CHAPTER II NATURE AND MAGNITUDE OF AGRICULTURAL LABOUR

2.1. One of the most disquieting features of post-independent rural economy of Assam is the growth in the number of agricultural labourers. The presence of agricultural labourers is not peculiar to Assam or to the Indian situation in the post-independence period. In fact, in the pre-independence period also, the Indian economy as a whole experienced an increase in the number of agricultural labourers and such labourers constituted an important group of wage earners in the country.1

It is, however, difficult to assess the exact situation of agricultural labour in India in the pre-British period because of lack of "precise information on the extent of agricultural labour hired for the purposes of farming"2 and it can be said that "the problem of agricultural labour was a phenomenon of the period of the British rule in India."3 It has been observed that the agrarian society of pre-nineteenth century India, constituting of self-sufficient and self-perpetuating

2. "From a study of the economic conditions in pre-British India, it can be safely concluded that agricultural labourers did not constitute an element of the agrarian society" (Nanavati, M.B. and Anjaria, J.J. : The Indian Rural Problem, 1965, footnote, p 463).
3. Ibid. p 464
village communities was founded on the integrated unity of agriculture and handicrafts and "there was no room for the existence of an independent and distinct class of agricultural labourers whose main source of livelihood was work on the land of others for which they received compensation in kind or cash."  

Although agricultural labour as constituting the main occupation for a sizable group of population began to form an important element in the agrarian economy in the pre-independent British India, the possibility of existence of element of labour employment on land in the pre-British period, however, cannot be wholly ruled out. But the existence of a sizable section of landless labourers could not be visualised before the middle of the nineteenth century as the landless peasants in India were not even considered for statistical measurement.  


5. The inequality in the distribution of holdings, the presence of upper caste sections with large holdings and the existence of landless persons and tiny holders constituting an important element of rural agrarian economy of India, mark the possibility of the existence of a section of rural people earning income for livelihood from cultivating others' land. The nature of employment or contract could, however, differ and instead of cash wage employment, kind wage employment could have been the standing rule or there could be share cropping system or contractual cultivation.  

6. According to Romesh Chandra Dutt (India Today, 1947, p 198), it is not correct to say that there were no landless peasants in India during early middle part of the nineteenth century but the fact was that the numbers were not of much consideration for statistical measurement.
labourers had just started to grow, it formed hardly 10 per cent of the total rural population. The almost absence of a distinct class of agricultural wage earners or the presence of only a small number of persons in the villages maintaining livelihood through cultivating others' land in the early part of the British rule or in the pre-British period as it could have been, was perhaps due to the existing self-sufficient village economy with traditional village and non-agricultural occupational classes, simple mode of living and low consumption need of the rural people, non-monetisation of the closed village economy and little requirement of price-exchanged commodities and absence of overcrowding on land.

The emergence of a class of landless labourers from the closing decades of the nineteenth century showed that the labourers numbered 7.5 million in 1881, 18.7 million in 1891 and 17.26 million in 1901, but their growth was so rapid that they stood at about 33 million in 1931 and while during the closing decades of the nineteenth century they formed not more than 10 per cent of the total rural population, within 50 years of the period 1901 to 1951 they constituted more than 30 per cent of the total rural population.


8. The rapid increase in the number of agricultural labourers during the period was perhaps due to the fact that a large increase had taken place in the agricultural population without a corresponding increase in their holding of land and it was also possible that lands were being concentrating in the hands of non-cultivating owners (Census of India, 1931, vol.I, Part I-Report, p 288).

2.2 The presence of a poorer section in the society could also be visualised in the early times during Ahom rule in Assam and was perhaps due to social and economic inequalities among the different sections of people. But "the life of the poor was also not very distressing" and those "in acute poverty could count upon the help of their co-villagers in the shape of doles of paddy or facilities for cultivation."

But the growth of a section of people as cultivating labourers in the rural areas of Assam had been marked when the pressure of population on land became high. Since 1901, the cultivating labourers in India as a whole increased decade by decade and from 17.26 million in 1901, it reached 27.50 million in 1961, but till thirties of the present century Assam did not have pressure of population on land. The State, on the other hand, "welcomed cultivating immigrants, particularly the Muslim immigrants from Bengal, even in the third decade of this century as there was plentiful supply of virgin land in the Brahmaputra Valley."

