SECTION B: SOCIETAL-ECONOMIC STRUCTURE
CHAPTER VIII

THE PEASANT AND THE RURAL SOCIETY

8.1 THE PEASANT

The peasants of Assam are distributed throughout the rural areas in 19.64 lakhs of agricultural holdings. They live in families either joint or nuclear\(^1\). One or more members of a family may be a cultivator/cultivators or an agricultural labourer/labourers and the others may be helpers, part-time workers or dependents. Thus the agricultural operation in Assam is a family affair on which the family's livelihood and the basic foundation of family's life and philosophy depend. A family is a unit of the rural society with which it is socio-culturally intertwined.

According to 1971 Census there are 22.84 lakh cultivators accounting for 55.86 per cent and 4.05 lakh agricultural labourers, constituting 9.92 per cent of the total working population in Assam. Therefore, as per definition of the peasant adopted in this study, there are 22.84 lakh peasants in Assam. The number of total operational holdings in the state is 19,64,374, out of which 18,47,106 are individual holdings and 1,17,270

\(^1\) Joint families are those in which live the husband, wife, children, parents, brothers, brother's wives and children, unmarried sisters, daughters, married or unmarried sons, while in nuclear families live only the husband and wife with their own children.
are joint holdings. It may, therefore, be roughly taken that there are 18,47,106 peasant families in Assam. Since the urban areas are excluded from the total number of individual operational holding, and since in rural areas, there are 6 persons per household on the average, it may be estimated that the total number of peasant population in Assam is 108 lakhs constituting 74 per cent of the total population and 81 per cent of the total rural population who are solely dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. On the average, there are only 1.25 peasants per peasant family who have to bear the burden of livelihood for 4.75 dependent family members on the average.

Spatial Concentration of the Peasant

The spatial concentration of agricultural workers, peasants, and agricultural labourers are presented in Figs. 8.1, 8.2, and 8.3 respectively by the location quotient technique. In Fig. 8.1 there are four types of cluster of agricultural workers. The highest order clustering is found in three zones — (1) Goalpara, (2) Nowgong-K.A., and (3) Lakhimpur. These are the industrially most backward areas in the state. Second highest order clustering is observed in two zones — (1) Kamrup and (2) Cachar - N.C.Hills. If, however, Guwahati city were excluded,

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2 World Agricultural Census, op.cit. p. 39
Kamrup would show the highest order clustering of agricultural workers. Cachar is relegated to the second highest order by the presence of a large number of tea garden workers who are included as factory workers in the census. The N.C.Hills district does not show the highest order clustering, because of the fact that a high proportion of workers from outside the district is engaged in the service sector in this newly constituted district. The third order moderate clustering is found in Darrang where the proportion of agricultural workers is decreased by the presence of a large number of tea garden labourers. The lowest order clustering is obtained in the tea-estate dominated zone of Assam comprising Sibsagar and Dibrugarh.

A comparison of the Figs. 8.1, 8.2, and 8.3 shows that the highest order clustering of agricultural labourers in Cachar has relegated the area to the low order in respect of peasants, while Goalpara and Nowgong maintain the same high order clustering in respect of both peasants and agricultural labourers, leading to the highest order in respect of total agricultural workers. Proportional share of peasants in Kamrup is higher than that of agricultural labourers, while in K.A., the highest order clustering of agricultural worker is constituted by a large proportion of peasants. Proportional shares of agricultural labourers are the lowest in N.C.Hills and Dibrugarh, while that of peasants is the highest in the former and the lowest in Dibrugarh. The
ASSAM

CONCENTRATION OF AGRICULTURAL LABOURERS
1971

LOCATION QUOTIENT INDEX

- ABOVE 150: VERY HIGH
- 125-150: HIGH
- 100-125: MODERATELY HIGH
- 75-100: MODERATE
- 50-75: LOW
- BELOW 50: VERY LOW

Fig. 8.3
LORENZ CURVE

ASSAM

SPATIAL VARIATION OF LAND CONCENTRATION
1970-71

Fig. 10.3

ASSAM

Fig. 10.4
highest order clustering of agricultural workers in Lakhimpur is due to the highest order clustering of peasants. In Darrang, proportionate shares of both peasants and agricultural labourers are moderate and in Sibsagar both are low.

The above analysis reveals that concentration of the peasant is higher in those districts where tea plantation is not significant. Another revelation of this study is that agricultural labourers are concentrated mostly in those districts where there is concentration of immigrant peasants.

8.2 THE RURAL SOCIETY

The social structure of the peasants is built of the social conditions of the rural society and a variety of cultural, legal, political and economic factors. Peasant agriculture carried out by the peasants in the social milieu of rural society is more a way of life than an economic proposition.

The peasants live in villages and, therefore, they form rural communities. To investigate the functioning of rural communities in Assam, one must have an adequate description of the structure of an Assamese village, as the village is the basis of the socio-economic structure.

