CHAPTER - 8

AN EPILOGUE

Agriculture has been basically a predominant occupation and a way of life to our rural people. It is the main source of (a) income to our landless labour force and (b) seasonal employment to our rural artisans. It is the chain-agent for providing various types of raw-material to our agro-based industries. It is the most important sector of our economy, contributing nearly half of the national income.

2. Agricultural labourer is a person engaged on farm and performs various agricultural operations for wages in kind, or in cash or in both. His labour is performed under the direction of his farmer-employer. He may be landless or occupier of only a small piece of land. He may be employed on seasonal or permanent basis.

3. It was during the Punjab Census of 1868 and the Madras Census of 1871 that the existence of agricultural labourers as a separate class was noticed for the first time. The emergence of this class can be attributed to the ruin and consequent disappearance of the Indian traditional rural cottage industries and handicrafts due to the entry of the British manufacturing capitalism.
Though not very spectacular, there was a gradual rise percentwise in the number of agricultural labourers during the period of 1901-1971, the agricultural labour force in India rose from 15.59 per cent in 1901 to 26.33 per cent in 1971. Though during the decade of 1961-71, Bharuch district witnessed a rise of 11.94 per cent in its agricultural labour force, it lost its significance when compared to the overall increase of 28.7 per cent in the number of agricultural labourers in the district.

4. Agricultural labour as a separate class may broadly be classified into (i) active and inactive labourers, (ii) skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labourers, (iii) attached and casual labourers, (iv) child and adult labourers, and (vi) male and female labourers. The detailed analysis of the total agricultural labour force of the district provided an interesting reading as follows:

Out of 4993 agricultural labourers surveyed during the year 1979 in the district, 88.00 per cent were active agricultural labourers as against 12.00 per cent inactive workers; 90.00 per cent were unskilled agricultural labourers due to limited use of mechanisation in the farm operations and lack of training facilities, as against 8.3 per cent and 1.7 per cent semi-skilled and skilled agricultural workers respectively; 59.8 per cent worked as casual labourers as against 40.2 per cent attached
agricultural labourers; 68.9 per cent were female casual agricultural labourers as against 31.1 per cent male casual agricultural labourers.

Further, despite the existence of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976, 12.9 per cent of the total agricultural labourers in 1979 found as bonded ones as they could not repay the debts created by them during the earlier years.

Viewing the figures of the total agricultural labour force sexwise, it can safely be said that there was almost equality in the male and female workers — as against 50.6 per cent male workers, the female workers were 49.4 per cent.

As Bharuch district has been economically, socially and industrially backward and there has been an abject poverty amongst the agricultural labour class their children had to work for supplementing the family incomes. Thus, 34.2 per cent of the total agricultural labourers were child-labour.

5. Agriculture, in our country, is the biggest industry on which 70.0 per cent of her total population rely. It is the largest source of employment to the rural citizens of Bharuch district as 82.6 per cent of its population earned their bread from agriculture and allied pursuits. While the black soil which is considered to be fertile and rich for cotton and other commercial crops,
provided ample scope for employment, lack of adequate irrigation facilities restricted the farmers to grow more than one crops on the majority of the farms/areas in the district. It is suggested that more and more areas of land should be brought under irrigation to increase the employment opportunities in the district.

Again, as the district was under the process of industrial development, its capability to provide subsidiary occupations to its population in general and landless agricultural labourers in particular was very limited. It is suggested that unless employment opportunities on massive scale for them are created in industrial sector under the plan and/or non-plan projects and steps are taken to rapidly modernise agriculture in the district, no material change would be feasible in job-opportunities available to them. Every efforts, therefore, should be made by Gujarat government, government and non-government agencies, and social workers to harness and utilise the existing resources to the district for generating employment opportunities for agricultural labourers.

6. The employment potentiality in agriculture depended upon factors pertaining to (i) the soils and their features and (ii) the tillers and their characteristics.

Indian farmers possessed small and tiny pieces of land from which they did not even get subsistence return. The
farmers of Bharuch district were no exception to this and as a consequence they were not in a position to employ agricultural labourers on their farms throughout the year. 50.59 per cent of the total land-holders possessed land admeasuring only 5 acres, which was regarded as an uneconomic holding. Some of the adult members of the families of these land-holders had to migrate outside for seeking the jobs to supplement their family incomes. It is suggested that the consolidation of the small pieces of land would increase the demand for more hired hands as the small and marginal farmers then automatically would not compete among themselves in the agricultural labour market for supplementing their family incomes.

