Organising Rural Labour
Process and Experiences

Vol. 1

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Foreword

Progressive reduction in the incidence of poverty, unemployment and underemployment, improving the standard of living of the people in general and socially and economically disadvantaged population in particular, strengthening the redistributive bias of public policies and services in favour of the poor, deprived and handicapped have been the central objective of the 12 Five-Year Plans (1952-2012) which have been launched by the National Government so far. Empirical studies and researches conducted so far, however, have shown that the fruits and benefits of development have not uniformly, consistently and equitably percolated down to all the layers, causing in the process huge gaps in the social ladder and bringing in their trail many undesirable consequences. Inequality, inequity and indigence have emerged as the direct offshoots of inequitable distribution of resources on the one hand and denial of access to services, facilities and opportunities for total development of the people placed at the lowest rung of the social and economic ladder on the other. This process has been compounded further by a section of the indigent population getting bonded to those who constitute the rich, resourceful and influential sections of society. This imbalance or distortion in the development process has to be corrected if the central objective of planning is to be carried to its logical conclusion – i.e. promoting justice, equality and equity to the poor, deprived and disadvantaged sections of society.

Organisation of the rural poor is one of the instruments for removing this imbalance.

Conceptually speaking, an organisation is not just a mechanical assembly of women and men. It's a tool and instrument of change for something better, higher and nobler. It is an outlet through which the natural and spontaneous yearning of women and men for decent living accommodation, food, water, air, light, health, hygiene, environmental sanitation, long life and freedom for leading a clean and congenial existence for every human being has found expression for ages. This is how organisation of the unorganized becomes a powerful conveyer of the quest of millions of human beings who have been at the twilight zone of development, leading a subhuman existence, battling against poverty, deprivation, discrimination and subjugation for years. It is organisation which instils a sense of new awakening through which the individual wakes up from a culture of silence and helpless dependence for realisation of the dignity, beauty and worth of human existence.

The million dollar question which arises is this: Who mobilises and organizes the unorganized? Does government have any role in this process? What strategy and methodology is required to be adopted to mobilise and organize the unorganized? What steps need to be adopted to make the organisation sustainable and deliver the desired results? How does one evaluate the content, process and impact of an organisation on the health, happiness and security of millions of members who form it?

Organising the unorganized is certainly not a task mandated for any government. The latter may perceive and internalise the need for and importance of an organisation and may act as a promoter, facilitator and catalyst to promote and encourage organisations of the poor but may not be able to assume the direct responsibility of formation of organisations on its shoulders.

It was left to the late (Prof) Nitish Rajan De, former founder and Dean of the National Labour Institute to conceptualise a strategy and methodology of organising the unorganized rural poor/labour in the early '70s which could be said to be unconventional and unorthodox. The strategy lay in organising a series of rural camps for those engaged in organising the rural labour including the sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers. The first such camp was organized at a relatively underdeveloped and remote village, Bana Nabagram in the district of Burdwan, West Bengal, with support from the Ministry of Labour, Government of India and Government of West Bengal. Attended by 24 participants and with a duration of five days, the camp devoted considerable amount of time to the primary task – i.e. to identify the problems faced by the organisers of rural labour in the process of organising. This task was sought to be accomplished through discussion and churning of critical consciousness of participants in small groups. The groups discovered through discussion that some problems were tractable, some were not so tractable and solutions to both the problems were also found out by them. Identification of problems and their solutions led to the formulation of a strategy or plan of action for facilitating the process of organising the rural poor/labour. It also helped in identifying certain areas where support from various departments/ agencies of the government such as the Department of Labour, Department of Land Records and Survey, Department of Public Relations, etc. was needed to facilitate and accelerate the process of organising. Evaluation of the content, process and impact of the five-day camp by the participants themselves was the best highlight of the programme. It brought out in a totally open and participative manner the strength and weaknesses which inhibit organisations of the rural poor/labour.

Over 45 camps followed in quick succession and the experiment conceptualised and translated to action by Prof. De continued even after he ceased to be Dean of NLI; and continues even after his death. This is

on account of the fact that there could be no two opinions on the rationale and strength of the basic principle guiding the design of these camps – i.e. ownership and participation which was sound and sensible. The natural, spontaneous and wholehearted manner in which the participants identified themselves with the camp and contributed substantially to the conclusions of the camp speaks volumes about the meticulous professional manner (which is also unconventional and unorthodox) in which the organizers of the camp proceeded to conduct the same. The camps brought out clearly and candidly the factors which contribute to the plight and predicament of the participants (landlessness, assetlessness, indebtedness, bondage). This awareness was further reinforced when the participants were able to articulate their concerns and entitlements before the agencies responsible for alleviating the misery and suffering of the rural poor/labour.

Holistically speaking, the central message emanating from the camps was loud and clear: organize and bargain for your rights. It reinforced the strength and efficacy of what Sri V.V. Giri (former Union Labour Minister, former President of India and an outstanding trade union leader of more than five decades standing) had observed way back in the '50s, "**It is in the capacity to combine that labour has its best strength and the wherewithal of deliverance from injustice and oppression**."

Volumes have been written since such prophetic words came from the late Sri V.V. Giri on the myriad problems of numerous categories and sub-categories of unorganized rural poor/labour and on the undisputed need for their organisation. Innumerable grass root level organisations have also come into being. For years they have been relentlessly striving to break the narrow artificial walls dividing humanity, to arouse and awaken the masses from their culture of silence and dependence so that they can become partners of progress and advancement. Stumbling blocks which are mankind's own creation built on caste, creed, colour, religion and outmoded social customs and practices have no doubt halted the pace and momentum of this great journey of humanity in search of justice, equity, equality and freedom but have not been able to dislodge it from its great odyssey.

It is a very happy augury that the V V Giri National Labour Institute has compiled Rural Labour Camp reports/articles in two volumes, I congratulate Sri P.P. Mitra, IES, the Director General of the Institute, who has taken the initiative in this direction as also the leadership and direction provided by him to bring out these two voluminous reports. I wish him and the band of his dedicated colleagues all success in this endeavour.

(L. Mishra)
Former Union Labour Secretary

Preface

Problems and challenges faced by the rural labour in India are many both in terms of their magnitude and impact on the rural economy in general and rural labourers in particular. The magnitude and the growth of rural labour are also huge. According to the First Rural Labour Enquiry Report (1964-1965), the estimated number of rural labour households in the country was 17.9 million. Today, this has increased to 55.1 million, according to the Eighth Rural Labour Enquiry: 2004-2005. Another aspect of the rural labour household is the fact that almost 70 per cent (69.53) did not own cultivable land.

In this perspective NLI envisioned an imaginative programme in the form of holding rural labour camps with a view to conscientising the rural labour. The purpose was to assist the rural labourer – particularly the largest component constituted by landless agricultural labourers, petty agricultural producers, sharecroppers and rural artisans, belonging especially to the vulnerable sections – to critically examine the nature and character of reality through a conscious reflection of the reality of their existence.

First, the problem of rural labour should not be conceptualised merely as that of poverty. What emerged from the diverse experiences gained from camps organized at different places with rural labour belonging to different socio-cultural backgrounds is that a lack of empathy on the part of rural labourers themselves and on the part of people who are involved in the process of solving their problems as well, is one of the major obstacles to their development.

This resulted in a situation where, apart from conceptual complication, the understanding of causes of and remedies for poverty remained a half-hearted reflection and action for transformation.

Second, the socio-economic structure, designed and perpetuated by the socio-economically powerful and privileged sections was viewed as if emerging from without. Many policies, programmes and actions were mostly formulated and launched without disturbing the skewed nature of control over productive assets. In the existing socio-economic structure, the rural poor are unfavourably placed. As a result, they have been denied their due share in the gains from the development process. What is perhaps more disturbing is that majority of the rural labour is unaware of their hidden potential as a collective. Their understanding of their potential that, if they are organized, a vast regenerative capability would unfold and help them create a new reality, thereby liberating them from poverty.

Third, it was amply clear that lack of organization is the most serious obstacle to taking up any conscious decision and decisive action on the part of the rural labour.

Fourth, it was also felt that mere conceptual awareness and imbibing organisational skills and information are not enough. What is required is to assist them to understanding issues on which they should reflect for taking action for transformation. Therefore, the clarity of issues – which might range from the social, political, economic, cultural and psychological to understanding their interconnectedness and dynamics – is more important for any organisation to form and sustain and getting it institutionalised.

The camp reports in the two volumes clearly spell the need and rationale for conscientising rural labour. The reports also suggest relevant strategies to be adopted for organising rural labour.

For bringing out the two volumes of rural labour camp reports, I thank Dr. Lakshmidhar Mishra who has been kind enough to suggest the importance of the camps and also for his generosity in writing the foreword to these volumes.

I would like to place on record my gratitude to the editors and also to the members of the Editorial Team Dr. S.K. Sasikumar, Dr. Poonam S. Chauhan, Dr. Helen R. Sekar and Dr. M.M. Rehman for taking interest in editing and bringing out the two volumes.

I hope the volumes will be useful to researchers, students, academics, policy makers, trade union leaders and other stakeholders who are interested in the emancipation of the rural workers from their poverty and exploitation.

(P.P. Mitra)
Director General

The Rural Training Camps of NLI

Gerrit Huizer

Since 1975, India is drawing international attention through an imaginative programme working more or less along the lines of a "conflict resolution strategy". It consists of a conscious effort to stimulate and support the creation and growth of effective peasant organisations through rural leadership training programmes. This programme is carried out by the Rural Section of the National Labour Institute (NLI) in the form of rural labour camps.

NLI is a semi-autonomous agency sponsored by the Ministry of Labour of the Government of India and supported in some ways by the ILO. It dedicates a large part of its attention to research and advising activities in the field of industrial democracy. Since early 1975, its Rural Section is dealing with rural labour organisation including research and leadership training activities.

The need for peasant organisation has of late been increasingly emphasised in India; and growing disparities and conflicts in the rural areas has been noted. In particular, it was felt that in spite of the best intentions, nothing much could be done to change the conditions of the rural poor. The only remedy is that the rural poor have to be organized to help themselves. That alone can give them confidence and strength to fight against the injustices and take up constructive programmes for their economic upliftment. When organized, the poorest of the poor will also realise the dignity of the personality and important role he or she has been playing and will have to play. The organisation of the weaker sections of the people will further strengthen the base of parliamentary democracy. And those organized will then influence the trend of discussion in legislatures and the pattern of politics outside.

The only type of organisation to achieve this is a kind of trade union organisation as was indicated. Peasant organisation, however, is a complicated affair in India for a variety of reasons. When looking at the peasantry in India it should be taken into account that there is a great variety of peasants and that it is practically impossible to make overall generalisations.

One general consideration is important, although with the reservation that in each State the actual situation varies from these patterns, the inequality of land distribution. From the 26th National Sample Survey (covering 1971-72) it can be seen that about 10 per cent of the total rural households are well-do-do farmers or rich landlords, together owning 53 per cent of the operated agricultural area. On the other hand, there are the poor peasants – either landless or owning up to 2.5 acres (one hectare) – constituting 60 per cent of the rural households but owning only nine per cent of the land. In between is a group of middle peasant or small farmers, 30 per cent of rural households owning

37 per cent of the land. It has been noted that this inequality is worsened by a similar maldistribution of access to credit, private as well as public, and a concentration of political power. As can be summarised:

Thus, numerically, the peasant bourgeoisie constitute a small minority of the peasantry, about one-tenth of the total number of households. But their might in the sum-total of peasant husbandry — the quantity of means of production to the peasantry and the amount of produce raise by them — is undoubtedly predominant. They are the masters of the countryside. The position of the middle peasantry is precarious. It is clear that the development programmes such as agricultural extension, community development and rural credit have until now generally benefited the top 10 per cent of landholders and the better-off of the middle farmers particularly through the Green Revolution. This disproportionate development has led in part even to a worsening of the condition of the 60 per cent of the small and landless peasants, but particularly to an acute sense of deprivation and unjust treatment by official agencies, leading to an alarming situation of unrest in many areas. This has been officially noted.

It is clear that the growing power and interest of the rural elite can only be neutralised and the balance of rural development be owed to the benefit of the poor, if the latter achieve a considerable bargaining power. Therefore, if the rural poor have to effectively meet the resistance of the rural rich to changes, it is essential to ensure that the rural poor remains united and maintain their solidarity.

The NLI Rural Section, therefore, directs its efforts to train rural leaders purposely not to the better-off leaders which are — consciously or not — the target group of a harmony-based community development programme but to persons who come from the poorest 60 per cent of the rural population.

Since the initiation of the rural labour camps programme in early 1975, about 15 such camps have been held in different States of India. In these camps 30 to 70 participants, potential rural leaders, have been together for five-six days to receive some fundamental training in detecting local problems and grievances, knowledge of the laws relating to minimum wages, bonded labour abolition, tenancy rights, in basic leadership skills, etc.

The NLI Rural Section staff consists of persons who all have some measure of practical experience of work in rural areas after academic training. Some have been involved in organisational activities, others in some kind of research or in a combination of both. Discussing and evaluating each other's work, the more experienced and sensitive persons help their colleagues to overcome some of the attitudes, which are distrusted by the peasants, but that urban and academic training, particularly the social sciences, seem to give. In this way a constant in-service training is going on.

Selection of the places where a camp is to be held: selection of participants

Since the problem of the rural poor exists on a large scale all over India in more or less similar ways, camps could be held almost anywhere. Various considerations have been taken into account in the selection of places where to hold camps.

The first camps, with a strongly experimental character, were held in areas where effective peasant organizations of one kind or another had been operating. These camps were particularly useful as a learning experience for the staff of the NLI Rural Section. Generally, a site was chosen in consultation with the national or state authorities in an area with which the decision-makers in the Central or State Labour Ministry or the staff of NLI were especially familiar or with which they had some kind of ties. Another criterion which was generally considered important was the presence of a strong commitment of the local administrative officers (often the District Magistrate) to the solution of the kinds of rural labour problems the camps were dealing with.

Once an area was chosen the local administration played a crucial role in the selection of 30-70 participants. In the first camps, participants were selected state-wide but later, in order to concentrate efforts more efficiently, selection was limited to a district. In those cases, however, the participants still came from widely scattered places. In order to have a certain similarity in the issues to be dealt with later within the districts, specific regions were chosen – e.g. a block, a smaller administrative unit. For the last camps, in order to facilitate contact between participants in the follow-up stage, they were selected from a few clusters of villages within the block. These clusters are groups of villages which are within walking distance from each other.

In some of the first camps the participants were generally cadres from the established rural trade union organisations of INTUC and AITUC (the national federations of the Congress Party and the Communist Party of India respectively). This happened in the camps in West Bengal and Kerala. Although the NLI Rural Section staff itself learned a great deal from these camps, it was felt that as a policy the less politicised and yet unorganized peasants should benefit from these camps rather than those who already had ample organising and political experience (and who at times seemed to use the camp more as political platform than a training opportunity). The main bulk of the individual participants were chosen by the local administration at the district and the block level. A few women were purposely included in most of the camps and have proved to be highly motivated and at least as active as the average male participants.

Criteria which were established for the local authorities for use in the selection of participants were:

1. being landless or semi-landless;
2. being rather young;
3. being vocal and with potential leadership qualities;
4. being lower caste or tribal; and
5. being non-political.

Preparation for the camps

The strategy utilised by NLI to prepare a camp is gradually coming out of its experimental phase. It contains a number of stages which through feedback and evaluation discussions among staff, involving also peasant participants is increasingly applied in a planned way.

1. After an area is selected, the staff becomes acquainted more profoundly with the socio-economic characteristics of the area through available documentation, government reports, sample surveys, statistics on land tenancy, population, economic activity, etc.
2. In the three weeks before a camps is being held, the participating staff members go into the area on short field trips, selecting villages in random way so as to become acquainted with the local situation. The first visits imply some kind of scouting in the region interviewing peasants and also local landlords here and there so that an overall picture can be formed about the most important problems.
3. Consecutively visits are being made to selected villages where special problems for poor peasants exist. Rapport is established with poor peasants. Through informal interviews, separately and in small groups, some of the most blatant problems and grievances are detected and analysed and steps which villagers themselves have been taking are discussed.
4. The participants chosen by the local authorities for participation in the camp are visited – if they happen to be at home — or information about them and the problems they represent is acquired from relatives or neighbours.

In a few cases some of the officially selected participants proved, upon closer scrutiny during the pre-camp survey, to be “friends” of the local landowners which made them unacceptable to their peers. Such persons were replaced by others who were more in agreement with the criteria. Generally, in the pre-camp survey, a few outstanding local leaders or potential leaders who were not on the list were discovered through the group interviews and discussions. They were then also invited to the camp in addition to about 50 initially selected participants. The final number of participants generally fluctuated between 30 and 70.

Conducting of the camps

The actual process of conducting of the camps — which varies considerably from one camp to the other — was studied utilizing the reports of past camps,

information from former participants in areas visited, and one direct camp experience (January 19-24, 1977 in Purenea District, Bihar).

The camp is generally held in a vacant school or a similar building with the number of large rooms and possibly one big meeting hall. The place is generally chosen in a village or on the outskirts of a small town. All participants and the three-to-five person staff dwell and eat in large rooms, as habitually, on the floor covered with straw and blankets. The plenary sessions are held in the meeting hall. Each participant receives the minimum wage in his State and free board and lodging. They are also given summaries of the most important laws regarding minimum wages, abolition of the bonded labour Act on redemption of rural indebtedness, tenancy regulations and homestead rights. Even if people cannot read, they will take it back to their villages where there are always some literates among the young people. Each participant gets an official badge with his name.

The first day the camp is inaugurated with some pomp generally by a State-level minister. The official speeches draw attention to the progressive legislation existing and the need to organize in order to get it implemented. After the official part is over the participants are given a chance to get to know each other and each other's problems in a plenary session – everybody, including staff and a few selected local officials (Labour Inspector preferably) – all sitting on the floor. Because of the informal atmosphere thus created the participants are not hindered by their habitual attitude of fear and awe shown in contact with officials. Each participant gets about 10 minutes to tell something about himself/herself and the problems faced. This act, during which each is urged to speak gently while all the others are listening, sets the tone for the rest of the plenary sessions. The participants generally prove to be eloquent speakers, clear and without phraseology. After this session, informal contacts between the participants and between them and the staff create an atmosphere of common interest.

The second day the participants are divided in five-six small groups, each representing a cluster of villages. The participants are asked to exchange and discuss now not only their individually felt problems but issues which their respective villages are facing. The small groups are supplied with flap paper and are asked to discuss informally and then summarize and list their cluster's main grievances and issues.

Within a few hours, this is done by the participants with hardly any guidance from the staff. The groups formulate quite clearly their commonly felt grievances and issues with a priority as to which are most serious. After this, in a plenary session, the items noted by each small group on the flaps are explained by one of the most vocal representatives, with some concrete examples to all the participants and the staff. The staff later tries to summarise the whole discussion.

On the second day finally small group-discussions are held again to discuss solutions to the issues brought up earlier. These are also summarised on flaps and brought into the plenary session.

On the third day of the camp some group games are held which are taken over in an adapted form from industrial management psychology. These are mostly the Star Power game and the Tower Building game. Through these games – a kind of role-playing – participants experience a process of polarisation between groups, the powerful versus the powerless (Star-Power game) and one of growing collaboration between different sections of the powerless among each other (Tower Building game). In the plenary group discussion following the games the processes experienced are recounted and analysed by the participants themselves and finally brought into broader perspective (if this is still needed) by the staff. The games have partly a recreational function but are also designed as an introduction to the discussion of strategy linking the games to the real life situation. An additional purpose of the games is to involve the more silent participants in the discussions – e.g. through reporting on their game experience.

The fourth day is then dedicated to the strategy of organisation to pressure or act in favour of the proposed solutions. Particularly in those camps in areas where certain organisational activities and forms of struggle have occurred in the present or past, highly interesting recounts are heard testifying to the considerable organisational talents among the poor peasants. Some refer to small, spontaneous local efforts reacting to too blatant abuses. In other cases they refer to the gradual building up of a larger region-wide organisation such as an association of tribal interests or a poor peasants' organisation indirectly sponsored by some urban based political party. There was among the peasants a considerable awareness of the tactics used by the landed elite and sometimes the recount of quite imaginative counter tactics (including legal tricks) used by peasants. Successful cases, as well as dismal failures, due to shrewd tactics used by landlords, oppression and mistakes made were amply discussed. It was quite obvious from the cases recounted that it was the rigidity and harshness of landlords towards even minor demands and rights which radicalise the peasants and non "outside" agents as landlords sometimes claim. The overall picture appears as one of considerable potential for organisation but very severe obstacles hindering its realisation (see preliminary evaluative observations at the end of this report).

A difficult problem coming up in the strategy discussion was how to unite groups of poor peasants with different interests and grievances on their minds. There were the landless who wanted higher wages, sharecroppers who wanted the (legally required) registered tenancy and tenants who wanted the distribution of plots of land or large owners beyond the legal ceiling. The kind of problems most strongly emphasised varied from

region to region. Also a distinction was made by the participants between demands and rights.

During the strategy discussions some of the participants who had leadership qualities and experiences which qualified them for broader region-wise organisational activities came to the forefront. In some cases, however, the presence and rather strong presentations of these leaders had such an effect that the more timid, but potentially able, people remained too much in the background. In some camps where the majority of the participants have no organisational experience at all, it took more inputs from the side of the staff with examples from elsewhere to get an effective discussion of solution strategies going. In some areas people were so oppressed that it took a few days even before they started to consider it feasible at all to do something towards a solution of their grievances. In all camps, however, the discussion of conflict resolution strategies took place. In one camp (Palamau, in Bihar particularly regarding "bonded labour") the need for a follow-up camp for a limited number of potentially dynamic participants was felt and this was carried out a few months later, then leading to the beginning of an effective organisation where such a thing had never existed.

The last day, in order to promote the search for a concrete conflict-resolution strategy for each village, the small groups, each representing a cluster of villages, come together to discuss possibilities for themselves.

Those possibilities are later brought into the plenary session and an overall strategy for the area may emerge – or at least a number of concrete activities on a broader than village scale can be set in motion. Agreements on follow-up activities and appointments for meeting again are made among the participants. Also some of the staff members will return to the area.

In the final sessions also concrete aspects of organizational activity are discussed – how to call an assembly in a village, to raise fees, to elect officials, to make accounts, etc. In some camps labour officials were present to explain the legal provisions for the formation of a rural trade union such as minimum number of members, regular statutes, etc. Fulfilment of these requirements is needed to give a union legal status and protection. In the end the staff members have informal talks with several participants individually to discuss concrete problems, help with advice and evaluate the camp experience with them. The camp is then closed with a ceremony, sometimes with a prominent speaker present.

Follow-up of the camps

Particularly from some of the last camps emerged various ways in which the participants follow-up on their camp experience. Different activities could be noted:

1. Some participants start to solve their own particular cases – e.g. refuse to be "bonded labourers". If they achieve their purpose, others in their environment can be stimulated to do the same. If the case is not won, the need is felt to form a group of those who suffer the same fate and to act collectively.
2. Others, particularly those who are not worse off but feel strongly embittered about the landlords' behaviour, start to get a number of people with more or less similar grievances together to discuss a common approach and start to form a local organisation. In a few cases a fee was even being collected in the beginning.
3. Some participants who have the advantage of special preparation (being literate, having worked in towns, etc.) start to help a variety of individuals or small groups in their surroundings with presenting their cases to the appropriate authorities. In cases when those concerned also start to meet regularly together to discuss the results of their dealings, the beginning of an organisation emerges.
4. Some participants of the camps have, after their return, immediately tried to discuss among their peers certain issues which obviously created divisions or made the peasants weak in confrontation with landlords and moneylenders. In some areas this was the quarrelling over distribution of the yields of certain products (shellac, or wood) from government lands. Elsewhere the problem of exaggerated liquor consumption is a reason for rural indebtedness. During the camps special attention was given to the habit of drinking alcohol. It was emphasised that in various cases women's organisations played a crucial role to combat this evil.
5. In a few cases where some kind of local organisation already existed the camps proved to be very useful in training people belonging to these groupings together so as to create a kind of exchange and the beginning of a broader network in which the local groups can operate more effectively – e.g. in a local strike for minimum wages – to ensure that poor workers from neighbouring villages are not brought in by the landlords.

Although quite a few such possibilities of follow-up action were observed in different areas, it is too early to make any generalising conclusions or concrete recommendations. A great deal of down-to-earth and thoughtful efforts are obviously resulting, which prove again now peasants are quite able to work for their common betterment and to defend their interests in a constructive way if an appropriate climate for such efforts is being created.

In this respect, it should be noted, however, that although the training in the camp contributed to the creation of a good climate for peasant interest articulation, the local environment as such was generally found to be less favourable, in fact often a serious obstacle. Most former participants, particularly

those who immediately became active, had been intimidated or were harassed by the local landlords who found their interests threatened – more concretely, those whose blatantly abusive approach was questioned by the victims. Only a few former participants had immediately given up as a result of this. Many were in the course of also bringing such acts of harassment to the notice of the police authorities or other competent agencies. Unfortunately, however, it was found that in only a few cases did these local authorities react promptly and in not a few cases did they covertly or overtly choose the side of the landed elite. It must be said, in the view of the peasants, the power of such local authorities is so overwhelming that it does not occur to them that authorities in the higher echelons of the State or National bureaucracy could be more willing to implement the laws in a just way.

Peasants seem to be perfectly able to work towards a solution of their problems and the conflict – situations they are involved in in an appropriate, orderly and legal way provided they find support or at least no opposition from the local administration. It would be enough, in most cases, to assure a climate in which peasants can bargain in an organized fashion for a lawful solution of the conflicts created by the landlords. The latter generally are the ones who commit all kinds of offences against the existing legislation, a thing that peasants rightfully want to correct so that the government's progressive plans and development efforts can take place proportionately to the benefit of all.

Preliminary observations on the camps

Although interviews with a number of participants in various parts of India and participation in one camp are of course not a real basis for a serious evaluation, some observations could tentatively be made.

One of the outstanding aspects of the preparatory work and the actual carrying out of the training camps is the fact that the development workers of NLI staff involved try to be maximally sensitive to the opinions and grievances of the poor peasants, to use the "dialogical approach" as they call it themselves (following Paulo Freire). They consciously try not to have pre-conceived ideas or plans as to how peasants should conduct their affairs.

The NLI staff is learning this approach by trial and error. Unfortunately a training in the art of dialogue, and particularly listening, has not been a crucial element in the preparation of social planners and administrators, and even social researchers have been taught to work with preconceived questionnaires and other research techniques which block rather than foster a sensitive rapport with local informants, not to speak of dialogue. The camps give ample opportunity to correct this bias.

A great deal of the knowledge existing on the Indian rural villages consists of sample survey data. Since, in the questionnaires utilised to carry out these

surveys hardly any items are included in tensions and conflicts, it has been difficult to get an impression of the way the poor peasants feel about the discrepancies which are statistically obvious. Even the Report of the Ministry of Home Affairs (see footnote 1, p.3) classifies and quantifies the number of clashes between poor peasants and landlords, but this gives hardly impression of how peasants actually feel about all kinds of injustices committed on them. The camp situation was a good occasion for the staff and particularly the officials present to get a deeper insight in the poor peasants' situation and their efforts to overcome the problems. This effect will be strengthened by a few cases of an on-the-spot follow-up action-oriented research related to peasant organisation which will be carried out by some NLI staff members in collaboration with the Indian Social Science Research Council and the Planning Commission.

It was encouraging to observe how even completely illiterate peasants know how to describe (often in colourful language) and analyse their situation and to verbalise their grievances once they are in an appropriate climate for doing so. They have a surprisingly clear awareness of how, particularly by the large landlords, land and other resources are wasted or not optimally utilised. They are also quite aware that much of the yield of their own toil is being wasted on conspicuous consumption and the acquisition of status-symbols in the cities.

Their bitterness about these things was generally mixed with a measure of good humour even when they talked about the risk they were running of retaliation from the landlords because of the fact that they had dared to attend the camp. It was a confirmation of their own and their peers' dignity that they took such risks.

