Like other parts of India, Assam ushered into a new era of plan and prosperity with the dawn of political freedom on August 15, 1947. The independence bloomed with fragrance of new hopes and aspirations of the people, particularly of those disadvantaged and poorer sections who were the champions of Indian agriculture for long time. Their socio-economic transformation with the development of economy was considered imperative and the spectacular feature of economic life of the country in the post-independence period has, thus, been marked by a series of development plans with fuller assurance of higher standard of living of these people. When freedom was considered as the indispensable means to overcome mass poverty, protect the farmer and artisan, create modern industry, remove privilege and injustice and reconstruct the entire fabric of India's social and economic life, economic planning was an organised effort to achieve these ends.

Situated in the north-east corner of the country and surrounded by a number of small States and Union Territories, Assam forms the core of the north-eastern part of the country. The State enjoys copious rainfall and high fertility of soil and a vast plains area of the State is dominated by the river Brahmaputra and Barak-Kusiara, preparing a fertile land for agricultural activity in the Brahmaputra Valley in the north and the Barak-Kusiara Valley in the south. Agriculture has, as such, been the way of life of the overwhelming size of
population of Assam for a long time. But the pressure of population was not marked on agriculture till the third decade of the present century. It is, again, in the post-independence period that the pressure of population has been greatly marked in the economy with overcrowding of agriculture.

The faster rate of growth of agricultural labour is, thus, a post-independence phenomenon in the agrarian economy of Assam. During the period since independence the State has been experiencing a rapidly growing floating labour force in agriculture, a major proportion (above 60 per cent) of which is landless leaving the rest to holding of tiny bits of land. As agriculture is still a traditional form of economic activity of the people of rural Assam, its labourers also get their employments, terms and conditions of works and wages largely dominated by this traditional pattern of agricultural production.

The problems of agricultural labourers, a distinct economic class in the lowest economic stratum, have drawn sympathetic attention since the beginning of planning in India. The Planning Commission in India expressed their anxiety about the gravity of the problem confronting agricultural labourers. To quote it: "In the past, not enough attention has been given to the problem of agricultural workers and information concerning the conditions under which they live and work has been extremely meagre". The First Socio-economic enquiry (1950-51) which highlighted the problem of employment, wages, income, cost and level of living and indebtedness could help to draw attention
to the significance of agricultural workers in the country's future development and its results were likely to be of material assistance in drawing up programmes for agricultural workers. While formulating the Second Five Year Plan, the Planning Commission visualised appropriately the complex problem of agricultural labourers in regard to employment, income, consumption and standard of living and their landlessness, when it contended that "increase in agricultural production, expansion of economic opportunities redistribution of land and the provision of social ceremonies for agricultural workers are seen as aspects of an integrated approach to basic problem of poverty." The Second agricultural Labour Enquiry (1956-57) after a detailed study of problems of agricultural labourers in the country maintained: "While it is possible to improve conditions of agricultural labourers by increasing agricultural efficiency, eliminating exploitative factors and creating employment opportunities by large-scale industrial development and rehabilitation of rural industries, which are being effectively attempted under the Five Year Plans, the fundamental characteristics like seasonal and intermittent employment, various modes of wage payment, employment contracts of attached workers and migratory character of agricultural labour are likely to continue since they are inherent in the condition of crop production? It is, of course, true that the concepts in the two Agricultural Labour Enquiries were different and the data have not been wholly comparable. But what both Enquiries could bring out was the enormous magnitude of the
problem, the widespread underemployment that existed, and the fact that increase in population had borne harshly on this section of the population.

In course of advancement of economic planning in the country when a new progressive idea of social transformation towards socialist goals was taken up in shaping programmes of Five Year Plans, the importance of awakening of this class of people from economic poverty and social neglect received one of prime considerations in economic planning. While emphasising the special ameliorative measures for agricultural labourers, the Third Five Year Plan maintained, "It has, however, been always realised that the various programmes for the development of the rural economy, which are undertaken in the interest of the rural population as a whole, must be supplemented in several directions by special measures for assisting agricultural labourers in improving their living conditions and obtaining a fair share of the wider opportunities which are now being developed in the villages through the community development and other programmes." The Plan, however, put emphasis on intensive rural development as an ultimate solution of the problem of agricultural labourers: "It is apparent from the experience of the first two Plans that while special schemes in the interest of agricultural labourers are useful, they can touch only the fringe of the problem. Ultimately, 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." Viewing the problem in the light of the achievements of the Five Year Plans in this direction, the National Commission on Labour (1969) held, "It is not necessary for us to present data on the extent of chronic under-employment and poor living conditions of agricultural labourers. The magnitude and gravity of this problem are obvious even without precise statistics. What needs to be stressed is that programmes and development envisaged so far fall far short of requirements and the situation is gradually developing into an emergency needing treatment on that scale." The Commission further observed, "We believe that there cannot be a uni-linear approach for improving conditions of agricultural labour. Remedies lie in bringing about fundamental changes in the agrarian structure and social relationship. Economic growth and more especially the location of industry in smaller centres and in rural areas, is a recognised remedy, though it is essentially a long term one."

