CHAPTER X: PROGRAMMES FOR ACTION

10.1 The agricultural labourers who are landless or at best owners of tiny plots of land and fastly accelerating in number in the villages of Assam with a variety of problems around them need to be treated pragmatically and a comprehensive programme designed to ameliorate their living conditions and protecting them from growing economic insecurity, social neglect and exploitation is as such urgently needed to make good the loss in the shortest possible time. The loss that is experienced over the period can be counted by the fact that "programmes and developments envisaged so far fall far short of the requirements and the situation is gradually developing into an emergency, needing treatment on that scale." ¹

The widespread unemployment and underemployment, causing birth to their abject poverty and consequent incredibly low consumption, accompanied with ever rising burden of indebtedness, especially as a result of rising cost of living that poses a serious menace even to their bare subsistence, deserve careful and effective handling particularly through direct rural works programmes having much bearing on them in the ultimate run.² It can be asserted that the staggering poverty, ignorance, illiteracy, exploitation, disease, lethargy and traditional view of living and other related ills of this section in the lowest rung of the rural society and accumulated arrears of negligence over the decades in this direction must not continue and this section of rural labourers must be brought out in the process of rapid social changes which are to be accelerated and reoriented by modern science and technology.

¹ Report of the National Commission on Labour, p. 399.
² Ibid.
10.2 In a backward agricultural rural economy as in Assam, there is always wastage and inadequate utilisation of man-power, but in a planned economy the utilisation of idle man-power with adequate education and training in more productive field is essential even apart from the employment aspect of the labourers. It has been found that the backward agricultural economies are gifted with surplus man-power but there is equally the large scale waste of human resources in the absence of mobilisation of the resources to the higher productive field and as such with overcrowding of human resources agriculture is over-burdened, a productive and low income generating sector, being resistant to new changes of technique of production. But in order to ensure that agriculture becomes a profitable occupation rather than a mere way of living, excessive dependence of population on it will have to be done away along with adoption of sound strategy for its development. It would inevitably mean development of industrial and other sectors to absorb the surplus man-power of agriculture.

In the light of experience gathered from the history of developed countries as well as the magnitude of the problem in the backward agricultural economies as in Assam, it can be asserted that the ultimate solution of employment and agricultural development with high productivity and wages rests in large scale industrial development, both in rural and urban sectors. But it is also to be contended that the growth of population with the increasing birth rate in the poverty-stricken agricultural labour families cannot be set free as in the present situation and the birth rate in the agricultural labour families must be effectively
curbed through propagation of the family planning programme.\textsuperscript{3} This would greatly relieve the families from bearing the additional burden of maintenance of living of the new comers as well as low consumption per capita. The uncontrolled growth of agricultural population, particularly of agricultural labourers in the rural areas, has been aggravating the problem of unemployment and underemployment, low income and low consumption, illiteracy and ill health and so on. If the sizes of the agricultural labour families are brought to a reasonable minimum, not only the agricultural labour families would get lesser burden of increasing population but both the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors would be greatly relieved of the additional pressure of unemployed.

10.3 As the agricultural labourers have no dependable source of employment except agriculture which is also being overcrowded with the growth of population and overabundant supply of labourers, the problem of agricultural labourers ultimately is a part of the wider problem of unemployment and underemployment in the rural areas. The provision of regular employment with minimum wages can, to a great extent, solve the problem of agricultural labourers since any step to better the condition of those labourers would be to improve their economic condition\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{3} "...a country's low level of living cannot be substantially raised unless the birth rate is reduced because the new arrivals consume the increased production leaving the community with its old low standard of living despite increased population" (Chandrasekhar, S., "India's Population, Fact, Problem and Policy", A I C C Economic Review, January 1, 1967, vol. 18, No. 12, p. 144).

It is to be pointed out that solution of problem of employment of agricultural labourers must be sought primarily in agriculture itself. It implies that "a break-through in agricultural technology leading to higher productivity per acre and per worker through intensification of farming is a precondition for dealing with the problem of agricultural employment at increasing levels of earnings." It has been found that in areas "where the farmers have chosen to take advantage of new agricultural inputs, agricultural labour has been provided with work more or less throughout the year." The new technology with irrigation, flood control, fertilisers, high yielding varieties of seeds, double and multiple cropping and use of light machines and tools are highly labour intensive as compared to the labour-saving technology. The development of agriculture with labour-intensive technique is desirable so long as agriculture remains an unavoidable means of livelihood of a larger section of rural population and so long as other sectors do not assure employment of agricultural workers out of employment due to introduction of more advanced technology in agriculture. In the context of heavy pressure of population in agriculture, the problem of unemployment can be seriously aggravated by labour saving devices and as such despite the argument of

7. Ibid., p. 396.
mechanisation for high productivity and wages and radical change towards science and technology, labour intensive-technique is suitable to the case of overcrowded agriculture in Assam. It is, however, to be maintained that it is not possible to provide all labourers with agricultural employment even if labour-intensive technique is developed unless the non-agricultural employment sources rapidly develop in the rural and urban areas to facilitate transfer of agricultural population.