Care is taken not to discuss peasant problems through sweeping generalisations, but rather to cautiously study each local situation on its own merits. While, for example, in some villages in a particular area the majority of the middle farmers are felt as the main exploiters by the poor peasants, in other villages it is the big landlords, while middle farmers, or some of them, do not arouse an antagonistic attitude among the rural poor, but are even considered as helpful. A great deal depends on the way the present situation came into being historically speaking. In areas where small peasants have lost out, or were evicted, by middle farmers and landlords, people react differently than where a certain traditional balance between the poor, the better-off and the rich has prevailed since time-immemorial. It could be observed however that on the whole, the introduction of commercialised agriculture, extension work, community development and the "Green Revolution" has disproportionately benefited those who were already relatively strong and that this was almost universally felt by the poor peasants as an injustice to be corrected. The carrying out of action-oriented research in some areas where camps have been

held should also be helpful to the local peasant groups in determining their policies.

An important benefit from selecting camp-participants from clusters of villages which are at walking distance from each other proved that the participants, once they start to experience the usual obstacles, can get in touch with each other and also provide moral or other support. A former participant working all by himself without such support, more easily falls back into hopelessness and bitterness if resistance from above against his promotion activities is strong and sustained (and it generally is). In several cases it was found that the participant's village attracted some people from neighbouring villages from which no one had participated in the camp to inquire and ask for assistance in organising activities. The camps clearly have a radiating effect in the areas where they are held.

An interesting side-effect of the camps is that a few district-level and higher officials who generally deal with local problems through their subordinate officials are confronted directly with a good number of village life situations. The environment in which they usually meet peasants is a setting in which peasants feel not at ease or even fearful and in which they behave over-politely. After a few days together with their peers and some officials in an informal atmosphere, peasants speak out their minds with great frankness and surprise many officials with their cunning and often witty but sharp analysis of their own situations. The camps give local and higher level officials a chance to get a more realistic picture of the situation in the rural areas, and the majority of the people's feelings about this situation, than statistics and official reporting does. It particularly corrects their bias that peasants are as stupid and ignorant as they appear to be in the normal setting which is characterised by an oppressive climate. In the setting of the camp it is even possible for peasants to openly denounce certain neglects or acts of corruption by some of the officials present. Officials not accustomed to be put to shame publicly, promise betterment and generally appear to be sincere in this. The dialogue which results from such mild confrontations shows the peasants some of the difficulties the officials have to face, particularly lack of transportation facilities which makes it almost necessary for them to rely locally on means put at their disposal by the elite to whom they then feel obliged. Most officials interviewed in relation with the camps were quite thrilled and motivated, in spite of the criticism they had to allow. In several cases also the district and State level authorities have expressed the utility of the view-from-below type of information which the pre-camp survey and the camp itself supplied them, and which had not reached them through the normal hierarchical channels. In some cases even prompt administrative action was undertaken, coming from this level.

Communication from the top down seems to be considerably more effective than the other way around. In official speeches of encounters in the camp the high officials concerned strongly expressed their interest.

One of the most important characteristics of this new rural development strategy (the conflict-resolution strategy) is that it does not require a big additional financial input. Rather, this strategy promotes a more equitable distribution of the existing inputs for the on-going programmes. It is designed to help peasants to bargain themselves for a less disproportionate utilisation of the locally available productive resources. This is an advantage not only from the economic point of view, but particularly from the psychological perspective. It tends to give peasants a feeling of satisfaction that former trends – particularly the gradual deterioration of their own situation, which they felt to be unjust – is being corrected or even reversed. This kind of satisfaction has proved to be on many occasions a strong motivating force. One of the mistakes that even well-intentioned development planners tend to make is to take an analysis of the present situation in the region concerned as a point of departure. In many development projects, the past frustrating experiences of the local people and their basic need for a correction of injustice done to them, is not taken into account. An example is the uneven land tenure situations which presently exist in many areas. The extent of the disequilibrium and the way it came into being is often not taken into account – not to speak of the need to correct this situation first before any other input will impress people as designed for their benefit (rather than of those who have in their eyes benefitted too much already).

For those who are more deeply acquainted with the way of thinking of poor peasants, it is well known that they generally look at their present situation in a historical perspective. In most cases they know that of their fathers or grandfathers and they cherish the return to those good old days, when many people owned their own plots. They are also well aware of the fact that a deterioration in their situation has come about not only as a result of population increases (although they do take this into account) but particularly through economic forces of the market economy, utilised skilfully and often ruthlessly by larger landowners, merchants, middle farmers and moneylenders to profit at the cost of the majority of small people. This "underdevelopment" has left a strong feeling of injustice and resentment among the poor peasants, which cannot be overlooked. It has been demonstrated at several occasions that when justice is done to peasants' grievances in the first place, and this corrected situation is taken as a point of departure for new development efforts, peasants react quite enthusiastically.

The 'conflict resolution strategy', as applied by NLI's Rural Section in rural labour camps appears an imaginative and effective contribution in this respect which deserves national and international support.

Annexure I

Some Problems, Conflicts, Solutions and Strategies Discussed in the Camps

It is almost impossible to report in this context on all the problems, conflicts, situations, ways to overcome these and the strategies and tactics used, as they came up in the camp and the pre-camp surveys or the post-camp interviews in some cases. Some, however, are so outstanding that they should be briefly mentioned to give an impression of the tremendous odds the majority of the poor peasants have to face in their efforts to get a just share in the development which is taking place.

It is quite striking (and apparently a surprising discovery for the few government officials present) what a clear insight peasants have to their problems and their background. They recount with considerable detail cases of illegal practices committed by landlords and rich farmers, not only regarding clear-cut issues such as not paying the minimum wage, employment of "bonded labourers" or practising of caste discrimination but also of the shrewd strategies landlords use to avoid the application of the ceiling law by dividing their estates into small parts for distributing to beneficiaries who are all relatives or servants. These are exposed with all details and considerable indignation. In a few cases such land has been forcibly seized by landless peasants who felt it right to take a stand since it was the landlord who had committed illegalities.

Particularly in the face of such continuous illegalities, peasants are acutely aware that most development efforts officially undertaken for the solution of their problems do not correspond to their basic needs. They prove particularly critical of some of the huge investments made. Examples were special input-intensive pilot projects, impressive marketing facilities (such as the 50 local markets financed through the World Bank in Bihar), easy credits for the purchase of tractors to middle farmers, etc. In the "view from below", such expenditures are conspicuously not for the benefit of the poor and in fact create considerable distrust and bitterness among them. Such projects do not basically challenge or correct the unjust situation from which the peasants are suffering.

A problem which creates a great deal of frustration among the poor peasants is increasing unemployment. Official statistics are confirmed by many concrete stories. Particularly resentful were the accounts about landlords who let parts of their land lie fallow without need; a fact which indeed could quite frequently be observed in some rural areas. The rapid introduction of tractors among the middle and rich farmers, stimulated by ample credits from the government, makes hundreds of ploughmen superfluous. In a few cases desperation rose so

high that sabotaging tractors was mentioned as a possible reaction to this trend. In some areas weed-killers were creating a similar problem making the work of many women superfluous.

It was encouraging to observe how peasants in some cases on their own account and without women being present, brought up the issue of equal wages for women in the camp. Particularly among the poor peasants the wife's contribution to the meagre family income is as much needed as the husband's. In this respect poor peasants are apparently advanced compared with their middle-class and rich colleagues who ostentatiously keep their wives at home.

"Bonded labour" was a frequently discussed problem which could sometimes be immediately solved because of the authorities' determination to help in its abolition. This is a form of bondage in which a labourer, in order to pay off a loan, works a number of days free or at a wage much lower than the usual rates for a moneylender, often a middle farmer or rich landlord. Since extraordinarily high interest rates are charged, people sometimes work for years to pay off (if they ever pay it off) relatively small loans. Although this form of labour is prohibited in India, it was brought up in all camps and pre-surveys because of its widespread existence. There were quite a few "bonded labourers" (or "semi-bonded labourers") as participants in some camps. During the field visits, a few cases of "bonded labour" were found in almost all villages visited. Participants in the camps have been helpful in terminating bondage either of themselves or of some of their peers, thanks to their newly acquired knowledge about the legal provisions and the government programme. Prosecution of landlords who maintained this system has, however, hardly ever occurred.

Another serious problem the poor peasants brought up, and of which they are very conscious, is the issue of caste discrimination. Although since the early fifties in the census data of India no reference to caste is being made and precise figures are therefore not available, it is quite obvious to all people concerned that the majority of the agricultural workers and a large part of the small peasants belong to the scheduled castes and tribes. Although discrimination based on this distinction is anti-constitutional, in the daily life in the rural areas it is a common practice. This kind of discrimination is also practised among the poor peasants themselves (some of them belong in fact to the high castes) and is one stumbling block in the way to effective unity. Caste alliances (with certain landlords) are given prevalence sometimes over common interests. It was one of the good effects of the camps, and the frank discussion of this topic, either formally or informally, that such barriers could be overcome. This happened particularly through the atmosphere of togetherness created, in which also the staff participated.

On the whole, it was found that even in areas with little organizational activity going on, peasants had a clear and concrete insight into the local

power relations. They know their landlords, the ways they support each other, the ways local officials are related to them and other aspects of the power-structure and its functioning, in considerable detail. Not always do peasants have a clear vision on how to cope with the overwhelming economic and political power of the local elite. They often found themselves rather powerless and realised quite clearly that unionisation was facing or would have to face tremendous odds. Thus, factional or inter-party strife proved to be in some camps an internal obstacle for peasant unionisation. Where more or less official political groupings of different types had been operating, such divisions could lead to certain contradictions between participants. These kinds of contradictions, however, seem to be taken for granted and as an unavoidable part of political competition in a country with a democratic electoral tradition. On the other hand a tactic which was applied in several cases by an emerging local organisation was to take advantage of divisions existing among the rural elite such as the rivalries between certain factions. Sometimes action is undertaken against one or a few particularly abusive landlords (those who are considered a bit exceptional, even among their peers) and purposely leave the other elite members out of the picture. Thus no united opposition will be provoked.

Another important strategy, discussed in the camps and carried out in several cases was not to initiate demands which are very far-fledged. Demands which have a reasonable chance of finding support from local authorities or which do not challenge the prevailing system too much, but are clearly a correction of exaggerated and abusive exploitation, have the best chance to be achieved... a thing which gives a considerable boost to growing organisational efforts.

A common obstacle encountered at times by peasant leaders when they embark upon common action concerning grievances or basic rights is imprisonment on false accusations or other attempts to intimidate or bribe them. Several participants recounted such experiences, and not a few camp participants had suffered, or were expecting to suffer, some kind of retaliation by the landlords in their villages. The fact that they then knew that many others in the area suffered the same dilemma, helped to bolster their strength.

In a few areas, it was found that peasants had been kept ignorant about the laws protecting their rights but in most areas some kind of official and electoral propaganda had been enough to make peasants aware of the illegal behaviour of their landlords in different ways (eviction, tenancy rates, minimum wages, usury etc.). They were also aware that the government machinery, particularly at the local level, was not equipped or prepared to implement the legal provisions. They expressed themselves quite cynically about these things and in some instances even about the camp itself, pointing out that altogether this was another bit of talking about problems and solutions without any concrete

action being taken. Not without humour it was noted that in this place (the camps) they at least got a few days of proper minimum wages and good food.

In the last days of the camp, however, such criticism tended to vanish when the participants discussed that. Then at least they could plan together with people of some neighbouring villages or areas about a common strategy. In camps in areas where not much organising effort had been going on before, the discussion of commonly-faced problems and conflicts as such was experienced as encouraging and enough to initiate some attempt at common petitioning or even initial organisation. In some cases, right during the camp, common activities were immediately planned or petitions discussed utilising the presence of some of the competent – and apparently well-intentioned — government administrators.

Annexure II

Some Impressions on Rural Unrest in India

In order to assess the impact of the camps, field visits were made to villages in various regions where camps had been held. These visits were made in a more or less similar way as the beginning stage of the pre-camp surveys undertaken by the staff of the NLI Rural Section.

However, since altogether only about 50 villages out of the 550,000 existing in India were visited in a few parts of India (Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar) only general impressions can be given. Some observations, however, come so strongly to the foreground in practically all cases (and are also confirmed by the existing literature) that it may be worthwhile to note them, albeit with some reservations. During these visits the official statistics indicating a gradual increase in the number of agricultural labourers and a decrease in the number of small farmers, tenants and sharecroppers and the decreasing level of living got ample confirmation through many dramatic life histories. One sign of the increasing awareness of frustration among the peasants was the fact that in several villages, people bluntly informed the visitors that they did not see much use in answering all kinds of questions. They had generally, however, such strong grievances in their minds that, in spite of the not always very subtle interview strategy utilised, the peasants spoke quite frankly about their problems with considerable bitterness, after realising that they were attentively listened to. Thus the reaction of the poor peasants to their worsening situation could be verified.

The 1969 Ministry of Home Affairs Report based its alarming conclusions on an inventorisation of cases collected through its official channels from all over the country, in the years 1967 and 1968. Supposedly, those were years of relatively widespread agitation in the rural areas as compared with the preceding years. In the Annexure I to this Report a numerical account is given of the cases reported on agitations for land to landless, for an increase in wages of agricultural workers, landlords versus tenants, for rehabilitation of persons displaced due to construction of dams and against increase in levy. In these cases several hundreds of peasants were involved.

During field visits to rural areas one gets the impression, however, that many more cases of clashes, tenants being forcibly evicted, huts being burnt, small-scale strikes being organized (and mostly lost because workers from elsewhere were brought in) occurred at the village level than appeared in the official reports. Of all the villages visited there was hardly place where open clashes had not occurred at one time or another over the last few years. These were related with frankness by the peasants concerned. On discussing such cases with officials at the district level it appeared that not infrequently they

were unaware of such events occurring in particular villages. Apparently these had not been reported to them by local officials.

Irregularities and atrocities committed by large and middle farmers against their labourers or tenants may be more widely commented upon among peasants than the cases where agreements had been achieved between conflicting interests. But on the whole one gets a picture of the rural scene as one riddled with injustice, lawlessness and a great deal of violence introduced from above. One middle-sized farmer who had agreed to pay higher wages to his workers told how he was pressed by his colleagues in the area to put the clock back. With few notable exceptions peasants complained that in conflict resolution efforts they generally found the authorities in their own locality against the law and on the side of the economic power-holders. There often seems to be a contradiction between what higher authorities know and are willing to correct, and what the local level authorities do. And they are the kind of government the peasants are regularly confronted with. One result of this is an erosion of the legitimacy of the local government in the eyes of the poor peasants, who on the whole, are deeply respectful to law, order and government administration as such. This erosion did not occur in those areas where authorities had on their own account or thanks to effective peasant organisations (on a smaller or larger scale) supported the normal legal procedures effectively. In several cases it was found that large landlords have their own private armed guards or a team of strongmen to intimidate the poor peasants and keep them "in their place". In other places local police authorities were found to act immediately on false accusations made by landlords against active peasants and quite a few peasant leaders had the experience of being in jail for a few days in such a way. There were, however, also cases where local officials had resisted the habitual temptations and taken action against illegal practices of landlords.

Care was taken to interview large and medium-level land-owners and farmers in most of the villages visited to get their point of view on the local situation. In the case of capitalist medium-sized farmers, who have benefited considerably from the various development projects and schemes a certain frustration was noticeable too as a result of problems they experienced. In some cases, like in Kerala, where agricultural workers are well organized and earn more than the legally established minimum wage, the rising demands of workers in addition to the rapidly rising costs of other inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides and tractors (and their maintenance) was felt as a threat to continuing progress. Middle farmers who formed part of the market economy and had expanded by taking over land or other resources from small peasants, felt themselves in turn increasingly threatened by, what they called "traders". These were often big absentee landowners who had gone into business and dominated the fertilizer and pesticides supply (as dealers for multinational or national corporations). Although at present less acutely felt as the frustration

of the small and landless peasants, this problem may well gain dramatic proportions in the near future and give the middle farmer also a rebellious attitude.

In some cases their information regarding payment of minimum wages, possession of land in agreement with the ceiling laws and the nonexistence of bonded labour contradicted that given by their peasants or outsiders. In other cases where local problems were discussed with large landowners as well as peasants, the existence of doubtful practices was generally recognised but explained by the fact that it had always been that way. A few landlords bluntly recognised irregularities they committed, blaming their peasants for laziness or unwillingness or even rebelliousness stirred up by outsiders. This last point has possibly been true in some areas, but it would be self-defeating to blame the overall agrarian unrest on such forces.

In this respect lessons could be drawn from history. It was noted that the strongly increasing unrest and violence occurring in various rural areas in the years immediately before and after Independence (1947) could only be contained by legislation and implementation of the abolition of the zamindari system of landholding. The same author noted the present growth of conflicts in practically all states of India at the local level, in a more complicated way, due to the differentiation of group interests. The present agrarian and labour legislation existing in India would permit — in fact prescribes — an effective solution. It is well known, however, that the implementation is seriously hindered or openly opposed by vested interests at various levels. The only way to cope in a democratic way with this resistance would be to allow or help the under-privileged and poor peasantry to gain effective bargaining power to support the administration in an effective implementation of the laws.

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Rural Camp at Bana Nabagram: Some Observations

Bhupendra Srivastava

Introduction

That the various developmental efforts in the field of agriculture including the benefits of the so-called 'green revolution' have not reached especially large numbers of sharecroppers and landless labour hardly needs to be substantiated. This has become a much talked about phenomenon in various forums in the country and has set in the process of critical examination of broad socio-economic frameworks at the highest policy levels in the government, political parties and in academic circles. A growing realisation of the need to improve the conditions of the rural poor by providing them with a proper share in the economic gains of their labour, although existing in the past among selected sections of the society, has now become a widely shared issue which calls for immediate action.

A cursory glance at the conditions of development in rural areas brings out certain facts more vividly. The partial success of such efforts as implementation of government legislation regarding land holding, introduction of modern technologies in agriculture and utilisation of loans, fertilizers and improved varieties of seeds by a vast majority of the rural poor has been variously attributed to social, economic and cultural forces operating within the village communities as well as the nation as a whole. Out of the various explanations for this state of affairs, one thing that seems to underlie the situation and is all pervasive is the lack of proper motivation and an organized effort on the part of the sharecroppers and landless labour to utilize the facilities provided by the governmental and non-governmental agencies. The experiences of the past two decades in India as in Asia have clearly and categorically shown that unless the sharecroppers, the landless labour and the rural poor as a whole organize themselves with a view to protecting their rights and working as catalysts in the proper functioning of the governmental institutions engaged in providing such vital services as adequate supply of inputs, credits, marketing and other ancillary services, any meaningful diffusion of innovations and breakthrough does not seem to be possible. The organization of agriculture labour, thus, is a necessary if not sufficient condition for ensuring the proper share in the gains of their productive activity, channelising their energies in the pursuit of economic betterment and improving the conditions of work and quality of life.

It is within this context of existing socio-economic realities that the National Labour Institute has embarked upon the programme of organizing a series of

rural camps for those engaged in organizing the rural labour, including the sharecroppers and landless agricultural labour.

The first such rural camp was organized at a relatively underdeveloped and remote village, Bana Nabagram, in the district of Burdwan, West Bengal, with support from the Ministry of Labour, Government of India, and Government of West Bengal. The camp was held for a period of five days from February 27 to March 3, 1975. Twenty-four rural labour organizers from five districts of West Bengal participated in the rural camp. The participants represented five political parties. Quite a few of them belonged to scheduled castes and tribes.

Programme objectives

The basic objective of the education programme has been to help the organizers of rural labour to take up educative roles in order to arouse and expand the level of consciousness of rural poor with regard to socio-cultural conditions, economics of land distribution and agrarian relations. We believe that this heightened awareness of the realities can be brought about through the processes of reflection and action among the rural poor which in turn can set in motion the organizing process of a self-generating and self-regulating type. The organization thus formed will be based on fundamental choices in the outlook, predispositions and value systems of the vast majority of the rural poor who will no longer seek refuge in the culture of silence and of apathy but will actively create and participate in a culture of voice and of commitment.

The first requisite, therefore, has been to help the organizers of rural labour to acquire and to sharpen their behavioural and attitudinal skills in such areas as motivation, leadership, problem solving, decision-making and conflict resolution based on behavioural science research and knowledge. Particular emphasis had to be placed on developing organizing skills suited to local conditions and geared to existing problems. In summary, the specific objectives of the programme can be stated as follows:

i) Organizing skills

— To gain an insight into one's own behaviour and attitudes with a view to effecting self-growth and development and to develop the ability and competence to establish inter-personal relationships based on openness and mutual trust.

— To understand the dynamics of group working and to examine the relevance of the processes of interaction among group members to the effectiveness of teamwork.

— To comprehend the dynamics of inter-group relationships in all its manifestations and to examine the consequences of utilizing competitive and collaborative strategies in different situations of inter-group conflict.

— To acquire behavioural and attitudinal skills in such areas as motivation, leadership, problem-solving, decision-making and conflict resolution.

ii) Problem identification

— To develop critical appreciation of such socio-cultural realities as their attitudes to the caste system, concepts and techniques of family planning, the dowry system and the like and to examine their relevance to the organizing process.

— To create an awareness of the economic realities with particular reference to agrarian societies in India at local, regional and national levels.

— To diagnose the problems of the rural labour and their impact on the socio-cultural life of the rural poor.

iii) Strategies of action

— To search for alternative strategies of action to deal with such problems which have a direct bearing on the organizing process.

— To devise ways and means for effective utilization of resources and facilities provided by various governmental and other agencies.

— To think of a concrete plan of action with a view to accelerating the process of organizing and developing commitment to it.

— To identify specific areas where support from government departments and institutions can be provided to facilitate the process of implementing suggestions.

Methodology

The methodology of the programme was based on a dialogical process between the staff and the participants who together deliberated upon problems and issues in small groups. Unlike the conventional approach to teaching, a minimum number of lectures were used. Our pedagogy of education is based on the assumption that people who experience realities are not only capable of but in fact are in a better position to reflect upon their experiences; to identify and diagnose the problem-areas and to seek meaningful solutions. This methodology therefore calls for creating a climate conducive to a free and open exchange of ideas and information among the participants. Thus, for the first part of the objectives, experiences were generated through simulated exercises and specially-designed games to provide an insight into their own skills and to help them acquire and sharpen their behavioural and attitudinal skills. For the second and third parts of the objectives, the participants worked in small groups and were encouraged to identify their own problems and search for alternative strategies of action.

The programme was conducted in Bengali.

Expectations of the participants

The participants at the beginning of the programme were encouraged to share the expectations with which they came to attend the camp. This was of

considerable help to us in providing a definite focus to the programme and in designing the programme accordingly. Some of the expectations were as follows:

— To learn ways and means to bring about improvement in the educational and literacy standards of the rural labour.
— To devise strategies to face challenges posed by prevailing social conditions, non-availability of year-round work and implementation of laws for the benefit of rural labour.
— To learn about the role of change agents in rural areas — their attitudes, skills, etc. which will make them more effective in their roles.
— To learn about techniques to deal with the social, economic and cultural problems of the rural labour which come in the way of organizing.
— To examine various alternatives to bring about an improvement in the standard of living of the rural poor.
— To explore various possibilities of encouraging the small farmers to adopt innovations in agriculture.
— To learn about and adopt techniques to stop the eviction of sharecroppers, to ensure their rights in land and to provide shelter to the agricultural labour.

Programme contents

The contents of the programme can be broadly divided into five themes. The major points of discussion on each theme and the issues arising out of these are presented under separate subheadings. What follows then, is a summary account of the problems raised, issues discussed and alternatives generated and not an exhaustive account of the deliberations.

Socio-economic realities and need to organize

A number of sessions were devoted to the critical examination of the socio-cultural and economic problems of agrarian societies of West Bengal in particular and India in general. Such issues as the dynamics of oppression, problems of land holding, agrarian relations and existence of acute poverty in rural areas were deliberated upon.

In his inaugural address, Shri Pradeep Bhattacharya, Minister of State for Labour and Animal Husbandry, Government of West Bengal, stressed the need for the rural labour to organize itself especially in a situation where disparity among various sectors of Indian society was enormous. Examining the issues in historical perspective he highlighted the reasons that have hindered the emergence of effective organizations of the rural poor. He expressed the hope that leaders of all political parties should unite on one platform to face the problem of the widening disparity in the country. He reminded the participants of the changing expectations and rising aspiration specially of the younger

generation living in the villages, who no longer accept rising unemployment in the rural areas as a matter of fate. Nor do they believe in old ideals and old values. They want to establish their rights in an organized way and this has to be the responsibility of the organizers of the rural poor to accelerate the process of organizing.

Dr. Gopal Das Nag, Minister for Labour, Government of West Bengal, who was to inaugurate the programme, could not be present because of unavoidable circumstances. His address was, however, delivered in absentia. According to Dr. Nag, it is for a lack of organisation and consciousness that the landless rural labour could not benefit much from amelioration measures of the government. Unless the rural masses organize themselves and utilise their collective strength for realising their long-felt needs, there is no hope for them, no future different from their present state of total distress. He expressed hope that the training camp will produce such organizers of rural labour who in their turn will spread the knowledge they have gained at this camp to their areas of operation.

In addition to the exercises, one specially designed games in order to provide insights into their skills, quite a few sessions were devoted to the discussion on problems of land holding in India and its various ramifications, legislation and regulations relating to rights to land and its problem of implementation and problems of bonded labour and their socio-economic implications. Shri D. Bandyopadhyay, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, discussed with the participants problems of land holding with cases from West Bengal. He also shared information about the conditions of the rural poor in the states of West Bengal and Bihar and highlighted not only the economic but also socio-cultural implications of prevailing conditions of the rural poor. Of particular interest was the discussion on bonded labour in which cases from the State of Uttar Pradesh were presented. The discussions particularly helped the participants to broaden their horizons by becoming aware of the prevailing conditions of the rural poor not only in their areas of operation but also in the neighbouring states.

Shri B. Sarkar, Director of Land Records and Survey, Government of West Bangal, dealt at length with the various legislations relating to the rights to land particularly in the State of West Bengal. He also shared his vast experience in this area and highlighted some of the problems of implementation of these legislations. The participants deliberated upon these problems and also examined the possible ways and means of making legislation an effective instrument of ensuring rights in land. Other issues like minimum wages for the landless agriculture labour were also discussed and their implications examined.

Prof. N.C. Mitra, Department of Law, Burdwan University, highlighted some of the problems the organizers might face in seeking to effectively

organize the rural poor. He analysed the presence of a number of interest groups in rural areas and examined the complexities of interaction among them.

Shri B.R. Bhagwati, President of the Indian National Trade Union Congress, in his address acquainted the participants with statistical data in support of his conviction that poverty in the rural areas was on the increase and that our failure to provide land to the landless labour was to a large extent responsible for a much slower economic growth of the country. He felt that two things that call for immediate action are: first, to implement and press for framing laws for the benefit of the rural labour in the light of trade unions and, second, to implement minimum wages for the landless agriculture labour. And this is possible only when the rural poor are able to organize themselves. The progress of the agrarian society and also of the nation lies to a great extent in the ability of the landless agriculture labour to organize itself.

Shri K.V. Raghunatha Reddy, Union Minister for Labour, highlighted the importance of rural organizations in the prevailing conditions in the country. He cautioned the participants to take into account the reality of the caste system and such other forces that might come in the way of the organizing process. Small peasants, he felt, should also be included in this organisation of the rural poor and should not be treated as an enemy. Once organized, the rural poor can become a powerful instrument of political and social change. He urged the participants to understand and appreciate the philosophy of India's culture of tolerance. Organizers must be tolerant and must act within the context of Indian culture. They should also have a missionary zeal to deal with socio-economic problems of the rural poor. Faith and conviction are two important virtues which are important for the organizers to inculcate in themselves. Unless political awareness is created in the masses, legislation alone will not be sufficient to deal with the complex problems of agrarian societies.

Shri Gurupada Khan, Minister for Land Revenue, Government of West Bengal, in his address outlined various causes for the prevailing poverty in the rural areas. Increasing pressure of population on limited resources can be identified as one such cause. Tracing a brief history of various land reforms laws, he urged the organizers of rural labour to get their demands fulfilled and to exploit the resources and facilities in an organized way. Such problems as employment in rural areas, he felt, can be tackled through rural labour organizations.

Problem identification

Considerable time was devoted to the identification and diagnosis of problems that the organizers of rural labour face in the process of organizing. The participants worked on this task in several small groups, shared their experiences and ideas and reassembled in the community hall for further discussions. In response to the question as to whom to organize, the participants

were of the opinion that the landless labour of both sedentary and nomadic types, sharecroppers and small peasants should come within the fold of their organization. Some of the problems identified are as follows:

I. Problems within their control

These refer to those problem areas where the participants themselves can initiate positive action and can have influence over the course of events. They can take the initiative, exercise control and take meaningful steps in dealing with those problems.