It was found that the farmers belonging to the upper class communities in the district had developed a tendency to get their agricultural work done through hired hands as a mark of their social status and influence of 'modern life' on educated young members of the farmers' families. 'Savarnas' hardly did any agricultural work. Out of the total of 646 non-scheduled castes farm-holders 50.00 per cent were patidars who, normally, did not work on farms with their counterparts — the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes. As a consequence acute shortages of hired hands were felt during the days of peak agricultural operations. Of the 950 families of the farmers surveyed in the district during the year 1979, 74.2 per cent
families had employed on an average 1.3 and 1.7 attached and casual agricultural labourers respectively.

7. Though the demand for labour in agriculture for various agricultural operations depended upon many factors, the labour intensive crop patterns influence the demand for labour greatly. Where labour intensive cotton crop was grown in Bharuch district, the demand for agricultural labour was relatively high as compared to those of the food crops, which was met either by the local labour population or by the labour population of the adjoining villages or by both. However, during the peak period, the casual labour force from the neighbouring district had to be employed on a massive scale.

8. The agricultural labour market in Bharuch district has been very peculiar as it is highly backward, and unorganised. Moreover no systematic attempts have been made by any agency to develop it scientifically. It was, normally, surplus labour market. Consequently, the system of collective bargaining for the terms and conditions of employment was practically absent. Building up of strong local unions of labour force would hardly need any emphasis.

9. The recruitment practices and procedures for employing the agricultural labourers in the villages of the district were more or less uniform. Attached labourers were employed through one year employment contract between
the concerned farmer-employers and the labourers. But, in the case of casual labourers, the needy farmer-employers have had to contact the labourers at their residences every evening to find out the preparedness of agricultural labourers for performing a particular work on farms on the next day. However, the contract labour system which is much popular in some organised industries, also found its place in agriculture here. This system is, normally, applied in weeding, harvesting, digging, cotton picking and grass-cutting agricultural operations in the district.

10. It was a matter of surprise that none of 4998 agricultural labourers so surveyed in the district had any type of systematic training for performing simple, complex, or mechanised agricultural operations. It must be realised that agricultural labourers do require specialised training in such areas as operations of tractors, threshers, crushers, diesel and/or electric pumps and motors, sprayer and duster pumps. It is suggested that all concerned with the development of agriculture in the district must try their best to establish and run smoothly institutional agency for imparting various types of training to agricultural labourers. A few training centres should be opened at suitable places in each taluka of the district. The training should be stipendiary one, as in organised industrial sector, to attract the agricultural labourers.
11. Wages are the reward for the labour put in by an individual. Similarly, agricultural wages are the reward for the work done by agricultural labourers.

12. Agricultural wages may be in the form of cash and/or kind. In certain cases, wages are supplemented by additional perks in one form or the other. Though there existed the system of payment of wages in cash and/or in kind to casual labourers, there was certainly a dominance of cash wage system in all the talukas of the district except Nandod.

13. The rates of wages, however, varied from taluka to taluka, ranging between Rs. 1.50 and Rs. 4.50 per day. The agricultural labourers of the Nandod taluka received their wages both in cash and in kind.

14. As regards the attached labourers the position was a little different. In six talukas—Amod, Bharuch, Jambusar, Jhagadia, Vagra and Valia—agricultural labourers were paid their wages in cash only and in five talukas they got their wages in kind and in cash during the year 1979. Wages in kind generally covered two meals a day. While a lunch meal included rice, 'Dal' or 'Khichadi', 'Kadhi' with one bread and with cooked vegetables, dinner provided two breads and cooked vegetables or pulses with 'Chhas' or 'Kadhi'. Though the annual rates of cash wages ranged between Rs. 1000.00 and Rs. 1450.00, the annual rates of cash wages along with kind wages ranged between
Rs. 200-00 and Rs. 600.00 during the year 1979. It was also found out that these rates were not uniform even within the village due to the customs and traditions prevalent, varied operations on the farms, and the types of hired hands used on farms.

15. The payment of wages in kind to attached labourers has a predominant feature in the district. This was mainly due to (i) the force of customs and traditions prevalent in the villages, and (ii) the preference shown by agricultural labourers to receive wages in kind on account of increasing market prices of foodgrains and sometimes non-availability of necessary quantity and quality of foodgrains in the nearest market.

Attached agricultural labourers did not receive wages according to the farm-operations as they had to work for fixed wage-rates irrespective of the types of operations.

