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Study of agriculture labour: Bihar Tour  
notes from 10th to 13th April, 1968.

Purnia - 10th and 11th April, 1968:

On the 10th April, 1968, immediately on our arrival, we held discussions with Kosi Development Commissioner, Shri S.K. Chakravarti and the District Magistrate of Purnia at the Circuit House. Shri Chakravarti gave a resume of agricultural development following extension of irrigation facilities with the construction of Kosi canals. Most of the areas are under double cropping though in some lands even a third crop is regularly raised. In those areas where triple cropping is adopted, the yield per acre has gone up to 100 maunds per acre which fetch about Rs. 3,000. The average size of holdings in Purnia was 5 acres though large farms consisting of two thousand to 10 thousand acres also exist. Out of 12 lakh acres of total cropped area, irrigation was available for 2 lakh acres. The local labour could not cope with harvest operations and seasonal migration of labour was an annual feature. A change in cropping pattern was evident. Areas under wheat and maize had gone up. For instance, wheat area accounted for 50 thousand acres in 1963-64; it went up to 4 lakh acres in 1967-68. Maize accounted for 60 thousand acres. Agricultural labour received, at sowing and harvesting of crops, one-fourth seer of foodgrain for breakfast and half a seer of rice for lunch and in addition a cash wage of Rs 1.50. For harvesting operation he is paid one bundle out of 7 bundles harvested. Though the labour had their own houses, they were not masters of the land on which these houses stood. The Homestead Tenancy Act had not been enforced in all areas. Only settlement operations can enforce land legislation.

2. The educated people had started returning to villages and one can observe a number of so-called gentlemen farmers. Many Professors had given up their jobs and taken to agriculture. Forty per cent of the people are landless and only 8 per cent of the people in Purnia own 50 per cent of total cultivable lands. The Kamia system under which an attached labour has to work for his master to clear off his debt - it is a kind of agricultural bondage - has not been aggravated but it exists. Rural Works Programme has not brought much relief to agricultural labour largely because of the rider to 50 per cent of the public contribution. The schemes also are not well thought out. In order to supplement the earning of agricultural labour, poultry, dairy and cottage industries should be encouraged. Child labour does not exist. Motivation for the education of children is discernible though the incidence is not significant among agricultural labour households. Another general impression formed was that though the lot of lower class



has improved the disparities between the haves and have-nots have widened. In other words various benefits of the development programmes have not been shared equitably among different classes in rural areas. There has also been significant increase in the mechanisation of farm operations; motivation for better living is unmistakably evident.

3. In the evening we visited a village a few miles from the District Headquarters. The agriculture labour in the village were conscious and looked healthy and well-fed. A local teacher was their spokesman. They complained that their wages ranged from 8 to 12 annas per day. Two local landlords also joined the meeting. It appeared that there were two kinds of agriculture labour in the area - one was attached labour and the other was casual. Wages of the first category ranged from 50 paise to 1.25 rupees, but he had other advantages. The casual labour were paid higher wages. In any case, it appeared that the allegations made by the labourers were not quite true and that the wages were higher than what was indicated by them. Not many labourers in the village sent their children to school; only two or three of them did. Mr. Chakravarti who accompanied us, offered to them technical and other assistance for some additional activities which labour could pursue in the slack period. They appeared to be enthusiastic about taking up such additional work.

4. On the 12th, we visited three villages - Parasbani, Champavati and Sarsi. We held discussions with the Project Executive Officer at Sarsi. He observed that real agricultural development had taken place under I.A.D.P., Programme. The key indicators of development, such as, consumption of fertilizers, distribution of improved seeds and credit were more dependable now than under the Community Development Programme. The area of big-sized farms ranged from two hundred to one thousand acres of land. Three or four persons in the village are in possession of almost all the land in the village. This class of landowners who have taken only some advantage of production programmes. They have not been able to cover all the lands under improved seeds and other inputs. This was because they cannot afford to mobilise adequate resources including labour resources and look after the land themselves. It was, in fact, the farmers owning middle-sized farms ranging from 10 to 30 acres who had been able to manage these farms with relative success. The crop sharing practices also accounted for the tardy progress in consumption of inputs. Also the Bataidars are not allowed by the land-owners to take advantage of agricultural development programmes. As a result of the increased output, cultivators have repaid their loans and cleared off their old debts. They have constructed pucca houses, purchased tractors (there were 55 of them purchased in one year) cars or motor-cycles. Net income of a cultivator with 15 acres of land was Rs. 25,000.