— Prejudice with regard to caste, community, religion etc.
— Lack of effective communication between employers and employees, between organizers and the rural labour and between one region and another.
— Misunderstandings created by rumours of all sorts among the rural labour and also the organizers.
— Lack of proper motivation, aspiration and sense of sacrifice among the organizers themselves.
— Lack of faith, conviction and sense of determination among the organizers.
— Lack of self-awareness and self-confidence.
— Lack of knowledge of the system and dynamics of exploitation.
— Problems like addiction and other social evils.
— Lack of educational facilities.
— Lack of medical and other health facilities.

II. Problems beyond their control

These refer to those problems that call for action on the part of other agencies. The organizers themselves may have little or no influence over these.

— Problem of implementation of minimum wages for the agricultural labour.
— Problem of getting proper share in production.
— Problems of recording sharecroppers' names in settlement records and proper implementation of land recording laws.
— Problems of getting loans and financial help.
— Lack of shelter, clothing and food.
— Social respect for all regardless of caste, group, and occupation.
— Participation in the process of administration in rural areas.
— Rising prices and cost of living in rural areas.
— Problem of alliances between the landlords and the police.
— Guarantee to provide work to the rural labour throughout the year.
— Capitalistic infiltration in agriculture.

— Lack of security for the organizers as well as the rural labour and sharecroppers.
— Liberation from indebtedness.
— Lack of understanding and sympathy from governmental and non-governmental agencies.
— Inadequate and ineffective government plans.
— Lack of social recognition.
— Improvement of cottage industries.

III. Suggested solutions

The participants came out with the following suggestions as possible solutions to these problems:

— Provision of free education for all including adults.
— Supply of seed, fertilizers and implements on interest-free credit.
— Developing a sense of interdependence and co-operation between the organizers and those who are to be organized and also among the organizers themselves.
— Setting up of co-operatives where each member deposits a part of his produce voluntarily.
— Availability of loans from banks without many strings and cumbersome procedures and other sources of financial help.
— Close co-operation between the government and the organizing agencies.
— Test relief to provide work to the rural labour throughout the year.
— Cultural programmes where everybody can participate.
— Complete nationalization of the grain trade.
— Formation of peasant-worker societies.
— Setting up of tribunals to resolve issues related to wages.
— Abolishing individual ownership of land.
— Introduction and maintenance of price parity between industrial goods and agricultural goods.
— Development of agro-industries.
— Formation of societies/associations with the representatives of workers at the area, block, district and state level for the purpose of:
  (i) Implementation of wages;
  (ii) Land reform for the benefit of landless labour;
  (iii) Distribution of land; and
  (iv) Providing employment for the whole year.
— Creating a sense of faith and self-confidence through direct communication.
— Making the rural poor aware and conscious of the history and impact of exploitation and oppression. Helping them to arouse their consciousness so that the rural poor no longer accept a fatalistic view of life.

— Liberation from different forms of addiction and gambling through education.
— Improvement in health conditions, provision of shelter and liberation from hunger.
— Proper wage structure and its implementation.
— Planning for full employment and irrigation plans so that agricultural work can be done throughout the year.
— Proper implementation of land reforms laws.
— Employment of agricultural labour in cottage industries.
— Compulsory rationing of essential commodities for the agricultural workers.
— Utilization of following mechanisms with a view to creating awareness and making them conscious of the realities:

(i) Night schools;
(ii) Adult education; and
(iii) Audio-visual methods.

— Making the rural poor conscious of their vital role in production processes and in the national economy.
— Initiating movements of various kinds including mass movements to organize the rural poor.
— Improvement in agriculture through the introduction of modern techniques and better inputs.
— Providing social recognition due to the rural poor.

Organizing process: a plan of action

The participants deliberated upon various steps that can be initiated with a view to facilitating the process of organizing among the rural poor. They worked in several small groups and examined the pros and cons of various strategies and their relevance to specific local conditions. What follows is an integrated account of the steps suggested by the participants themselves.

— To organize the poor peasants, sharecroppers and landless agricultural labour through the movements of implementation of wages and recording of sharecroppers' rights in land during the settlement and survey of land.
— To help the rural poor to organize themselves by creating social and political awareness among them.
— Formation of strong and effective committees at area, block and district levels with a view to:

(i) Stopping the eviction of sharecroppers;
(ii) Recording the rights in land during settlement; and
(iii) Protesting against the injustices

— The villages where sharecroppers and poor peasants are in a majority to be selected first in order to make them aware of their situation through:
  (i) group discussions;
  (ii) cultural action for social change;
  (iii) processions and slogans; and
  (iv) propaganda against casteism.
— Representatives of the rural poor from all areas to be encouraged to form committees at local, block and district levels under the banners of political parties. Action for this to be initiated in selected villages first.
— A movement for creating awareness through education, for ensuring legal and other facilities — like rights of sharecroppers, minimum wage, land distribution, etc. — to be initiated under the banner of political parties and by selecting committed leaders from amongst the agricultural labour.

Need for support

The rural labour organizers were able to identify certain areas where support from various agencies will facilitate and accelerate the process of organizing. It will also help them to gain confidence in their attempts to solve the problems of the rural poor and will provide a significant source of encouragement for the organizers and also those who are to be organized. Given below are the areas where they feel they would require help from various agencies:

1. Department of Labour

(i) Implementation of wages.
(ii) Tribunal for resolving disputes between landowners and agricultural workers, to make a tribunal an effective instrument of conflict resolution.
(iii) Recognition committees to be constituted consisting of representatives of the agricultural workers.
(iv) Stopping police interference in the people's movement.
(v) Immediate recognition of unions and ensuring supply of all government circulars to these organizations.
(vi) Financial support to the representatives of the organizations whenever needed. Allowance to be given to those who take the initiative in organizing rural labour.
(vii) Organizing similar rural camps in all other districts of West Bengal and also India.
viii) Establishing an agricultural labour institute in West Bengal on the pattern of the NLI.

2. Department of Land Record and Survey

(i) Recording of sharecroppers' rights and to look after their interests.
(ii) Small and middle peasants should be exempted from the increased land revenue.

(iii) Measures to bring more lands under irrigation.
(iv) Land reforms committee should accept representatives of rural labour organizations at all levels.
(v) During settlement, the presence of a representative of the agriculture labour at the time of recording should be ensured.

3. Department of Public Relations

(i) To propagate the message of establishing rights in land by films, drama, and such other media.
(ii) Free distribution of leaflets and magazines relating to conditions of rural labour, their organization, etc.

4. National Labour Institute

(i) To provide educational aids like leaflets, magazines, films, etc. describing the conditions of the rural poor and organizing skills.
(ii) To help solve the problems that organizers face from time to time.
(iii) Continuous help in the process of organizing and further follow-up training programmes.
(iv) Arrangements to be made for the visit of organizers of rural labour to those places where agricultural labour is already organized.
(v) To organize similar training programmes in all districts of West Bengal and also in other parts of India.

Evaluation by the participants

The evaluation of the programme by the participants was highly encouraging. The enthusiasm with which they participated in the group discussions and the sense of optimism which they exhibited in their ideas were indicative of their genuine concern for the rural poor and a desire to learn more to deal with difficult problems. Some of the views expressed by the participants are given below:

— The main problems of the Indian working class are the same and liberation from those problems requires social and cultural awareness among the vast majority of the rural poor. They should be organized and political consciousness should be aroused.
— The programme helped us in understanding the reasons and importance of organizing the rural poor.
— We gained more knowledge and experience of the processes of organizing.
— We learnt the role of co-operation through various exercises and games.
— After organization, what should be the aim, methods etc. were not discussed.

— Without effective communication, any organization cannot be built.
— Against all opposition, dangers and odds, and even without outside help, the have-nots and the exploited will have to be organized.

Conclusion

"To become aware of and to implement ideas in reality require sacrifice and hard labour. National Labour Institute, New Delhi, is trying to create awareness among the organizers of rural labour so that they can play a more effective role in organizing the rural poor. Day-to-day problems will consume a lot of your time, but even with all these, you have to organize others. You should not get lost. With determination you should proceed to become the pioneer in making the landless labour powerful." The programme concluded with these remarks of Shri Pradeep Bhattacharya.

The rural camp which was the first venture of this Institute has undoubtedly been able to provide new insights into the prevailing socio-cultural and economic conditions of the rural poor. It has also added to our knowledge of complexities involved in organizing the sharecroppers and the landless agricultural labour in rural India. The first-hand experience of interacting with the grassroots organizers of rural labour has contributed to our understanding of the situation. It has also raised new issues that call for fresh thinking on the part of those involved in the education process.

Success of this programme will depend to a large extent on the ability of the participants to transfer learning to specific situations. It is in this process of transference that unanticipated problems and difficulties might arise. It will therefore be necessary to organize follow-up programmes of relatively shorter durations with a view to sustaining and strengthening the learning and also dealing with those problems.

Also, expectations of support from various governmental agencies that the organizers of rural labour have expressed the need to be fulfilled to the extent it is possible. So far as their expectations from us are concerned, the National Labour Institute has already initiated action on most of their suggestions.

Looking back at the whole experience, we do realize that there is scope for improvement in the programme design as also in the choice of programme contents. This has been a learning experience for us and we are going to incorporate innovation in our future programmes.

Report on Rural Camp at Penamaluru

Subhash Gakkhar

From Bana Nabagram to Penamaluru, is another step for the Institute in helping those engaged in organising the rural labour equip themselves with behavioural and attitudinal skills of leadership, decision-making, co-operative group problem-solving, conflict resolution etc., besides widening their perspectives for critical appreciation of the existing socio-economic and socio-cultural conditions at local, regional and national levels. In their educative roles, these organizers would help the rural poor in conscientization, diagnosis of their problems in the light of prevailing economic and social realities of land holdings and resource ownership; exploration for alternative courses of action for solving these problems, and utilization of facilities provided by governmental and non-governmental agencies, thus transforming the culture of submissive silence and apathy into a culture of commitment and meaningful quality of life.

The second rural camp for organizers of rural labour was held, with support from the Ministry of Labour, Government of India, and organizational help from the District Collector, Krishna, at Penamaluru, a small village in Krishna District, Andhra Pradesh, for a period of six days from 4th April to 9th April, 1975. A total of 51 organizers of rural labour, most of whom were landless agricultural labourers, participated in the camp. Four trade unions had nominated leaders of their respective local units. A large majority of the participants belonged to the scheduled castes and were in the very low income group. Though Krishna District is one of the richest in agricultural yield in the country, a broad survey indicated that all but three of the participants were heavily indebted and were paying inhuman rates of interest to the local moneylenders.

The programme methodology employed was the same as in Bana Nabagram — a free and cordial dialogical process of exchanging information and experiences between the participants and the resource group and amongst the participants themselves in small groups. Most of the time participants were facilitated in raising questions, diagnosing various aspects of the problems and searching for alternative strategies. The programme was conducted in Telugu. Immediately after inauguration by Shri T. Anjaiah, Minister of Labour, Andhra Pradesh, the participants and faculty went in for the first community meeting. For greater coordination in programme design and its effective communication, the participants were invited to share their expectations from the six-day camp. Most of them were very enthusiastic, some of them to the

extent of being overwhelmed at being invited to share their emotional burden. Some of the expectations were:

— to learn how agricultural workers can work together and organize themselves for a fruitful course of action; *to know the techniques of developing barren land so that such barren government land which is lying vacant can be reclaimed for agricultural production;
— to acquire information about agricultural technology – various inputs, the right type of seeds, fertilizers, irrigation cycles etc.;
— to gain information about agricultural economics – the cropping pattern, recycling of crops, timely selection of inputs;
— to learn about ways of getting financial help from the banks – both for agricultural and domestic purposes to get rid of the moneylenders' clutches and to grow more food;
— to learn about avenues of employment in the village itself, other than agriculture so that year-round employment can be secured;
— to search for strategies for getting possession of the government assigned land, to face challenges posed by the non-co-operation of village officials and hostility of landlords;
— to learn about Land Reform Acts and also ways and means of getting these implemented – to meet challenges in getting these laws implemented;
— to get information about different facilities provided by the government for agriculture;
— to gain organizing skills for meeting the challenges of eviction of sharecroppers, to learn more about the rights of agricultural labourers;
— to learn about getting information about benami land ownerships and about lands in excess of the ceiling under the law.

Responding to their expectations and general discussions, Prof. Nitish R. De emphasized the necessity of working and organizing together to realise those expectations. For working together, an individual should know his own strength and also that of others with whom he is going to work. Knowledge of each other's strengths would lead to an atmosphere of trust in the group which in turn would facilitate collective decision-making and mutual support. Once having started trusting each other, the members of the group would sit together, analyse their problems, look for different alternatives and then come to an understanding for a group plan of action – that is the initiation of the organizing process.

To start the process of trust building, a series of specially designed games were played in small groups. The first one— an exercise in motivation indeed

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* *The author is grateful to Sri M.A.M. Rao, Miss Hema Mahidara and Sri P.V. Ramana Rao for English renderings of some Telugu questionnaires and discussion recordings.*

brought out a good deal of enthusiasm. Out of 12 groups, eight had higher than average levels of expectations matched by equally good performance.

After the game, the participants were sharp enough to relate the constraints of the game to their real life situations and were able to perceive the role of co-operation, understanding and teamwork in achieving positive results despite constraints.

The next game was a simulated exercise in trust building through mutual understanding and co-operation. This was also played in small teams. Once again, most of the participants reflected upon the message of the game and related this to their real life situation highlighting those with common interests and cooperation, they could unite, and that a spirit of competition in the interdependent situation would lead to division of ranks and continued exploitation.

The third game was a stimulating exercise in group processes and decision-making through consensus. During discussions, various factors affecting sound decision-making were brought out. And then the different facilitating factors were discussed.

That the message was driven home effectively was evident from the discussion which took place after feedback.

The communication exercise, despite the rather poor literary language, proved quite effective. The reasons why communication gets distorted were put as follows by one of the participants:

— distortion of communication, if proper clarifications are not given;
— distortion due to pre-conceived ideas about the subject being communicated;
— distortion due to selective grasp by the person by whom the idea is being conveyed; and
— distortion due to incomplete understanding of the message by the listener.

The cooperation message was reinforced through another exercise. Like the exercise, the complete solution may lie distributed amongst the members of a group; individually none would be able to reach the goal all alone. The necessity of mutual understanding and co-operation in real life situations was linked to the simulated game.

At the end of these games, the participants summed up their experience and it was a useful feedback for the resource group to move to the next step of the programme.

It was at this stage that Mr. D. Bandyopadhyay, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, discussed the dynamics of restricted production output and dependence of the agricultural labourer on the landlord. He shared his experiences of land distribution and land reforms with case studies from

West Bengal. Problems of land holdings, various legislations relating to rights to land, and problems of their implementation were also discussed. The problem of bonded labour and its devastating socio-cultural and socio-economic effects on the poor landless were also clearly explained by him.

He, then, discussed at length, manipulations through which a landlord keeps productivity low in view of his interest being limited to profits rather to the development of the whole area. The same land distributed amongst many people would yield much more because of multiplication of development efforts. "Agricultural labour are national assets but they are taken as national liabilities in times of famine, draught, etc. To convert these liabilities into assets, they should be given an important factor of production — land — since capital is scarce. A small peasant will produce primarily for himself and secondarily for the market. This will ensure higher productivity because of the right type of motivation."

Lastly, he added that land reforms should deal not only with redistribution of land, but creation of an infrastructure also to ensure the supply of adequate inputs to the small peasants who would normally not be able to secure them. After this, Mr. B.N. Yugandhar discussed with the participants, the problems of wages. It was surprising to learn that none of the participants had heard about the Payment of Minimum Wages Act in force in the state for more than six months. He shared information with the participants about various legislations protecting wages of agricultural labour.

Discussing about the development programmes, he explained the process of trickling down of the developmental funds to the needy and various official and unofficial bottlenecks constraining the flow. Various schemes had, by and large, helped only the rich while the poor for whom those schemes were designed, hardly got any money. Then he emphasized the necessity of organizing the rural labour into a close-knit group which would be able to influence the decision-making authorities and get the necessary help through development plans for the needy.

He, then, discussed at length about the mechanics of agricultural output adding successively to the profits of the landlord (his profits being linked with the rising prices of agricultural produce) and successive depletion of the net earnings of the agricultural labourer.

Working in small groups, the participants discussed at length the organizing process. The first task was the identification of their short-term and long-term goals and the problems coming in the way of realisation of those goals. Each group presented its ideas on flip-charts which were shared subsequently in the community meeting. Some of the goals identified by various groups are as follows:

— set up cooperative forms to work together with latest implements and tools of farming;
— work for ensuring adequate supply of agricultural inputs like fertilizers, seeds, irrigation facilities for all;
— work for the speedy implementation of land reforms, distribution of surplus lands generated through implementation of land ceiling laws;
— work for speedy distribution of government waste lands amongst the landless poor;
— use of scientific methods for reclaiming the waste lands and making them suitable for agriculture;
— work for getting credit from the banks and other governmental agencies for various agricultural inputs;
— get one fair-price shop opened in each village and work for distribution of all essential commodities through these shops;
— work for representation of agricultural labour in various local development agencies;
— persuade the district authorities to let the cooperatives of landless labour handle the wholesale distribution of food grains;
— seek housing assistance from the government for the landless labour;
— get financial assistance from banks and other governmental agencies for the poor to release them from the grips of perennial indebtedness;
— work for the creation of provident fund for the agricultural labour with suitable contribution from the landlord;
— work for getting reasonable medical facilities in every village;
— work for free educational facilities for the agricultural labour;
— work for the setting up of cottage industries in each village to utilise the existing local skills and provide employment to the unemployed village youth;
— work for setting up of small scale industries in the rural areas; this will help the poor agricultural worker get year-round employment;
— work for getting the minimum wages fixed for different types of jobs linked to the cost of living index;
— create consciousness amongst the agricultural labour in the socio-economic areas;
— work for reducing caste restrictions;
— develop courage to resist the temptation and disruptive tendencies of some landlords;
— educate the village people on family planning ideas and techniques;
— campaign against established black marketers and hoarders.

The groups had discussed various problems with regard to achieving these goals. Some of these are:

- lack of unity amongst the rural labour,
- oppression by landlords through force and coercive methods,
- exploitation by the moneylenders by extorting high rates of interest (interest rates as high as 100% are not uncommon!),
- corruption prevalent in some of the offices,
- inter-caste differences and intra-caste differences,
- influence of landlords on government machinery,
- lack of will on the part of village level officials for implementing the land reform laws,
- jurisdiction of courts over the implementation of land ceilings legislation,
- lack of cooperation of village level officials for ensuring the payment to the agricultural labour at the rates prescribed under the Payment of Minimum Wages Act,
- social inequalities,
- lack of timely help from different governmental agencies,
- dearth of efficient officials,
- economic backwardness, etc.

Dr. B.K. Srivastava discussed in detail the process of organizing with particular reference to the rural poor who have their internal strength as the only resource available to them. The existing relationships in the social system will have to be changed for ending exploitation of man by man. One of the means he said was the administrative machinery. Having a broad look at the existing socio-economic milieu, one could say that various developmental schemes and programmes were oriented towards the rich peasants, who reaped maximum benefits of these schemes. Dependence on the administrative machinery may not lead to significant improvements.

The second method of reaching the objective could be political action, he added. But lack of political will and genuine interest in the oppressed poor have only led to further deterioration in the situation. Thus it is for the agricultural labour to organize itself effectively without any external assistance to achieve their objective—so that they can convert the administrative machinery and the political set-up in their own favour.

Recalling the different games played on the first two days outlined the characteristics (good and strong organization reinforced the message of mutual support, trust and encouragement, as conveyed through the game).

Subsequent discussion on Paulo Freire's pedagogy of cultural action for social change through a Reflection-Action-Organisation sequence evinced keen response from the participants many of whom wanted more information

and were hopeful of utilizing the new-cultural synthesis for building effective organizations.

The participants then worked in small groups discussing various aspects of the organizing process. Sharing their discussions in the community group on the question of whom to organize, most of them agreed to include agricultural labour, tenant farmers and selfless social workers. There were some differences over the inclusion of workers from other castes. Ultimately, realising that unity of purpose lay in over coming of the backwardness — economic as well as social — they agreed to include all weaker sections and sympathisers.

Some of the problems of organization as identified by them in the community group are:

— lack of unity amongst themselves — learning how to resolve conflicts and differences of opinion,

— caste and religious differences — the need to bridge the gap in attitudes and prejudices,

— selfless, dedicated and capable leadership — some of the participants were interested in getting advanced training through similar games and exercises,

— attempts by the landlords to disrupt the emergence of leadership through bribery, coercive threats, non-cooperation, character assassination, etc. (one of the participants related the incident of an offer of Rs. 10,000 to an emerging leader by a sarpanch for withdrawing from the election to a village body — the disguised language used implied the use of money as bribe as well as a reward for his head),

— personal rivalries within the group,

— social inequalities leading to differential attitudes,

— lack of information about various legislations protecting the rights of the landless labour and sharecroppers,

— lack of support from the village level officials for getting various land reforms implemented, organizing — planning for action.

Sri Madhava Rao discussed various aspects of the organizing process and the plan of action with special emphasis on self-reliance. The organization would have to be internally strong and should not foster a culture of dependency. Generating unity of purpose through different shades of the neglected landless labour, an organization should carry all like-minded persons with it, he added. Then the groups took up the task of finding ways of solving the problems of organizing and planning for future strategy after returning to their respective villages. A few ideas, as emerged in the community meeting on the issue, are:

— to spread the message of whatever we have learnt here in the village and start organizing with a handful of selfless workers,
— to set an example of model behaviour, persuade others to give up social evils like drinking, etc.,
— to first take up small problems of common interest, solve them through unity and move forward step by step to bigger problems — initial success will generate enough confidence for handling larger issues,
— to start cooperative societies and, with the cooperation of authorities, try to secure labour contracts for different development schemes operating in the area,
— to draw all people with common interest into united action and forge strength and cohesiveness through unity of purpose,
— to procure copies of different documents protecting the rights of landless labour, inform all members of the society through discussion — and plan a further course of action,
— to collect information about illegal land-holdings, cooperate with the authorities for proper implementation of the land reforms legislations,
— to organize action groups at the village, block and district levels and enlist the support of authorities in getting representation in different local development bodies — like cooperative bank, block development office, etc.,
— to strengthen the cooperative farming for gaining sufficient bargaining strength,
— to work for removing the caste and religious differences through individual contacts,
— to acquire knowledge of various rules and regulations,
— to collectively bring to the notice of senior officials obstacles created by landlords in implementation of land reforms laws,
— to distribute the benefits equally amongst all the members,
— to start, through collective action, small scale industries in the villages,
— to enlist support from sympathetic groups already operating in the area, lower officials and small farmers for strengthening the base.

Conclusion

Sri K.V. Raghunatha Reddy, Union Minister for Labour, and Sri Pradeep Bhattacharya, Minister of State for Labour, West Bengal, visited the camp and spent a day with the participants. Addressing the participants, Sri Reddy urged them to take into account the prevailing social forces that might come in the way of the organising process — without distinction of religion, all weaker sections of castes and the rural areas would be organized and transformed into powerful social change agents. Sri Pradeep Bhattacharya appreciated the enthusiasm

of the participants and he shared his experiences of implementation of land reforms and the plight of the landless labour in West Bengal. He advised the participants to move ahead with determination and organize the landless poor for getting their due in the society.

Sri B. Bhagawati, President, Indian National Rural Labour Federation, addressed the participants on the valedictory day. Giving substantial statistical data on the plight of the rural labour, he emphasized the need for organising the rural poor. Industrialization in India has increased pressure on agricultural land unlike the Western countries – in addition to having caused a decline of traditional village-based cottage industries.

Deploring that most of the benefits under various government plans had not percolated to the poor, he stressed the necessity of organizing the rural landless labour that formed a much larger group as compared to the organized workers in the industrial sector. He said that the government should amend laws in favour of the poor and ensure that they are not left at the mercy of landlords for their living. Organizations of landless labour, small peasants, sharecroppers should be given land for co-operative farming with adequate supply of inputs like fertilizers, seeds, pesticides, irrigation facilities, etc.

Emphasizing the need for providing year-round employment to the agricultural labour, he stressed the revival of cottage industries with infra-structure for marketing the products. Larger companies should not be allowed to operate in the villages dependent upon the village economy.

Concluding the six-day camp, Sri G. Sanjeeva Reddy, President, Andhra Unit of the Indian National Rural Labour Federation, said that the government should come forward for organising the rural labour in view of the enormity of this task. Distribution of land would not be enough — other essential inputs and necessary financial help must also be provided by the government, he added. Finally, he expressed appreciation for the National Labour Institute for organising this camp and hoped that the Institute would organize more camps in other states too.

The camp, by and large, provided a lot of insight into the socio-cultural and socio-economic realities faced by the rural landless poor. Also evident was a high degree of dependence on the government machinery which may prove a regressing force to the organisation process in the absence of sympathetic officials. To that extent, the programme for the next camp will have to be adopted for dealing with such situations. It has been a very valuable learning experience which would contribute to the effectiveness of the next camp.

Rural Camp at Rajgir: Some Observations

R.N. Maharaj & K. Gopal lyer

The week-long Rajgir Camp in Bihar was the third in the series organized by the National Labour Institute. We had 39 participants, drawn from 18 districts of Bihar. They were all of rural origin and operated in the rural areas. They were mostly drawn from the worse-off strata of the peasantry. Only two of them were of rich peasant origin. There was a fairly good representation of Harijans who accounted for 60 per cent of the total number of participants. Our participants were mostly young, their average age being 30 years. Twenty three of them had long experience of political work among the peasantry. Twenty of them were sponsored by INTUC, 16 by AITUC, and three by registered trade unions of agricultural workers. Their educational levels were rather high and so were the levels of their consciousness. Some of them held high positions in their parent organisations. The AITUC team included Sri Yamuna Verma, Secretary, Bihar Raj Khet Mazdoor Union. The INTUC team had in it Sri Dilkeshvan Ram, ex-MLA and President, Gaya District Congress Committee. Other prominent participants were Sri Basudeo Paswan, Secretary, Monghyr Zilla Khet Mazdoor Union, Sri Ram Babu Singh, Secretary, Sitamarhi Zilla Khet Mazdoor Union, Sri Anis Ahmed Fatmi, Secretary, Purab Champaran Zilla Khet Mazdoor Union, and Sri Vidya Kishore Vidyalankar of Bihar State Congress Committee. Smt. Banarsi Devi Gupta was the only lady amongst the participants who highlighted the problems specific to women agricultural workers. The Rajgir Camp indeed turned out to be one for the advanced elements. Our participants displayed an intimate knowledge of the problems of the rural poor and an unusual flair for learning. Sri Bansropan Chamar of the INTUC team impressed us all with his understanding and commitment. With few exceptions, participation was on the high side.

In addition to the three faculty members of the National Labour Institute, we had several guests to assist us. They were Sri B.N. Yugandhar from the Planning Commission and Sri Lalfak Zuala from the Labour Ministry, Government of India. Sri Bhola Prasad, M.P. and Vice-President, All India Khet Mazdoor Union, Sri Chaturanan Mishra, MLA, and veteran communist trade unionist, Sri A.U. Sharma, Commissioner, Patna Division, Sri K. B. Saxena, Registrar, Bihar, helped us through their participation in our deliberations. The A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna, evinced a keen interest in our camp. Profs. Sachchidanand and J.B.P. Sinha, Dr. M.P. Pandey, and Sri I.D. Sharma took all the trouble to come to the camp to discuss with our participants various aspects of the problems relating to the life of the rural poor. The local communist M.L.A. was a constant companion, always

at our beck and call, doing everything to make our programme a success. The District Congress President, the District Collector and other functionaries of the State Government were only too willing to extend all cooperation. The officials of the State Department of Labour, particularly Sri R.N. Sharma, Director, Agricultural Labour, and Gopal Prasad, Chief Inspector of Wages, were the real hosts.