Though the rates of wages fixed for male, female and child labourers under the Minimum Wages Act were uniform, there prevailed different rates of wages for casual, child and woman labourers in actual operation.

16. The agricultural labourers of the district were fortunate to receive customary perquisites over and above regular wages in cash and/or in kind. The perquisites they received covered such items as tea, 'Chhas', 'Kadhi', pair/s of clothes, shoes, betel leaves, tobacco/beedies,
free house sites, fuel material, gift, 'Bani' and marriage 'Chanilo'. However, the quality and quantity and their values varied according to the prevalent customs and traditions, the relations between farmers and concerned agricultural labourers and the category of agricultural labourers.

It was a general practice prevalent in almost all the villages of the district that casual labourers were, generally, not entitled to get as many perquisites as the attached agricultural labourers received. Though 'Chhas', 'Kadhi', Pan-tobacco/beedies were common perquisites made available to all the types of agricultural labourers, pairs of clothes, shoes, gift and 'Bani' were specially granted to the attached labourers. All these perks served as a tool to motivate them for better work on farms and to increase their efficiency.

17. Wages to agricultural labourers were, at times, adjusted against their short-term loans they had earlier taken from their employers for consumption purposes during the off-seasons. It was revealed that 97.7 per cent of 2009 attached agricultural labourers and 49.1 per cent of 2989 casual agricultural labourers surveyed had borrowed small amounts for consumption purposes during the year 1979. These debts were adjusted against their wages which they earned during their active employment.
Both the types of labourers — attached and casual — were of the view that the facility for borrowing against the adjustment of their wages in future saved them from the hardships during unemployment and/or financial difficulties.

18. While the casual labourers, normally received their wages daily, the attached labourers got their wages frequently in instalments according to their needs.

19. The prevailing wide disparities in the wage-rates for agricultural labourers in the district were the result of many factors influencing the situation. Skillfulness, experience, reliability, laborious nature of work, indebtedness, outflow and inflow of agricultural labourers and varap (fit state of soil for agricultural operations particularly during the monsoon season), types of agricultural operations, peak-period of crop and government laws and regulations were the major factors which had varied weightage in determining the wage-rates for both the categories of agricultural labourers in the district. For instance, the rates of wages for cotton-picking at the beginning of the season were normal, but during the middle of the season, they rose upto Rs. 10.0 to Rs. 15.0 per day. Similarly, labourers who were indebted got lower rates of wages as compared to those of their counterparts.

20. The money-wages received by agricultural labourers during the year 1979 had not satisfied them as they were
far below the minimum rates of wages fixed by the State Government under the Minimum Wages Act. They were too inadequate to maintain and supply even the bare necessities of life to all the members of their families throughout the year. As a consequence, the demand for at least minimum rates of wages so fixed was a regular phenomenon among all the categories of agricultural labourers in the district. A minimum wage-rate is, generally, fixed after taking into consideration the number of members in the family and the bare needs of human life of a worker. Accordingly, the Government of India had passed the Minimum Wages Bill in 1948 in our country, which was subsequently made applicable to our agricultural labourers too. Insofar as agricultural labourers of Gujarat were concerned the rates of the minimum wages for agricultural labour class were, for the first time, fixed for Umargam taluka of Valsad district in Gujarat by the Bombay State in 1953. But, after the formation of the separate State of Gujarat in 1960, the Government of Gujarat appointed, in 1964, an Advisory Committee for fixing and revising the minimum rates of wages for agricultural labourers. On the basis of the recommendations of this Committee, the Government of Gujarat fixed varied rates of wages both for the attached and the casual labourers according to the areas of the different districts of Gujarat. For removing these area-wise disparities in the rates of the minimum wages, the Government of Gujarat again revised the rates
in 1972 by fixing them uniformly at Rs. 3.00 for all
types of work for both the categories of labourers.
These rates were revised in 1976 from Rs. 3.00 to Rs.
5.50 per day for casual agricultural labourers irrespective
of their sex and age and agricultural operations and Rs.
2000.00 per year for attached labourers.

21. The Act empowered the concerned State Government
to establish and arrange for the implementing machinery
for the effective enforcement of the Act. The Government
of Gujarat, for the purpose, has set up in 1980 separate
machinery from State to taluka levels.