10.4 As non-agricultural employment opportunities are imperative to relieve agriculture from overcrowding and provide employment to unemployed and underemployed agricultural labourers, it will ultimately mean large scale industrial expansion in the rural and urban sector. Assam has considerable industrial potential and as the State is rich both in agricultural and forest wealth, a number of resource-based industries can be started in the rural areas. Among the industries which have necessary scope to develop in the State, a few of them are Silk Industry, Sugar Mill, Pulp and Paper Mill, Cement Industry, Rice, Flour and Oil milling, Fruit cultivation and Canning Industry, Dairying unit and Fisheries etc. For the development of agro-based and other small and village industries the State's role has to be bold and as suggested by The National Council of Applied Economic Research, to "attract private capital, some compensation for the disadvantages of location, concessions on local taxes and subsidies on power and water rates are essential." It needs to be noted here that the employment

aspect must also be an important condition of these industries, apart from their income yielding capacity and scope of their future expansion. On the other hand, to bring change of outlook of the rural people towards industrial production, it is necessary to extend adequate training facilities and demonstrate new scope of employment and earning by putting up a number of establishments preferably along-with the training centres.

10.5 It may be contended that the problems of agricultural labourers cannot be strictly isolated from the broader problems of rural economy and as the agricultural labourers are also partly share-croppers, contract labourers and manual day-labourers, generally 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 section of the population can be substantially benefited." 10

But the experience of the decades of planned development reveals that the rural economic development has benefited mostly the contractors, rich farmers, petty beuracrats and has enriched the rural oligarchy instead of reducing poverty of the poorest. 11 It can, thus, be maintained that the programmes of development of the rural economy "must be supplemented in the several directions by special measures for assisting agricultural labourers." 12

10. Third Five Year Plan, p. 376.


10.6 As industrial development will take time and as all the agricultural labourers, who are also manual labourers, cannot be assured of full time regular employment in agriculture and in industry and other sectors, the Work Guarantee Scheme as the special measure of the unemployed and underemployed labourers has great merit since it provides security of employment and distributes the rural works among the unemployeds with a fixed minimum wage. In this context, it can be pointed out that only the pumping of money into the rural areas cannot build up the employment base unless the projects are made continuous income-yielding and funds are economically and properly utilised. It has been found by experience that leakage of fund due to corruption is common in rural development expenditures or uneconomic and non-income-yielding spending on local projects is swallowed by the rural richer sections. In these circumstances, in all cases it requires efficient management and implementation of the programmes and a special cell is suggested to be created at the State, District and Block levels to watch closely the progress of development programmes and execution of the Work Guarantee Scheme. On the otherhand, the section of the rural population which is landless and unemployed and which depends on wage employment for livelihood must be organised into militant union 
"to demand that project funds and benefits really reach the poorest and are not swallowed by the contractors, rich farmers and petty bureaucrats through whom they are channelled." The labourers' union which will be represented by the number of persons seeking employment

can be closely associated with the Work Guarantee Scheme which, in turn, will ensure work for those who report for work for a full day. The special cell will have to function to explore the possibility for new work projects and direct the unskilled or skilled rural unemployeds, particularly the unemployed agricultural labourers either through regular employment or preparation of master roll for work guarantee scheme.

10.7 The absence of operation and non-revision of statutory wage rates according to consumer price index has opened the way for large scale exploitation of labourers who have weak bargaining power. The wages in the rural areas are subject to wide variations, depending on peculiar traditional village systems, payments in kind, debt obligation, seasonal production and overabundant supply of labourers against low work opportunities. The wage rates which do not go in favour of agricultural labourers must be replaced by statutory uniform rates covering the minimum consumption need of the labourers. The legislative fixation of minimum wages is of great importance to reduce exploitation of labourers associated with individual fixation of wage rates and thereby ensure minimum consumption to labour families in all areas.

But only the fixation of minimum wages is of no significance unless minima fixed are effectively implemented and periodically adjusted to the changes in consumer price index. The fixation of minimum wages for agricultural labourers has so far been found to be ineffective and impracticable because of their periodical non-adjustment with the cost of living and conspicuous absence of implementing machinery. This must no more be allowed to
continue if minimum level of living of the labour families and removal of exploitation are aimed at. It is, of course, true that the system of kind payment cannot be ruled out in the rural areas which have not been still completely monetised but the kind wages can be fixed by the machinery dealing with implementation of minimum wages.