Smt. Ramdulari Sinha, State Mazdoor Mantri,* was the presiding entity. She not merely inaugurated the camp but also spent maximum time with us. Sri Bindeshwari Dube, State Minister for Health, and veteran Congress trade unionist, delivered the valedictory address. The inaugural and valedictory speeches clearly pinpointed the objectives of the camp. Smt. Sinha's speech was a clarion call to organize the rural poor. She highlighted the urgent need for organisation and the difficulties involved in it. Referring to various ameliorative legislations to improve the lot of the rural poor she pointed out one serious omission — the claimants were missing and only a real organization of the rural poor would endow them with necessary strength to claim what was their due. Sri Dube's valedictory speech was practical and down to earth. He highlighted the objectives of the organisation — acquisition and exercise of power — and discussed various issues that would confront the organizers.

Our approach was based on a dialogical process between the faculty members of the Institute and the participants who reflected upon problems facing the rural poor in small groups. We feel that the rural poor have not only the necessary ability to reflect upon the real life situation but also possess potentialities for identifying and diagnosing problems and seeking meaningful solutions to them. We, therefore, stimulated participants to discuss issues in a free and unrestrained atmosphere so that everyone could manifest his true feelings and reactions, and engage in a mutual learning process. The participants throughout worked in small groups not only in the initial stages of the administration of simulated exercises but also in the later process of identifying problems, seeking solutions thereof, discussing problems relating to organisation and spelling out short-term action plans for organising the rural poor. We started by administering simulated exercises. We measured their internal control and inter-personal trust. The range of scores of the respondents in the internal-external control instrument was 0 to 12 with the median score at 8.6. Their high internal control was positively associated with their experience of work among the rural poor as well as with their commitment reflected in the small group working. The score-range of participants in the inter-personal trust scale ranged from 26 to 75 with a median at 69.7 indicating that it was on the low side. This was also evident from the nature of inter-personal interaction

* *Score below 12 is indicative of a personality style oriented towards initiative in improving one's own action, use of one's ingenuity to survive and less proneness to dependence on others.*

between the AITUC and INTUC participants during the first two days which gradually increased towards greater cooperation, teamwork and inter-personal trust.

This is how the Minister introduced herself to our participants in Hindi during the first introductory session.

Simulated exercises

The simulated games were basically aimed at providing an insight into developing behavioural and attitudinal skills among the participants. The first one was an exercise in motivation known as "Tower Building". The game sought to demonstrate that for organising rural labour, motivation and teamwork are very important, and that it is necessary for the organizers of rural labour to understand their own behaviour and competence as well as those of others with whom they interact.

The participants played this game in seven small groups. In one group it was observed that the actor had set a very high target but consensus forced him to settle for a lower one which resulted in low achievement and consequent frustration for him. In two other groups one member assumed the dominating role in fixing the commonly agreed target. In the process of reflection, the participants could relate the game to the real-life process.

Some of the observations were: When an individual dominates the decision-making process in the organisation, he stifles others' initiatives to the detriment of the interests of the organisation. Low targets and their fulfilment or over-fulfilment inspire popular confidence in the organisation which is conducive to its growth.

Constraints imposed in the game reflect the constraints that a khet mazdoor (agricultural labourer) organization faces in the real-life situation; lack of team spirit experienced in the game also characterises the organisation of the rural poor; the task of tower building is as difficult as that of organising khet mazdoors; team work, cooperation, mutual understanding etc. are necessary ingredients in building up a khet mazdoor organisation.

The second game was an exercise in the group decision-making process which was administered by means of a 10-item leadership rating schedule. The participants first worked in four small groups. In one group all the members actively participated in the decision-making process and in remaining three, only one or two participated actively. In order to intensify and activate the process of reflection, the participants were then asked to constitute an inner group which was involved in the task of decision-making with the outer group acting as observers. The latter reflected on the process of the decision-making of the inner group. The inner group exhibited absolute lack of cohesiveness. They stuck to the decision of their former reference group with which their identification was very high. The participants in relating their experience to

real-life situations realised that insistence on one's own view in the decision-making process is not conducive to the growth of a khet mazdoor organisation. They felt that for the effective growth of an organisation, collective participation should have precedence over individual dominance or stubbornness.

The third game was a simulated exercise in trust building and cooperation, known as "Prisoners' Dilemma". Several members indicated that their initial objective was to win, but they did not do it as it involved winning at the expense of other members of the group. They felt that the spirit of suspicion and distrust towards each other and non-cooperation would hinder the realisation of the objective of the organisation. They felt that in their dealings with rich peasants, the khet mazdoor organisation could sometimes adopt a co-operative approach and sometimes that of confrontation. The INTUC and AITUC participants in the initial stages were holding antagonistic attitudes towards each other but through the games they could realise its futility; it slowly increased their mutual understanding of and cooperation with each other. "Broken Square" and "Win As Much As You Can" exercises reinforced the significance of cooperation in the process of building up khet mazdoor organisation. In their mutual dealings we could see a greater manifestation of mutual trust and cooperation.

"Star Power" was the last simulated exercise in which a low mobility three-tier society was built through the distribution of wealth in the form of chips. The mechanism of moving up the ladder of vertical mobility was found invariably operating and a person having moved from a lower to higher rungs forgot his earlier status group and also changed his group or class identification. During the process of reflection, the participants identified the less privileged groups as khet mazdoors and untouchables. They also felt that in the existing society, a less privileged person or group is always exploited by those in the upper status groups. They could realise that exploitation is in-built in the system and that institutional changes are necessary to be brought about if poverty has to be eradicated. They could identify the exploiters and the exploited in the society and also realise that the exploited would have to be united in order to curb the exploitative proclivities of the exploiters.

Problem identification

The psychological tests were followed by the identification of the problems of the rural poor. Participants were divided into four groups each representing one agricultural region of Bihar. Each group deliberated at length and identified problems specific to their regions. They committed the results of their deliberations to writing on flip charts which were displayed in the community session hall and discussed. It was clear from the general discussion that the problems facing the rural poor had their roots in their economic and social exploitation. Usury, rack-renting, insecurity of tenure, low levels of wages, long hours of work, non-availability of land to the landless, under-employment and unemployment, beggary (forced work), widespread eviction

of sharecroppers etc. were identified as the main economic problems. They arose out of the highly skewed nature of the pattern of agricultural holdings and their poor technical base and the perpetually deficit character of the rural poor households. In areas where agriculture is no longer a stagnant sector, rents have considerably gone up and there has been an appreciable increase in the eviction of share-croppers. Tractorization has made heavy inroads into the demand for labour. There has not, however, been any significant increase in the wage levels as a consequence of increased productivity. What surprised us more was that agricultural progress was often accompanied by increase in the incidence of attached labour. It again did not have any liberating influence on the bonded labour. They continue to be as they were. While the incidence of bonded labour is not very high, it still exists. From our participants we learnt of its existence in the districts of Nalanda, West Champaran, Monghyr, Nawada, Gaya, Bhagalpur, etc. In the course of our visit to seven villages of Nalanda district we could ourselves see bonded labourers in two of them. This phenomenon was more widespread in villages under upper caste Hindus to avoid plough taboos. They were also needed to meet the permanent component of the landlords' demand for labour.

The mechanism of bondage is very simple. The landlord advances a loan not exceeding Rs. 300 to defray the marriage expenses of the person who would be bonded. Demolishing and burning of houses of scheduled castes by upper caste Hindus, the practice of untouchability, grabbing lands of the agricultural labourers and poor peasants by the caste Hindus, implicating the rural poor in false cases to harass them, humiliation to which females are subjected, use of abusive language by upper caste Hindus in their dealings with rural poor, forcing scheduled caste people to huddle on the outskirts of the village and not allowing them to be a part of the mainstream of the village life, preventing the rural poor from sitting on a chair or to lie down on cots, exploiting the children of the rural poor as cowherds etc. were identified as the main social problems. Some of the scheduled caste participants in particular were very critical of the social exploitation meted out to them by upper caste Hindus, particularly in the matter of entry to temples, observance of untouchability, etc. They also reported increasing incidence of tuberculosis among Harijans. They narrated to us certain cases in which they protested against social exploitation with partial success.

Political problems

Lack of political consciousness, use of threat and force to prevent the rural poor from going to polling booths and casting their votes, resistance offered by upper caste and upper class people in the village in the formation of rural labour organisations etc. were identified as the major political problems.

The participants reported several instances in the districts of Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Samastipur etc., where the rural poor were forced to desist from

voting by the hirelings of landlords. They also reported certain instances in which polling booths were even captured by the upper caste and upper class people in the village.

Cultural programmes

Superstition, fatalism, untouchability and tradition-induced extravagance were identified as the major cultural problems.

The diagnostic session was followed by a prescriptive one – i.e. a search for solutions. The laws meant for the benefit of the rural poor were discussed at length. The participants' discussion revealed that it was a necessary but sufficient condition. It could mean that only when it was implemented and it could not be implemented unless a countervailing power of a peasant organisation was created.

Organizing rural labour

The prescriptive session was followed by a discussion of the problems relating to organization. The participants divided themselves into four groups, to reflect on such matters as whom to organize, against whom to organize, and to identify positive and negative resource inputs for organising the rural labour. Since many of them were already involved in organising the rural poor, they could clearly pinpoint the real issues. All the four groups specified that landless labourers, share-croppers, poor and middle peasants would constitute the main groups to be organized. They identified the landlords, rich peasants, moneylenders, and corrupt and uncommitted officials as constituting antagonists. The organisation according to them, would strive for the implementation of all law intended for the improvement of the lot of the rural poor and ending social and economic exploitation. They maintained that the organizers would have to strive for greater horizontal solidarity among the rural poor and to conduct campaigns against habits and traditions as and when needed. The organizers would persuade the rural poor to cut down their expenditures on items that do not promote health and efficiency. They would take scrupulous care to avoid violent confrontation with antagonists or state power. It would be their earnest endeavour to use State laws and administration to improve organisational prospects and thereby the lot of the rural poor.

Final session

The final session was devoted to the preparation of a six-month action plan by each participant. Action plans, by and large, reflected the deliberations they had during the entire period of the camp. As all our participants were already associated with one organisation or another, they thought of strengthening their parent organisations particularly at the grassroots. They planned to improve the financial resource base of the organisation through a collection of foodgrains from members and sympathisers at harvest time. It would help them in providing

striking workers with doles, launching literacy campaigns and so on. They stressed the primacy of education as a factor creating greater awareness of legal rights, causes of their poverty, and remedies thereof. Through education they planned to fight all those obscurantist forces that imprisoned the minds of the rural poor and stood in the way of their greater solidarity. Many of them were keen to help the rural poor graduate to leadership.

Evaluation

Participation, as pointed out earlier, was on the high side. The camp working hours ranged from eight to 10 hours daily. There were, however, hardly any occasions when participants would make themselves scarce. Even though Rajgir, our camp site, has many tourist attractions, our participants eschewed all interest in sight-seeing. At our request for their frank views about the usefulness of their stay in the camp, a representative of each group spoke during the valedictory session. They found the camp very useful. It could demonstrate to them the identity of objectives between the AITUC and INTUC, the role of cooperation and conflict while dealing with the basic masses, and the antagonists, and how to tackle various problems in organising the rural poor. They were, however, not satisfied with our holding a single camp. They wanted us to help them plan and organize such camps at various other places.

It was our first rural camp following the promulgation of the Emergency. We could see quite well the kind of change it had brought about in the socio-political milieu. The administration is much more responsive to the aspirations of the rural poor than in the past. The rural world is in ferment, with various groups engaged in seeking new relationships. Grassroots leaders of the rural poor approach the problems of organisation with increased awareness and confidence. We learnt quite a lot from our participants in the camp. Apart from the fact that our knowledge of rural Bihar was greatly enriched, we could also gather valuable experience which will help us increase the effectiveness of our camp. We could know the kind of literature we should make available to our participants, the kind of language to be used, ways to tackle groups composed of persons of diverse cultural and other standards.

Rural Camp at Naharmangra

Gopal Iyer

Our Naharmangra camp in the district of Udaipur in Rajasthan held from September 6-11, 1975 was the fourth in the series. In many ways it turned out to be significantly different from our earlier camps. The hunting palace of the ex- Maharana of Udaipur which had been lying desolate since independence was the venue. All our 33 participants were drawn from the various tehsils of the district. This obviously put us at a disadvantage in the sense that we could not get a feel of the situation in the entire State. This was, however, compensated for by the greater depth of our knowledge of the district in its entirety.

Our participants in the Udaipur camp were drawn mostly from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, who constituted 65% of the total number. They were mostly illiterate or with a small modicum of education. They represented experience rather than youth. Except for half a dozen persons, their ages ranged from 35 to 65. Our participants exhibited a very low level of political consciousness and an overwhelming bulk of them possessed no organising experience. They were mostly poor. Their average per capita annual income worked out to Rs. 250. They were frugal in habits of food and dress and deeply traditional in outlook. Beedi rather than cigarette was what some of them smoked. Even the scanty fare served to them, consisting of chapatis, pulses and two varieties of vegetables, appeared a luxury to them. They would caution us against extravagance. They were mostly God-fearing people and would often spend hours meditating upon their favourite deities. The only quality they valued in a leader was his moral integrity. Our camp in short was a microcosm representing the macrocosm that Udaipur is.

The camp was a big event in the locality. Shri Harideo Joshi, Chief Minister of Rajasthan, inaugurated it. Shri Mohan Chhangani, State Labour Minister, and Shri Devpura, State Irrigation Minister, also spoke on the occasion. Shri Joshi highlighted the kinds of change that were to follow the promulgation of Emergency. He spoke of the consigning of feudal princes and jagirdars to the dustbin of history and of the need to wipe every tear from every eye. The two of his Cabinet colleagues who followed him elaborated upon the same theme in its different dimensions. The inauguration of our camp, incidentally, coincided with that of another one to distribute loans to small and marginal farmers for agricultural development. The District Magistrate, Mr. P.N. Bhandari, the innovator of this new technique of loan distribution, was there to concretize the task of agricultural development. It was a new experience for us and we could clearly visualise the changing ethos in Rajasthan.

Following the inauguration of the camp we could soon discover that our participants were caught in a dilemma. Many of them were careful to keep

themselves away from the galaxy of elites assembled for the occasion. They were, however, very curious to know from us in vivid details as to the kind of business that would be transacted in the camp. For many of them, it was perhaps the first occasion when they had assembled to reflect on their problems and their solutions. Problems, indeed, were an integral part of their lives. Solutions had, of course, deluded them. We could see a glow in many eyes, an indication that problems might turn out to be tractable. The homogeneity of interests and outlook that characterized the camp greatly facilitated the creation of an informal atmosphere and group cohesion. Our experience clearly revealed that whatever the level of formal education no one is incapable of thinking over his problems and their solution. The Wretched of the Earth not merely know what pinches them but also what lies at its root.

In addition to the four faculty members of the National Labour Institute, we had Dr. N.N. Vyas, Director, Tribal Research Institute, Udaipur and his colleagues, Principal, Janta College, Dabok, Shri B.N. Yugandhar from the Planning Commission, Shri D. Bandyopadhyay and Shri A. Deb from the Ministry of Labour, Government of India, Shri P.N. Bhandari, Collector, Udaipur, and Shri Bhagwat Bhandari, a trade union leader and advocate, to assist us. Mr. Tarachand Gupta, S.F.D.A. Project Officer, Udaipur, and Mr. Tyagi, B.D.O., Mavli, were always available to do anything to make our programme a success.

Our camp for the organizers of the rural poor began with their involvement in some simulated games designed to convey a few messages in the abstract which were to be related to the real life situation. The messages which the exercises convey are that one's real life situation is not immutable or divinely ordained and that through conflict with some and co-operation with many, an Eldorado can be created right here.

We started with the Tower-Building exercise. Participants were divided into seven groups. Each group consisted of four persons, each with an assigned role — that of President, Secretary, Actor, and finally that of an observer. The President, the Secretary, and the Actor had each to set a target for tower-building. The three were then asked to arrive at a common target through consensus. The blindfolded Actor started tower-building. The observer was more or less like the umpire seeing that the games were played according to the rules — the President and the Secretary had the option to offer suggestions but no help. The five groups comprising persons of the same cultural levels had a smooth sailing. The two groups consisting of persons with different educational levels had quite a different experience. The relatively more advanced persons sought to dominate and influence the consensus as they liked. Measured in terms of achievement, the five groups achieved exactly the target they had set for themselves. The remaining two groups over-fulfilled the target by 100 per cent. It was so because the

President and the Secretary were always encouraging the Actor for each new height.

The participants were asked to relate the lessons of tower-building to their real life situation. They could clearly see that building the tower represented efforts to reach new economic and social heights and that such efforts were circumscribed by severe constraints as reflected in the Actor building the tower blindfolded. They could clearly see how the individual behaviour is conditioned by the behaviour of the group of which he is a part. In a group in which the level of aspiration was low or the life-experience dictated not aiming high, the fixation of the target was at a low key. As to the achievement, the Napoleonic principle—you can do it was very much in evidence. Wherever the President and the Secretary were in the inspiring roles of Cheermen targets were overfulfilled, but in other cases there was no divergence between the target and the achievement. When related to the real life situation the participants could well see the handicaps under which the rural poor have to strive to create a better tomorrow. Unrealistic targets were thought to be as unproductive as non-cooperation with those engaged in joint endeavour. Another thing, again, was very revealing; the actor of one group which had over-fulfilled the target, ascribed his success not to the kind of response received from his confreres but to God sitting in Heaven and dispensing Fate. Internal control was indeed on the low side.

Once the participants had come to a consensus that the low socio-economic level of the rural poor was not immutable, they were involved in the second exercise – i.e. identification of the essential attributes of a successful leader of poor peasants through consensus. It was a two-phase exercise. In the first phase the participants were made to constitute five groups and deliberate upon the various qualities of the leader. Since the groups were by and large homogeneous, there was little difficulty in arriving at the consensus. Unlike the Tower-Building exercise, the participation was not high.

In the second phase some members constituted the inner and others the outer group. The inner group sought to arrive at a consensus while the outer group was responsible for critical reflection over the whole process. Here the one thing that impeded progress towards consensus was the tenacity with which some members stuck to their earlier commitments. They just did not examine the issue with an open mind. The exercise was not merely intended to help members reflect but also create an atmosphere leading to self-introspection by each participant in terms of certain values and commitment to goals.

The third game known as Prisoner's Dilemma was a simulated exercise in trust-building and developing cooperation. In this game mutual loss is in-built in three situations but there is mutual gain only in one. Since the basic message that this game has to convey is co-operation rather than conflict, the two sub-groups involved have the option of mutual consultation during the process of

the game. It is to facilitate exchange of knowledge as to how each is faring in terms of its gains and losses and also to suggest the kind of strategy which each has to adopt in order that gains are maximized or losses minimized.

The participants were divided into five small groups. The game allowed each participant 10 moves. Each group consisted of two sub-groups. When participants were asked to reflect upon the relevance of the game to the real-life situations, they could clearly attribute losses or gains to competition or co-operation within sub-groups. The rural poor, some of whom were a part, did not have a community life characterized by horizontal solidarity. Many ethnic and religious factors cut across their class loyalties. The parasites were always eager to take advantage of such fissiparous tendencies to fleece the rural poor. The beneficiaries — the moneylender, the liquor contractor and those in the lower echelon of the bureaucracy who have their palms greased — stood thoroughly exposed.

The fourth one was an exercise in cooperation at its zenith, known as the Broken Square exercise, in which cards of different geometrical shapes were given to the participants in small groups. They were required to arrange them in a square shape. The game is not considered complete until all the group members complete their individual squares. Therefore, the greater the cooperation among the participants, the higher the chances of the group achieving success. It was intended to be an exercise to impress upon the rural poor the need for complete horizontal solidarity. The participants played the game in five separate groups. All the five groups were able to complete their squares, though with different time spans. When asked to reflect on their life situation vis-a-vis the lesson this game had to convey, the participants could see that cooperation with persons placed in a similar situation is essential for success.

The Star Power was the last in the series of simulated exercises. It emphasises the positive role of conflict in situations characterized by irreconcilability of interests between groups. The participants were divided into three groups, representing three social classes. The exercise is so designed that intermediate groups vanish altogether and participants are confronted with a situation in which they find themselves divided into haves and have-nots. The haves appropriate all power and are free to dictate the rules of the game to the have-nots. The situation finally turns out to be so unbearable that the latter group has to mount a heavy protest against the high- handedness of the former. When asked to relate the exercise to their real-life situation, the participants could see how the rural poor are pauperized and finally bonded. They could well see that it was only through an organized attempt that deliverance could be secured.

Involving the participants in simulated exercises in Rajasthan was not that easy. We had to be very patient in explaining the entire process of the exercise. In the Star Power exercise, chips had to be replaced by coins.

The remaining days were devoted to the identification of the problems of the rural poor, as well as the question of organising them. The participants, divided into three groups, deliberated for four hours and finally put their findings in writing on flip charts. They were on display on the walls for discussion at the plenary session. While forming the groups we had taken into account the different ethnic compositions of population in different tehsils. Uneconomic holdings, high incidence of unemployment and under-employment, lack of draught power, implements and seeds, were listed as the main economic problems. Low level of income and consequent indebtedness leading to usury, rack-renting and debt bondage were seen as the inevitable consequences of the poor economic resources base. Illiteracy, ignorance, alcoholism and observance of marriage and death rites were seen as major social problems. Corrupt bureaucracy, particularly the police and revenue officials, moneylenders, liquor and forest contractors, were listed as the main villains of the piece. The participants were bitterly critical of poor medical facilities in the rural areas. They cited numerous cases to prove that premature deaths had occurred for want of timely and adequate medical help.

Poor housing and clothing were not listed as the major problems. The participants complained that the poor were not able to benefit adequately from welfare measures initiated by the government. There were difficulties in obtaining loans as lands individually operated by many were registered in one single name. They also blamed the anti-poor attitude of state functionaries including schoolteachers. Many of them complained of sexual exploitation. It was particularly acute in Kotra Tehsil. In one case refusal had provoked a patwari to the extent that he killed his servant.

Relief operations in many cases did not turn out to be an unmixed blessing. Various cases of defalcation and sexual exploitation through grant of petty patronage were reported. The consensus that emerged during the discussion was that drastic measures against those listed as the villains of the piece were necessary to win the war against poverty and exploitation. It was also felt that only through organized and peaceful efforts would the rural poor be able to get what the State has promised to them.

A survey of the situation obtaining on the organisational front revealed that the rural poor hardly functioned as an organized group. Various extra-class loyalties weakened their horizontal ties. It was felt that a movement for the abolition of social practices like extravagance on marriage and death rites would greatly help the rural poor reduce their dependence on moneylenders. War against alcoholism, dissemination of the knowledge of various laws and schemes for the benefit of the rural poor would greatly reduce incidence of illiteracy and ignorance. Strengthening of the family as an institution could be another measure to increase horizontal solidarity.

The discussion on methods of organising the rural poor ended with the preparation of a six-month action plan by each participant. Since many of them were illiterate, they spelt out their plans orally. They sought to initiate social movement, identify households without house sites, encroachment of public land and illegal transfers as measures preliminary to their organisational work.

Training Camp at Gopavaram

Vijay Kumar Kulkarni

In February, 1976, the National Labour Institute started organising a series of rural camps for the organizers of rural labour. The seventh camp in the series was organized in Cuddapah District, Andhra Pradesh. This was the second camp in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The first one was in Krishna District in the region of Andhra Pradesh known as Sarkars, a highly fertile and highly developed agricultural region of the state.

From 16th to 21st February, the second camp in Andhra Pradesh was organized in the region known as Rayalaseema, an extremely poor and drought-prone region of the state. The locale of the camp was Gopavaram project. This project for the landless labour collective co-operative, is the result of a generous financial grant from a West Germen Christian Aid Agency. It is to cover two hundred landless agricultural families to be resettled on 1200 acres, with housing, modern agricultural facilities, etc. We had 56 participants*, about 50 of them were Harijans and Girijans. One important feature was the presence of six women as participants. Eight participants were from the neighbouring district of Chittoor and one from Rural Community Development Association, Chinglepet, Tamil Nadu.

All the participants were drawn from organisations like Harijan Development Corporation, Andhra Pradesh, Nehru Yuvak Kendra, Agricultural Labourers' Union, Cuddapah District Vyavasay Cooleela Survodaya Sangam, Mahila Mandali, Vyavasaya Karmika Sangam, INTUC and AITUC.

In addition to the three faculty members of the National Labour Institute, we had as guest faculty, Shri D. Bandyopadhyay, Jt. Secretary, Ministry of Labour, Shri B.N. Yugandhar, P.S. to the Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Shri V. Chandra Mowli, Dy. Secretary, Ministry of Labour.

Shri P.L. Sanjeeva Reddy, Collector, Shri R. Co-ordinator, Nehru Yuvak Kendra, Shri A.K. Goyal, Sub-Collector, Shri Ramachandra Reddy, Badvel Project Administrator, and the other staff of the Cuddapah Collectorate made the camp a success by their painstaking efforts.

The camp was inaugurated on the 16th by the State Labour Minister, Shri T. Anjaiah, and the valedictory address was delivered by the Union Minister for Labour, Shri K.V. Raghunatha Reddy. Both the ministers stressed the need for unity and organisation among the rural poor and explained how the 20-point programme would benefit them.

On the first day, the participants were asked to write down their expectations from the camp. Some of these, in their own words, were:

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* *One woman participant came with her baby.*

- How and by what methods are we to gain and consolidate the gains of the 20-point programme?
- How to improve our socio-economic conditions?
- Ours is a stratified society, how to bridge the gaps?
- I come from an agricultural labour organisation. I want to know how to develop a co-operative spirit amongst members of our society. How to organize a collective co-operative society?
- I am an organizer of rural labour for the past 25 years. The rich landowners try to break our movement. The declaration of Emergency has changed the situation somewhat, but benefits from the government are not reaching the poor fast enough. I want to know how to go about it.
- What are the legislations and ordinances in favour of the rural poor? How and by whom to get them implemented?
- I want to know how to bring about a united effort by all the different organizers of the rural poor.
- To learn modern methods of farming. To learn something new.
- Want to learn from the co-participants about their situation, and what they are doing.
- The working class in factories has all the benefits, but what about the agricultural labour? I want to know more about the life of agricultural labourers in other parts of India.

All the participants were divided into seven groups, each with eight to nine members, and from the points raised during the previous day, tasks were assigned, viz.:

Task I: Rural indebtedness

A. What are the different causes of indebtedness of rural poor?

B. (i) From whom do they get loans?
   (ii) At what rates have they to repay loans?
   (iii) Do they also pay by their own labour?

C. What are the consequences of rural indebtedness for the rural poor?

D. Can they do anything collectively to reduce the causes of rural indebtedness?

Task II: Social problems of scheduled castes

A. (i) What are the strengths of the members of the scheduled castes?
   (ii) What are the weaknesses of the members of the scheduled castes?

B. What can the members of the scheduled castes do to overcome their weaknesses?

All the groups were given free options to choose whichever task they preferred to discuss amongst themselves. Then, after a couple of hours of discussion, they wrote down on flip charts the results of their discussions, which are mentioned below.

On rural indebtedness

(i) Purchase of agricultural inputs;

(ii) Birth, marriage and funeral rites;

(iii) Medical problems;

(iv) For observing age-old customs;

(v) The fruits of labour are not proportionately shared by the labourers;

(vi) Unplanned families, gambling, liquor, etc.

(vii) From whom do they get loans?

(i) From rich landowners

(ii) From moneylenders

(iii) From shopkeepers

Rates of interest

The rates of interest ranged from 1% to 2% per month compound interest.

Whether they repay by their labour

The loans are being repaid by way of labour and sometimes by bonded labour also.

On social problems of scheduled castes

(i) Very little literacy

(ii) Landlessness

(iii) Not enough employment

(iv) Poverty and disunity

(v) Liquor, etc.

Regarding remedies on both the counts, the participants suggested joint concerted effort, government assistance, etc. The Harijans in the state are divided into two sub-castes, the Madingas and Malas. These two groups are traditional enemies of each other, so much so that a member of a group won't take even water from the other. This has led to a total split among the scheduled castes.

Some simulated exercises were used to generate a climate of participative learning so that the participants could relate their real-life situations to the learning experience. These exercises brought out the dynamics of mistrust, competitive vs. collaborative strategies etc. The participants reflected on the simulated experience and tried to relate it to their life situations. Some of the

points raised were very revealing, demonstrating the power of a participative design.

Some of the issues which were raised can be classified as follows:

(1) Competitiveness among agricultural labour breeds anarchy and co-operativeness brings harmony;
(2) We want the rural poor should work unitedly for each other's gain.
(3) One of the chief causes of our disunity is mistrust among ourselves.

