participation in resettling the landless labourers.

9.5 The problems of agricultural labourers are one of the grave problems of the rural economy but the development programmes of the rural economy can have significant impact upon them if the quantum of development is brought out in their favour.

The Community Development Programmes, initiated by the government in 1952, have included agricultural extension, development of animal husbandry, irrigation, reclamation, health and sanitation, education, communication, housing and rural arts, crafts and industry and the State with its present boundary has been covered by 130 Blocks

Along with Community Development, Panchayati Raj, set up as democratic and popular institution, is to enable the area to realise maximum development potential based on rural man-power and other resources.

A noteworthy change expected under the community-development and Panchayati Raj including agricultural development is creation of additional employment to absorb unemployed and under-employed agricultural labourers. But during the early years of planning no significant improvement of employment opportunities for agricultural labourers is marked and even there is sign of increasing unemployment and fall of non-agricultural employments.

The programme of creating wider employment opportunities in the rural areas has received special attention by the government during recent years and the special programmes relating Small Farmers' Development Agencies, Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labour Projects, Rural Works Programme and Crash Programme for Rural Employment are to enlarge employment opportunities to the advantage of underemployed and unemployed persons. But the employment opportunities due to these various schemes are only occasional and very low in the context of large labour force in the rural areas and these give only some relief to the agricultural labourers. Thus, though some provision of employment for the rural people has been increased by the changes brought up in the rural society due to the programme of economic development, the problem of employment of


agricultural labourers has remained as yet acute and unresolved and there has been no basic change towards ensuring security of employment regularly throughout the year.

9.7 The development of agriculture has a direct bearing upon its labourers as levels of employment and wages tend to rise over the period. The Intensive Agricultural District Programme in Cachar and new agricultural technique undertaken with irrigation, chemical fertilisers, high yielding varieties and double and multiple cropping have led to higher level of employment in agriculture. But as the application of new agricultural technology has not made much headway and it takes fairly long time for the effect of such change to work itself out, employment of labourers on land has not risen, especially in the context of overwhelmingly dominating traditional technique, still being the rule of agricultural production. Even under planned economic development with higher emphasis on agricultural development, there has not been structural change in agricultural production and the individual farmers have responded inadequately to the new changes of technique and as the farms providing employment have practically little scope to grow bigger in sizes, the increase in employment brought up by the extension of agricultural development has been very insignificant in relation to growing labour force in the rural economy.

9.8 The inadequate provision for employment in the context of overabundant supply of rural labourers has, thus, created only limited scope of earnings and the level of real incomes of
agricultural labourers who mostly depend on agricultural and non-agricultural wage employment has not risen. The rise in level of money wages and incomes has not been commensurate with rising price index of consumer goods and consequently the real incomes of the labourers have come down. It is, however, logical to maintain that the developmental spending and wages in the rural programmes have influenced the wage rates of agricultural labourers, both in agricultural and non-agricultural private employments. But it cannot also be denied that whatever improvement in employment and wages has been made so far, it has largely been the result of rural developmental programmes in uplifting the living condition of rural society.

9.9 The social and economic changes, brought up in the rural areas during more than two decades of planned development, have paved the way for enriching the rural life and the benefits, which the rural society has reaped through these changes, have been from a tradition-bound backward agricultural economy striving to search for higher productivity, higher level of living, social justice and welfare.

As an integral part of the Community Development Programmes, the number of drinking water wells constructed and wells and tanks renovated stood at 10,858 and 17,888 respectively in the Second Plan, 12,959 and 32,231 in the Third Plan, 841 and 961 for 100 reporting blocks in 1967-68, 669 and 1387 for 103 reporting blocks in 1968-69, 1034 and 1661 for 134 reporting blocks in 1969-70 and 867 and 1398 for
129 reporting blocks in 1970-71. For social education, 1,705 literacy centres were started and 48,758 adults were made literate during the First Plan, but their respective numbers were 5,688 and 1,00,423 in the Second Plan, 7,453 and 1,74,918 in the Third Plan and with the usual number of blocks reporting in the respective years 1,768 literacy centres were started and 32,330 adults were made literate in 1967-68, 1,429 and 30,488 in 1968-69, 1,314 and 30,822 in 1969-70 and 788 and 24,619 in 1970-71. In the development of rural communication, 'new kacha roads constructed' and 'existing kacha roads improved' covered 8,383 Kilometres during First Plan, 16,645 Kilometres during Second Plan, 28,729 Kilometres during Third Plan, 2,620 Kilometres in 1967-68, 2,119 Kilometres in 1968-69, 3,740 Kilometres in 1969-70 and 3,654 Kilometres in 1970-71.