5. Agriculture labour is mostly landless. The better off among them own homestead land consisting of three to four kathas



or one-tenth of an acre. Payment in kind shows an increase from 2 to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  seers in triple cropped areas. Their money wages have also gone up from Rs. 2 to Rs  $3\frac{1}{2}$ . Absentee landlords pay a wage of 8 annas to their labour but the labour in such cases have a much larger share in harvest. There are also cases of misappropriation of crops. The agent of landlord manages to show on paper an yield of only five to six maunds per acre whereas it is much more. At the harvest, a labour gets one maund out of 8 maunds harvested. In those areas where tractors are used in connection with harvesting of crops, he gets one bundle out of 14. As the yield of crops is more, the workers' share also gets increased. There is also a competition among cultivators for agriculture labour in some areas which has also resulted in rise in wages. Unlike Shahbad where cultivators give lands to agriculture labour, labour in Purnia have no lands of their own. The labour wear better clothes. He is aware that he is not going to starve as there is plenty of work available. He works only for four to six hours. Labour wants the wages to be paid in kind.

6. In Purnia, unlike other districts, old zamidars had not acted as an agent of development. They did not set up educational institutions. Santhals cleared the lands and zamidars occupied them. Therefore, there is not much appreciable change in the attitude towards education among agriculture labour, and only a few among them send their children to schools. Tribals are responsive to improved methods of agriculture. They take to development of poultry readily unlike the caste Hindus. The tribals have their own individuality and pace of development should take these factors into account. In the three villages we found that the traditional mode of payment of wages both in kind and cash held good in respect of traditional kharif crops. A new and somewhat more liberal mode of payment of wages has developed in respect of new high yielding crops, such as taichung, larma etc. The labour who had their own land and houses got one maund out of 10 maunds at the harvest and wages ranging from Re. 1 to Re 1.50 in addition to a day's meal. At some places, the labourers complained that they were getting a wage of Re. 1 and one day's meal. We found that the labourer was conscious everywhere and he did not hesitate to contradict his landlord.

7. We visited a few houses at Parasbani. The houses were neatly kept. Newly harvested wheat was spread in the courtyard. The children had taken rice, dal and vegetables. There were grains in the stores. This was a measure of the labourer's modest share in the affluence around him.

8. At Champavati, we found a farm partly mechanised. Wheat had been harvested and threshing was in progress. Labourers claimed Re. 1 to Re.  $1\frac{1}{2}$  by way of wages.

9. We wound up our visit to villages with a brief stay in a few labourers' houses at Sarsi. They did not possess any land and their houses stood on the land given to them by their landlords. They got half a seer of grains for breakfast or lunch. Their children did not go to any school. They were attached labour. Their share in the harvest of new crops, such as, larma and taichung was one maund out of 12 maunds and in the old crop one maund out of



9 maunds. Casual labour got more about Rs.1.50. In two other villages the labour said that their conditions had slightly improved though they had to work very hard.

RANCHI - 13th April, 1968.

On the 13th April, we visited two tribal villages of Chalagi and Anigara and in Khunti Sub-Division about 20 miles from Ranchi, to study conditions of agricultural labour. Unlike Purnia we found that agricultural labour in Ranchi District was generally not landless. In fact, all labourers in two villages had some lands and had their own houses. Their wages were also higher, ranging between Rs.1½ to Rs.2. But their bargaining power, on the face of it, was not better because production programmes in Ranchi District have not made any headway and, therefore, labour is not sure of employment all round the year. Though he has lands, its produce does not last more than two or three months and he is to seek employment for the remaining period of the year to maintain himself and his family. Chotanagpur agricultural labour is also better educated and he sends his children to the schools which are far more numerous in this area than in Purnia.

10. Owing to lack of irrigation agriculture in the two villages has not become a wholetime occupation. Productivity is also low. Prices have gone up and this has affected agricultural labour because he depends on local market for supply of foodgrains for major part of the year.

11. We found that the conditions of non-tribal agricultural labour were worse than those of tribal labour. There tribal labour also looked weak and emaciated. This was particularly because in tribal villages, tribal have lands and they belong to a homogeneous, well-knit and vibrant community.

12. At Chalagi a non-tribal agricultural labourer gets a wage of Rs.1½. He does not get, like the tribal labour, any food for lunch or breakfast because of prevailing sense of pollution. He owns about an acre of land. Of this four children none of which goes to school. The produce from the field lasts only two months.

13. The ex-mukhia in the village complained that the contractors at Hatia did not pay fixed wages for weeks. The Labour Officer, however, contradicted him but later admitted that there were a few cases of under-payment which were looked into and in which the payment was made.