10.8 In implementing minimum wages, the special cell dealing employment programme can be given the responsibility to see that in no case the labourers get below their statutory minimum. In suggesting implementation of minimum wages of agricultural labourers, the National Commission on Labour argued for Village Panchayats to the task of implementation of minimum wage act. But it is to be pointed out that the Commission itself referred to the objection which is levelled against this suggestion that "the enforcement machinery of the local bodies is exposed to pressure from the elected wing in the local bodies which derive support from employers against whom legislation is enforced. The same situation is likely to arise if Panchayats are left to deal with the implementation of the Act." 14

Though the National Commission on Labour did not give weight to this argument the experiences from the achievements of Panchayats in Assam provide a gloomy picture since labour interest is little reflected in the elected bodies of the Panchayats. Moreover, the elected representatives of Panchayats belong to the relatively well-to-do section. These rural well-to-do people who have been exploiting the share-croppers for long time despite

legislative measure conferring protection to share-croppers, it is doubtful that they would favour enforcement of higher statutory wages against their own interest. It is, however, to be noted that in the rural areas where there are diverse ways of payments, advances, individual contract of employments and wages and debt obligations, it is only through the local bodies that these barriers in implementing an uniform rate can be greatly overcome. It is, thus, to be suggested that both the employment cell for rural employment and wages and the village Panchayats which are the democratic institutions, however the rural richer sections dominate, can be given the responsibility to watch the minimum wages implemented. But, above all, the organisation of labourers is to be strengthened to realise their statutory minimum. When the labourers get themselves organised, many of the evils of employment, wages and debts can be greatly reduced.

10.9 As the higher consumption and level of living are broadly linked with increasing level of income, it is with the increase of earnings of labour families that their level of consumption and living can be raised. Since independence though there has been rise in money wage rates and labour earnings, the standard of consumption of labour families has in general declined rather than recorded any upward movement. The factors which may be ascribed to it are: (i) acceleration in growth rate of population of the labour families and (ii) sharp rise in prices of essential goods outstripping growth in money earnings. The labourers while experiencing irregular income due to irregular employment and higher prices of food and other consumption goods do not only remain
in indebtedness throughout their life but also accentuate financial difficulty from generation to generation. The problem of galloping inflation has become so acute in the present time that it needs immediate price relief measures in the rural areas and as such a piecemeal solution cannot go a long way in resolving the difficulties of ever growing scarcity and consequent shooting up of prices of goods. The Government should establish fair price shops or co-operatives in each village, in order to ensure satisfactory minimum consumption requirements of the agricultural labour families.

10.10 The agricultural labourers mostly belong to the backward castes and because of very low economic and social status are being neglected and exploited by upper caste sections and are ultimately subjected to low status complexity in the rural society. As soon as State takes up responsibility to ameliorate their conditions through taking economic measures relating to employment, wages and consumption, their social status will, as believed, go up. But this section of rural society, so far suffering due to ignorance, illiteracy, lethargy and backward village psychology, must be provided with educative welfare and social security measures. In this regard, it will have to be confessed that only some common economic measures will not serve the purpose of protecting these people from poverty, indebtedness, exploitation and economic insecurity unless the State comes forward to guarantee full extent of economic and social security to them. For this the State should introduce necessary legislative measures so that even though they are labourers in primary sector or in rural projects, they are in no way less benefited
due to social security and welfare measures as compared to labourers in industrial and other sectors.

It can, thus, be added that apart from measures relating to employment, wages and consumption, necessary conditions must be so created that labourers overcome illiteracy, ignorance, lethargy and traditional village psychology. The extension of compulsory free education and training with modern knowledge of science of technology has undoubtedly much relevance in this regard. Education and training can build up skill and improve efficiency in utilising man-power resources in a planned economy. Further, it is necessary to ensure that the Government provides for nutritious food and extends facilities for sanitation as well as makes available medicines and other necessary vitamins, calcium and minerals for promoting health of members of agricultural labour families. Here it may be suggested that the applied nutrition programme of the Government of Assam must be extended throughout the rural areas to benefit the ill-fed and ill-clad children of labour families and the offices dealing with this programme must be given proper direction. It may also be well contended that Unemployment Insurance and Invalidity Insurance Schemes have great significance in providing security to the labourers and these schemes may be well introduced on the principle of social insurance.