10. The Ahom rulers entered Assam in the third decade of the thirteenth century and ruled a greater part of the Brahmaputra Valley till the annexation of Assam by the British in 1826.
12. Ibid.
13. Total agricultural labourers in India was 31.51 million in 1961 and 47.48 million in 1971 (Census of India, 1971, Series 1 - India, Paper 3 of 1972, pp 2-3).
15. Ibid.
Thus, when the different regions of India already showed very high proportions of agricultural labourers varying from nearly one-fifth to two-fifths of the total agricultural working population beginning with the early decades of the present century, it was about 2 per cent of the agricultural working population in Assam in 1901 and 1911 and about 3 per cent in 1921 and 1931. 16

But the pressure of population on land began growing in course of time with the increasing rate of growth of population and this combined with the effects of the Hindu and Muslim laws of inheritance and free right of transfer resulting in an increase in subdivision of holdings and lack of institutional credit facilities compelling many small farmers to make unfavourable contact of loan with the money lenders, led to a considerable extent, a large number of rural people to become holders of small fragments of land and fall gradually into the state of landlessness. 17 In such condition, it would be inevitable that these landless people and holders of tiny plots of land in the low caste strata of the rural society would turn to be the manual day labourers because of quite insufficient employment opportunities in the rural areas and depend for their livelihood on regularly cultivating others' land against remuneration. When

a class of landless people and holders of small fragments of land began increasing in the rural areas of Assam, they were "strengthened by the Muslim immigrants, Hindu refugees and ex-workers of the gardens." \(^{18}\)

2.3 But the agricultural labour, forming an important sector in the agricultural hierarchy of Assam, has been showing a faster rate of increase during the post-independence period. The size of cultivating labourers including the dependants numbered about 157 thousand in the State in 1951, constituting approximately 1.7 per cent of the total livelihood classes and their dependants. \(^{19}\) But in the working force in Assam, agricultural labourers which formed the size of 170,243 labourers in 1961, constituted about 3.70 per cent of the total workers (4,609,277). The size of agricultural labourers which formed very small proportion to the size of total workers in Assam during 1951-61 increased considerably during the decade 1961-71. \(^{20}\) While the total workers in the State appeared to have declined during the period 1961-71 (from 4,609,277 in 1961 to 4,088,493 in 1971),

\(^{18}\) Dutta, op. cit., p 31.

\(^{19}\) The figures covered all the plains and hills districts of Assam as stood in the year 1951.

\(^{20}\) Though the figures cannot be strictly compared due to difference in the concept and definitions used in the Censuses but only a relative situation can be realised by the fact that the number of agricultural labourers has been increasing in the rural areas.

\(^{21}\) One important cause of decline in the number of total workers in 1971 is that though the number of male workers increased in 1971, there was, on the otherhand, a sharp fall in the number of female workers, apart from the fact that workers in 1971 Census were treated on the basis of main occupation unlike in 1961 Census when even a person working for an hour was included in the category of workers.
the agricultural labourers increased from 170,243 in 1961 to 405,440 in 1971. In otherwords, during 1961-71, the total workers in Assam declined by more than 11 per cent whereas the agricultural labourers increased by about 13.8 per cent annually (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1
Distribution of Agricultural Labourers and other workers and Percentage change of Workers in different sectors during 1961-71.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Assam 1961</th>
<th>Assam 1971</th>
<th>India 1961</th>
<th>India 1971</th>
<th>Percentage change during 1961-71</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Workers</td>
<td>4,609,277</td>
<td>4,088,493</td>
<td>188,571,542</td>
<td>180,373,399</td>
<td>(-) 11.3 (-) 4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultivators</td>
<td>2,919,058</td>
<td>2,283,698</td>
<td>99,526,313</td>
<td>78,176,707</td>
<td>(-) 21.76 (-) 21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural Labourers</td>
<td>170,243</td>
<td>405,440</td>
<td>31,519,411</td>
<td>47,489,383</td>
<td>138.1 50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Workers</td>
<td>1,519,976</td>
<td>1,399,355</td>
<td>57,525,818</td>
<td>54,707,309</td>
<td>(-) 7.9 (-) 4.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though Assam has a lower percentage of agricultural labourers to the total workers, as compared to different States in India, the percentage increase of agricultural labourers

