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Growth of Agricultural Labour in Bankura District: Colonial Experiences

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Abstract

The colonial land revenue policies implemented by the British in India fundamentally transformed traditional agrarian structures, leading to widespread landlessness and the emergence of a class of agricultural labourers. These changes effectively destabilised existing land tenure systems that had been in place for generations. In regions like Bankura district in West Bengal, the repercussions of these policies were particularly pronounced. Bankura, often classified as a backward district, experienced significant socio-economic upheavals due to the imposition of exploitative revenue systems. Moreover, the agrarian distress and the frustrations arising from the colonial land revenue systems led to considerable unrest in Bankura. The issue of landlessness and the emergence of agricultural labour in the Bankura district is discussed in this article.

Keywords: Agricultural Labour, Bankura, Landlessness, Tribal, village community.

The foundation of India's traditional agrarian society was the harmonious coexistence of handicrafts and agriculture. Manilal B. Nanavati and J.J. Anjaria, in their book 'The Indian Rural Problem' argue that, "there was no distant class of agricultural labour before the 19th century". Significant economic and social transformations during the 19th and 20th centuries led to the rise of a sizable class of agricultural labourers and a new kind of social interaction in rural India. Historians say agricultural labour was not seen as belonging to a significant class before the eighteenth century. Despite the existence of domestic and menial servants, they were incredibly rare and did not identify with any certain tribe.

The Indian village community owned land in common or jointly before the colonial land settlement. This form of community is called 'Joint Village' by Badan Powell. He also identified a separate unit of village community that's called "severalty" or the "rayatwari village".¹ The colonial regime witnessed a huge political and socio-economic change In

India. Decline of domestic industries, breaking up the pattern of landholdings, rural indebtedness, rapid famines and epidemics; all affect the cultivators and artisans, and that is why one-third of the total could be turned into landless labour.²

In the colonial era perhaps one of the most marginalized and socially and politically impoverished groups was the agricultural labour force. One of the worst effects of the British administration was the explosive rise in the number of landless labourers. A home that received the majority of its revenue from agricultural wages in the preceding year is considered to be an agricultural labour household. Such households formed 24.7 per cent of the total rural households. “In 1931 agricultural labours formed nearly two-fifths of the agricultural population of India, their proportion virtually tripled from nearly 13 per cent in the late nineteenth century to 38 per cent in 1931.”³ In 1951 the agricultural population was 82 percent of the total rural population.⁴

A historic system of land ownership and cultivation served as the foundation for much of India's agriculture, with most peasants being either small landowners or tenants. Before the 19th century, every farmer in India kept working in his field with the assistance of his own family. There was no noticeable large class of agricultural labourers at this time. Sir George Campbell wrote “as a rule, farming is not carried on by hired labour.”⁵ In 1842 as the census commissioner, Sir Thomas Munro declared that there were no landless peasants in India, according to R.P. Dutt's book *India Today*. The picture indicates that the quantity was not considered to require statistical measurement, even though it is manifestly erroneous.

A change in the agricultural structure was brought about by the introduction of cash crops and the extension of British control. Large landholders started turning their properties into plantations as the demand for cash crops like cotton, jute, and indigo rose, forcing out numerous small farmers and renters. These uprooted peasants were compelled to work as agricultural labourers, leasing their land to larger landowners who had turned their properties into plantations that produced cash crops. This new class of agricultural labourers represented a significant change in the social relationships of rural India. Unlike the traditional peasantry, these labourers were not tied to the land they worked on. Instead, they were reliant on daily or seasonal employment, often facing exploitative working conditions and low wages. The emergence of this new social relationship further exacerbated the divide between the landed elites and the landless labourers. This new social relationship had profound implications for the rural population in India.