On the third day of the camp the participants were again given three tasks to discuss:

Task A: Identify your friends and allies in the village society and why they are your friends and allies.

Task B: Identify the parties which are the causes of your miseries and sufferings.

Task C: How you can strengthen your relationship with friends and allies.

After a few hours of deliberation in groups, the participants wrote down their answers on flip charts. Some of the answers were:

Task A:

(1) The carpenter, washerman, blacksmith, potter and other artisans are also poor like the agricultural labourers and they also give support at the time of need.
(2) The youth and agricultural workers' associations.
(3) Poor and middle level ryots and artisans.
(4) Harijans and Girijans.
(5) Landless agricultural labourers.
(6) Small farmers.

The reasons for friendship were given as:

(i) We are working together in the society in all fields including agricultural work.
(ii) We are financially backward.

Task B:

The rich landowner, moneylender, government officials coming from rich families. One woman participant wrote that her enemy was her ignorance.

Task C:

The solutions were: forming unions of rural poor, education, co-operatives, inter-caste marriages, making representations to government, abolishing dowry system.

Cuddapah district has about 80 government-sponsored colonies. In these colonies, Harijans are provided with one-room tenements and two to five acres

of land per household, with irrigation facilities and other agricultural inputs from the Small Farmer's Development Agency. The Harijan Development Corporation has picked up from each village and colony one educated Harijan, and he is designated as Harijan Development Officer. Normally a Harijan Development Officer is the leader of the colony. A good number of such Harijan Development Officers constituted our participants.

On the fourth day, the participants were divided into those who were coming from colonies and those who were not, and then small groups were formed. Two different tasks for the respective groups were given.

Task A for those coming from colonies was:

What is your experience in the colonies and your suggestions?

Task B for those not belonging to the colonies was:

(1) What are the problems of the people living outside colonies?

(2) What are their strengths?

(3) How to solve their problems?

The participants deliberated for about half a day and came out with the following suggestions:

Task A

Experience: The colonies which have been constructed for the agricultural labourers have from 200 to 300 acres of government land, on one year's renewable lease under Harijan Development Corporation.

The houses constructed are not strong; very few have school buildings. The bore wells are not functioning properly. The fair price shops are not functioning well for want of funds. Since all the Harijans of a village are not covered, there is a feeling of dissatisfaction. The people in the colonies are not united. Severe financial problems are faced in finding funds for buying agricultural inputs etc.

Solutions: The financial problems can be solved by more subsidies from the government, banks and other agencies. The assigned land should be freed from the clutches of the landlords. Irrigation facilities may be provided. The colonies should be provided with primary health centres, schools, fair-price shops. Poultry and dairy farms, cottage industries should be developed so as to supplement the income during the lean months and also provide employment during non-cultivation periods.

Task B

The weaknesses: ignorance, disunity, caste division, illiteracy, liquor, heavy debts, etc.

The strengths: The government legislations on minimum wages, Bonded Labour Abolition Act, etc.

Solutions suggested

1. We must organize one District Labour Development Society at the district level by taking one member from each village committee.
2. The village committees should take their issues to the District Committee.
3. A government representative should be on the District Committee to implement the labour laws.
4. The village committee would be responsible for maintaining discipline and eradicating social evils from the village, etc.

On the subsequent two days, having deliberated upon the issues of mutual distrust, co-operation and conflict in a situation characterised by lack of identity and existence of interest groups, the participants identified poverty as the basic problem of the rural labour in the context of socio-economic exploitation of their life situation. A critical discussion on the solutions was carried out.

The participants reviewed the entire system of welfare legislations, schemes for the betterment of the condition of the rural poor, their implementation and also the role of voluntary organisations, governmental agencies and so on. They came out by appreciating the need for effective organisation for themselves. Facilitating factors as well the factors that impede the growth and expansion of an organisation were identified. The participants discussed some case studies of various rural labour organisations, how they capitalised on their strengths and overcame their weaknesses.

The camp ended with participants preparing a six-month action plan. Some of the highlights of their action plans were:

(1) Form agricultural labourers' and poor peasants' unions.

(2) Identify instances of bonded labour and report these to the district administration.

(3) Strive to resolve the differences such as caste, amongst the village poor.

(4) Try to secure government assistance for improving the conditions in the colonies.

(5) Secure loans for raising crops.

(6) Through peaceful means seek to solve the differences with the employers who are exploiting them.

(7) Secure household land pattas for the homeless.

(8) Work for the implementation of the Minimum Wages Act.

(9) Collect data on surplus land in the area.

Palghat Visited

R.N. Maharaj

The King governs all,
The Parson prays for all,
The Lawyer pleads for all,
The Ploughman pays for all (And feeds all.)

(The King of the Norfolk Poachers)

They hang the man and flog the woman
Who steals the goose from off the common;
But let the greater criminal loose
Who steals the common from the goose.

(Traditional Rhyme)[1]

I stayed in Palghat for 10 days in connection with our fifth Rural Camp at Mallampuzha[2]. I took four days off to go round the Palghat countryside to obtain an insight into the conditions of agricultural workers. The district leaders of the Congress and the CPI-sponsored Agricultural Workers' Trade Unions' and the District Conciliation Officer were my guides. They took me to several villages in the Palghat, Alatur and Chittoor Talukas of the district. They helped me establish instant rapport with my respondents and also acted as interpreters[3].

The agricultural workers in Palghat do not constitute a homogeneous mass. They comprise three distinct groups based on their social origin – the backward community of the Ezhavas[4], Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The scheduled population has also some sprinkling of immigrant Tamil labour.

It was a pleasant experience for me going round the countryside. The jeep was running along roads meandering through lush green paddy fields and coconut groves. It came to a sudden halt and we were ushered into a four-room house, modestly furnished and kept very neat and clean. We had chairs to sit on and coffee to sip. Numerous curious faces, men and women, boys and girls, gathered round us. All had spick and span dresses and none betrayed any overt sign of under-nourishment.

Mr. R. Narayanan, District President of the Congress-sponsored Desiya Karhsak Tozhilali Federation, introduced me to my respondents and the stage was immediately set for an intimate dialogue. Everybody present was literate. Many of them possessed a fairly good modicum of education. They were intelligently aware of the various social and economic issues and could quite well see that problems would be amenable to solution through protective legislation backed by organized action. They were all members of DKTF and had been part of the organized agricultural working class even before this

organization was born. On the day of my visit they were on strike demanding payment of wages at rates fixed by the Industrial Relations Committee. Their landlord was really big. He had his fingers in many pies. He owned rice mills, plantations and also a fleet of buses. He could pull the correct administrative and political wires. The workers, however, were not at all afraid of his might. They knew the salient features of the Kerala Agricultural Workers' Act. Their trade union was vigilant and so were they. The limit to a landlord's powers was known to all. They were confident that the wages would in time touch the IRC prescribed level.

As I hail from Bihar where the vast bulk of agricultural workers are condemned to a life of utter destitution and isolation, it was indeed difficult to believe that I was inside an agricultural worker's house. There was no sign of destitution. It was not situated on the outskirts of the village, nor was it surrounded by a cesspool of filth. The people knew it quite well that the decisions in Trivandrum and the attitudes of various political parties towards organizing agricultural workers would have a significant impact on their lives. Once the discussion was switched over to the questions of income, employment, food and dress etc., many faces suddenly began to look stern. Opportunities for gainful employment were at most limited to 100 days a year. An increase in wage rates as such was not reflected in a commensurate increase in income. During the peak seasons all working adolescents and adults would get jobs. The family would be able to lay something by for the rainy day. But with the onset of the lean season, the income stream would virtually dry up and within a few months the granaries too. Normally, an agricultural worker had two rice meals a day, the morning meal invariably consisting of vellachoru — the left-over of rice from last evening's meal. Only in the evening would the hearth be warm with a fatigued housewife attending to chores in the kitchen. Women agricultural workers suffered more than men. They had to work even when carrying for nine months. Again, 20 to 40 days after delivery, want would force them out of the house into the fields. Suckling babies would have to be carried to the work-sites to be breast-fed or they would have to subsist on kanji — thin rice gruel. Clean clothes, they protested, did not signify that they had enough. Many of them had only one piece. During transplantation they would be drenched to the skin and find it hard to dry wet clothes over the hearth. At times they would lie in bed wrapped in the wet apparel. Education was universal but also very wasteful. Incidence of dropouts was very high and for the failed SSLC boys and girls, who were so many, there was hardly any opportunity for more remunerative employment. Questioned "What would you suggest as a remedy to your problems?", the reply invariably was that the redistribution of land should be such as to ensure every agricultural labour household an acre of plot. It would take care of problems relating both to wages as well as employment.

The next day I visited villages inhabited by Scheduled Caste agricultural workers. Their hamlets did not form part of the village continuum as the Ezhava hamlets did. Incidence of illiteracy among them was very high. Not more than 10% of the people were literate in any of the villages I visited. The levels of their social and political awareness were pitiably low. Many of them had acquired membership in the trade unions only after the enforcement of the Kerala Agricultural Workers' Act, 1974. They were in the union though not yet organized. They had yet to engage themselves in sustained struggle for higher wages. While they were not denied entry into temples, the upper caste Hindus maintained a social distance from them. They were not allowed to use private wells.

The last two days were devoted to visiting the villages inhabited by immigrant Tamil agricultural workers. They lived in dilapidated huts which were owned by their landlords. They had been lured to Kerala on false promises and subjected to savage exploitation. They were wholly illiterate and in terms of their social and political awareness were no better than Neanderthal men. The Kerala Agricultural Workers' Act, as I will later describe, really boomeranged on them.

Kerala is a trail-blazer in the matter of having enacted a comprehensive legislation to protect and promote the interests of the agricultural working class. It is perhaps the only one of its kind in India. While it seeks to confer benefits of higher wages on casual workers, it accords security of job and provident fund benefits to permanent hands. Every employer having a holding above one hectare has to maintain a register containing names of permanent workers. The Act lays down the conditions under which a permanent hand can be denied work. All agricultural workers have to be provided with wage slips before they are sent out to the fields. These slips contain relevant information relating to the personal identification of the workers, the date and hours of employment, and the rate of wages. In case there is any infraction of laws, recourse to legal remedy is speedy and cheap. The dispute is referred to the District Conciliation Officer who convenes some kind of a tripartite meet. In case the landlord is intransigent in his attitude, the officer delivers an ex-parte award. An appeal against his judgment can be preferred with a one-man Agricultural Tribunal which must dispose of the case within 30 days. The tribunal, however, cannot stay the award of the executive. All those having holdings above one hectare and employing agricultural workers can be prosecuted even for offences which do not relate to underpayment of wages. Such prosecution, however, can be launched only after obtaining prior approval of the Labour Commissioner or the District Collector.

The Act seeks to forge a new economic relationship between the employer and the employee not warranted by the situation obtaining in the labour market. It has given rise to a situation in which the workers through their

trade unions are trying to overcome the constraints imposed by the market and the employers are busy seeking new devices to frustrate the provisions of the Act. The latter, however, are in a happier position. The enforcement of the Act was not preceded by a census of permanent agricultural workers. This omission has come in as a windfall for the big landlords. They are bent upon transforming their permanent hands into casual ones to reduce their liability to pay prescribed wages and to contribute to the provident fund. The poor Tamil workers have to bear the brunt. They are all in the CPI sponsored trade union which sprang up after the enforcement of the Act. As I pointed out earlier, they resemble those cavemen who do not know of any benefit that legislation can confer. The Act has come to mean many things to many workers. To the Ezhavas, it has ensured the payment of wages at rates normally tending to reach the level prescribed by the IRC. To the agricultural workers drawn from the scheduled caste community, it has only meant that wage rates are no longer sticky. But for the poor Tamilians, it has been a Pandora's Box rather than a cornucopia.

Usury is not a prominent form of exploitation in Palghat villages I visited. Landlords lent only rarely. While Ezhavas and many Scheduled Caste agricultural workers could borrow from the bank against the pledge of ornaments, others were left high and dry. Another important thing about the Palghat landlords was that they could subject no agricultural workers to social oppression. There were only faint murmurs against practice of untouchability. The Tamil workers, however, were being subjected to harassment. In one case a landlord had set his haystack on fire to implicate his workers in criminal cases.

Notes :

1. Palmer, Roy, (Ed.), "The Painful Plough", Cambridge University Press, 1973, p. 4.
2. Camp was held from 5th to 10th January, 1976.
3. The Desiya Karshak Tozhilali Federation is a Congress-sponsored Agricultural Workers' Union. The Kerala Karshak Tozhilali Sangam is the CPI offspring.
4. The backward community of Ezhavas is characterised by a very high degree of intra-community inequality — social as well as economic. The Ezhavas account for 50% of the Communist membership in Kerala.
5. The DKTF was founded in 1972.
6. The landlord's attempt to induct 'blacklegs', as the workers described it, was foiled by stiff resistance from the latter. One senior District Officer of the Labour Department, Govt. of Kerala, was consulted by the landlord in his house at night; workers could know of it and make a strong case out of it. A prominent Palghat journalist openly referred to it in our camp.

Rural Workshop at Mallampuzha (Kerala)

Subhash Gakkhar

Kerala, with the highest percentage of rural households without land in the whole of India – i.e., approximately 31% against an all-India average of approximately 11% and the lowest per capita availability of cultivable land – i.e, about one hectare against the all-India figure of about three hectares (Oommen, 1975), presents certain unique and complex problems of the man-land-agriculture relationship. Historically, Kerala had probably the widest variety of land tenures. All these factors had significant impact on the evolution of agrarian trade unions in the State – the first state in the country to have organisations of the rural labour. It was in this context that the workshop for the organizers of rural labour — the first in the series — was held at Mallampuzha in Palghat district of Kerala in January, 1976.

This workshop had one distinction from the previous workshops in that all the 67 participants including one woman were engaged in organisation of the rural poor for different periods ranging from two to 30 years. They came from 11 districts of Kerala and represented rural wings of different political parties. About half of the participants were landless and the rest except three possessed land-holdings of size less than half an acre.

The first session of the workshop was devoted to design on a participative basis like other workshops. Work started on identification of the problems of agricultural labour. Working intensively in small groups composed of a mixed combination from different parties and different districts, they identified some of the problems faced by the agricultural labourer as follows:

(a) Unemployment and under-employment, lack of work for sufficient number of days in a year owing to the fixed cropping pattern; average number of days a landless labourer gets employment in the fields is about 100.

(b) A low level of consciousness and awareness of socio-economic realities because of level of education. This is in spite of the fact that Kerala has the highest literacy rate in the country and also the largest readership of language news media.

(c) Existence of various kinds of superstitions, beliefs and practices in the socio-cultural milieu resulting in absence of any unifying and driving force amongst the rural labour.

(d) Discrimination against the socially depressed members partly due to (b) and (c) above.

(e) Lack of sufficient information about government rules, regulations, statutes, etc.

(f) Indebtedness of rural labour; his dependence on the village landlord; absence of rural banks to give consumption loans. All but nine of our participants were under debt for amounts varying between Rs. 500 and Rs. 5000.

(g) Absence of or lack of work-based education, that is to say, the current educational system had little vocational orientation and is primarily class room-textbooks-examination oriented.

(h) Lack of housing sites, funds and other basic necessities like drinking water and drainage. Before the Land Reforms Act of 1969 there were about four lakh households with homestead on other people's land (Kudikidappu).

(i) Ineffective implementation of different legislative measures in the field of land reforms and minimum wages.

(j) Non-availability of agriculture land. Want of land occupied a low priority, understandably so, as the maximum available land for redistribution after implementation of the Land Reforms Act of 1916 is not more than three lakh acres. (Oommen, 1975).

(k) Absence of social security measures like provident fund, insurance, unemployment compensation, maternity benefits for women workers, primary medical facilities for children, etc.

(I) Exploitation of the contract labour by the landlords as they have not been covered adequately by the employment security, under the new law.

For some of the participants, working together, though belonging to different parties, was a novel experience in the beginning. Those who got the opportunity to speak, took a little longer time to present their view points, while many participants could not get sufficient opportunity for expressing their views. Being the first experience of its kind, initially the level of discussion tended to be broad-based rather than being specific and data-based. Some found this unstructured session a little vague and they expressed the desire for having 'one faculty member' for each group. One of the participants expressed this as the first learning of organising, starting with the self. Another one pointed out the inadequacy of Malayalam-English-Malayalam translation; this was soon related to the real-life situation by another participant who observed that when they went to the villages they did not talk in the metaphor of the landless poor labourer but tended to talk in the sophisticated journalistic eloquence.

Next they worked on the exercise on:

(a) steps that the organisations of agricultural labour can take to make implementation of land laws effective;

(b) steps that can be taken to increase cooperation between government machinery and organisation of agricultural labour.

Some of the ideas emerging out of discussion on the first point were:

(a) to undertake to get the names of agricultural workers registered with the local authorities;

(b) to undertake to learn and teach the rural workers various aspects of agricultural labour laws, regulations, etc.;

(c) to take steps to get the workers their due share from the landlord through appeals or representation to the authorities;

(d) to intimate the names of agricultural land owners who hold land beyond the ceiling limits to the authorities.

Some of the steps to ensure effective cooperation between the government machinery and organisations of agricultural labour were thought of as follows:

(a) to organize committees at the district, taluka and panchayat levels; consisting of representatives from the labour department and the workers for speedy implementation of the Land Reforms Act,

(b) to hold joint conventions of different unions and workers at the village level,

(c) to arrange for widest circulation of Malayalam version of different legislative measures,

(d) to conduct seminars at the village level in collaboration with the labour department,

(e) to organize implementation committees for the Land Reforms Act,

(f) to arrange for legal assistance to workers through the labour department.

So far the discussion showed signs of involvement and identification with the rural poor, but did not reflect the symbiosis of reflective action and critical theorising. The rural worker was seen more of an object for whom problem-solving could be done externally rather than helping them to problematise the reality and generate critical consciousness for helping them to seek their own solutions. There were faint signs of the realisation that "the more accurately men grasp true casualty, the more critical their understanding of reality will be. It so happens that to every understanding, sooner or later, an action corresponds, once man perceives a challenge he understands it and recognises the possibilities of response he acts." (Freire, 1974). To highlight the interpersonal dynamics in the groups, the exercise for reflection on mutual trust and cooperation was utilised. As an experiment, different combinations of the teams were tried: participants from the same party, from the same district, from two parties and a combination of all. Interestingly, the results were no different for any one team. One of the participants commented that they had a long way to go – learning to cooperate with each other on the road to organisation. Another one highlighted the need for interparty and intraparty cooperation for the cause of

the agricultural worker who would not be interested in any specific symbol but would be keen on knowing who would help him get his due wages. He would be more interested in a horizontal communicative relationship to empathy resulting in a loving-humble-hopeful-trusting matrix.

This theme was further explored with the different groups working on the portraits of an agricultural worker and organizer of the agricultural workers. This was indeed an intense experience and we could see the closer identification of the 'organizers with the organized.' The agricultural worker was seen as a pathetic figure enshrouded by wants of food, work, shelter, education and social acceptability. The second part of the exercise turned out to be partly an exercise on what an organizer should be rather than what an organizer looks like. Was this because of the realisation of wide gap between the organizers and the agricultural workers whom they wanted to organize or was it a reflection on escaping the realisation of what need not have been?

This was followed by an open discussion on the salient features of the latest legislation protecting the agricultural workers. Officials from the State Labour Department responded to the various points raised by the participants and took note of some of the difficulties faced by the agricultural worker in getting his due wages.

During the course of a discussion the need for using colloquial language for communicating with the agricultural workers was highlighted and emphasis was laid more on using the dialogical process of helping them understand their situation rather than offering them readymade solutions or plans of actions.

Continuing the focus on internalisation of the rural situation, the groups deliberated upon the likely causes of resistance from the agricultural worker within the group and resistance of external factors for smooth group working. The economic backwardness and resulting insecurity was seen as the primary cause of agricultural workers' inconsistent response to organisation. Influence of caste-ridden customs, traditions and practices was seen as the second major demotivating factor. Interestingly, the role of political parties was a major external resistance to the smooth functioning of the organisation, though all the participants belonged to one or other of the major political parties operating in different areas of the state. The role of the rich landlords and the dubious game played by them for their own ends was also seen as yet another factor.

Level of discussion was now focussed on the 'here and now' aspects of the situation and the participants had time to reflect on their individual role in the light of previous discussions. Working through the individual plans of action, many of the participants planned to update themselves on the intricate aspects of all the legislative measures and translate these to the agricultural workers through their respective unions. Mass contact through personal visits and frequent stays in the rural sector, living with the workers, sharing their

miseries, was another design. Some of them planned to convene panchayat level committees and work intensively with them through taluk and district level committees. Yet another group planned to try out the same exercises and discussions in their respective organisations, pursuade their colleagues on a common action plan for working with the grassroot people for a continuous stretch, help them organize themselves, and move on to the next area for repeat action.

There are some questions which could be examined in the light of our experiences in this six-day camp. The state has progressive land reform legislation supported by the infrastructure of implementing these measures, well read and informed rural workers, good deal of field work by different political parties, yet the condition of the landless poor is not substantially different here than that prevailing in other states of the country. Why is it so? What kind of organisation/awareness could have made difference in the situation? Fred Emery in his paper, has suggested a participative design which can be implemented at the grassroots level as well as at the higher levels of hierarchy for total development of the village community. In the continuously changing situation, direct participation rather than the traditional hierarchical or representative set will be the adaptive strategy through which the decades of time necessary for raising the educational level of the villagers can be saved. Extending this concept of matrix organisation in two planes, i.e., organisation of the rural poor and the interface of this organisation with the governmental machinery responsible for implementing various legislative measures. One could think of a positive adaptive approach for getting total involvement of all the people in the network and the maintenance of this network by shared values and goals. The village level workers, the block development officer, village level secretary of the party and the agricultural worker will all apply their common partial knowledge to the totality of problematized rural situation and work jointly for their own solution rather than the external bureaucratic solution. May be in our next camps we will have to get involved at the grassroots level and see if a pilot participative design can be worked out, until then the questions raised earlier remain unanswered.

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Rural Camp at Narangarh: Some Observations

K.G. Iyer

Introduction

Even after almost two and a half decades of freedom, the conditions of rural people have not improved to the extent they should have. The view is neither pessimistic nor is there a zest for unwieldy optimism. An in-depth inspection of rural life reveals the following facts:

(a) That still there is painful exploitation of the poor by the rich and the privileged;

(b) The rural masses, most of whom belong to the deprived sections of the population, are unorganized and ignorant of the causes which obstruct their progress;

(c) They have failed to identify unambiguously their allies and foes and are suffering from an intense sense of frustration which generates in them a spirit of aggression. This spirit of aggression, however, is channelized in an unproductive manner.

One can formulate many more problems which encompass the socio-economic, political, psychological factors which are important determinants of rural stagnation. Needless to say that the regeneration and upliftment of rural society is a task that cannot be tackled by the government alone unless people feel involved and identify their own resources to provide a workable solution to end their miseries.

Objectives

The National Labour Institute took up the task of playing its modest role in the awakening of the rural poor, make them aware of the social, cultural, psychological, political and economic realities of the agrarian relations, sharpen their behavioural and attitudinal skills in the areas of motivation, leadership, problem-solving, decision-making, etc., based on the knowledge and research of behavioural science. Besides, it is also geared to the task of understanding the hindering and facilitating factors in the process of organising the rural poor and to evolve concrete plans of action for organising the rural poor.

The present report is restricted to the rural camp held at Village Narangarh (Orissa) from 22nd February, 1976 organized to achieve these objectives jointly in collaboration with the Labour Ministry of the Government of India and the Labour Department of the Government of Orissa.

Participants

The 39 organizers who participated in this camp were drawn from 6 districts of Orissa, 70% of them from Puri district itself. Most of them belonged to landless labourers and poor peasants category. Only 10% represented the category of middle peasants. Harijans and tribals accounted for 40% of the total number of participants. 68% of them were below 40 years and the rest were above 40 years. Four of them had long experience and eight of them moderate experience of working among the peasantry. None of them was illiterate. 82% of them were below matriculation level and the educational levels of the remaining were rather high. Most of them were members of rural labour organisation led by INTUC and some of them held high positions in the local organisations. Among the participants there was one ex-M.P. and one ex-M.L.A.

Faculty

Besides the faculty members of the National Labour Institute and Shri D. Bandopadhyay from the Labour Ministry, Government of India, there were two officers of the Labour Department, Government of Orissa, to assist us.

Shri Benudhar Baliar Singh, Labour Minister, Government of Orissa, along with his team of officials was a constant companion doing everything to make our programme a success. The District Collector and other functionaries of the State Government were only too willing to extend all cooperation. The Headmaster and his colleagues and students were the real hosts. The camp was inaugurated on the 22nd February, 1976 evening. Shri Raghunath Reddy, Union Labour Minister, met the participants individually and in groups on the 24th February and asked about the problems of the rural poor from their respective areas; he acquainted them with what the Government of India is doing for the rural poor and highlighted the urgent need to organize the rural poor. Smt. Nandini Satpathy made a valedictory speech on the 27th. Some other ministers of the Orissa Government and President of INTUC also addressed the participants on different days of the camp.

Methodology

The tools and techniques used for the camp consisted of simulated exercises, small group method of discussion and feedback in the community session as well as some instruments to identify some of the personality characteristics of the participants. Simulated exercises consisted of Tower Building (meant to provide an insight into the skills of motivation and mutual support), Prisoners' Dilemma (a presentation of co-operation-competition strategy leading to an insight into the efficacy of co-operation) and group decision-making (through consensus rating of leadership characteristics leading to developing an insight into the consensus method of decision-making) were utilised for providing an

insight into their own skills and sharpen their behaviour and attitudinal skills. For identifying and diagnosing the problems of the rural poor, considering the problems faced in organising them and their solutions, first they worked in small groups and then in the community session reflected upon their common pool of knowledge into these questions.

As usual the session was geared to the dialogical process between the participants and the faculty members. Each session was first conducted in small groups and the feedback process was generated in the community sessions. Social Reaction Inventory consisted of 29 items with two possible answers out of which the participants were required to choose one – i.e., either (a) or (b). The two alternative responses to each item measured internal and external control. The internal control measured initiation, self-reliance, efficacy etc. and the external control measured an individual's subservience to the elements of luck, fortune, fatalism, etc.

The General Opinion Survey instrument was a paper-pencil test measuring interpersonal trust of the participants. This test consisted of 40 items. The participants were to indicate their own beliefs to each statement from 'strong agreement' to 'strong disagreement' by writing appropriate numbers 1 to 5 – 1 indicating strong agreement, 2 mild agreement, 3 neutral belief, 4 mild disagreement and 5 strong disagreement. Eighty four per cent of the participants exhibited high internal control indicative of leadership style with initiative in controlling one's own action, less proneness to dependence on others and self-competence and efficacy in handling social issues. The high scores in the General Opinion Survey instrument were indicative of their high degree of cooperation and interpersonal trust which also characterised their behaviour during the entire period of stay in the camp.

Procedure

The sessions started with the enquiry into what they expected from this rural camp. This was obviously significant as it provided a common anchorage and set the direction to the thinking of the participants. The session devoted to sharing of expectations lasted for about four hours, that, and the whole of the morning session on the second day. This was followed by three simulated exercises which were started right from the afternoon session of the second day and continued till almost the end of the third day. The fourth day was devoted to identification of the problems of the rural poor. On the fifth day both the sessions were devoted to visualising the problems of developing an organisation for the rural poor and possible methods of overcoming these problems. On the sixth day, in the first session, the participants were required to chalk out individual plans of action for developing an organisation of the rural poor. In the second session of the sixth day, the participants were asked to review the programme.

Observation

A majority of the participants in the first session of the second day were non-directively led to recognise the main purpose of this camp. Most of the participants seemed a little out of place in the beginning of the first session of the second day but as the interaction warmed up, their common pool of knowledge could spot out at least the crux of the problem. Besides this, the morning session of the second day also facilitated the interaction process within the participants and between the participants and the faculty.

In a majority of the cases simulated exercises were found partially effective in developing some of the individual skills of the participants. Besides, they also facilitated the perception of factors which could help the growth of organization of rural poor. They also succeeded in helping the participants to link up the experiences in the games to the problems of their actual life. For example, the Tower Building exercise could communicate the message of inducing courage among individual members through mutual cooperation and support, self-reliance, capacity to face challenges, developing team-spirit, etc. The Prisoners' Dilemma exercise, however, could not elicit the required reaction to the extent it was expected.