23. See Table 1.21 (Chapter I).
in the State is substantially high. The growth rate of agricultural labourers in Assam was next to the highest rate of 61.61 per cent as experienced by Uttar Pradesh during 1951-61. The significance of growth rate of agricultural labourers in Assam during post-independence period can be realised from the fact that despite their small percentage to total working force in the State, the labourers have registered a faster rate of increase, more than that is pronounced in India as a whole (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage change in Agricultural Labourers</th>
<th>According to 1961 and 1971 Census Reports.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage change in agricultural labourers</td>
<td>in 1961 over 1951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Assam</td>
<td>+ 48.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 India</td>
<td>+ 14.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It may, however, be pointed out that Assam has dearth of women labourers and the percentage of women labourers to total agricultural labourers in the State declined from about 12.3 in 1961 to about 4.9 in 1971.

2.4 The cultivators though constituted the largest proportion to the total workers in the State declined from

63.3 per cent in 1961 to 55.8 per cent in 1971. When the working force engaged in cultivation declined by about 21.8 per cent during 1961-71, the agricultural labourers increased by about 138.1 per cent (Table 2.1). Similarly during this period the labourers in manufacturing industry increased by about 14.3 per cent which was insignificant compared to the percentage increase of agricultural labourers. It was, again, during the period 1961-71 that there was a decline in labourers by about 7.9 per cent in other categories with small increase in the categories of construction, trade and commerce, transport, storage and communications and other services. It is, however, true that increase was marked in most of the categories of other workers and the overall decline in the category of "other workers" was primarily due to decrease in the categories of households and livestock, mining, plantation etc.

But compared to the percentage changes of workers in India where the decline of total workers was not as high unlike in Assam and almost an equal proportion of decline was marked in the category of cultivators, the percentage change in agricultural labourers was substantially higher in Assam than in case of India as a whole.

2.5 The controversy that has centered round the phenomenal increase in the size of agricultural labourers in 1971 compared to that of 1961 is that "the shift from cultivators to

25. See Table 1.18 (Chapter I).
26. See Table 1.20 (Chapter I).
agricultural labour is dubious* and that "the sharp rise in the shares of agricultural labour might indicate that many of the erstwhile unspecified have been returned as agricultural labourers in the 1971 Census." It is assumed that many of unspecified workers mentioned in 1961 Census has been included into the category of agricultural labourers in 1971 and the elimination of the unspecified category in 1971 and the sharp increase in the number of agricultural labourers have prepared the basis of this argument.  

But it is also possible that many of the unspecified were reported as non-workers on the basis of their main activity in 1971 Census or they were distributed among the different categories and in such case the argument that the rise in the number of agricultural labourers is due to the inclusion of the unspecified has no strong ground. It is also contended that in the rural areas where the pressure of population is very high, the small cultivators who constitute the major proportion of the cultivating section, have experienced a decline in their per capita holding and become marginal cultivators or tiny holders. A substantial portion of them might have depended on other employment and in the context of low non-agricultural employment opportunity, alternatively, it can be maintained that a section

28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
of small cultivators turned to be the wage earners in agriculture.

Thus, the possibility that "the significant increase in the relative proportion of agricultural labourers has taken place by intra-group shifts, that is, largely by a relative decline in the proportion of cultivators and by an increase in proportion of agricultural labourers" cannot be ruled out. On the other hand, the possibility that there is increase in the number of agricultural labourers from cultivators, apart from the natural growth of agricultural labourers due to population increase in the labour families, is also based on another argument that in 1961 Census a large number of cultivators and persons engaged in household industry had agricultural labour as secondary means of livelihood and a section of them might emerge as agricultural labourers in 1971. About 49,845 male cultivators and 13,616 female cultivators in the plains districts of Assam adopted agricultural labour as a secondary means of their livelihood in 1961. Similarly, among the workers in household industry, 587 males and 4,485 female out workers in the plains districts in 1961 hired their labour for wage employment in agriculture. The hill district of Mikir and North Cachar had 1,036 male and 260 female cultivators and 65 male and 98 female household workers engaged in agricultural wage employment as secondary means of livelihood.