22. Inspite of the functioning of the separate
machinery comprising huge staff, the implementation of the
Act and its provisions has failed in satisfying the
agricultural labourers in the district. None of the
casual and attached labourers had received wages at the
rates so fixed in normal cases. On an average a casual
labourer received Rs. 3.00 per day in place of Rs.5.50
and the attached labourer received Rs. 1500.00 annually
as against minimum wage of Rs. 2000.00 fixed under the
Act. It is suggested that at each village the enforcement
of minimum wage-rates should be entrusted to the Panchayat
under the guidance and supervision of a Watch-dog-Committee
consisting of one representative of farmers, one panchayat
member and one representative of agricultural labourers.
It was found that abundant supply of labour, inflow of outside supply of labour during the peak season, absence of agricultural labour union at taluka and district levels, ineffective enforcement of the Minimum Wages Act, inflationary pressure on economy, low prices of foodgrains and non-food crops fixed by the State Government, existence of large number of small and marginal farmers in the district, continuation of hereditary personal relationship between the farm labourers and the farmer-employers, and arbitrary fixation of uniform rates of wages for all types of agricultural labourers -- male, female and child and for all types of agricultural operations were responsible forces coming in the way of effective and efficient implementation of the minimum wage-rates so fixed for the agricultural labourers.

23. Good working conditions affect positively the efficiency of worker, under which he or she performs various types of work. The various agricultural operations on the farms are performed by agricultural labourers under the open sky throughout all the three seasons -- winter, summer and monsoon. Geographical, climatical and natural environments play very vital role in governing the working conditions on farms. The actual working conditions on-the-farms covered work places, work conditions, tools and implements, provisions for
accidents, safety measures, night work and overtime, hours of work, rest pauses & intervals, rest shelters, work timings, drinking water and lavatories, and off-the-farm conditions covered leaves & holidays, bathroom facility, and welfare measures in agriculture.

24. The working conditions on the farm begin with work places. The work places for agricultural labourers are scattered and far away from their residential places. They are also under open sky and unsheltered. There is complete absence of any transport facility to reach at work places. Work conditions on farms are hazardous and uncomfortable. In monsoon, scorpions and serpents come out angrily from their burrows and rush for biting any one who happens to be there. Among the various agricultural operations, the dusting and spraying of pesticides and insecticides are dangerous operations for agricultural labourers. It was found that 17 agricultural labourers seriously suffered from suffocation of pesticides and 2 of them died despite timely medical treatment. It is suggested that in a village where there prevailed absence of medical facility, a First-aid-box should be kept by its Village Panchayat so that timely medical aid can be available to all needy villagers including agricultural labourers.

25. Agricultural labourers use traditional and indigenously designed & made tools and implements in
various agricultural operations. These tools, implements, machines, pumps, bullocks, etc. have to be handled and managed with proper care when they are used.

26. Provision for safety measures against accidents is a must to protect agricultural labourers from accidents during their work on farms. Biting of poisonous insects, injury during ploughing, digging and harvesting operations, fall-down in the wells during repairs of electric or diesel pumps installed on the well, injury by horn or kick of bullocks, buffaloes and cows, and any reaction of pesticides, are the instances of accidents which required provision for safety measures for agricultural labourers. It is high time to have a comprehensive legislation for agricultural labourers on the lines of industrial legislations in regard to this.

27. The high-yield-variety crop pattern do require repetitive irrigation. Though paucity of agricultural labourers during the peak season demands more hired hands, it is difficult to find out additional hands there and as a consequence, in majority of cases the farmers have to employ the same workers on the farms during the night hours by paying overtime rates of wages. Agricultural operations like irrigation, threshing and harvesting do require overtime and night hours work in agriculture because they have to complete within a specific period of time. Insofar as hours of work are concerned, the
agricultural labourers, of late, become conscious by Government regulation in this regard. The Government of Gujarat has fixed 9 hours for adults and 4.5 hours for child labour per day as hours of work in agriculture. However, hours of work in agriculture vary from time to time, day to day, season to season, crop to crop, village to village and even region to region. The attached agricultural labourers worked for longer hours in a day in any season than the work longevity of the casual agricultural labourers. Inspite of the statutory provision of the 9 hours of work per day for adult labourers, none of them had actually worked upto 9 hours of work as they included 1 to 2 hours as rest hours per day.

There was no unanimity of opinion in regard to the working for long hours. While attached labourers were of the firm view that long hours of work assured them the continuation of employment very next year, casual agricultural labourers believed that shorter hours of work would assured them the continuation of employment very next day. However, even within a village there was no uniformity in hours of work between the attached and casual labourers.

Informal relationship between the farmers and the agricultural labourers, oral employment contract of attached labourers and prevalence of customs and traditions were the factors influencing the fixation of hours of work.
28. The working hours for female labourers of the villages of the district were shorter than those of the male labourers because almost all the female labourers had to attend to their domestic duties at their own residence and at the farmers' house before joining the farm-work.