Table-1
Amount of the Total Rural Debt in British India

Year	Amount in Millions of Rupees	Estimated by
1911	3,000	Sir Edward M'Clagan
1924	6,000	Sir M.L.Darling
1930	9,000	Indian Central Banking Enquiry Committee
1935	12,000	Dr. Radhakamal Mukherjee
1938	18,000	Mr. E.V.S. Manaim

(Source: Surrendra J. Patel, *Agricultural Labourers in Modern India and Pakistan*, Bombay: Current Book House, 1952, p.56)

The decline of domestic industry, British land revenue policy, and rural indebtedness are all contributing factors to the rapid de-peasantization process. Surendra J. Patel⁶ argues that a transformation of traditional agricultural society which led to increasing indebtedness to the cultivators and land mortgages from the second half of the nineteenth century led to a rise in the number of agricultural labourers. He argues, “The traditional form of rural society began to disintegrate rapidly after the advent of British rule in India. This disintegration was reflected in the growth of an independent class of agricultural labourers”⁷ Bhowani Sen also argues that the British rule led to a transition in agrarian societies, he wrote:

“The monetization of the rural sector transformed the land into a commodity from the very beginning. Now the conversion of produce rents into money rents, the increasing role of money lending and the sale and purchase of land as a commodity- the cumulative effect of all these factors had been the passing of land out of the hands of the peasantry and the emergence of landless labourers as a distinct category in Indian rural society.”⁸

Agricultural labourers made up a very small percentage of the entire agricultural population throughout the final three decades of the 19th century. The proportion was-

Table No-2
Agricultural Labour in India

Years	Agricultural Labour in India (%)
1871-72	18
1881	15
1891	13

(Source: Surrendra J. Patel, Agricultural Labourers in Modern India and Pakistan, Bombay: Current Book House, 1952, p.12)

Table No-3
Number of Agricultural labourers (In millions)⁹

	1871	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931
Agricultural labourers	8.2	12.5	25.5	52.4	50.6	27.8	42.2

(Source: P Surrendra J. Patel, Agricultural Labourers in Modern India and Pakistan, Bombay: Current Book House, 1952, p.14)

Census data from 1931 showed that about one-third of India's agricultural population were agricultural labourers. All over India, the agricultural labourers formed the largest single group within the agricultural working class.¹⁰ In the 1872 and 1881 census report classification used to denote agricultural labourers, was ‘General labourers.’ It included both the rural agricultural and non-agricultural labourers including some urban labourers who were difficult to classify under any specific occupation.¹¹

India's rural economy has seen tremendous change in the previous few decades, which has had a profound impact on the country's economy. The concerning growth of the landless and ill-defined class of labour and the decline of the actual soil tillers have created a perilous situation in rural life. Dr Radhakamal Mukerjee said that the state of affairs in the hamlet "is connected closely with the growth of the landless class, which is both a social and economic menace to the country."¹² Daniel Thorner points out "agricultural workers from the most disadvantage economic groups in India today. Their wages are typically low; conditions of work are often onerous; and employment is frequently irregular. The level of living which their earnings permit is very meagre. Their daily lives, as it were reflected the problems of underdevelopment, underemployment, and 'surplus' population".¹³

The term 'agricultural labour' or 'agricultural worker' is used for all those who work in the fields for wages. The agricultural worker is, "a person who reports that he or she is engaged in agricultural operations as a hired labourer for wages for 50 per cent or more of the total number of days worked by him or her during the previous year."¹⁴ An agricultural labour family is defined as "one in which either the head of the family or 50 or more of the earners report agricultural labour as main occupations."¹⁵ According to the Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee of 1956, A person who desires his major or at least 50% income only from wage labour has been defined as wage labour in agriculture¹⁶. The agricultural population most commonly consists of the rent receiver, cultivators and field workers.

Different scholars have classified agricultural labourers based on their employment duration, kind of skills and types of remuneration. The official census data reviewed agricultural labour but did not attempt to make any analytical definition of agricultural labour. On a composite basis of classification, includes members from all the classes who engaged in the actual cultivation of land. It gives a high social stratification. Each of the classes further is divided into smaller groups. The landless labourers who performed unskilled labour and were paid poorly make up the lowest stratum, while the cultivating owners who are at the top perform only skilled labour. The census data deals with the agricultural population under the following terms:¹⁷

1. Non-cultivating proprietors, taking rent the money or kind.
2. Estate agents and managers of owner's farm.
3. Agents and managers of government farms.
4. Rent collectors, clerks, etc.
5. Cultivating owners.
6. Tenants cultivators.
7. Agricultural labourers.
8. Cultivators of Jhum, Taungya and shifting areas and,
9. Special crops, fruits, etc.