32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
Apart from the variety of reasons for phenomenal increase in the number of agricultural labourers in 1971 over that of 1961, it has also been said that a large number of workers who were actually in the category of agricultural labourers were absorbed in the category of cultivators in 1961 Census. It is maintained that "the percentage of the total labour force deployed in agricultural production has not shown any appreciable change in the last few decades" and it "may be said to indicate that the category of 'cultivators' in the group 'Agricultural Workers' is absorbing a larger share of the labour force" than the category of "Agricultural labourers." The Census of India 1971 with a critical view on the small proportion of agricultural labourers to total workers in 1961 (16.7 per cent for all-India) put that "at the 1961 Census there appears to have been a definite bias in favour of persons recording themselves as cultivators, for the purpose of economic activity" and in many cases "persons who were basically agricultural labourers were treated as cultivators even at the tabulation stage."

The broad conclusion that can be drawn is that agricultural labourers have occupied a significantly higher position than many of the categories of labourers in the working force and the growth rate of agricultural labourers is considerably faster than the growth rate of other categories.

2.6 The Agricultural Labour Enquiries with sample method


of study also found a considerable proportion of agricultural
labour households in Assam. According to First Agricultural
Labour Enquiry, the agricultural labour households constituted
a little more than one tenth of the total rural households
(Table 2.3). Taking into consideration the labourers engaged in

Table 2.3
Distribution of Agricultural Labour households
and Rural Households in Assam during 1960-61
and 1956-57. 36

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated number of</th>
<th>Percentage of agricultural labour households to total rural households.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Agricultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950-51</td>
<td>1,934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956-57</td>
<td>2,234</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

livestock, poultry, dairy farming etc., the Second Agricultural
Labour Enquiry (1956-57) showed a marked increase in their
proportions.

But though these proportions cannot be brought
under comparison due to difference in the concept used by two
Enquiries regarding agricultural labour households, 37 it can,


* Includes Manipur and Tripura.

37. Chellaswami, T. "Comparability of the Results of the
First and Second Agricultural Labour Enquiries",
however, be maintained that like the Census Reports which showed low proportions of agricultural labourers to total workers in Assam compared to those of all India, these Enquiries also revealed the lower proportions of agricultural labour households in Assam compared to the all India proportions.

The proportions of agricultural labour households to total rural households in Assam though were lower than the all-India proportions but when the all India proportions declined from 30.39 in 1950-51 to 24.47 in 1956-57, the proportions of Assam increased from 10.53 to 18.18 reflecting a relative higher trend of agricultural labour households in Assam. Even with higher proportions of agricultural labour households the different States in India experienced a decline in their proportions from 1950-51 to 1956-57 and this decline was from 28.26 per cent in 1950-51 to 24.53 per cent in 1956-57 in Madhya Pradesh, from 50.31 per cent to 35.59 per cent in Andhra Pradesh, from 40.63 per cent to 29.55 per cent in Bihar, from 28.99 per cent to 26.03 per cent in Bombay, from 38.10 per cent to 22.73 per cent in Kerala, from 55.10 per cent to 36.54 per cent in Madras, from 37.93 per cent to 27.27 per cent in Mysore, from 42.86 per cent to 29.41 per cent in Orissa and from 25.58 per cent to 25.00 per cent in West Bengal. But according to the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry, Uttar Pradesh (14.41 per cent in 38. The figures cannot explain the real position because of difference in the concepts in the two Enquiries but compared to Assam, these states show a relative fall in the percentages of their agricultural labour households.

1960-61 and 17.24 per cent in 1966-67\(^{40}\) and Assam were the exceptions where an increasing trend of the proportion of agricultural labour households to the total rural households could be noticed.

2.7 The National Sample Survey estimated a little more than 12 per cent of agricultural labour households to the total rural households in Assam in 1963-64 as compared to less than 21 per cent in India as a whole (Table 2.4).

**Table 2.4**

Distribution of Agricultural Labour Households with Rural Households and Rural Labour Households in 1963-64.\(^{41}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period of Survey</th>
<th>Total No. of Rural Households</th>
<th>Total No. of Agricultural Labour Households</th>
<th>Percentage of Labour Households to total Rural Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>1,765</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>67,562</td>
<td>17,247</td>
<td>14,124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But the proportion of agricultural labour households in Assam according to National Sample Survey stood lower than the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry's estimate of 18.18 per cent. This decline from 18.18 per cent in 1966-67 to 12.30


2. DISTRICT-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS IN 1961 AND 1971

AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS
1961 - 5000 = ☐
1971 - 5000 = ☐

DISTRICTS:
GOALPURA - ☐
KAMRUP - ☐
DAHANG - ☐
NOGGONG - ☐
LAKHIMPUR - ☐
SIBSAGAR - ☐
CACHAR - ☐
UNITED MIKHIL AND M.E. HILLS - ☐

0 - 64 MILES
per cent in 1963-64 with all-India decline from 24.47 per cent
in 1956-57 to 20.90 per cent in 1963-64 does not, however,
reveal that the position of agricultural labour households in
Assam in regard to their growth in the rural economy has improved
since the estimate of National Sample Survey covered about 77 per
cent of the total number of rural labour households.