Surprisingly enough, some of the participants, after they had played Prisoners' Dilemma, came to the conclusion that they should not fight or quarrel in the village either among themselves or with the moneylenders and landlords. With regard to the decision-making exercise, some of the characteristics, e.g., character, integrity, etc., seemed to be out of order. This minimised the efficacy of the instrument in the context of the rural poor. It was observed that consensus could only emerge in the group session, but when the same was strived through representatives from each group, it was found that the consensus could not arise because of pre-existing rigidity and identification with their earlier small groups. This could, however, be resolved in the community session and the participants felt that even in solving minor problems of the village, a consensus decision should be the target.

On the fourth day in the morning, the participants were divided into a number of groups and were non-directively led to identify the problems of landless agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, poor peasants and small peasants. Some of the common economic problems identified were: (i) low wages, (ii) high rate of interest charged by moneylenders, (iii) employment only for 100 days in a year, (iv) landlessness, (v) lack of house-sites, bondage in the form of dadan labour system, etc.

Among the social problems they identified were: (i) exploitation by the landlords, (ii) by the moneylenders, (iii) by the lower level functionaries of the bureaucracy, (iv) prevalence of the dowry system, (v) discriminatory caste practices, (vi) low level of education, (vii) lack of consciousness among the

rural poor, etc. They also identified the negative role of co-operatives, banks, tahsildars, etc. as well as the domination by the moneylenders and landlords in various committees.

They pointed out that in the absence of any alternative source of credit, the rural poor are forced to sell their lands and mortgage their meagre assets including ornaments to repay the loans of the moneylenders. One of the complaints was that the poor peasants and small peasants do not get fertilisers and seeds on loan from the cooperative and so they are forced to go the moneylenders for loans, consequently, rendering peasants still poorer. In many cooperative societies, if a rich landowner completes his term as a member, his son ipso facto succeeds him, thus maintaining the hold of moneylenders and landlords. This was substantiated by another participant who referred to the fact that in the Bagaria Seva Samiti, this was happening for the last few years.

Regarding share-croppers, they opined that hard work failed to procure their due share for them. Many of the sharecroppers were evicted from their land and when they filed cases for rights over the land, the local police functionaries and tahsildars worked against their interests. A sharecropper has to part with half the produce to the landowner and a good portion of the balance crop went to the moneylender. This generates a vicious cycle. They are again forced to raise loans from the moneylenders for their subsistence. Sometimes they are even forced to harvest unripe crops and are compelled to sell them at a much lower rate than the market price. Sometimes, when a sharecropper files a claim for his right over land, the landowner persuades some of his relatives to file a counter-suit for the same plot of land as a share-cropper. In such cases the tahsildars, invariably give a decision in favour of the rich landowners. Many sharecroppers are ignorant of laws and so do not file claims at all. Some still hold the legitimacy of the landlord's right over such a piece of land and do not come forward to file cases. Due to non-availability of employment for 2/3rds of the year they are forced to work on as low a wage as Rs. 1.50 per day, are forced to beg and take recourse to the dadan labour system. Many of the dadan labourers die on the spot and some of them never return home.

The dadan labour system is a form of labour contract prevalent in the Puri and Ganjam districts for the last 50 years. The contractors and khatedars (agents recruiting labourers from villages) recruit the labourers for a period of three months for Rs. 210 plus free food and travel and send them to different places in India to work at the construction sites and other earthwork operations. The contractors and khatedars in Puri and Ganjam districts receive their fixed percentages. The labourers are forced to work at the work sites for 15 to 16 hours a day, and beaten severely in case of refusal to work. They are also forced to work for six to eight months for the same amount. Many of them do not even get the full wages of three months as promised.

Those who organize the rural poor are victimised and they are not engaged as agricultural labourers by the landlords. Most of the landless poor have neither been given land nor house-sites. Even now there are a large number of landlords having land beyond 10 standard acres but they have not been brought under the ceiling limit. None of the government schemes reach the rural poor. Many of the landlords had partitioned their lands in the names of their relatives and are evading the land reform laws. In Bardama village one landlord had partitioned his land in the name of his son who was shown as an adult 20 years back but it was detected that the child had attained his 20th year only recently. The local tahsildar did not take any action on this case. Some of the participants said that ministers, engineers, doctors and people in government service having land should invariably be asked to surrender their entire land and it should be distributed among the rural poor. One of the participants said that even though in law government has taken over the temple land but still the Sarbarkars at the local level control the land and exploit the rural poor. He said that even now the Puri Jagannath temple has thousands of acres of land and lots of riches in the form of gold and silver which could be distributed to the rural poor.

A participant from Sambhalpur district narrated the problem of local tribals which was agonizing because well-to-do tribals from Bihar were given land in this district at the cost of the sons of the soil. The rates of interest charged from the adivasis on advance of loans from banks were exorbitant. When the adivasis are not able to repay the loans, the cooperatives realise the money by selling their land, whereas legally the land of the tribals cannot be sold. Many of the tribals who are engaged in plucking kendu leaves are given not more than Rs.2 for a whole day's work by the Forest Department, which is only half the minimum wages fixed by Govenment of Orissa.

In Kalkat and neighbouring villages in the district, many of kharposh lands belonging to tribals were illegally settled by local tahsildars in favour of non-tribals. In the 14 Khomar villages in this district, large tracts of land belonging to the tribals were illegally settled in favour of non-tribals. The holiyas (permanent agricultural worker) in this district used to get four seers of rice per day and other perquisites for a long time but after fixation of the minimum wages at Rs. 4 by the Orissa Government, the landlords give them cash which is much less than what they were getting earlier. Minimum wages fixation did not take into account the local practices and they need to be revised accordingly.

On the fifth day in the morning, the participants considered, first in small groups and then in the community session, the problems of organisation of the rural poor. Most of the participants in different groups stated that the landless agricultural labourers, poor peasants (Nam Matra Chasi), small peasants and village artisans (e.g., carpenters, blacksmiths, potters) will be the main

constituents of the organization of rural poor. They formulated that the aims of the organization would be to fight for the payment of minimum wages to the agricultural labourers, ownership rights to the share-croppers, getting out of the clutches of the moneylenders, enforcement of land ceiling, procurement of loans from cooperatives and banks for poor peasants and small peasants, fighting for relief from bondage, setting up of cottage industries for promoting employment for the rural poor, etc.

Most of them identified the capitalists, moneylenders, big landowners, tahsildars, lower level functionaries of the police and the bureaucracy as the main sources of obstacles to the growth of organization of the rural poor.

In order to remove the obstacles the participants wished to educate the rural poor about the main problems facing them and to convince them to unite within one organizational fold. Besides approaching sympathetic and committed government officials to protect them from harassment as well as to implement the laws meant for the welfare of the rural poor, they would also wield pressure on the lower level functionaries of the bureaucracy to give loans and other benefits for the poor. They, however, felt that sufficient support of the government will be necessary to strengthen the organisation of the rural poor. They were confident that by developing a strong and effective organisation they can overcome the obstacles being put in the way by the rural elites and the lower level functionaries of the bureaucracy.

On the final day, the morning session was devoted to the task of preparing individual plans of action. Most of the participants planned to organize the landless labourers, poor peasants, small peasants and village artisans. The organization would be initially formed at the village level and gradually be extended to the block, the sub-division, and the district levels. The objectives of the organization would be to fight for the minimum wages for agricultural labourers, for the share-cropper's right to land, loans from cooperatives and banks to the small peasants and the poor peasants, etc. In order to run the organization they proposed that each rural poor household would be persuaded to sacrifice a small portion of its income to the common pool of the village fund, which will be a stand-by not only to help the needy but would also be a source of strengthening the organizational activities. They were quite confident of exerting pressure on the rich peasants to contribute to the village fund. They were, however, quite apprehensive of the problems created by the rich landowners, police officials and moneylenders as well the lower level functionaries of the bureaucracy. Their other apprehension was that the organizers may be harassed and victimised. They felt that these impediments will, however, not succeed in frustrating their organization so long as the members had mutual trust, co-operation, and strength of conviction among themselves. The effectiveness of the camp was evident from the assertions of

the participants to hold similar camps for the oppressed sections of the rural poor.

From the aforesaid observations, it is evident that the camp succeeded to a considerable extent in arousing active participation and interest among the participants. It succeeded in arousing a feeling of equality and one could expect that they would feel less scared and less distant from high officials in placing their legitimate demands before them. It is also felt that frequent intervention in the camp was not healthy for the growth of participation, inter-personal interaction and free exchange of views and attitudes. It is also felt that these camps would serve their purpose more meaningfully if suitable measures are taken to evaluate the contribution of the participants at different points of time through systematic follow-up studies.

Rural Camps: Current Assessment and Future Issues*

Rajesh Tandon

Ratlam was one of the four sites where an International Workshop on Rural Development was held during the first week of April 1977. Broadly speaking, the objectives of this workshop were to assess the impact of the rural camps organized by the National Labour Institute since February 1975 and to generate strategies of rural change and development with the target population of the poorest sections of rural society (the landless and the poor peasants) — as both the inputs to and beneficiaries of the development. The key participants in these three-day workshops were those rural poor who had attended previous rural camps. At Ratlam, a total of 22 rural participants attended this workshop. They had attended one of the three rural camps held earlier at Ratlam (11 participants), Bilaspur (seven participants) and Udaipur (four participants).

The basic principle guiding the design of the workshop was participation, and members of the NLI staff and international colleagues played the roles of facilitators, catalysts and listeners. To that extent, the thrust of the workshop was for the rural participants to share their experiences since the previous camp, to examine their successes and failures and the reasons thereof, and to generate alternative strategies to ameliorate their sufferings.

This report is based on the experiences of and the data generated during this workshop. It attempts to highlight the current scene as observed by us and as described by the participants. It is intended to identify some trends which have been set in motion since the previous rural camps. Moreover, some aspects did not register any change at all. This report will present both these aspects. In order to provide a reference point against which the changes or lack of it are assessed, the reports on the previous camps held at Ratlam, Bilaspur and Udaipur have been used. After an assessment of present trends, this paper identifies and discusses some issues related to the future design of rural camps and the alternative roles that the National Labour Institute can play.

Present trends

Based on our observations, both prior to and during the workshop, and the data generated by the rural participants, a series of propositions, and their supporting data, are presented below to highlight the present trends:

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* *This report is based on the experiences of the International Rural Workshop organized by the National Labour Institute.*

The author wishes to acknowledge valuable assistance given by S/Shri R.N. Maharaj, Anisur Rahman, R.S. Joshi and international colleagues Mr. Philips A. Neck, Dr. Chris Duke and Dr. Elizabeth N. Sommerlad during the data-collection and write-up of earlier drafts.

1. Participants were intensely aware of and articulate about their sufferings its causes and their legal rights.

Right from the very beginning, it was clear that the participants were very much aware of their misery and what is causing it. About eight of them were very vocal about it too. They were able to identify the reasons for their suffering as emanating from their own practices and those of the money-lenders/landlords. They did not hesitate in accepting their socio-religious rituals as being the main source of their indebtedness. Similarly, they were vocal about the various exploitative practices followed by their local money-lenders and landlords.

More significantly, they were able to articulate their legal rights. They knew minimum wages in their states, were clear about the abolition of bonded labour and removal of indebtedness. Most of them knew whom to approach in their tehsil or district for obtaining the various legal rights due to them; and nine of them had already approached officials up to the level of the District

Table 1

Sl. No.	Groups	Organisation-Building	
		No. of villages	No. of people
1.	Ratlam (a:	5	60
	b)	6	100
2.	Bilaspur	12	50
3.	Udaipur	5	150

Improvements/Successes		
Relief from bonded labour	Wage increases	Removal of indebtedness
47 Halis in Delanpur (Tehsil Ratlam) 18 in Sherpur Khurd (Tehsil Aloth) 10 persons 10 Halis	Bhils get Rs. 4 (male) and Rs. 2.75 (female) as PWD construction workers in Delanpur.	27 acres 65 cases under processing
	Minimum wages in 4 villages	11 cases (ornaments worth Rs. 3000 in police custody).
	In 8 villages, minimum wage increased from Rs. 2 to Rs. 3 (equal wages for men and women). In Kotala Tehsil, wages increased from Rs. 1.50 for men and Rs. 1.25 for women to Rs. 3.50 and Rs. 3.00 respectively. 250 ST's got land for agriculture.	16 cases (range from Rs. 300 to Rs. 1000) Following the arrest of 2 moneylenders forced voluntary return of goods in case of 240 Harijan families.

Magistrate with their grievances. In our meeting with the District Collector of Ratlam, we learnt that he had noticed this increased awareness on their part.

It was clear that the previous rural camps had helped the present participants in two significant ways. Firstly, they had become quite aware of the dynamics pertaining to their poverty as well as the various legal measures available to them. Secondly, they had become confident enough to boldly verbalize them in the presence of others. This latter point can be contrasted with the experiences during the first rural camps, where they were experiencing great difficulty in even verbalizing their names.

2. Significant successes had been achieved in the acquisition of their legal rights through their own initiative.

During the initial rural camps, one of the central messages given to the participants was to organize themselves and to demand their rights. During this workshop, the details of successes achieved by their initiatives were impressive. Table 1 summarizes some of these accomplishments.

The data given in Table 1 should be seen in the context of two critical factors. Firstly, these data about their achievements are only suggestive. Moreover, they are also self-reported by the participants themselves. We were able to obtain some rudimentary confirmation of these figures for the Ratlam groups because we had undertaken some field trips in Ratlam district prior to the workshop. No such confirmation is available for the other two groups. Secondly, the issue of obtaining minimum wages is rendered very difficult in regions where migratory labour is available. In Ratlam Tehsil, we came across a group of Harijans who had no work during the peak harvesting season. We learnt that they had asked for the minimum wages (Rs. 3.50 per day) but the landlords were able to find migratory tribal labour to work for Rs. 2 per day. This group of about 30 families had set up a temporary settlement right across the road from the Harijan colony.

In spite of these factors, the data listed above indicate the changing trends. It may look like ‘a drop in the ocean’, but it was clear that concrete successes had been achieved.

3. Two factors — level of organized action and support obtained from the local officials — jointly contributed to the successes mentioned above.

When the participants described the achievements mentioned above, two factors were almost invariably present in each of them. These two factors were the level of organized action and the degree of support from local officials. The data suggested that the higher the level of organized action and the greater the degree of official support, the better were the chances of success. Some examples, given by them, were:

(a) Police Inspector arrested the moneylender when a group of villagers took the initiative in abolishing bonded labour in village Dhonswara, Tehsil Ratlam.

(b) After being threatened by police in village Richa, the leader went to the Tehsil thana with 150 labourers (all members of his organization) and was able to obtain an assurance of help from the authorities.

(c) In village Piplia, 16 cases filed against bonded labour have not been settled so far because "the local officials do not listen".

(d) When the landlord beat up the bonded labourer who refused to work under bondage, the organizers approached the SDO of Ratlam tehsil. Due to the latter's intervention, all those who had kept bonded labourers were arrested and forced to sign a declaration not to perpetuate such practices any more.

(e) In Udaipur district, organized efforts to remove indebtedness did not bring any success for a long time because the local MLA was the main land-grabber and the local officials failed to take quick action against him.

It is evident from the few examples mentioned above that the presence of both these factors — high level of organized action and minimum support from local officials — is critical for success. Any one factor alone will not bring about the desired results.

4. Instances of resistances to organized action were associated with a lack of tactical/strategic planning during organization-building.

As might well be clear by now, the rural camps had triggered off a number of efforts at building organizations of the rural poor in the districts of Ratlam, Udaipur and Bilaspur. Simultaneously, efforts to build these organizations and to take organized actions in their interest met with various resistances. These resistances came from various sources — the vested interest groups (landlords, moneylenders etc.), the local officials (who do not want to disturb the status quo), and other rural poor (who are either satiated in their present conditions or do not trust those who are initiating organization-building). The local politicians, in general, came from and were aligned with the first two groups anyway. The nature of this resistance varied greatly. Instances of passive resistance were seen in withdrawal or non-participation in organized action by the rural poor themselves. Other examples were a lack of response by the local officials in the form of delay in taking action against cases of violation of the laws, losing applications given by these organizers etc.

Instances of active resistance were of two kinds. The most common form was hostility towards and direct attack on the organizers. In the district of Ratlam, four cases of direct attack were mentioned. These were initiated by the moneylenders and landlords who were going to be affected by the actions of the organizers. In a few cases, the local officials also summarily rejected or dismissed the cases filed by the organizers against some violators. Another form of active resistance was exemplified through instances of 'protest-absorption'. From Namli village in Ratlam Tehsil, one key leader of Harijans was given

a job in the office of the District Collector. He was the only literate person in that group and he had compiled a list of those who were indebted to the local moneylenders. After he got the job, there was no one left to pursue those cases, thereby undermining the effectiveness of that newly formed organization.

From the data provided by the participants, it was also evident that active resistance occurred mostly in those cases where the organizers made tactical mistakes. It was clear that in the zeal of building organizations, these participants had not given enough thought to various strategies and tactics that they were going to adopt. They rarely identified local resources, people who can and who cannot be trusted, officials who are sympathetic and who are corrupt etc. They failed to think about how to use information as a source of power, how to keep some plans secret till they are implemented, how to build trust among the various groups of rural poor etc. It is not implied here that they were expected to do all of the above. What are being described here are those issues related to tactics and strategies of organized action which are critical. There was some evidence that overlooking the tactical and strategic aspects was associated with active resistance from the other parties. To that extent, it can be posited that tactical and strategic considerations in organization-building of the rural poor can reduce instances of active resistance.

5. Mechanisms for continuous flow of information to the grass-roots rural organizers are still non-existent.

As was evident during the initial rural camps, no mechanism existed to provide continuous information to these rural organizers. The participants mentioned that they looked forward to this workshop as a source of fresh information about events, laws and issues which affect them. The rural camps had provided them information about their legal rights vis-a-vis minimum wages, abolition of bonded labour, removal of indebtedness, etc. The lack of any mechanism for valid information led to the widespread belief in the myth that with the change in the central government all the laws protecting the rights of rural poor were rendered void. The participants told us that some moneylenders and landlords had started demanding that their loans should be returned in cash or kind. In the absence of any valid information, these organizers and participants felt hesitant in protesting or opposing the moves made by the vested interests. In fact, the participants were unsure if the old laws still existed when they came to the workshop.

This workshop acted as a source of information to break that myth. Another example of this lack of information mechanisms was narrated by the District Magistrate. The 'legal aid' committee formed in the district had not been used by these rural poor primarily because they did not know of its existence. Moreover, the participants themselves mentioned that they needed some on-going mechanism which can inform them about various events and decisions affecting them.

6. The semi-urban trade centres continue to be under the control of the few.

Previous reports from Ratlam and other districts have indicated the sizable hold that a few persons have over semi-urban trade centres. The grain mandis, milk-products and vegetable markets continue to be under the tight control of these few. In spite of the governmental influence in the form of registration of traders and appointment of an official secretary etc., the grain mandi of Ratlam was still oligopolic in nature, and small peasants had to accept the prices established by the traders' cartel. To that extent, rural camps had not been able to help the small peasant. Till these mandis provide opportunity for free sale, exploitation of small peasants will continue.

Future issues

In the preceding section, some central aspects of the present trends that were noticed during the workshop have been described briefly. Based on a number of these trends and other data generated during the workshop, this section will identify some issues which need to be resolved in future. The issues presented here are grouped in two categories: (a) issues related to the future design of the rural camps and (b) issues related to the future role of NLI.

(a) Issues related to the future design of rural camps.

The central question concerning the future design of rural camps is: what kinds of grass-roots rural leaders is NLI interested in helping? The answer to this question will lead to the mechanics of how. If it can be assumed that the purpose of these rural camps is to bring about an awareness among the rural poor about the need for organized action, then consciousness-raising dialogues can fulfil that purpose. However, if the purpose of rural camps is defined more broadly to include some concrete training in building organizations of the rural poor, then the design of future rural camps has to include specific skill-building efforts, In this context, then, two related issues also need attention, Firstly, can some structured exercises, simulations and names be used in facilitating specific skill-building among the rural poor? And, if so, such materials need to be modified and developed to suit the special context of the rural poor. Secondly, the various roles to be played by the NLI staff during these rural camps will include the roles of group facilitator, resource-person, trainer and consciousness-raiser. To that extent, the staff of NLI engaged in rural camps also needs to learn skills relevant to these roles in order to perform them more effectively.

Since organization-building among rural poor is included in this broader definition, the questions of resource-networks and support-systems become critical. In order that the participants of the rural camps succeed in building viable organization in their areas, some local resources, resource-persons (e.g., those who are literate), support groups etc. need to be identified, developed and linked with the participants. It might be unrealistic to expect that they can go

out of the camp completely on their own, and develop effective organizations among their brethren.

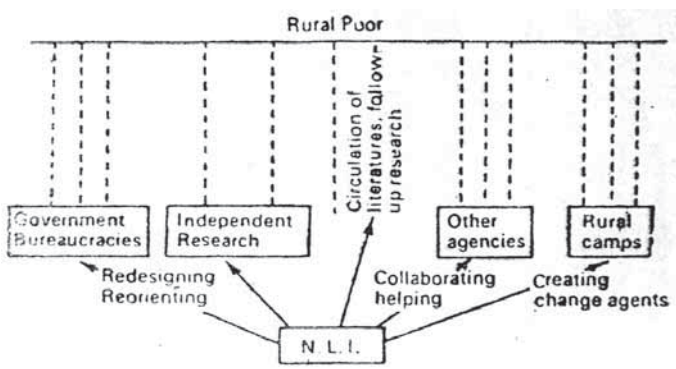
Another issue is organizing rural camps for women. When asked about it, the participants in the workshop approved it overwhelmingly. It appears that such camps would provide the much needed local support to the already 'trained' participants. If such camps are to be planned, then NLI has to consider the various aspects of staffing them.

Finally, some follow-up mechanisms need to be built into the very design of the rural camps. Various options exist. Circulation of literature, field-visits, and camps inviting participants to NLI etc. are some of the options. Circulation of some kind of literature seems to meet another need mentioned earlier — the need for a mechanism for continuous information-flow. However, this will not exclude using other options. Moreover, undertaking field trips to do a comparative research on the impact of various rural camps can be another mechanism to provide follow-up.

These are some of the key issues which can affect the future design of rural camps. However, these issues are submerged under the overall questions about the future role(s) of NLI in rural change.

(b) Issues related to future role(s) of NLI.

The central theme in this category is: should NLI continue to be directly involved in rural change (e.g. through rural camps) or should it be indirectly engaged in it? Indirect involvement in rural change implies creating change agents, training others (individuals, groups, associations etc.) to organize rural camps, coordinating, collaborating with and providing help to other agencies engaged in various rural change efforts of various kinds, redesigning and reorienting government bureaucracies which deal with rural poor etc. Given the resources and expertise of NLI and the magnitude of the clientele (roughly 250 million rural poor), it appears more appropriate for NLI to play the indirect role. It is conceivable that the NLI's involvement in rural change may take the pattern shown in the figure below.



The model presented here shows a number of ways in which NLI can directly as well as indirectly engage itself in bringing about rural change. The most direct form of direct involvement can be through independent research and action-research projects. One such example is the on-going research in the nature, sources and impact of peasant organizations in India. It is clear that such research efforts can be the bases for some future policy and planning decisions. Another mechanism for direct involvement suggested in this model is the circulation of literature to the rural organizers and other grassroots leaders who might lack any on-going source of valid information.

Besides these direct mechanisms, the model also suggests a number of indirect mechanisms. One of them is training the change-agents or trainers who can independently organize rural camps for helping the rural poor. These change-agents can be individuals, groups, agencies or associations interested in rural change. Another mechanism that can be effective in the long run is the collaboration with other agencies in their on-going rural change efforts. One such example is the current action research project being undertaken in collaboration with Seva Mandir, Udaipur. Other mechanisms of indirect involvement are through the re-design and re-orientation of the government departments engaged in rural change. NLI has been doing a number of programmes for government agencies and these can be reorganized to provide the thrust outlined above. This model is only an example of the roles that NLI can play. Of course, various other possibilities exist, depending again on the kinds of resources and expertise available with the NLI.

Anyway, the question raised earlier in this section is more important than the particular answer provided above. Future role(s) of NLI vis-a-vis the rural poor and rural change needs to be explored in depth. This second issue — role of NLI in rural change — is to be resolved prior to considering the issues related to the future design of rural camps. It is hoped that the International Workshop has generated enough data and ideas to make this exploration meaningful and valid.

Notes:

1. Refer to the articles on Udaipur, Bilaspur and Ratlam in the National Labour Institute Bulletin Vol. 2, No. 1 (January 1976) and Vol. 3, No. 3 (March 1977).
2. Refer to early reports on rural camps, especially Vol. 2 of the National Labour Institute Bulletin (1976).
3. ‘Cactus, Suction Pump and Invisible Men’, Anisur Rahman, K. Gopal lyer and R.N. Maharai, National Labour Institute Bulletin Vol. 3, No. 3, March 1977.

The Rural Camp in Barh: Some Observations

Valerian Rodrigus

An agricultural labour camp was organized at Aghuanpur High School Barh, a sub-divisional town of Patna District during November 20-23, 1978, by the National Labour Institute. Fifty-three participants, mainly agricultural labourers drawn largely from Barh and Mokamah Police Thanas participated in it. There were also 17 women among the participants. The camp site was located 40 miles from Patna on the Patna-Mokamah-Siliguri highway and the Eastern Railway. The name of the town is perhaps derived from the fact that it stands on a spot liable to the flood (barh) of the Ganga. The river takes a sharp turn to the north-east here, and when it rises in flood, overflows its banks.

A pre-camp survey was held from November 16 to 19, to select the participants for the camp. The active cooperation of the two labour inspectors of Mokamah and Barh Police Thanas was available in selecting the participants. The camp was managed by the Labour Department of the Bihar Government. The survey attempted to obtain a general outlook in the existing agrarian relations, the prevailing wages for agricultural labour, the nature and intensity of tensions building up in the agrarian scene and the available resources to resolve these tensions.

Dynamics of caste/class relations

It is necessary to have an overall picture of the caste and class relations in this part of Bihar in order to explain the mounting tensions at present. The four upper castes — Brahmins, Kayasthas, Bhumihars and Rajputs — were the traditional large landowning castes in Bihar. They remained dominant during the British period and even after the abolition of the zamindari system in 1951, most of the agricultural land remained in their hands. The Brahmins and Kayasthas dominated the intellectual and cultural spheres and the higher echelons of bureaucracy. The Rajputs and Bhumihars largely confined themselves as landowning castes besides entering the police and army and some levels of the bureaucracy in strength. The Congress movement succumbed to the dominance of this four-caste bloc providing the bulk of leadership to it. However, this was the bloc deeply rooted in feudal relations and committed to maintaining its caste supremacy vis-a-vis the other castes below it. The absolute dominance of these castes in the sphere of economy which was largely agricultural helped them in this process. But these were the castes which looked down upon manual labour. They rarely worked in the farms and confined themselves, largely to supervision. Their womenfolk,

likewise, rarely participated in productive work. Therefore, Bihar, till recently, did not have a middle class which has broken its umbilical cord with landed interests or with caste configurations.

The intense politicisation initiated by the Bihar Kisan Sabha, and later by the Congress as a movement, brought the lower castes into the limelight. It intensified the latent contradictions existing between the caste/class gamut. The infrastructural facilities available in this region made the development of agriculture possible. The backward castes especially the Ahirs, Kurmis and Koeris were quick to grab both the political and economic advantages in spite of the disadvantageous position they were placed in within the given agrarian structure. A large majority of them were small tenants and/or carrying out supportive pastoral activities. Therefore, they enjoyed a certain degree of independence from the large feudal based castes. This 'area of manoeuvrability' helped them to make certain independent assertions vis-a-vis the upper-caste bloc given certain favourable conditions such as: the demand of the national movement for mass participation; organized forms of struggles by the Bihar Kisan Sabha; the support extended to the peasantry by the urban intelligentsia as represented the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) and later by the socialists; the disintegration of large feudal estates etc. As castes involved in productive work, they stood to gain from a number of agricultural development programmes. The 1920s onward precisely shows the ascendancy curve of these castes economically and politically with all the vicissitudes. In Barh subdivision, the upper castes, especially the Bhumihars and Rajputs, and the backward castes, especially the Ahirs and Kurmis, are strongly entrenched in the agrarian scene as landowning castes within the gamut of their caste strivings.