While various measures undertaken to ameliorate the condition of agricultural labourers as a part of the programme of rural development have touched only the fringe of the problem, the growth of agricultural labourers, on the otherhand, has been continuing at a faster rate. Not only agricultural labourers are rapidly growing in the country-side, they are growing inheriting poverty, indebtedness, illiteracy, ill-health with more appalling condition of their living. As against high price and swiftly growing cost of living these labourers seem to have no scope of increasing their income under the present rural condition and this throws only a dim prospect on the future
achievements of our Five Year plans in the light of the past experiences, unless a radical change is brought out on that scale. Our approach is that despite distinct feature of agriculture as distinguished with industry, its labourers must not be left on their own destiny, they must be uplifted from the chronic state of poverty and the agricultural sector must be relieved of growing overcrowding. For this not only intensive development of rural economy is necessary but development of industrial sector in rural, semi-urban and urban areas with special employment schemes for the rural labourers will be imperative. It is our firm conviction that the planned efforts which have benefited only a smaller section in the rural society must reach the labourers in the lowest social and economic stratum and in this regard not only the programmes but the implementation of them must receive supreme importance and consideration.

The present study of problems of agricultural labourers in Assam is the outcome of my considerable experience about the working and living condition of these toiling and poverty-stricken labour class. I was very much moved by the appalling poverty and social neglect in which they live in the villages. It caused me anxiety to be well acquainted with the living condition of these people since the early days of my school education. Being brought up in a village, I was in a very much privileged position to know these people from very close quarters.

The problem of agricultural labourers rooted deeply into the agrarian system, has so far not been adequately probed
into. With the experience of Five Year Plans, it is, however, essential to study the gains which are supposed to have accrued to them in respect of employment, wages, level of consumption and overall living conditions. This present work of the problems of agricultural labourers is, as such, a type of pioneering work on the problem of this agrarian labour force in the light of hopes and promises of Five Year Plans.

While probing into the problems of agricultural labourers in Assam, it appears that they are of very serious dimensions deeply related to the economic poverty, generated in the backward agricultural sector as well as the entire economy of Assam with tradition and custom still ruling the rural life and agricultural production. However, an effort has been made to study those aspects of the problems that a labourer experiences in his employment, wages and some other fields which he is closely attached in his living. Problem of agricultural labourers have their own peculiarities as against those of industrial and other labourers. But what the labourers expect in a growing economy is adequate employment and wages and protection against such disabilities like low consumption, indebtedness, illiteracy and impoverishment etc.

It has been found that the development programme in the Five Year Plans has almost bypassed the problems of agricultural labour. Not only there is ever growing labour force in agriculture but they are growing with landlessness, unemployment and under-employment, low real earnings and consumption and, consequently, with constant poverty and
indebtedness. Though rural development through agricultural and community development was to affect favourably the labourers also, in reality their problems of unemployment and under-employment, wages and earnings, level of consumption and overall living have been greatly exposed with the passing of every period of development plans.

But though attempt has been made to throw light on different aspects of agricultural labour in Assam, the limitation of availability of data has been realised in all cases because of relative neglect of studies made so far in this sphere. Despite growing interest on the part of the Government towards ameliorating the condition of agricultural labourers, only a few studies could be made during more than two and a half decades of economic development in the country. However, I do acknowledge with due thanks necessary assistance provided to me by various libraries in and outside the State. I have at times drawn freely the data incorporated in different Government publications and reports of various bodies. My sincere thanks are also due to authors whose works have been quoted now and then. Apart from the aforesaid sources, village surveys and individual contacts with the labourers and other people in the villages on different occasions have helped me considerably in prosecution of my present research programme as they proved to be very fruitful in the sense that they have gone a long way in analysing different aspects of problems of agricultural labourers in their work and living, objectively.

The present work is the result of thorough guidance of
Dr. S. N. Mehrotra, M.Com, Ph.D., who has been the constant source of inspiration to me throughout the period of research. Without his valuable comments and suggestions as well as constant encouragement, the work would not have been completed. I, therefore, express my sincerest gratitude to him.

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