Every year natural calamities like flood or drought do cause considerable misery to the people, particularly to this poorest section of the rural society in various ways. Though the Government has been spending
large amount of money for flood relief measures,\(^{15}\) necessary care must be exercised to ensure that the benefits of flood relief measures quickly reach them.

It may also be suggested that as a greater proportion of agricultural labour families is landless, necessary measures be taken to ensure that they are resettled at the earliest with allotment of a plot of land, however small it may be. It may as well be asserted that agricultural labourers' welfare cannot be achieved if they are not assured of a house to live in. For this, apart from allotting house plots to those who do not possess a house-site, technical assistance alongwith necessary materials for the purpose will have to be assured to them on reasonable terms.

To protect the labourers against chronic indebtedness not only debt relief measures are of urgent and immediate necessity but also cheap credit facilities have to be provided to them with provision for proper administration to look after their utilisation in productive fields. The labour families must be well protected from the clutches of village lenders and mahajans and the co-operative stores or ration shops

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\(^{15}\) An amount of Rs.24.39 crores has been provided for flood control works in the Fourth Five Year Plan in Assam. Of this, Rs.19.89 crores is meant for the Brahmaputra Valley and Rs. 4.50 crores for the Barak Valley (Economic Survey, Assam, 1972, p. 28).
or Government stores need to be directed to provide essential consumption goods to those who are properly certified by the Special Cell dealing with Work Guarantee Scheme or local project employment scheme of the labourers with their branches at Block level, as a special measure when the labourers due to sickness or other difficulties or due to non-availability of work, remain unemployed and do not get wages.

10.12 The increase in income as a means for higher consumption and better standard of living, can be brought about, apart from higher wage earnings, by creating suitable conditions for self employment of the labourers. A self employment programme may be compulsorily introduced according to the choice and suitability of the family and Government should provide for the purpose adequate finances, technical assistance and other essentials. It is needless to point out here that this self-employment programme will have to be considered as a supplementary source of earnings for the families and a family unit can take up even two or more of such programme which will include small poultry farming, livestock, vegetable and fruit growing, bee-keeping, weaving, fishing, bamboo and cane making etc. Though the Government has also shown interest to the development of the household industries, this has not led to desired impact on the agricultural labour and other rural households
and, moreover, the successful implementation of the programme need adequate arrangements including easy marketing of the household products. Necessary conditions have also to be developed to ensure that agricultural labourers accord due importance to the programme. Mere voluntary provision and arrangements of assistance, which the labourers in most cases do not even know, cannot induce the labourers to undertake such programmes unless they are made compulsory along-with the required assistance supplied to them.

10.13 The successful implementation of the measures for uplifting the agricultural labourers from the depth of poverty and backwardness can only build up the basis for the society aiming at socialist goals. The prosperity of the agrarian economy cannot be attained without creating conditions necessary to cause prosperity of its poorest dependants. It is after more than two and a half decades of economic planning that the labourers in the lowest social stratum being rapidly growing in the country-side regard themselves to be destitute in the rural economy. The problem of this class of people has reached to such an alarming stage that they are now in appalling economic condition with constant strive to survive. There are sufficient facts to reason that the planned development activities, though have widened the investment programme for various developments and welfare of the economy, have not been able to change the lot of this neglected rural class of labourers who are unorganised and have not been able to raise their voice so far even when they belong to the sector which is the mainstay of the State's economy. It is high time for the Government to prepare
comprehensive scheme for agricultural labourers with effective machinery to implement it. True that over the period since independence, the Government has undertaken certain measures like fixation of minimum wages, resettlement of landless labourers, rural works programme, the crash programme for employment and scheme for marginal farmers and agricultural labourers etc. They, however, by and large failed to bring about necessary changes in the economic condition of the labourers. It is, of course, not the case in regard to programmes for agricultural labourers alone, but even for rural development programmes as well what were proposed by the Government could not have been so far realised and this failure has primarily been due to the fact that there has been a wide gap between words and deeds. What has been tragically happening is that money is spent mostly in haphazard way without considering much of its yields and benefits and a larger share of investment is being swallowed by corrupt officials, contractors and other well-to-do persons concerned. If this is allowed to be real and sad state of affairs, no positive benefit can be even dreamt of for the agricultural labourers. But if the measures are well streamlined and if the officials for the execution of the programmes are held responsible for any wrongful spending, corruption and uneconomic and less
beneficial projects, it may go a long way in improving
upon economic condition of agricultural labourers.
3. Map of Assam showing the location of the villages surveyed

Villages surveyed:
- Kavastha Para (north) ①
- Ranguli Mahajan Para ②
- Beltola ③
- Khandikar ④
- Kashtilla ⑤
- North Kalachup ⑥
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