The present stage, however, is characterised by a certain degree of politicisation among agricultural labour which is mainly constituted of the scheduled castes. There are initial pangs of hesitancy, retreat, despair and militancy. This story is written large all over the map of Barh subdivision. The initial organisation of these people is proceeding in an extremely haphazard way. It is a tedious process to watch. In those villages where the traditional feudal classes are strong, e.g., the Bhumihars, the earlier forms of exploitation are very prominent as far as the agricultural labour is concerned. For example, Rampur Dumra is situated 30 miles from the sub-divisional headquarters of Barh on the Patna-Mokamah-Siliguri Highway in Mokamah Development Block under Hathida Police Station. There are about a thousand households overwhelmingly dominated by the Bhumihars. The Bhumihars are the only landowning caste in the village. The other backward/scheduled castes are Dhanuk, Dusadh, Kahar, Dhobi, Naua, Chamar, Tatua, Kanu, Bania, Sonar and Yaday. There are 15 households that own around 100 acres of land each. The rest of the Bhumihar households, although owning less land, always

side with the rich Bhumihars in case of any conflict from outside the caste threatening the existing power relations. Among the agricultural labour, there are about 45 households which are 'bandhua' or bonded labourers. They belong to Dhamak, Dusadh and Kahar castes. There are around 100 'chhutta' or casual labourers' households. They hail from the Dhanuk, Dusadh and Kahar castes. The 'bandhua' labourer gets 1.25 kg. of grain for a whole day's work. However, the grain never includes wheat or rice. No meal is given during the day to the agricultural labour and, unlike in other parts of the sub-division, the bonded/attached labourer here does not get even a small tract of land for self-cultivation. The bonded labourer must be at the service of not only the landlord but also his other family members. He is not free to absent himself from work for any reason or on any occasion.

There is a middle school and a high school located in the village. The teachers are all drawn from the Bhumihar caste. The utter contempt in which the upper castes hold the scheduled castes extends even to the schools. The scheduled castes students continuously become a target of the upper caste students and are held in disdain by the teachers and are, at some time or the other, compelled to leave the school.

Indebtedness among the agricultural labourers, and especially among those who are bonded, is very high, however, for the last two generations, none of the bonded labourers has taken any cash/loan from the landlords. Only some of their predecessors two generations ago might have taken certain loans. But, at present, it comes to hundreds and thousands of rupees, which the present generation will never be able to repay. The landlords' attitude can be succinctly put thus: "The children of bonded labourer who take food from him also belong to him."

Any sort of protest from the bonded labourer is severely punished. For example, Jamuna Ram, around 50 years old, was a 'halwaha' of a Bhumihar landlord. From the time he was able to work he was the 'halwaha' of the same family. In July 1976 Jamuna Ram fell ill. He was bedridden for three months and could not attend to his work. The family was in utter despair and could get food only once in 3-4 days. One day, the master came with some members of his family, dragged Jamuna out of his bed and started beating him up badly. He was taken out like an animal, his hands and feet tied to a bamboo. He was unconscious. He was stripped naked and dragged on the road for half a kilometre. The landlord thought of throwing him on the railway track and then register a case of suicide. But finally he was just thrown on the roadside. The people of his locality picked him up and somehow he survived but was paralysed for the rest of his life.

Another case is that of Parsadi Paswan who expressed his inability to work if food was served to him very late. Immediately two brothers of the landlord

came to the field and beat him up ferociously. They thought of throwing him half-dead into the makai field and set fire to it. However, later on, he was left in the field, as one of the brothers did not agree to kill him outright.

Given this overwhelming culture of repression, hardly any attempt has been made in this village to counteract it. Many bonded labourers, therefore, would wish to remain resigned to their present fate rather than raise their voices against it. The loans that the bonded labourers have inherited go on increasing without their ever hoping to pay them back. There were certain attempts to raise a cow or a buffalo and return the loan. But the bonded labourers have realised through their bitter experience, that it does not alter their present position in any way.

The same thing can be said about Rawaich village in Barh Thana where the Rajputs dominate. The labourers, here, are kept on the roadside. Suppression of any protest here is no less harsh than in Rampur Dumra. One of the big landowners even came to the campsite to physically take his halwaha who had dared to attend the camp. Even after the intervention of the officials present, he threatened the participant with death when he returned to the village.[2]

There are a number of villages, however, where certain forms of struggle have developed and organisations of agricultural labour have come up. A case in point is the Tartar village about seven miles from Mokamah. It remains totally cut off during the rainy season. An agricultural labourer gets 1.5 seers of uncooked grain for a full day's work, and a full meal of sattu in the afternoon. Struggles have been launched here since March 1977 under the leadership of an educated young man from the Mallaha caste, demanding one share out of 12 during the cropping season. The dominant landowning caste are the Kurmis. When the halwahas joined in the struggle, they were immediately thrown out of employment and replaced by labour from other villages. There is a continued threat from the Kurmi landowners that in future if any struggles are launched, a 'Belchi massacre' will be repeated there too. However, the agricultural labour is united and they have managed to elect the leader of their struggle as the sarpanch of the village. One interesting factor for the development of this struggle is the switching over of loyalties by Dularchand Yadav, from the landlords to the agricultural labour. He, initially, acted as the 'lathait' of the landlords. He also owns five bighas of land. His assistance was extremely reassuring for the agricultural labourers as the landlords are quite scared of him. There is an abundant surplus of labour here. Therefore, as soon as the struggles were launched, by boycotting work, labour from other villages was brought and the struggle was suppressed. Therefore, in spite of the bad treatment meted out to them, many labourers of the village would prefer to remain attached labour for the sake of permanence of employment. The utter contempt in which the landlords hold the agricultural labour is clear from this one instance: Bhikhari Paswan was asked by his master, a Kurmi landlord,

to work on the thresher. Bhikari pleaded ignorance of working on a thresher. However, he was forced to work on it and in the process lost his hand. He was prevented from filing any case and thrown out of employment. The struggles of these people have given rise to very militant songs:

Ham Kisan mazdoorwa sabahi Apas me phut geyilo
Ghar phodath rahela ye sab din Phutke ham lut geyilo
Ab sub seth mahajan se kah do
Voh bharela tijori khol detain
Nahin to sub purala mazdoor kal parson Halfah bol detain.[3]

Certain other places, however, have really witnessed remarkable progress in the struggle of the agricultural labour and resultant effectiveness of the organisation. A case in point is Sultanpur village near Mokamah where the Mazdoor Sangathan embraces all the agricultural labourers of the village. Here, after a successful struggle, wages were increased to 2.5 kgs. of grain per day. No food, however, is given in the afternoon. The halwaha also gets a bigha of land for his personal cultivation, the landlord providing him with bullocks to plough that plot of land. The Mazdoor Sangathan is stable and is registered. However, great encouragement in the initial phases of the struggle came from an employee of the Shipping Corporation who belongs to the scheduled caste.

Belchi massacre

The burning of nine Harijans and two others, all agricultural labourers, after being shot, on May 27, 1977, hit the headlines in national papers. Belchi is a small village in Barh sub-division adjoining the Nalanda village. During the rainy season it remains largely cut off from the rest of the area and can be reached only on a boat. The 'backward' Kurmi caste constitutes the dominant caste here. However, the landholdings are still not very large. Mahavir Mahto, who was the leader of the Kurmi gang, owns around 20 bighas of land. There are 25 Kurmi, 40 Musahar, 30 Dusadh, 10 Chamar, two sonar and one Brahmin households in the village.

There are, even today, several versions current about the events leading up to this gruesome episode. However, there is no dispute whatsoever about the existence of social banditry in this region as far as memory can go back. There are even today, roving gangs of musclemen and gang-men who, while holding out their own, are always ready to serve anybody who can afford it. However, in the current situation, the role of these gangs has become politically vital. Although, they still clash against one another when larger interests are at stake, they also come together.

Mahavir Mahto is not only the leader of the Kurmis of Belchi but also the leader of such a gang. There are enough illegal gun manufacturing concerns around to supply arms and fire-power to these gangs.

In the killing of Singhuwa, the leader of the scheduled castes, and 10 others, at least three such gangs joined hands. One of them was led by lndradeo Choudhary, a sitting M.L.A. of Bihar and a Kurmi himself. It was not merely a question of pitting superior manpower against the Harijans but was also intended as a show of Kurmi dominance. Therefore, Belchi has become a symbol of assertion for the Kurmis throughout this area.

There were certain land disputes going back to the period of independence when some Muslims left the place to go to Pakistan. The land they left behind was auctioned and some scheduled caste households got involved in this transaction, evoking thereby, the wrath of the Kurmis. However, it did not lead to any overt clash between these castes and even in the 'Belchi incident' neither land nor wages figured as a central issue.

Singhuwa was chased off from a neighbouring village where he had daringly cultivated 15 bighas of vacant burial land. Once that land became cultivable it was seized from him by one of the Kurmi landlords after a prolonged armed clash. Singhuwa came and settled down in Belchi, with his in-laws four years before the incident. He took to sharecropping and rallied behind him the Harijans of the village who so far lived under the repressive thumb of the Kurmi landlords.

It should be made absolutely clear that the mounting tension between the Kurmis and the Harijans does not have anything to do with economic demands that organized agricultural labour began to make. Singhuwa did not attempt to build an organisation of agricultural labour. However, Singhuwa's very reputation as a strongman made the exploited Harijans rally behind him, given the terror on them. Therefore, the support extended to him was more covert than overt, by the agricultural labour. However, the independent self-assertion by the scheduled castes under the leadership of Singhuwa was taken as a serious threat to the Kurmi hegemony in the village by the landlords. Again the Kurmi onslaught was not led by the publicly accepted leadership of this caste but by a known gangster of this caste in the person of Mahavir Mahto. However, in the changing caste/class dynamics, the function of social banditry began to assume serious political implications. To make a proper assessment of this incident, it is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between social banditry and its political implications at certain conjunctures.

This explains why Mahavir Mahto was not supported by all the Kurmis of the village. Only half of the Kurmi households of the village rallied behind him. Mahavir Mahto as a gangster could not evoke that moral authority even within the caste equation.[4]

Reference has already been made to the dynamics of the caste/class equation in this region of Bihar. Today, the Ahirs, Kurmis and Koeris are the leading backward castes involved in the tooth and nail struggle with the upper

caste bloc to establish their caste hegemony or establish a hegemonistic bloc along with the upper castes. The vehemence of these middle castes can be much better understood if we take into consideration the fact that in their drive towards hegemony they do not want to face any threat from the castes placed below

Singhuwa, who was from the Dusadh caste, was a known strongman himself. He was, therefore, known as 'Sirkatwa' (chopper of heads). Therefore, if the scheduled castes, who constitute the vast agricultural labour force, make an independent self-assertion no matter in which area and in what form, it is considered to be a threat by the middle castes. This assertion may manifest itself under economic demands or in the name of 'izzat' (honour). The middle castes want the scheduled castes to lie low, as they have done in the past and accept their leadership passively in their struggle against the upper castes. This is the dilemma: on the one hand, the backward castes' demand of a greater say in political and ideological spheres looks very progressive; on the other hand, the middle castes are fighting it out within the caste gamut. Just an example will suffice for it. As soon as Singhuwa took the side of the Harijans of Belchi, he became a hero, a widely beloved protector. The low Brahmin household was so impressed that Singhuwa was offered the sacred thread, a most unusual gesture toward a Harijan.[5]

The sacred thread was the sign of equality within the caste-bound stratification. The Kurmis, were not prepared to accept the Harijans as equals by investing them with the sacred thread. It is good to remember that the Kurmis themselves fought a long battle for the sacred thread in the thirties of the last century. The intense participation of Kurmi women in the whole episode is well registered. They brought petrol to be poured on the 'sacred altar'. They brought out their torn sarees, and threw them on the raging fire. The women of the upper castes have rarely extended their support directly in the repression carried out by their husbands, in a similar fashion. Belonging to a caste involved in production work, the Kurmi woman does not lead a marginal existence as women of the upper castes do. Therefore, she is as much a part of the tendency of caste assertion as the Kurmi menfolk, bound as she is within the limits of caste consciousness.

The scene of violence still exists in Belchi. A 10-member police section is all that stands between the Harijans and the organized Kurmis. Till the time of the camp the arrested culprits were still in jail. While serious attempts are made to exonerate the culprits by making the whole incident appear as a case of social banditry, the Harijans are continuously reminded of the consequences as soon as they are released from jail or even without it. Most of the Harijans could read on the horizon the impending catastrophe. Therefore, a number of them have already left the village.

The overall picture obtained from the pre-camp survey may be briefly summarised below:

1. There are two labour inspectors for the agricultural areas in the Barh sub-division. Their intervention in arbitrating between the various cases has been successful only when there was a movement of the agricultural labour. In a number of places, the inspectors themselves are not able to speak out due to the economic and political muscle that the landlord wields. One of the labour inspectors said, "In such areas, we are afraid to file individual cases due to the fear of harassment from the landlord."
2. The wage structure for the agricultural labour differs from village to village. It also differs for the two major categories of agricultural labour—the bonded/attached labour and casual labour. In certain places a breakfast or lunch is served in addition to the daily wage. In some places the bonded/attached labourer gets a plot of land for his self-cultivation. The size of the plot of land, again, is different in different places, e.g., in Tartar the daily wage is 1.5 seer of unthreshed grain (nearly 1 kg.) while in Sultanpur (where there is an agricultural labourers' organisation) it is 2.5 kgs. In Rampur Dumra, the bonded/attached labourer rarely gets a plot of land for self-cultivation while in Nadavan, such labourers always get a plot of land of the size of one acre.
3. In certain villages men and women get equal wages for similar agricultural activity. In other villages there is a marked difference, e.g., in Gheebad Dheebar village a man gets Rs. 3 as daily wage but the woman gets only Rs. 1.50.
4. Bonded labour is widely prevalent. The margin between attached labour and bonded labour is very thin. The attached labourer, naturally, tends to take certain loans and once he falls into the landlord's clutches, it becomes almost impossible for him to come out. But as unemployment is generally widespread, a labourer tends to remain attached rather than fall into the category of the casual labour. A casual labourer is assured employment only for about 130 days in a year.
5. There is a very high degree of indebtedness among the agricultural labour. The rate of interest in money lending varies from place to place. Roughly it is 3% per month. However, for the agricultural labour there are scarcely any hopes of getting loans even at this high rate of interest. Once a loan is taken, there is no possibility of its redemption. In such an eventuality, he even gives up keeping an account of the loan and interest. But sometimes, the disparity between the loan taken and the sum demanded is so high that it even baffles the imagination of the labourer. For example, 40 years ago Gino Mehto had taken a loan of Rs. 500 from a Bhumihar landlord in Rampur Dumra. Since then he is working for him. Now his master demands Rs. 22,000.

6. The culture of repression is all-pervasive in the sub-division. The Barh sub-division is known for its illegal gun-manufacturing factories. In a number of villages the bonded labourers even refused to talk. Very few of the bonded labourers consented to attend the camp and even they were threatened with punishment.
7. Dacoity and banditry are widely prevalent in this sub-division. During our stay in Barh, an armed assault was made on the town in broad daylight. Shutters were immediately pulled down. Looting and arson continued for nearly an hour. There was, however, no shock or panic around. It is taken as a matter of course.

In the midst of such a situation the labour inspectors and their immediate superiors concerned with agricultural labour are fulfilling their duties, fighting against all the odds involved. They may not be highly successful given the existing agrarian relations in the countryside. However, the genuine respect in which the agricultural labour holds them, is sufficient evidence of the genuineness of this machinery, at least, in this part of the state.

Selection of participants

The participants were chosen from about 15 villages mainly from the Barh and Mokamah Thanas. There were three-to-five participants from each village. Care was taken that one or two women participated from every village. The villages were generally chosen by the labour inspectors. Care was taken that these villages were placed where a certain amount of movement of agricultural labourers was already on, or a certain stable organisation of the agricultural labour had already come into being (e.g., Tartar and Sultanpur villages respectively). Some villages like Rampur Dumra or Rawaich were chosen due to the widespread prevalence of bonded/attached labour where the agricultural labour did not enjoy any area of manoeuvrability.

The participants could roughly be divided in the following categories:

(a) The activists among agricultural labour, themselves being agricultural labour, who initiated the process of organising the struggles.

(b) Bonded/attached labourers who could articulate their grievances.

(c) There were a couple of poor peasants who had identified themselves with the agricultural labour in their struggles.

(d) Women who could speak out boldly and articulate the specific forms of exploitation they undergo.

(e) Along with the bonded labourers care was taken to bring in casual labour. There is a difference not only in their work-situation, but it was found that in a number of villages their cooperation with each other cannot be taken for granted.

(f) Care was taken that the participants were drawn from all castes among the agricultural labour. The caste barrier is still very strong which prevents agricultural labour from being brought under one organisation.

The participants were generally chosen by calling the whole community of agricultural labourers in one place and, after the camp, asking the people themselves to make the choice. The choice was generally unanimous, taking into consideration all the factors involved. A few potential recruits who were bonded labourers, however, could not be persuaded to attend the camp. The survey and selection was undertaken early in the morning and late in the evening to facilitate the meeting with labourers, as during the day they remain dispersed at their respective work-places. In quite a few places, the research investigators also went to the houses of the rich landowners to ascertain their point of view. In other places, it was almost impossible as the barriers between the landowners, on one hand, and agricultural labourers and poor peasants, on the other, were too clearly marked and any such step would have been looked upon with suspicion by both these camps.

The training camp

The camp opened with a narration of account of the villages by their respective spokesmen, one from each village. The account of one such village is as follows as spoken out by one of the participants. In spite of the fear of duplication, in certain accounts, we reproduce it below as such:

The problems of Mor and Indiranagar[6] villages are as follows:

There are two sections among the agricultural labour.

1. Bonded labour (bandhuwa mazdoor)
2. Non-bonded labour (ghair bandhuwa mazdoor)

Bonded labourer

a. There is no land of one's own for homesteads.
b. In the name of a house there stands a hut is made out of grass in which on an average 10-12 people stay.
c. In the form of daily wage the labourer gets 1.25 seers of grain. If he is paid in cash, he is paid the price of the same quantity of the lowest quality of grain.
d. If due to certain special occasions, like 8 Shradh, illness, upanayan, marriage, etc., the labourer is absent, he is fined for those days.
e. The malik (master) pays 1/10 of the produce to the labourers at the time of harvesting. One bundle out of every 10 bundles.[7]
f. The ploughman, according to the customary agreement between the landowner and himself, is expected to get one bigha of land or its produce. But this custom is rarely followed. Even if the ploughman gets the land it

does not exceed 12-15 kattas (1 bigha=20 kattas). The fertility of such land is normally the lowest.

g. No loan is paid to the ploughman without interest. Even when the loan is given, he is charged 3% compound interest per month. If for any reason there is a clash between the landowner and the ploughman, the landowner doubles the amount of loan to be recovered. He knows that the ploughman will not be able to return that amount and will not be able to claim his freedom.

h. As the bonded labourer becomes a slave in the hands of the master, he begins to consider the prescription of the landowner as the prescriptions of God (Prabhu ka Aadesh). Therefore, even if the landowner pays the bonded labourer quite irregularly, the latter is compelled to work at his place. One of the major reasons for this submission is the terror at the behest of the landowner which he is prepared to wield at any time.

i. The bonded labourers who live like animals do not possess any animal either (an animal cannot possess any animal).

j. This situation is worse confounded by the lack of unity and organization among the agricultural labour itself. The landowner quite cunningly causes divisions among the agricultural labour whenever the chances of their coming together under one organisation are very high.

There are quite a few bonded labourers who for generations have fallen prey to these slave-like[8] conditions, and much against their wishes have been forced to remain in this state. Most of these labourers, due to their multiple levels of exploitation, are neither able to provide proper livelihood for their family or educate their children. As soon as the father dies or becomes incapacitated, he has to send his children to work in the master's farm.

Non-bonded labour (ghair bandhuwa mazdoor)

1. They are also known as chhutta mazdoor. In this category the women are paid Rs. 2 and men Rs. 3.25 per day. There is no equal pay for equal work. For example, during planting, weeding and sowing the difference between men and women is simply made on account of their sexes rather than on account of work done. The landowner extracts as much work from women as men, although women are paid less. Therefore, the landowner gives such work only to women and leaves the men unemployed.

2. If the labourer in this category takes any loan from the landowner then he has to pay 3% interest per month, on the sum borrowed.

3. The landowner pays one bundle out of every 12 bundles. For this the labourer has to do the reaping, threshing, winnowing and transportation of the grain and fodder.

4. The landowner does not give any land or food, clothes or housing to this category of labourers. The fate of women thrown in such a situation is very

> severe as poverty drives them even at an advanced stage of pregnancy or immediately after childbirth to work in the field. Even then they are paid low wages. In the rainy season, they bear the biggest hardship. Along with the other difficulties new problems crop up as the saying goes, 'Nanga kya nahaye, kya nichode'.[9]

After returning from the field she has to look after her house as well. She is the target of exploitation both inside and outside the house.[10]

The representatives from other villages also narrated their experience. A woman from Gwar Dharampur had this to say: "Girasth log (landowners) are strong and labourers are weak. Let's unite together. We have to work carrying a babe of nine months in our womb. When we approach the master for wages, he screams: 'You have taken your wages two days ago. Do you expect me to pay you every day?' We come back. There is no food in the house. We take a few utensils that are in our hut to the shop intending to pawn them and get some grain. But often the shopkeeper refuses as the utensils are not to his liking. Once again we approach the landowner. He says cryptically: 'You won't get any wages.' We remain hungry. There are children. They cry. But there is no alternative. Sometimes some roots and leaves alone go to satisfy our hunger. We live such a ghostly existence. We stay in huts. You live in bungalows. You will not understand our troubles. When it rains we all gather in one corner and shiver."

This is the story of a woman's existence. When placed in such conditions the problem of feeding the household perpetually haunts her.

The first day the participants spoke of their conditions of existence, the struggles they have undertaken and the sort of organisation, if any, they have given rise to. In the evening one of our colleagues, attempted to collate their experiences and put certain questions before the participants which emerged from their own narration. The participants were asked to select their problems according to priority. In between the sessions, the participants were encouraged to discuss among themselves.

The following day, Sri K.B. Saxena, Special Secretary, Home, Harijan Cell, Bihar Government, spoke to the participants. This was followed by certain games which tried to focus on the situation of agricultural labour, the poor peasant, the middle peasant and the rich landowners; the wages and means adopted by these various sections; the necessity of establishing unity among agricultural labour and building alliances with the middle peasants. The participation in these games was intense. The participants themselves expressed the lessons they learnt from these games. About one of these games, a participant said:

"When the pillar to which a cow is tied is strong the cow remains under control. The red and yellow groups in which you divided the labourers are one and the same. The landlord spreading his network of cunning has kept them

divided. Therefore, the landlord goes on winning. The game has proved that even when we win with another group of agricultural labour, it is not really the landlord will go on winning. Sometimes, he wins over a section of the labourers by petty inducements. The labourer in his ignorance falls into the trap of the landlord. When we fight among overselves, whether we win or lose, it is a victory for the landlord. We have understood this, it is all right. We will now organize overselves and fight for our rights. The labourers of the one village should not fight with the labourers of another village."

After this, one of our colleagues explained what leads to the disunity among the labourers themselves and why they are not able to unite together. He pointed out the necessity of critically looking at their own social behaviour especially:

1. The caste division among the agricultural labour itself which disunites them and helps the landowner.
2. Excessive spending on occasions like marriage (normal spending is Rs. 1500. For an agricultural labourer from Tartar, even if he works every day in the year, it will take two years to collect that amount), festivals and shradhs which drive the labourers into the clutches of moneylenders leading to their perpetual indebtedness.
3. The parochialism among the agricultural labour. The labourers of one village get pitted against those of the next.
4. Lack of organization.
5. Remaining obedient to the landlord even in such acts as voting.
6. Considering the small peasant as their enemy.
7. Ignorance of laws regarding minimum wages, bonded labour, indebtedness, land ceiling etc., which directly bear on the situation of the worker.
8. Do not imitate the landlord. For the labourer his master remains the model for this social existence. This leads to his vertical integration with his master leading to submission to the master when he exploits him and succumbing to the consciousness of the latter.

During the intervals, a number of officials of the Labour Department of Bihar Government addressed the participants and attempted to acquaint them with the existing labour legislation regarding agricultural labour and assured full cooperation of the whole machinery to redress their grievances. The camp was also attended by six senior officials of the Government of West Bengal.

A few statements of the participants are as follows:

1. The rich landowners always say that they have earned their money out of their own sweat and blood; we are poor because we are lazy and due to our karma.

2. We realise that if we unite with the middle peasant, we can isolate him from the big landowners and fight with greater force.
3. What the games have shown and whatever is happening in the village there is no difference.
4. A middle peasant owns up to five acres of land. He has one pair of bullocks. He does not keep a ploughman. He may employ free labourers during the peak agricultural season. He works only in his field. The lower classes work in others' fields. He ploughs and sows by himself and eats and drinks out of the produce of his labour. He does not have money to lend.
5. If the middle peasant does not give us the support then we cannot fight our struggle. Our experience has shown that there are certain rich landowners who are sympathetic towards our fight and our demands. We have seen that if we are united, sometimes splits can be brought about within the landlord camp itself.
6. Where there is no organisation backing him, the agricultural labourer does not find the courage even to go and file a case.
7. As long as the labourers do not get organized, there is no hope of getting the minimum wages. There is no room for complacence.

At the end of the camp, the participants tried to specify the priority problems before them. It was a consensus decision arrived at among themselves:

1. Biggest problem before us is that of minimum wages. As long as we do not organize we will not get this right. We need to fight with those forces which refuse to implement this right.
2. The second problem is of residence. As long as we stay on the land of another person we are required to obey the orders of the owner of that land.
3. Fight for the removal of indebtedness.
4. Old-age pension: As long as we have blood in our veins we work. In old age, our fate is terrible.
5. Struggle against social exploitation–untouchability distinctions, unemployment, the extra-economic demands of the landowners.
6. Struggle to implement land reforms. The efforts of only the government will not solve this problem. The government needs a powerful organisation from below.
7. Struggle for fixed working hours. They force us to work to the maximum with the least possible wages. The health of the agricultural labourers is minimally low. Even our progeny will not be healthy.
8. Education: In the given set-up, with the available opportunities, it is literally impossible for the agricultural labourer to educate his children.

Personal experiences narrated

1. Lakki Mistry: Tola-Nadavan, village-Gwar Dharampur, caste badhai. He was a good craftsman. The landlord ordered him to provide certain furniture. He forced him to work in a particular fashion. Lakki Mistry did not agree. He was assaulted and an attempt was made on his life. All the five fingers of his right hand were chopped off so that he would never be able to practise his profession. Now, he is good for no work.
2. The daughter of Nandaki village Gwar Dharampur was molested by the son of a landlord when she had gone to cut the grass. None raised their voice on behalf of the girl due to the fear of the landlord. Both Lakki Mistry and Nandaki were participants in the camp.

Certain observations

1. Even though during the field investigation, we had generally outlined the purpose of the camp, initially, the whole purpose was considered by the participants to be hearing speeches and submitting memoranda. Therefore, very few participants initially opened their mouths. Gradually this stereotyped impression gave way to active participation. Sitting with them on the same floor, eating with them and generally spending the whole time with them in an attempt to understand and articulate their experience rather than giving them speeches, led to the building up of a rapport between the participants, the officials and the NLI team.
2. The initial preparedness to listen gradually gave way to strong assertion of their own points of view. At one point of time, when a labour inspector got up to tell something about the agricultural labour he was shouted down by one of the participants saying the agricultural labourers are capable of articulating their own experiences, it need not be mediated through the officer.
3. Those participants who had some education or experience in fighting collective battles were the most articulate.
4. The women, as a group, were the least articulate. This was not due to their lack of the experience of exploitation. In private conversations, they narrated the horrible story of their existence. Probably, the medium of communication was too alien for them as they spoke mostly in the local dialect. Even the general passivity they are reduced to even in their houses, probably made them to transfer the responsibility of speaking out their grievances on the public platform to their menfolk.

Notes:

1. The average number of partitions of estates per annum was highest in Patna District in Patna Division from 1866-96. For Table see: G. Misra, Agrarian

Problems of Permanent Settlement: A case study of Champaran, p. 20, New Delhi, 1978. Also see, Patna District Gazetteer, pp. 361-62, 1970.