2.8 The district-wise distribution of agricultural
labourers in Assam according to Censuses of India (Table 2.5)

Table 2.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Total working population</th>
<th>Total agricultural Labourers</th>
<th>Percentage of agricultural labourers</th>
<th>Percentage of agricultural labourers to total working from 1961 to 1971</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>613,310</td>
<td>598,886</td>
<td>38,522</td>
<td>76,589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>834,585</td>
<td>744,610</td>
<td>29,609</td>
<td>59,332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>606,394</td>
<td>505,485</td>
<td>21,147</td>
<td>42,621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>753,750</td>
<td>617,344</td>
<td>10,407</td>
<td>29,927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>449,058</td>
<td>455,849</td>
<td>22,552</td>
<td>60,273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>715,926</td>
<td>523,321</td>
<td>13,201</td>
<td>29,576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>478,954</td>
<td>482,946</td>
<td>32,581</td>
<td>98,228</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.5 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>United Mikir &amp; N.C. Hills</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>157,300</td>
<td>150,052</td>
<td>2,224</td>
<td>8,894</td>
<td>1,41</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>299.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4,609,277</td>
<td>4,088,493</td>
<td>170,443</td>
<td>405,440</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>138.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

shows that apart from the overall increase of agricultural labourers by 138.1 per cent during 1961-71, some districts even exhibited more than 200.0 per cent increase. Among the districts in Assam, the United Mikir and North Cachar Hills district showed the highest rate of growth although the total numbers of agricultural labourers in the district were the lowest in Assam. It was, again, in the plains districts that the percentage increase of agricultural labourers varied from almost cent per cent in Goalpara to more than three-times in Cachar which also showed the highest percentages of agricultural labourers to the total workers in the State. Thus, according to the Census of India, when the population of Assam increased by about 35 per cent during the decade 1961-71, the agricultural labourers increased much faster, about four-times to the former one.

2.9 But the agricultural labourers who have substantially increased in the State during the post-independence period, either possess only small strips of land or are landless. The proportion of the agricultural labour families with land in Assam has been found to be significantly lower than those of their landless counterpart. But in 1950-51, the First Agricultural Labour Enquiry showed about 57 per cent of agricultural labour households with land the remaining
without land (Table 2.6).

Table 2.6

Percentage Distribution of Agricultural Labour Households with Land and Without Land in 1950-51 and 1956-57.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Agricultural Labour Households</th>
<th>With Land</th>
<th>Without Land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>56.65</td>
<td>36.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>49.33</td>
<td>42.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry (Table 2.6) and National Sample Survey (Table 2.7), much different state of affairs, that is, more that 60 per cent of agricultural labour families without land, was observed.

Table 2.7

Percentage Distribution of Agricultural Labour Households with Land and Without Land in 1963-64.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Agricultural Labour Households</th>
<th>With Land</th>
<th>Without Land</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>39.56</td>
<td>60.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>38.83</td>
<td>61.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


When the major portion of agricultural labour households in Assam is landless, it is to be contended that with the increase of agricultural labourers in the economy during the years since independence, the number of landless labour households has also been increasing. This indicates the addition of more floating labour force in the agricultural sector with every increase in the number of agricultural labourers.

2.10 The phenomenal increase in the number of agricultural labourers in Assam in the post-independence period can be attributed to a number of factors like high birth rate and its consequent net increase of population in rural areas, pressure of population on land with increase in the number of small holders or marginal cultivators and landless persons, decline in the traditional means of village occupations like handicrafts, impoverishment caused by diseases, crop failure, indebtedness etc. and increase of immigrants and tea garden labourers.