Five, Six, and Seven make up the majority of the agricultural population out of these nine categories; their percentage ranges from 90 to 98% of the total.¹⁸ According to wage patterns, the Agricultural Labour Enquiry Committee, which was established by the Government of India Labour Ministry before 1947, separated agricultural labour into two

categories: "attached" and "casual". "Casual" labourers were paid market rates and "attached" labourers were obligated to work for their employers regardless of their preferences and were typically not allowed to look for other employment.¹⁹ A distinction was drawn between "cultivators" and "cultivating labourers" in the 1951 census. A cultivator is a decision maker while a 'cultivating labourer' is any person "who receives rent in cash or kind in respect of land which is cultivated by another person."²⁰

The following classifications of agricultural labour have been established by A.M. Lorenzo in his book *Agricultural Labour Conditions in Northern India*²¹:

- (i) Cultivating owners.
- (ii) Tenant cultivators.
- (iii) Landless farm labourers.
- (iv) Field workers. (or Unspecified labourers)

The cultivating owners have their land, tools, and cattle, and cultivate their land with the help of their family. Hired help is also employed. They cultivate their lands hereditary lands and generally, they belong to a higher caste whose traditional occupation was agriculture. The Tenant cultivators are either statutory, occupancy, or non-occupancy, and cultivate rented holdings of land belonging to hereditary landlords. They also work on their cattle and tools depending on their family hands and casual hired help.

The landless agricultural labourers, sometimes known as the third class, lease out their labour to wealthy landlords and tenants while lacking capital and land. They are primarily drawn from the village's lower socioeconomic strata. Their work is skilful and is always in demand for such operations as ploughing, sowing, irrigating, marketing, etc. All family hands contribute their share to the family budget, and therefore, most of the females and children join in various agricultural operations. Under casual employment, they receive a cash wage but in permanent employment, their daily wages are supplemented by a customary grain allowance at harvest.

The last class of agricultural labour termed as "unspecified labour" represents miscellaneous labour who requires no special skill or experience in his career. Regarding this group, the census commissioner of India in 1911 remarked, "It is probable that the great majority of these labourers unspecified were in reality field labourers".²² They have no land and no capital, and their work is not specialized. This class is always mobile because its demand and supply are closely regulated by agricultural and industrial seasons. Therefore, during agricultural seasons, they lie at the mercy of well-to-do cultivators, and in the off-season, they depend on urban factories for livelihood.

The demand and supply of the 'general unspecified labourer' are very largely regulated by seasons. During the sowing and harvesting seasons, the demand for workers rises for agricultural work. As their work is unskilled and undefined, their wages are unregulated, though their work is of great importance and necessary in agriculture. Although it is said that there is no hard rule by which the task of each class is differentiated in actual practice, to a certain extent caste regulates the nature of work which falls in each group. This

classification excluded the rent receivers or non-cultivating owners and tenants, artisan and general workers, who were employed in public works and urban industries by residing in the village.

The works of the “unspecified labourers” may maybe agricultural, industrial or some kind of unskilled casual labour. In their frantic search for some employment, these labourers have to travel considerable distances, from one village to another, from one district to another and from one province to another. In addition to such migration for seasonal employment in industries, there is considerable movement of the labourers for agricultural work, especially for harvesting the rice and the potato fields of Bardhaman, Hooghly and Midnapore districts. All these seasonal movements indicate that the migrants move towards centres where the work is easier to find. Such centres are the areas where agriculture has been developed in recent times with the assistance of extended irrigation facilities.²³

Manilal B. Nanavati and J.J. Anjaria, in their book, *The Indian Rural Problem*, have classified agricultural labourers into three groups, field labourers, ordinary labourers, and skilled labourers.²⁴ The field labour includes the ploughmen, reapers, sowers, weeders and transplanters. This type of agricultural labour has a seasonal character. Surendra J. Patel classified agricultural labourers into four main types:

- i) Bonded or semi-free labourers
- ii) Dwarf-holding labourers
- iii) Under-employed landless labourers
- iv) Full-time free wage labourers.

The bonded or semi-free labourers do not have the freedom to choose their masters or jobs. This class has been generally termed as ‘agrarian serfs’. That indicates some form of feudal bondage. Royal Commission of Labour in India points out that this type of labour, “borrows money from the landlord under a contract to work until the debt is repaid. The debt tends to increase rather than to diminish and the man, and sometimes his family, is bound for life”²⁵. The bonded labourers are known by different names in different parts of India.