14. Though tribal and non-tribal labour have a sense of pollution, there are communal occasions at sowing and harvesting of crops. They eat together but they eat the food cooked by themselves.

15. The period from July to September are the hungry months. Employment is not regular. Prices are high, villages are cut off to the outside world.

16. The menu of a labourer consists of rice, rice beer and leafy vegetables.



17. At the other village, Anigara, the people again complained of high prices and bad days. We found the village community a fairly live and vigorous body which lays down wages and enforces them. Violations of agreed terms and wages are punished. Children of labour go to schools. The employment is not regular though the Panchayat in the village sees to it that none starves. The wages for male labourer were Rs.1½ and for female labourer Rs.1. All labourers are in possession of lands and houses. People knew about the Minimum Wages which were fixed on 25th November, 1961 and which consisted of 3 seers 12 chhataks paddy and 4 chhatak rice or beaten rice for adult labour.

18. In bad months they depend on grain golas which loan out grains at a certain interest and also on money-lenders. A man borrowed fifty rupees and he paid sixty rupees by way of interest during the year. Family Planning has just been introduced and it is being practised in secrecy.

19. We visited a stone quarry near Tajna on our way to Ranchi. We found a large number of labourers engaged in the work. There were different sizes of slabs being cut and removed. Wages paid to the labourers ranged from Rs.25 to Rs.50 per head per week. There was an arrangement for supply of water to workers. The labourers looked healthy and well-fed but they did not send their children to school. Their village was closeby.

20. The number of cases filed under Minimum Wages Act was very poor as brought out by the following statement furnished by Labour Officer, Ranchi.

Year	No. of claim petitions filed.	Amount secured.	Pending with claimed amount.
1965	7	Rs.2877.44	Nil
1966	3	Rs. 802.08	Nil
1967	8	Rs.2296.66	3 for Rs.2286.75
1968	2		2 for Rs. 821.25

The statement shows that the Minimum Wages Act has remained a dead letter and that the administrative machinery set up for enforcing it does not measure up to the task.

Patna District: 14th April

21. On 14th April, I (M.S.) visited some villages in District on way to Bihar Shriff and Rajgir. near Bihar Shriff harvesting was in progress. He was happy with the harvest he has been able to get this year. He was complaining, however, of no



of labour. Though advance in age, he was working himself behind bullocks in threshing operations. Some members of this family, mostly women fold, were helping him. The difficulties, according to him, for getting labour, were of recent occurrence. It is only at high rates that he can persuade workers to join him. Being a person who had seen days when labour was cheap he found it difficult to adjust himself to the wage rates now prevailing. He said that agriculture was now more paying though he himself had to put in a lot of work for making it paying. The usual complaints about inadequacy of irrigation facilities and other inputs - seeds and fertiliser, etc. were hard. He was conscious that these would make his efforts still more paying. The problem still remains for him is that with more grain to be harvested, he will find difficulties in getting extra labour.

22. The same story was repeated by another group of farmers in a village between Bihar Shriff and Patna on my return journey, though because of the size of the farm the owner had to engage more labour. The labour engaged was casual and on being questioned seemed to get work more frequently than before. For a person who is willing to work, on the admission of labour, there will be no question of not living better. A fair number of children were on the farm because teachers were on strike. They were all in one school or the other. The workers with whom I had a talk had tiny pieces of land. They had come for work to help the bigger farmer in reaping his harvest.

23. An idea of how land pays could be had from another farm on the road about 20 miles from Patna. An old lady had got this farm on lease of three months and was taking a crop of onions. She was working herself on about 3/4th of an acre and for using the land only for three months, she had to pay to the zamindar about Rs.400/-. Income from it, according to her, calculations, will be about Rs.700/-. She had some margin of assistance from one of her male relatives. At another place, 3 old ladies were working on a vegetable farm. They were complaining about wage rates which were round 1.50 rupees. They had to put in about 4-5 hours' work. According to them, work of this type was available but not if higher wages demanded. They were conscious that what they got was less because in relation to the effort put in by the owner he got very much more.

24. In Bihar Shriff I visited a bidi establishment. In three small rooms but adjacent rooms, nearly 150 men and boys were working. The boys ranged from anywhere between 5 years to 8 years. They were used as helpers for tying thread on bidis which were rolled by a senior. The rate for bidi rolling was Rs.2.48 per thousand. Out of this helpers also had to be paid. The rate for a helper was about 40-50 paise a day, depending on the total output of the senior. The conditions appeared to be deplorable. Though Factories Act appeared to be applicable, there were no signs of the establishment being inspected at all.

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