The achievements through these developmental and welfare activities and also through agricultural and rural industrial activities, however, great or small, have, to an extent, improved rural environment in which the agricultural labourers are acclimatised to live in. But it can be maintained that even if the villages of Assam are believed to have achieved significant benefit in different spheres of development and welfare, these cannot ensure higher level of consumption and living to agricultural

10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
labourers as this is conditioned by how much higher wage employment and other scope of earnings are secured for them. It appears that agricultural labourers particularly the landless labourers who form the poorest section in the rural labour force and who belong mainly to backward classes, have shared little the gains of development. While delivering Speech at the Inaugural Session of the National Commission on Labour, the Union Labour Minister candidly admitted:

"When I was first called upon to take up the labour portfolio, I went to Gandhiji for his blessings and his instruction to me was to take good care of those workers who were the most neglected, I cannot forget that I have not been able to carry out his desire. Much has been done to change life in the country-side. I can give a whole list of measures culminating in the experiment of the Community Development and Panchayati Raj. But the fact remains that the impact has not been very visible so far as landless agricultural labour or small farmers are concerned." 12

It has, thus, been maintained that while some people were "undoubtedly benefiting from the development programme and improving their economic and social condition," they usually belonged "to those sections in the village who were already somewhat better off than their fellow villagers." 13 "The basic aim of the community development programme, whatever the approach may be, is to lift up the rural masses particularly the weaker sections from their time


old moribund economic conditions." There is, however, "very little to show by way of any perceptible impact of plans in raising the levels of this section." The Report of the Study Group on the Welfare of the Weaker sections of the village Community (1961) went to document the failure of all ameliorative policies to reach the poorer people in the Indian villages and quoted from the evaluation reports and other pertinent studies to demonstrate that "the weaker sections have not benefited sufficiently from the community development programmes." The agricultural labourers, the disadvantaged section in the rural community, have, thus, been very little benefited by the changes brought out by the development programmes since independence.

Thus, admitting the fact that land reforms, agricultural development and community development programmes have attempted to develop a new outlook and higher living of the rural people with the task of realising a more productive rural economy, these have not been able to promote the living condition of the labourers with very low income from land employment and other rural manual labour


employing. The level of their consumption has not increased; it has, rather, shown sign of decline inspite of the fact that their money income has increased and the production of consumption goods, particularly manufacturing goods, necessary for improving the condition of living has been continuously rising in the country. Thus, though the supply of semi-luxury consumption goods necessary for modern living has been increasing in the economy including the rural markets since independence, but the agricultural labourers cannot afford to consume them. The fact is that when the Indian economy is producing numerous goods for consumption, in the rural economy the labourers in the primary sector are even curtailing the consumption of their food, clothes and other essential articles. This is mainly due to the effect of rising prices of food and other consumption goods and of increasing income and consumption expenditure gap on their living. Thus, though the economic development has been producing its effects upon the rural people, the agricultural labour families in Assam are still struggling hard for the basic need of maintaining the minimum of food for consumption. When more than two decades of planning have passed over the economy, the condition of food of agricultural labourers, their dresses, houses and other requisites of life have not shown sign of significant improvement and agricultural labourers still constitute a vast unorganised, illiterate and unskilled manual labour force surrounded by the acute problems of unemployment, low wages and income, poverty and indebtedness and other socio-economic hardships.

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