The dwarf-holding labourers are not included in the Census classification. It is challenging to distinguish their labour from that of landless agricultural labourers. They included sharecroppers who worked in agriculture and tenancy at-will renters. This type also includes small tenants with occupancy rights and smallholders, cultivating patches of land below five acres. The income from dwarf-keeping farming is usually insufficient for their livelihood. Hence, they are forced to seek auxiliary work as agricultural labourers.

The landless agricultural labourers are those who have no other occupation. They seek work as full-time agricultural labourers. But their employment is based on the sufficient demand for the service. Because of the limited demand for agricultural work, they are forced to stay unemployed for the rest of the years. They also included all those agricultural labourers who migrate for seasonal work. The work of these migrant labourers may be agricultural, industrial or some kind of unskilled casual work.

The full-time free-wage labourers are employed on an annual or part-time farm work. Unlike the bonded labour they are fully employed but they are free. The plantation labourers and farm labourers are included in this category. The economic condition of full-time free-wage labour is relatively better than the other three types. Surendra J. Patel said that they form a kind of ‘labour aristocracy’ within the agricultural labour.²⁶

The situation in the Bankura district of the colonial settlement is the same as the situation throughout India. Situated in the western region of the state lies Bankura, the fourth largest district in West Bengal. This area is within the Bardhaman Division. It lies between longitudes 86° 36′ and 87° 46′ east and latitudes 22° 38′ and 23° 38′ north. It is 6,882 square kilometres in size. The Bardhaman district borders the district in the north and northeast, with the Damodar River separating them mostly. Bankura is a region in Southern Radh that combines aspects of two distinct cultural streams: Indo-Aryan and native Aboriginal. It has been said that the Bankura district serves as the link between the Chota Nagpur plateau on the west and the Bengal plains on the east. The areas to the east and northeast are low-lying alluvial plains, like predominating rice lands of Bengal. To the west the surface gradually rises, giving way to an undulating country, interspersed with rocky hillocks. Much of the district is covered with jungles.

As a vigorous result of colonial revenue policy landless agricultural labour increased in Bankura district. The rich zamindars indeed tortured the subjects in the Bankura district during the Bhum kingdom period, but there is no evidence of land displacement of the rayats. During the colonial period, that picture changed completely. The Permanent Settlement of 1793 on one hand opened the floodgates for bringing new areas into cultivation and on the other brought major changes in land tenure systems in the Radh region, for instance, the traditional Mandali. Ghatwali and Pradhani tenures in Bankura/Purulia were gradually disappearing during the 19th century²⁷. William Wilson Hunter wrote, “The growth of a distinct class of day labourer in the district, neither possessing nor renting any land, is checked by emigration.”²⁸ As stated in district settlement reports by F. W. Robertson, “The people are so poor that there is no lack of hired labour available. The Bauris as a class exists mainly as labourers and a large proportion of them are landless men.”²⁹

Most of the people dwelling in the district of Bankura are engaged in agriculture directly or indirectly. The Adivasi and low-caste Hindu people of the district are engaged in handicrafts and work as labour alongside agriculture. The percentages of the Adivasis of Bankura gradually increased, particularly in the western part of the district. Even so, the geographical situation was not conducive to maintaining the heavy population. The colonial land revenue policy bitterly destroys the traditional ‘Ghatowali’ and ‘Mandali system’ of the district. Their existence was severely impacted by the colonial government and the land settlement system. The result was widespread debt among the Adivasis and the loss of land. The *Mandali* system was destroyed, and non-tribal proprietors of land converted the Santhals into rack-rented tenants or sharecroppers or landless labourers. Even the Bhumij

chiefs and *Ghatwals* become victims of moneylending Mahajans. Santhals and Bhumij lost their forests and surplus land following the zamindari abolition by the first quarter of the twentieth century. Agriculturally less productive land was left for the Adivasis.

As a result, the tribal peasants and agricultural labourers were left without sustenance in their home villages for a large part of the year. All over India from the 19th century, the number of agricultural and landless people increased rapidly in the district. Most of the Adivasis and low-caste Hindu farmers of the Bankura are small and marginal farmers. The chief problem of small and marginal farmers was limited resources. The site got more problematic and difficult in the southwestern portion of the territory where the irrigation facilities were not right and there was no alternative job. Every year, just one crop is produced, and it too depends on rainfall. The territory was becoming further engulfed in mass poverty. As a result, the small and marginal farmers have no other options except to work as farm labourers, wage labourers in non-farm businesses, or farmers in neighbouring territories.