29. All the child labourers in the district had to work upto 6 to 7 hours per day against the statutory provision of 4.5 hours of work per day. It is suggested that strict supervision of the Minimum Wages Act enforcement machinery should be imposed to curb the exploitation of child labourers.

30. The laborious and arduous nature of agricultural operations require rest pauses and rest intervals to recoup the energy for further work. It was found that a general tendency prevailed in all the villages selected for study that for every interval of 2.0 hours, a rest pause upto 15 minutes was allowed, leading to total rest of one hour per day during the year 1979. Over and above this all workers were entitled to 1.50 to 2.00 hours as rest period to take their lunch and rest after the lunch. During these rest periods, generally in monsoon season, most of the agricultural labourers did not prefer to return to their homes at noon to take their lunch and get rest. They used to took their lunch and rest under the shadow of trees.
31. The work-timings -- beginning and completion times -- of any particular work, normally, depended upon the types of agricultural operations, crop-durations, and customs and traditions prevalent in the villages of the district. For instance, the work-timings during the monsoon season were absolutely uneven and uncertain.

32. The Factories Act of 1948 requires that the industrial units must provide the facility of drinking water with sufficient supply of hygienic quality of water to their workers. But our agricultural labourers were not fortunate to have this facility at their work places. They have to carry with them a pot filled with water at the time of going to farms. And if the quantity of water is exhausted during the working hours, they have to find out water from nearest well, if it existed in the neighbourhood, otherwise they have either to return to the village or to pass a day without water. Sometimes, they are compelled to drink water from the small pond, if available, nearer to their work-places.

33. Conditions off-the-farms were also not satisfactory in the villages of the district. For instance, to find out the bathing facility in the real form of bath-room attached to the houses of agricultural labourers was a matter of surprise. They generally use the pond as their bath-rooms during the summer and monsoon seasons. However, one can find a bath-room which is made of cotton or 'Tuver'
stalks covered by 'Kantan' if they afford, otherwise they have to take their bath under the open sky.

34. There is complete absence of provision in regard to leaves and holidays with wages for agricultural labourers in the district. On the contrary, every industrial and administrative employee entitled to leave with wages and weekly and national holidays. While there is no question of holidays and leaves for the casual labourers as they get wages only when they work on farms, the attached labourers are not granted any leave or holiday as a matter of right. However, they enjoy few leaves and holidays as a matter of favour of their employers. It is suggested that all the workers should be made entitled to have at least 3 paid National holidays, viz. Republic Day, Independence Day and Mahatma Gandhi's Birth Day and five festival holidays as may be fixed by the appropriate Government. The attached labourers should be made eligible for casual and sick leaves as may be agreed upon by both the parties.

It was found that all the 2009 attached agricultural labourers had availed of 2 days sick leave with wages and 4 days sick leave without wages during the year 1979. 98.9 per cent had availed of one day and 2 days of social leave and 51.00 per cent had availed of one day religious leave both with and without wages respectively.
35. Like industrial workers our agricultural labourers should be covered under the activities of welfare measures. Recreation facility, medical facility, educational facility, provision for creches and creches-room with at least a nurse-in-charge should be provided, -- which are totally absent for agricultural labourers --, for increasing their efficiency, morale and improving their physical conditions. These would also help in improving the relationship between the agricultural labourers and the concerned farmer-employers. However, the availability of massive financial assistance is a very dominating tool for starting, maintaining and expanding welfare activities for agricultural labourers.

36. The efficiency of agricultural labourers depended upon the climatic conditions, agricultural implements, types of soil, irrigation facilities, use of fertilisers, crop-patterns, quality of seeds, presence of training facility, etc. It is therefore, necessary to bring about improvement in the entire environ under which they perform the various tasks.

37. Out of 2009 attached labourers 26.7 per cent had changed their former farmers willingly for one or the other reasons, 28.3 per cent were compelled to change their employers, 22.5 per cent were became casual labourers and 2.5 per cent migrated during the year. And out of 2989 casual labourers 82.3 per cent failed to
secure their employment at their former respective farmers. This condition created a problem of security of employment in agriculture sector in the district. It is suggested that if the labourers themselves do not desire to change their employers, it is in their interests to continue their jobs with the said employers to ensure stability in jobs and to strengthen their relationships.