It is to be maintained that the relative inelasticity of supply of land and the growth of agricultural population with the inequality of land distribution and consequently the concentration of land into few hands, have been greatly responsible for increase of a large number of small holders and landless persons.45 It has been found by experience

45. "When and where expansion in the cultivated area was not a feasible alternative - whether for physical, technical, social economic or institutional reasons - population growth was reflected, in the first instance, in the cumulative subdivision and fragmentation of the acreses already under cultivation. Later this process ...... often contributed to the rise of large land owners, the demise of small peasant proprietors and the increase of the landless" - (Myrdal, Gunnar : Asian Drama, An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations, vol.II, p. 1048).
and also at the time of village survey by the present author* that poverty, indebtedness and unfavourable contract and obligation of debt, the division of landed property among the sons after the death of their father and sale of property, have caused, in many cases, the loss of ownership of land of the smallholders, at least partly or even wholly. This important feature in the rural areas perhaps explains the element of landless labourers, that could be traced even when population pressure was not acute on land. The economic and social set up in the villages, correlated mostly with the possession of land and social caste, have been, to a considerable extent, responsible for the presence of a disadvantaged section, a large number of which belonging to the low caste strata ultimately depend on agricultural and other manual labour for livelihood.

The growth of "an agricultural proletariat" is, thus, a "complicated process" and once a household falls into poverty, a bad season, personal misfortune, ceremonial expenditure, disease etc. force the former to go into debt and lose even the land which he possesses leading to the final stage of landless labour. 46

2.11 The household industry in the past played a significant role not only among the people of rural Assam but field cultivation and domestic industries were considered as two pillars of the Indian rural society. 47 It is the weakening

* Refer to Appendix.
47. Patel, op. cit., p 40.
condition of the latter as the dependable means of livelihood that caused its people to seek "some way of finding a livelihood either as tenants or as agricultural labourers under whatever terms." It has been found that as the lands concentrate in the hands of a few households from the hands of unprotected tiny holders and small farmers, large masses of peasantry roll down the social ladder first as tenants at will and then as agricultural labourers.

It can, thus, be maintained that the deteriorating economic position of small and tiny holders and very little scope for new avenues of life apart from growth of labourers due to population increase in their families and social factor like caste system, have been greatly responsible for faster rate of increase of agricultural labourers in the rural areas of Assam. It has been revealed through personal investigation and contact with the rural people that many of the landless labourers were not landless for all the time and different factors worked behind their gradual impoverishment that led to the loss of their holdings.

50. "As the economic circumstances of small holders worsen, they become more vulnerable to complete loss of their lands" (Myrdal, op. cit., p. 1051).
51. "Every circumstance which has weakened the economic position of the small holder has increased the supply of agricultural labourers - the subdivision of holdings, the loss of common rights in the rural economy, the disuse of collective enterprise, the multiplication of rent receivers, free mortgaging and transfer of land and decline of cottage industries" (Mukherjee, Radhakamal : (ed) Economic Problems of Modern India, vol.I, p. 123).
Over 1951, the proportion of cultivators to the total working population in Assam has declined but the proportion of agricultural labourers has increased. Considering the occupational structure in the economy, it can be said that, there has been no except basic change in the agricultural career of the rural people/within the agricultural occupation when there has been an increase in the number of landless agricultural labourers and labourers with small fragments of land. The crux of the problem is that as the extent of agricultural labour would grow, the employment possibility per labour on land would tend to decrease. As the number of agricultural labourers increases with the corresponding decline of cultivators, it is sure to pronounce the symptom of agrarian unsettlement. The rise in the number of agricultural labourers as distinguished from manufacturing and other labourers, has its impact not only on the employment, income and living condition of agricultural labourers themselves but on the agrarian system as well as upon the entire economy.

The seriousness of the problem that has arisen in the present period is: How far the increasing agricultural labour force can be provided with adequate employment and level of living? It is to be realised that the growth of agricultural labourers is not like that in organised industries or in the fields of regulated employments, it is rather unregulated and

52. See Table 1.18 (Chapter 1.).
53. Mukherjee, op. cit. p XI.
uncontrolled and the extent of employment of the labourers is determined by the availability of works and demand for seasonal cultivation. In such circumstances, every addition to the number of landless agricultural labourers and agricultural labourers with small fragments of land, is bound to increase the problem of employment, income and living of a large number of labourers being already at the lowest rung of rural ladder.