Caste division is also important in the emergence and development of the working class in the production system of the Bankura district. In 1876, W.W Hunter in his Statistical Account of Bengal³⁰ divided the social hierarchy of the Bankura district based on different occupations.

Table No-4
Different Occupational Class of Bankura district

Agricultural Classes	Artisan Caste	Labouring Caste
Aguri	Kamar	Beldar
Bauri	Kansari	Bhalya
Tamli	Kumar	Chunari
Kaibara	LaheriSankhari	Kora
Koeri	Sonar	Nauk
Kurmi	Sunri	Patial
Mali	Sutradhar	Samanta
Sagope	Teli	
Sarak	Kalu	

(Source: W.W. Hunter, Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. IV, 1876. 1973, p. 240.)

In the Bankura district, there was no hard and fast rule for linking up castes with particular works in agriculture, industry or trade. In the census, the agricultural community groups of the district have been divided on the basis of caste. In general, the Kshatriya caste was established as Samanta, and Malla was established as zamindars and rich feudal lords. Kayasthas, and Ugra Kshatriyas are mentioned as middlemen like, *talukdars*, *mokararidars*. That's the role Brahmana also played. Even as *lakherajs*, they enjoyed barren land. Tilli, Sadgope, Vaishya have been mentioned as middlemen as well as wealthy independent farmers. The Goala, Brahmin and Tamuli *jati* households excluded themselves from hiring out manual labour because they considered it beneath their status as caste Hindus. On the

other hand, communities such as Santhals, Bhumijis, Khairas, Bagdis, Lohars and Bauris played a special role as agricultural labourers.

Dividing Bankura agricultural workers and unorganised workers is a difficult task. In the agrarian economic system of the district Bankura, there are three classes of agricultural labour found based on their work, duration and remuneration.³¹

- i) Sharecroppers
- ii) Wage labourers
- iii) Field labourers

Sharecroppers were one of the landless farmers of the Bankura district. According to O'Malley's writings, such raiyats were entitled to the right to chastise the land for a year or a season. A portion of the crop production had to be paid as rent to the landowner. This type of rent is known as '*saja*'.³² This system led to a kind of sub-feudalization in the countryside. Sharecroppers migrated as migrant labourers at other times of the year.

The second type of agricultural labour was wage workers. They were divided into several sub-categories. The other of them were daily wage workers. They were employed in agriculture as mercenaries on daily wages. There were also *krishan* or *mahindars*³³. They got a share of the production of the land they worked on. If they laboured on the land as well as supplied seeds and bullocks, they would have received half of the production. Another type of wage worker was *gatania munishor* engaged labour. They were not paid in cash. Sometimes their landowner would give a portion of the land for cultivation. This type of land was called '*batania*'³⁴.

Field labourers made up the third group of employees. They were landless farmers and unskilled labourers. They were in the worst shape. This division included the wage workers from the Santhal, Bagdi, Dom, Khaira, and Bauri communities, which were at the bottom of the agricultural activity scale.

The Adivasis and low-caste Hindu landless people in Bankura district have the nominal freedom to seek employment, their socio-economic reality reveals a landscape marked by significant inequalities and vulnerabilities. The landless people in the district were mostly irregular agricultural workers. Since they are free-wage workers, they are free to choose to work for any landowner. The compensation for their labour is often shockingly low, reflecting the widespread economic disparities within agricultural sectors. Wages can be provided in cash or kind, but even when given in kind (e.g., food, grain), the value is frequently inadequate to meet basic needs, pushing workers deeper into cycles of poverty.

Pay disparities existed between male and female workers as well as small labourers. The low compensation of casual labourers makes the problem of a short work year worse. Low annual income causes extreme poverty, which sometimes puts people in a difficult situation where they must borrow money from local moneylenders. This situation has prompted members of the working class to go outside the district in search of work. Thus, the Adivasi

and marginalized people were pushed to survival-oriented intermittent labour migration as a way of life.³⁵

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