38. Sophistication and observance of manners by both the employees and employers of an organisation demand positive discipline from them for its continuous progress and prosperity. To achieve this, codes of conduct are, normally, constituted for and practised by the people who work in the private and the public sectors of our economy. It is pity that our agricultural sector is one where there is complete absence of prescribed codes of conduct for agricultural labourers and farmer-employers. However, unwritten customs and traditions, and code of behaviour prevail there. If any agricultural labourer breaches any tradition or code of behaviour, the farmer-employer takes disciplinary action against him for improving his behaviour. It is suggested that it is now high time for taking a quick action for statutorily regularising unwritten customs and traditions and code of behaviour with suitable modifications which serve the basis for enforcing and maintaining discipline among the agricultural labour sector in our country. These actions
may be oral reprimands, requests, warnings, loss of privileges, fines, suspension and even dismissal from the employment.

39. It was found that all the attached and the casual labourers surveyed were penalised by oral reprimands, requests and warnings for the breaches of code of behaviour during their employment period in the year 1979. However, 12.00 per cent the attached labourers and 8.00 per cent the casual labourers were suspended, and 7.5 per cent of the attached and 5.2 per cent of the casual labourers were dismissed from their services on one or the other ground of indiscipline during the year 1979. Moreover, 6.00 per cent of the attached and 8.3 per cent of the casual labourers were found stealing the commercial crops, especially cotton, from the farms of the farmers of the same village or of the surrounding villages. It was a point to be noted that the farmers held the firm view that theft of cotton from the farms was a regular feature for the last many years inspite of the watch and ward arrangement made by the village authorities by appointing salaried 'Rakhas'. The farmers further held the view that agricultural labourers practised thefts of cotton because (i) cotton fetched attractive prices, (ii) it could easily be stolen and (iii) one event of theft gave them about Rs. 60.0 to Rs. 80.0 individually which suffice for the maintenance
of their family at least for a week. Hence, such agricultural labourers were not ready to work even in peak season of cotton crop.

40. The problem of absenteeism in agricultural sector is vital one, especially for attached agricultural labourers. It was noticed that all the attached labourers remained absent for genuine or otherwise reasons on an average for 7 days during the year 1979. This had adversely affected their economy and increased their indebtedness. The most predominant ground for absence was sickness followed by social and religious ceremonies.

41. The cases of gross indiscipline and thefts of agricultural commodities from the farms often resulted in disputes between the agricultural labourers and the farmers. However, complete absence of any dispute settlement machinery and non-availability of other jobs in villages, these disputes did not long last. Moreover, personal contacts between the farmers and the agricultural labourers residing in the same village and social pressure, at times, proved very helpful in solving their disputes. However, this does not mean that there was no need of providing for any dispute settlement machinery. Alike organised industrial sector, provision for a dispute settlement machinery comprising the representatives of farmers, agricultural labourers and village panchayat
would go a long way in protecting the exploitation and victimisation of agricultural labourers in such disputes.

42. The Hindu religion had the highest domination on the agricultural labourers that were surveyed. Out of 952 families of agricultural labourers, 95.5 per cent were Hindus. However, they were divided into different caste-groups and again each caste was sub-divided into many sub-castes which were endogamous and independent groups for all the practical, social and religious purposes. Though, the thumping majority of agricultural labourers belonged to SC and ST and had the lowest status in the societal ladder, which did not allow them to ameliorate their conditions rapidly in any sphere. Very recently the Government of Gujarat has established "Gujarat Rural Workers' Welfare Board," to set up and run welfare centres in the State for improving the standard of living and social and economic conditions of agricultural labourers. While 4 such centres did function in the district, it is premature to assess their impact on them. However, the scheme needs to be expanded both horizontally and vertically.

43. The economic conditions of the agricultural labourers in the district reflected in the level of incomes they derived from the agricultural and non-agricultural labour on one side and, on the other, expenditures incurred by them on the different items of
consumption for sustaining the lives of the members of their families. Agricultural labour was the main source of income of these labourers in the district. The percentage share of agricultural labour in the total annual incomes of attached & casual labour families were 83.8 and 68.1 respectively. It is suggested that their agricultural wage incomes should be supplemented through the provisions of cottage, village and small scale industries, especially in off-seasons. However, domestic work done by female members of the family of agricultural labourers was also an important source of income for the family.

44. It was found that even within a village, the incomes of the families of both the categories of labour -- attached and casual -- having the same size and number of earning members were not uniform as the attached labourers got employment at least on annual basis and the casual labourers got employed as and when farmers found it necessary to engage them. Their wages also differed because of the varied wage-rates for different farm operations. The average annual income per average family of agricultural labourers, irrespective of their categories was only Rs. 2012.0 in the district during the year 1979.