The livelihood of most of the families in the rural areas of Assam is dependent on agriculture and only a few of them depend on craft and cottage industries and other occupations.
The village is an institution by itself. Though the old basis of its socio-economic structure is being gradually eroded by the contemporary changes under the impact of market economy, it still retains a structure marked by a strong rural characteristics.  

An average village of Assam consists of nearly 100 households, 60 per cent of which are headed by peasant cultivators having an average holding of about one hectare only. The agricultural land lies on all sides of the village and there are no farms in the sense of extensive and compact agricultural landholding as in the developed countries of the world. There are only fragments of holding of a family of peasants, which lie scattered in the fields surrounding the village, intermixed with strips cultivated by others. In some cases, peasants may farm at a place far away from their own village, even amongst lands predominantly worked by peasants from another village.

The social structure that comprises the village community of Assam can be divided into the following six groups —

(i) the owners of land — those who have hereditary rights of tenancy and who fully or partly cultivate their land; (ii) the sub-tenants, tenants-at-will and share-croppers; (iii) the landless agricultural labourers; (iv) the village artisans;  

(v) the money-lenders and shop-keepers; and (vi) the persons in the professions or in personal services, e.g. teachers, village officials, doctors, priests, etc. Although the connection between a caste or a tribe and occupation still persists in some cases, the groups are not mutually exclusive. An individual may combine ownership in land with the role of a tenant, a money-lender or a priest. A tenant may also be a field labourer or an artisan.

The cultivators belonging to the first two groups take lease of small plots of the village land either directly from the Government or from a landlord to whom they pay rent. They work on the land themselves with the aid of their family members and in some cases with the help of hired labourers. They supply the small capital from their own savings or borrow from the village landlord or money-lender. They carry their produce to the village market held once or twice a week for sale in order to purchase their necessities. The work of the small proprietor is much the same in all the under-developed countries. He tries to produce sufficient grains for the satisfaction of the following requirements: (i) to feed himself, his family and his animals; (ii) to retain some seeds if possible for the next crop; (iii) to meet the liabilities such as rent or taxes; (iv) to pay some interest and capital if he is in debt; (v) to sell his surplus, if any, for buying the day-to-day necessities, and (vi) to spend on social festivals, religious functions, rites, and education.
of the children. Such cultivators are called peasants who are numerically predominant in the rural society of Assam.

The third group consisting mostly of the landless agricultural labourers is the poorest section of the community. In 1961, the Census Report recorded 1.70 lakhs of agricultural labourers in Assam which increased to 4.05 lakhs in 1971. Thus the number of the rural proletariat has been increasing.

The fourth group, comprising the artisans and other professional castes were at least in the past, necessary adjunct to the rural economy. The weaver, the blacksmith, the oilman, the potter, the carpenter, the jeweller, and the fisherman supplied the needs of the small rural society. Almost all of these cottage industries and traditional professions suffered a lethal blow from the growth of manufacturing industries and market economy, and thousands of artisans and traditional professionals were thrown out of employment. However, these cottage industries, especially weaving, have not altogether lost their significance.

The petty shop-keepers perform the important function of facilitating exchange of different products. The money-lender who usually combines other functions also, especially those of a rent-receiver or a middleman, is a very important person in the village. The non-cultivating landowners include the rent-receivers such as widows, persons in other professions, priests and some of
The rural community in Assam in the past represented a self-sufficient unit. Since each group was dependent upon another, there grew up a strong sense of unity and solidarity which helped to preserve the integrity of the village in the years of good harvest. For a society so largely dependent on agriculture at a marginal level, poverty and starvation were common social and economic crises. When the harvest of the staple food crop, i.e., rice failed, the streams of new income ceased to flow for almost every group in the village except those in the services. Each family was then thrown back on its meagre assets such as ornaments, utensils, cattle and other household articles. Sometimes some families resorted to credit or depended on their personal skill. Sometimes again their survival depended upon their capacity to migrate or on aid from the Government. Such a situation still holds good in majority of the villages in the state with certain changes brought about by the market economy.

The peasants' way of life including his daily work schedule is organised by the local customs and traditions. The slow pace of industrialisation has not been able to obliterate the force of customs standing in the way of socio-economic changes. Wages and profits are governed by customs and are comparatively fixed and inelastic. Labour has been immobile and what little capital has been there in the village is locked
up generally in land and ornaments instead of investing it for the increase of agricultural production.

There is poverty everywhere in the rural areas. The standard of diet of the vast majority of the ruralites is below the necessary minimum. Many causes have been attributed to this appalling situation prevailing in the rural society of peasantry. Some say that it is due more to social causes than to economic ones. But actually social factors are not sufficient to explain the wretched condition of the peasants. Some economic factors must be combined with the above for a comprehensive explanation.