45. The other side of the coin is the expenditure the family could incur on different items of consumption like food, clothing, fuel, education of children, housing, foot wear, medical treatment, recreation, social and religious ceremonies, etc. The expenditure incurred on
different items of consumption by an average family of an agricultural labour of Bharuch district during the year 1979 was to the extent of Rs. 2455-00, of which 83.12 per cent was only on food, followed by 8.00 per cent on clothing.

46. A comparative study of the incomes and the expenditures of the families of agricultural labour revealed that each family had to have a deficit of Rs. 443.00 in one single year to make its both ends meet, which would be regarded as a very deplorable conditions of agricultural labourers in the district. A majority of them created debt for consumption purposes followed by social needs of the family. Nearly 87.0 per cent of their debts was borrowed from their respective farmer-employers on the mortgage assurance of their future labour to the concerned farmer-employers. As their economic conditions were very precarious they could not manage even required quantity of foodgrains for their members of the family. The issue of quality of foodgrains, therefore, found no place in their consideration. This was one of the main reasons for accepting cooked food or foodgrains even with low rates of wages. Similarly, due to poor economic condition, they could not purchase even required pairs of clothes for their members of family. Attached male agricultural labourers sometimes got long-used and torn clothes from their farmer-employers as a
matter of their grace, generosity and obligation. It is suggested that unless their per capita income rises, there does not seem any hope of their spending more on clothing.

47. Abject poverty also compelled the agricultural labourers to refrain from purchasing necessary text-books and stationery for their children's education and consequently they could hardly make any progress in that direction which resulted in their social and political backwardness. It is suggested that running evening and night classes seems to be the practical solution for providing facilities to educate the rural people in general and children of agricultural labourers in particular.

48. Again, health and recreation are necessary for raising and maintaining efficiency in agriculture. But their poor economic conditions did not permit them to spend even marginal amounts on these items. It is suggested that Village Panchayats with the generous financial assistance from (a) the Taluka Panchayat or District Panchayat and/or (b) Gujarat Rural Workers' Welfare Board can be developed as an effective agency for providing recreational and health facilities to our agricultural labourers of village level.

49. The debts created by the agricultural labourers for various purposes remained unpaid for long or never
repaid for one or the other reasons. For instance, the low level of the earnings of the members of their families, resulting in the progressive rise in their annual deficits did not allow the family or the individual members to repay the borrowed amounts to their respective creditors. Thus, it can be well said that our agricultural labourers born in debt, lives in debt and dies in debt. It is suggested that agricultural labourers can never be free from indebtedness unless statutory debt-reliefs or total debt-abolition are granted for funds borrowed from all sources and they are assured of supplementary sources of income especially during off-seasons.

50. The social and economic conditions of agricultural labourers could greatly influence their housing conditions. Normally, the agricultural labourers of the district resided in huts or hutments located in the areas of the outskirts of the villages. The conditions of their houses were very poor in terms of construction, sanitation, light, air and safety of their movable assets, if any. These conditions often create a situation for falling the victims of many contagious and seasonal diseases. It is suggested that a free-house-site and financial assistance in the form of loans and/or subsidy for construction of house should be provided to our landless agricultural labourers for solving their shelter problems. It is also necessary that bulk of the landless agricultural
labourers will have to be provided with subsidiary means of income if there social and economic conditions are to be improved.

51. Political awareness of the agricultural labourers in the district was not satisfactory. Inspite of the spread of political philosophy and the holding of many elections of political organisations from village to national levels, the agricultural labourers did not get the theme of politics. Inspite the seats so reserved from village panchayat organisation to Loksabha for the SC and ST communities -- which is the thumping majority of the agricultural labourers of the district -- only 217 of the total 4998 agricultural labourers of the district so surveyed for the study were the members of the different political organisations of the district. However, of these, 197 were the members of the 95 Village Panchayats. It is suggested that if their penetration in the political system would increase, greater would be their influence in bringing about pressures for raising their socio-economic conditions.

52. The social, economic and political conditions of the agricultural labourers were and deplorable. The low level of income and social status, massive illiteracy, abject poverty due to non-availability of gainful employment opportunity, insanitary residential places and houses, heavy indebtedness and lack of sufficient knowledge of political currents were the major factors
responsible for their miserable conditions. To pull them out from these conditions, it is high time to provide them with social and economic security measures on massive scale. The Central and the State Governments must take adequate steps to provide them employment on various programmes, projects and schemes prepared specially for rural development. The only option to ameliorate their conditions is to improve their purchasing power in all respects. It is suggested that the regular supply of the consumption goods under the Public Distribution System would go a long way in raising their purchasing power and improving their standard of living.

53. The modern age is characterised by rapid spread of industrialisation everywhere in the world and as its off-shoot organisation of their unions by the labour force. Though hundreds of unions of industrial workers have been functioning in our country, a very few unions of agricultural labour have come into being and most of them have been in their infancy.

54. The need of unions of agricultural labour require does not any emphasis. Unity and solidarity are basic foundations of any field of our economic activities as 'united we stand, divided we fall'. Various authorities and institutions had strongly pleaded the case for agricultural labour unions to safeguard the interest of agricultural labourers; to improve their working and
living conditions; to get the benefits of all the programmes, projects, schemes, plans, and laws and specific provisions made therein for rural people by the State and the Central Governments; to remove their economic, social, political and cultural weaknesses; and to create and maintain harmonious relationship between the agricultural labourers and the farmers.

55. The States in which the efforts were made to establish and operate the unions for agricultural labourers are Haryana, Punjab, Kerala, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. Though these unions are established on the lines of the 'Trade Unions Act, 1926', they could not make much headway there.

56. Insofar as the State of Gujarat is concerned, three unions of agricultural labourers, viz., the Agricultural Labour Association, the Gujarat State Khet Majoor Association and the Halpati Seva Sangh have functioning at the state level in agricultural sector. Similarly, three unions of agricultural labourers — the Dakshin Gujarat Halpati Union, the Kisan Sabha, and the Rural Labour Association — also been formed by different political parties for organising agricultural labourers under their respective folds in the districts of Bharuch, Surat, Valsad and the Dangs, however, the Halpati Seva Sangh has concentrated its activities on Bharuch, Surat and Valsad districts.
57. The Halpati Seva Sangh, the Dakshin Gujarat Halpati Union and the Kisan Sabha had arranged agitations, managed hundreds of strikes, observed satyagrahas, 'Dharnas', rallies, fasts and represented many times the issues regarding wage-rates and conditions of employment before the appropriate authorities at State and District levels for ameliorating the conditions of their members. Moreover, the Halpati Seva Sangh has taken steps to provide economic security to its members by establishing, managing and arranging various types of commercial and industrial activities and made available financial and non-financial assistance to thousands of people of Bharuch, Surat and Valsad districts.

58. There does not exist any formal union of agricultural labourers at the district or taluka level in Bharuch district. It is high time to establish and run at least one union at district level for the agricultural labourers.

59. The functioning of the four regional labour unions in the district has created inter-union rivalry which resulted in their inefficient and ineffective performance. They failed in attracting sufficient number of members for their economic viability and as a consequence they faced the problem of shortage of funds to undertake any constructive and welfare activities for their members. Only 28.5 per cent of the 4998 agricultural
labourers so surveyed during the year 1979 were the members of one or the other unions functioning in the district.

Further, it was found that their haphazard functioning created suspicion in the minds of members in regard to their degree of success in accomplishing their predetermined objectives. 50.74 per cent of 1428 members of one or the other unions had opined that their unions achieved little success in their operations. Thus, one can find that none of the unions could spread union philosophy among agricultural labourers of the district.

60. Absence of prudent leadership of the existing unions, lack of sufficient funds, multiplicity of unions, hereditary relationship between the agricultural labourers and the concerned farmer-employers, low level of literacy and education among agricultural labourers and apathy on the part of the State Government, social and labour leaders in organising the agricultural labour unions were the factors responsible for the building up of strong and prudent agricultural labour unions in the State in general and in the district in particular. Joint efforts of these agencies would definitely go a long way in generating, stabilising and expanding the agricultural labour movement in the district.

61. Our agricultural labourers -- the vulnerable section of our society -- live in a vicious circle of
dire poverty and social, economic and political backwardness. Unless this circle is broken through (i) providing them ample employment opportunities in all the sectors of our rural economy, (ii) building up of their strong and prudent local unions affiliated to their State level unions and (iii) protecting by government machinery their rights and benefits granted to them under various legislations and development projects and schemes, the chances of improving their work-efficiency for higher agricultural production & productivity and ameliorating their existing conditions seem very remote. Surely, it is not only a herculean task but also challenging and time-consuming. As an optimist let me hope of its accomplishment by the sincere joint efforts of our Government, agriculturists, social and political workers and their organisations and agricultural labourers.