2. The SDO of Barh sub-division, was later requested to guarantee the safety of this participant.
3. We the peasants and labourers/split among ourselves/All these days our houses were destroyed/But split as we were, we could be robbed. Now tell the rich and the moneylenders/To open up their full treasury/otherwise all the labourers within a day or two/will launch an attack.
4. Certain 'respectable' Kurmi household in Belchi did not support Mahavir Mahto. The meeting of reconciliation just before the gruesome killing had taken place in such a Kurmi house, between the party of Singhuwa and that of Mahavir Mahto. This Kurmi householder has his sons placed in high positions in the state machinery and is quite satisfied with the vertical mobility in his own status it has ensured in the village community. Therefore, he would opt for peace and stability rather than the drastic steps chosen by Mahavir Mahto to assert the Kurmi dominance.
5. Shashi Bhushan, "The Belchi Killings", in Economic & Political Weekly, June 18, 1977, p.974.

   The step that the Brahmin household took was really unprecedented. However, given the caste dynamics, this step can be understood. As the ideologues of the caste structured society, the Brahmin well knew that to maintain his own supremacy the best thing to do in the given situation is to exaggerate the contradiction between the Kurmis and the scheduled castes by placing one of the latter with the 'twice-born'.
6. The name 'Indiranagar" is of recent origin. The village is dominated by Bhumihar landlords. Tall promises were made to the Harijans in this village especially during the Emergency in the name of Indira Gandhi. But hardly any of them was fulfilled.
7. This share is quite high compared to other villages (e.g. Tartar situation referred to earlier on p 41). It is not certain, however, whether it is an outcome of custom, struggle or 'from above'.
8. Hindi word for 'slave' used by the participant was 'ghulam'.
9. The naked person has nothing to wrap around while bathing, and hence nothing to wash later.
10. The participant who presented this report is an unemployed educated young man, belonging to the Musahar caste. He is active in mobilising the agricultural labour.
11. The word used for 'ghostly' was 'rakshashiya". Ghosts do not need to eat anything.

Banswara Rural Labour Camp: A Survey

Abhimanyou Tambar

National Labour Institute organized a rural labour camp in Rajasthan at Banswara. A pre-camp survey was conducted from July 18 to 26 during which we visited different parts of the district. Some of the impressions about the region are given here.

The Banswara district is divided into three subdivisions, i.e., Banswara, Khushalgarh and Garhi and eight Panchayat Samities. The population of Banswara district is spread over 1,462 villages of which 73 per cent constitute the tribal population. In Garhi the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe population is only 50 per cent and because of this low concentration of tribals here the tribal population in the rest of Banswara is about 85 per cent or more. The total population of scheduled castes in the district is only 25,000 out of 6.5 lakhs whereas that of tribals is 4.77 lakhs. In Garhi the level of literacy is 13 per cent whereas it is only seven to 10 per cent in the rest of the district.

On July 18 the team went to Sarvaina village about 15 kms. from Banswara. The village is dominated by Gujarati Patels and other high caste Hindus. Harijans live in a nearby basti which is at a distance of about one km. from the village. It was found that the major occupation of the villagers was leather tanning and bamboo craft, i.e., basket-making. The average income of a family was around Rs. 150 per month. The major complaint of the villagers was that after the construction of Sarvaina Dam when the affected people were rehabilitated they were not satisfied with the compensation given to them in the form of cash which was insufficient and land which was barren or uncultivable.

On July 20 we went to Bagidora Tehsil about 40 kms. from Banswara. Tehsil Bagidora is situated in the south east of Banswara. It consists of 259 villages with a population of 1,72,220 administered by 25 Patwar Wandas in three Girdawar circles. There are three police stations in this Tehsil, i.e. Saloyat, Shergarh and Kalinjhara. The number of cattle in the area is 1,85,247. The total area of the tehsil is 33 square miles or 2,12,251 acres, out of which 53,208 hectares and 7,105 hectares is used as grazing land for the cattle, 8912 hectares of land has been shown as government forest and 12,494 as hilly land.

At Bagidora tehsil the tehsildar was quite cooperative; he not only provided us with information about his tehsil but gave some useful suggestions and accompanied us to various places in the district for the selection of the camp site. After a survey of one S.T.C. school at Garhi, to high schools at Partapur

it was decided to hold the camp at Partapur Gandhi Seva Ashram. From Partapur we went to Shergarh, about 35 kms. away. We contacted several people in the Harijan basti. It was found that most of them had mortgaged their property to the mahajans. Since they are not getting sufficient employment as labour, a majority of them go to Gujarat where the employment opportunities are more and the wages are better.

Next day we went to Kushalgarh via Sajjangarh, which are at a distance of about 65 and 40 kms. respectively from Banswara. On our way we also visited Kalinjhara, Patan and other villages. Tehsil Kushalgarh is situated in the south of Banswara district. It is divided into two blocks, i.e., Kushalgarh and Sajjangarh, consisting of 397 villages. Total population of the Tehsil is 1,23,265. There are 2283 wells in the area out of which 79 are fitted with electric pumps and 187 with diesel pumps. The pattern of land-holding in the tehsil is: below one acre-5991, 1-3 acres-6406, 3-5 acres-3536 5-7 acres-1787, 7-10 acres-657, 10-20 acres-369 and above 20 acres-19. Out of a total of 1,04,623 hectares of cultivable land in Kushalgarh tehsil 2,671 hectares are wet, 52,232 hectares are dry and 55,649 hectares are under cultivation. During 1977-78, 2741 acres of land was distributed to 1688 tribals, 77 acres of land was allotted to Harijans and 58 acres of land was allotted to other 61 low caste peasants. Under the Antyodaya scheme from Kushalgarh tehsil 1974 families were selected, out of which 1829 were tribals, 68 were scheduled castes and 46 others. Besides allotment of 911 acres of land to 367 persons other benefits provided to podi families were loans granted to 32 persons, seeds distributed to 143 persons and old age pension given to five persons.

The villagers in the village Tandi near Sajjangarh revealed that all the 15 to 20 families of the village remain there during the monsoon period only for sowing, otherwise they all go to nearby places of Gujarat for labour. The usual trend in this entire area is that they borrow some money ranging from Rs. 200 to 500 from brick manufacturers of Gujarat as an advance of their wage during monsoon or festivals etc. and then they and their families work for these contractors for the whole year. In Kalinjhara and other places the rate of interest on money borrowed by the tribals from moneylenders was 50 per cent to 100 per cent per year. Our team in village Patan was received with surprise by the Harijans because it was the first time that any government officials visited their basti in a jeep instead of going to the high caste persons of the village. Acute poverty was evident here, many people got meals for only three days in a week. Unemployment was one of the major evils of this area. Villagers told us that a man from this village went to Madhya Pradesh for employment as a labourer and was missing for the last few days.

The Banswara district is divided into two parts, the hilly area and the plains. The hilly area consists of tehsil Ghatol and Peepalkhunt. On the fourth day of the pre-camp survey our team visited Ghatol via Peepalkhunt about

28 kms. from Banswara. These two areas are more backward than the other places of Banswara. It is very difficult to reach the interior villages there. Our team attempted to visit a place Ghantali which was almost inaccessible in the monsoon season and when we reached there we could not stay there for more than half an hour because of the fear of heavy rains. Because, as the driver told us, once it starts raining it was not possible to come back for at least six to eight hours. All the villages in this area are scattered in hamlets of four to five huts at the top of the hills. The land was almost barren, totally unsuitable for agricultural purposes. It is surprising how people cultivate it and survive on the yields from it.

Out of 118 government-managed tribal hostels in Rajasthan, Banswara has nearly 20 hostels in different parts of the district, which house nearly 1,000 tribal students. An attempt was made to collect some data from these hostel students also. A discussion with the hostel warden and the students revealed that the students were not provided with the nutritious diet, i.e., no milk, protein or fruit except pulses. There was no provision of any medical facilities; those who fall sick have to go back to their homes. The amount sanctioned for stationery and books was not sufficient to buy even the text-books. There was no provision for sports facilities either. Most of the students too were not interested in studies; they came to hostels because of the poverty at their homes. Their major aspiration after completing higher secondary education was to become schoolteachers, patwaris of the village or join police service, and only 20 per cent of the students wanted to go for higher studies or professional training. The warden was satisfied that the students had no bad habits like smoking, drinking, going to cinema or even taking tea.

Antyodaya scheme in Banswara

In Banswara district from 1,462 villages 7,133 families have been selected under the Antyodaya scheme out of which 318 persons were selected for old age pension, 2,166 families were allotted land, 2,641 persons were employed under famine relief work, cottage industry loan was sanctioned to 699 artisans, but 1,819 applications for loan were rejected because they were in arrears and they had already drawn about 5.49 lakhs of rupees.

Besides land allotment and loans from the banks the other schemes running under Antyodaya are training schemes. Khadi Gramodyog and I.T.I. give training even to those who do not mortgage anything. The training is given in basket making, rope-making, other bamboo-craft, etc. Under the Khadi Gramodyog scheme a charkha worth Rs. 10 is given free to the apprentices and subsequently some work is also given by them for which they are paid Rs. 80 per day as stipend to 92 candidates. The state fisheries department also gives Rs. 130 as stipend and after completing their training the candidates can get loans from the banks and the fisheries department also gives contract of

lakes and tanks for fishing. At present it is proposed to give employment to only three per cent of the candidates through fisheries. The plan is to release 13 lakhs of fingerlings in the tanks.

The other training is given by Syntex Textile Mills which also give a stipend of Rs. 120 and recruit if not all, a majority of its apprentices. Another scheme proposed is to organize forest industries to collect honey, gum, lac, mahua flowers, tendu leaves. One more proposal is to develop brick and clay tile industries. According to the project director in Talwara region there are huge deposits of good quality marble granite and bran cite as raw materials for cement and other industry which have yet to be explored and exploited. The government is looking into the prospects about it.

During the pre-camp survey from July 21 to 25 a team of four investigators visited nearly 30 villages of five tehsils in different parts of the Banswara district to assess the socio-economic conditions there. During this pre-camp survey the team also selected nearly 55 candidates for the camp who appeared to be vocal and showed some initiative in discussions; they were between the ages of 18 and 55 and were either landless or had marginal landholdings or were agricultural labourers.

During the survey it was found that the majority of the tribal population consists of either the landless or marginal agricultural labourers; even those who cultivate their own land have too little land, i.e., two to five bighas, which is not sufficient for their livelihood and therefore they have to go out for labour. Since most of them depend on nature for irrigation they grow only one crop in the rainy season. The average wage throughout the district was Rs. 2.60 for male adults and less than that for females and children. Since the wages are higher in Gujarat, a large population of tribal labour migrates to nearby Gujarat cities like Dobad and Baroda etc., after the rainy season where the wages are Rs. 8 to 10 for adult males.

While moving from Bagodora to Garhi one tehsildar told us that the number of cattle in his district is very small because during the last famine the poverty was so acute that many of them had to slaughter their cattle for their food.

During discussions with the government officials the general impression we got was that by and large, they have a negative image of the tribal people. The continuous famine for the last so many years has made the tribals dependent upon government relief works and other forms of government aid instead of doing something on their own. There was a wide discrepancy in the opinion of the government officials and social workers of that area about the success of the development programmes. In spite of all the efforts of the government to bring up the rural citizens the goal cannot be achieved unless some effort is put in to make them aware of their rights and they willingly come forward to avail of the facilities provided by the government for the development of their area.

Visit to Hoshiarpur: A Rural Labour Camp Report

Ashok Khandelwal

Since the transfer of power in 1947, many developmental programmes have been taken up to solve the problems of poverty and backwardness only to find that most of them are not suitable in the Indian context. In the subsequent process of a critical appraisal of these developmental programmes, a number of different explanations and suggestions have come out. One such explanation is that the problems of the poor cannot be solved unless they themselves are involved in the developmental programmes meant for them. Consequently, a suggestion was made to educate the poor in such a way that they become aware of their rights and can make an organized effort to get their legitimate share in the carrot. It was within this explanation of the root cause of the poverty and suggestion for the betterment of the lot that the National Labour Institute started organising rural labour camps with the main objective of identification and training of potential leaders at grassroots level for organized efforts towards participatory development.

The NLI has been holding these camps since its inception. Although the objectives have remained the same, there has, however, been a change in the way these rural labour camps are being organized over time. Whereas in the first camp participants were gathered from all over the State, nowadays the selection is from a cluster of villages from within a block. There has been some change in the method of transfer of knowledge also.

The present camp, on the request of the State government, was organized at Bembeli village of Mahilpur block in Hoshiarpur district of Punjab during February 24-28, 1981.

Hoshiarpur District

Hoshiarpur is the most backward district of the State economically as well as socially. Compared to Punjab as a whole, the cropping intensity is very low due to lack of adequate irrigation facilities. This has consequently led to a low level of productivity. The mineral resource base of the area is also very poor. Socially, more than one-third of the population belong to SC. In some villages the concentration of SC is as high as over 70 per cent. About 10 per cent of the SC population of the State live in Hoshiarpur. However, the educational level in Hoshiarpur is found to be much higher than the State average. Whereas in rural Punjab the percentage of literates is 27.81, the same for Hoshiarpur stand at 38.47. The literacy rate is also higher in the case of males which stands at 34.69 per cent for Punjab and 48.09 per cent for Hoshiarpur.

Female participation rate is insignificant in Punjab. Of the total agricultural labourers in rural areas, females constitute only one per cent, the ratio being nearly the same for Hoshiarpur district and Punjab State.

Socio-economic conditions in Mahilpur

Mahilpur block consists of 152 inhabited villages divided into three kanungo circles, 41 patwar circles and 133 panchayats. The total area of the block is 40,500 hectares and total population as per 1971 census is 89.1 thousand of which 46.7 thousand females outnumbered 42.4 thousand males. Density is 245 persons per sq.km. Literacy rate is 40.9 per cent. Of the total population only 26.7 per cent are workers. Percentage of agricultural workers in the total work strength is 68. About 35 per cent of the total population is Scheduled Castes.

Compared to the State as a whole, the agricultural situation of the block tells of its relative backwardness. Table 1 clearly shows that all the available indicators — cropping intensity, irrigation, cultivated area, number of tractors, use of fertilisers and literacy — are very low in Mahilpur block compared to Punjab state figures.

Table 1

Some Indicators of Agricultural Growth for Punjab and Mahilpur Block

Indicators	Punjab	Mahilpur Block
Cropping intensity (%)	157	146
Irrigation (%)	78.2	49.0
Cultivated area (%)	83.68	62.71
No. of tractors per 100 ha. of NAS	2.60	0.90
Fertiliser consumption per 100 ha. GCS	91 kg.	39 kg.*
Education (%) rural	27.81	40.09

Sources: *For column 3, Facts about Punjab. Director, Information and Public Relations, Punjab, Nov. 1980.*
For column 4, information provided by Block Development Officer. Mahilpur Block, Hoshiarpur District.

Notes : *1. *This figure relates to agricultural year 1979-80.*
2. Figures relate to 1971 census.
3. Figures for column 3 relate to year 1978-79 and for column 4 for the year 1977-78.

In an attempt to acquire some more detailed information about the socio-economic conditions in the area, as also to select participants for the camp, we had undertaken a number of group interviews in about a dozen villages of various sizes. All these interviews were conducted in an informal atmosphere and manner ruling out the possibility of their contents being recorded in a structured framework. However, they were highly rewarding not only in

confirming the impression gathered from some of the secondary data, but, in revealing a number of other expected and not so expected facts which are crucial to an understanding of the socioeconomic conditions in the area.

A different Hanlon

Our first experience itself was typical. Contrary to our usual experience elsewhere, we could not identify here the Harijan total as well as Harijans prima facie. A Harijan basti here presented a picture far from dismal; drinking water was no problem, most of the houses were pukka, many houses were electrified, etc. Similarly, a typical Harijan agricultural labourer was not a weak, meek, half-fed famished looking fellow, wrapped up in rags and afraid of landlords or bureaucrats.

The impression gathered from the very first interview confirmed what we sensed on the very first sight. It was more than obvious to us that the atmosphere in general was very much unlike a typical feudal or semi-feudal village. Economy of the area ensures them a bit more than two meals a day, education among them is widespread, they enjoy a better and more human social status, people behave with them in an unrestricted manner, they have some level of aspirations and they are relatively articulate.

During group interviews, people talked more about the availability of alternative employment opportunities at a higher level of earning rather than subsistence level of employment as is the general case elsewhere. Their concern centred around problems of drainage, pukka pavements, construction of dharamshalas, supply of cement, etc. Atrocities, enough employment to ensure two square meals a day, a homestead place, indebtedness etc. which are the general issues for SC in most areas of the country were found almost non-existent there. Another important aspect of social life observed there was that, unlike in other places, Harijans themselves constituted a rather homogeneous group in the area.

Division of labour

Caste is an important element in the division of labour. Caste-wise, mainly Jat Sikhs and Harijans are found in this area. Backward and other lower caste households like Gujjars, Sainins, Kasia, Jhoors, Luhars, Chirs, etc. together form the large section of the remaining households. Number of other upper castes like Brahmins, Rajputs etc. is rather insignificant.

Jat Sikhs are predominantly owner-cultivators. The size of a holding hardly exceeds 15 acres; the average size holding falls somewhere between 10 and 12 acres. However, despite their small size, many of these households do keep attached migrant agricultural labourers. This is partly because wages payable to them are abysmally low and some of the big landowners also practise rather intensive cultivation. Besides a larger share of land, the Jat Sikhs also own a

still larger share of agricultural implements and machinery like tractors, pump-sets, threshers, etc. Harijan households constitute the major reserve of local labour supply. Their employment opportunities and wages seem to have been adversely affected by migrant labourers. Some of these households do own a piece of cultivable land but usually below two acres.

Changing pattern of migration

Another special feature we observed in this area is out-migration. Incidence of emigration has been high in this area historically. Factors like fragmented nature and smallness of the holdings, population pressure and backwardness of agriculture induced emigration right from the beginning of this century. According to one estimate, 20 per cent of the total population emigrated during the twenties of the present century. However, because of the two favourable factors — high rate of education and economic prosperity — earlier only Jat Sikhs emigrated. The literacy rate among Jats was 37 per cent compared to negligible literacy among Scheduled Castes, the other prominent section of the population. Economically, Jats were mainly the landowners whereas the SCs were tenants.[2]

However, since independence this migration pattern has changed. At the time of independence the SCs were predominantly illiterates though the desire for education was probably lurking in their minds due to the demonstrated effect of the Jats who considered education as only their prerogative because of economic superiority. This is reflected in the fact that during the post-independence period the literacy rate among SCs in Hoshiarpur district rose sharply from zero level at the time of independence to 29.16 per cent in 1971 and this provided employment opportunities for them outside the village. Many people migrated to join various services. Education not only increased the incomes of Scheduled Castes, but also released them from the old feudal relations and widened their cognitive map. And it is because of these positive benefits of education realised by the SC community that today SC people in this area appear to be most conscious about providing education to their wards. We found in the villages visited that all the boys and girls go to school up to primary level. However, because of poverty, the opportunity cost of education becomes increasingly unfavourable as the children approach their teens and thus a large number of them drop out slowly.[3]

Decline of handloom industry and leather work

Earlier a good number of families were artisans (chiefly weavers) in many villages of the area. Of late, introduction of mill cloth and power handlooms have rendered a large chunk of these families jobless. In the absence of alternative industrial employments, this situation has forced them to join agricultural labour force. A similar fate has also overtaken many leather workers.

Tenurial conditions

The impression gathered about tenurial conditions in the area was also unusual. The practice of leasing out land is not at all very wide in Punjab as a whole. However, in this area, small plots of half to one acre are leased out by the absentee landlords extensively. The terms of tenancy is cash which varies from Rs. 40-125 per kanal (1/8th of an acre) depending upon the fertility of soil and availability of irrigation facilities. The plots are leased out for more than two terms to a particular leaser. An indication of the extent of such tenancy can be had from the fact that in one village, one-third of the total of about 60 Harijan households was under such tenancy. The leasers mainly constitute the out-migrant owners. The high rate of non-settler migration and negligible rate of female participation has probably given rise to such a pattern of tenancy here. However, many migrants, settled at their respective places of destination, are also involved in such practice of leasing.

A contrast within Mahilpur

Mahilpur block can be divided into two distinct parts taking the main Chandigarh-Hoshiarpur road as a dividing line. The two sides of the road present a profound picture in contrast. The east side of the road called Mandi area locally, is much poorer than the west green belt. On the east side we saw people barefoot, clothed in rags, living in thatched hovels, devoid even of petty minimum metallic household goods like utensils. One can easily discern there vast tracts of land lying vacant for want of irrigation facilities. We observed people of the lower caste frightened of higher castes even in our presence. We saw how the voice of the poor was suppressed and how the depressed and oppressed man is forced out of fear to respect a man of superior caste and economically better off. It was a clear case of taking extra-constitutional liberty with impunity. We also discovered here the prevalence of a practice of repayment of loan through labour. This was reported to be quite common in at least a few villages in the area.

Socio-economic characteristics of participants

The five-day camp started with a brief introduction from the 50 SC participants wherein we jotted down certain information relating to their socio-economic and demographic background like age, sex, family structure, caste, occupation, land particulars, etc. Table 2 provides this information under 13 heads. As is evident from the table, participants represented each age group (young adult and old) fairly well. They were neither very educated nor predominantly illiterates. Occupation-wise almost half of them were labourers, mainly agricultural labourers The rest comprised army pensioners, educated unemployed, students, tenants, weavers, petty-traders, etc. Family size of the participants was also wide ranging. Whereas a little over 50 per cent

of the participants belonged to families of normal size ranging from merely four to seven, the rest belonged to families having anything from two to 20 members.

Only one quarter of the total participants reported living in kachcha houses. Further enquiries revealed that out of 31 pukka houses, 20 were constructed before 1970 and the rest is between 1970 and mid-1975. Most of the pukka houses were self-financed. No pukka house was constructed (save for a single exception) during 1975 to 1978. These and some other specific queries revealed two things. First, the green revolution hardly had any impact on house construction, and second, even during 1975-78, when rural house construction was greatly emphasised as part of the 20-point programme, construction was almost negligible.

One-fifth of the total participants' families did not own any milch animal. Of the rest, a majority owned either only buffalo or buffaloes with she-goats. Only two households reported having cows. In the case of buffaloes, a peculiar system of joint ownership was observed. Only three families reported owning seven draught animals.

Table 2

Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Participants

a) Age		b) Education	
15-20	= 18%	Illiterates	16%
20-30	= 28%	Up to Primary	26%
30-45	= 28%	Primary-Middle	42%
45-55	= 10%	Matric	14%
Over 60	= 16%	Glackiate	2%
c) Occupation		Weave +Agrl. Lab.	
Agrl. and other labourers	48%	Tenant+Agrl. Lab.	4%
Household industry	10%	Dropout	2%
Student	4%	Others	2%
Pensioner	4%	Owner+Tenant	18%
Handicapped	2%	Cultivation	2%
Cultivation+labour	2%		
d) Family size		e) Type of house	
Up to 3	14%	Kachcha	25%
4-5	28%	Pukka	62%
6-7	26%	Mixed	12%
8-10	24%		
7-10	8%		
f) Date of house construction		g) Sources of finance	
Before sixties	14%	Self-financed	64%
1960-70	26%	Loan	8%
1970-75 (Mid)	28%		
1975 (Mid) Early '78	2%		
After early '78	10%		
h) Livestock (milch animals)		She-goats+ Buffaloes	
Buffalo	34%		

	She-goats	12%		24%
	Cows	2% C	She-goats+cows+ buffalo	6%
	Cow+Buffalo	2%	No milch animal	20%
i)	Consumer Durables			
	Nothing	18%	Bike, watch, machine	6%
	Bike+Watch	6%	Bike, transistor, fan	10%
	Bike+Transistor	14%	Bike, fan, watch, tran	2%
	Bike+Transistor+ Watch+Machine	2%	Only bike More than one bike.	28%
	Bike+Machine	2%	Fan, transistor, watches, machine	8%
			Bike, machine, watches, tran., fan, handpump	4%
j)	Permanently Employed: Migration			
	In Military	12%		
	In other services	12%		
	Working abroad	2%		
k)	Electricity			
	Houses electrified	62%		
	Houses not electrified	38%		
1)	**Total livestock (Nos)**			
	Draught animals	7	She-goats—Young-13)	27
	Milch Animal		Old —14)	
	Cows		Buffaloes—Young-26)	48
	Young –	5	Old —22)	
	Old–	3		
			Total	90

Above one-fifth of the participant households did not possess any consumer durable. The rest possessed one or more of them in various combinations. Most common was a bicycle, a table and a chair. Wrist watches, transistors, fans, sewing machines, were other items which participants owned in various combinations. Two households even owned hand-pumps.

Every village is electrified in Punjab, but certainly not every household. Of the 29 participant households who gave information only 62 per cent reported having electricity in their houses.

Land ownership and operation

Parts A, B and C of Table 3 provide data about ownership and operation of land. The table reveals that a large number of households, almost four-fifths of the total, did not own any land. Most of the landowning households also fell in the categories up to 2.5 acres and none owned more than five acres. Thus, ownership-wise this strata of society is very poor. Pattern of land operation as presented in Part B of the table, indicates the wide prevalence of tenancy in the area. Compared to 78 per cent landless households non-operator households were only 68 per cent. Though none owned more than five acres of land, six per cent of the households operated more than five acres. In total, land operated was three times more than land owned. If the gap between land owned and land

self-operated is indicative of anything, it can be said that tenancy is vertical between different size-groups of landholding. The total land owned by the participants' households was 14.75 acres, whereas total land self-operated was 12.5 acres.

Compared to these two figures, total land operated by participants' households was 47.0 acres (Part C Table 3).

We also gathered information from participants regarding land holdings and operations, some of which was really beyond our expectations. (Part C Table 3). Nine participant households were not related with the land. Of the remaining 41 households, 22 households reported to be working as agricultural labourers. However, surprisingly, of the rest of the 19 households, almost half were non-owner operators and three owned less and operated more. On the contrary, only three households were non-operator owners and just one owned more and operated less.

Table 3

Land Ownership, Operation and Land Relations

a)	**Land ownership**		**b) Land operation**	
	Landless	78%	Non-operator	68%
	Up to .99 acres	8%	Up to .99 acres	8%
	1-2.49 acres	10%	1-2.49 acres	140/
	2.5-4.9 acres	4%	2.5 —4.99 acres	4%
	5 acres and above	nil	5-7.49 acres	2%
			7-9.99 acres	nil
			10 acres or more	4%
c)	**Land Relations**			
	Landowners	22%	Total land owned 14.75 acres	
	Landless	78%	Total land self-operated 12.5 acres	
	Landowner-cum-operators	8%	Total land operated 47.0 acres	
	Owner but non-operator	6%	Neither owns nor operates	
	operates	62%	Does not own but operates	
	operates	16%		
	Owns less, operates more	6%		
	Owns more, operates less	2%		

Proceedings of the camp

The camp process which lasted for five days started on the first day with introductions, details of which have been presented in the preceding section. Thereafter, the rest of the day was devoted to a series of group discussions

where the participants were asked and also helped to identify their needs and problems. In the initial stages of the discussion, the objective was to identify the problems only, whereas later discussions were intended to gradually help the participants realise the commonness of their individual problems. The problems identified initially at individual and later on at group levels were typical of the area which is quite obvious from the following list:

(i) Cement scarcity: even after allotment, cement is not delivered;
(ii) Loans are sanctioned but payment is not made;
(iii) Fair price shops are inadequate;
(iv) Lack of lands for cattle grazing;
(v) Cost of education is very high;
(vi) Streets are not pukka;
(vii) There are no street lights;
(viii) Medical facilities are inadequate;
(ix) Out of 16 items, only a few articles are distributed by the fair price shops;
(x) Text-books to children are not supplied in time;
(xi) Unemployment among educated youth, etc.

The above list of problems identified by the participants is certainly not a typical one. In most other areas people are likely to talk about a village school, not the cost of education and seasonal unemployment of agricultural labour, not the unemployment of educated youth. This list was, thus, fully reflective of the comparatively better social status of the SCs of the area about which we have already mentioned before

On the second day, the participants discussed the possible solutions of the problems identified by them. Following the same procedure of individual and then group-level discussions, the participants came out with the following list of solutions:

(1) Supply of yarn and security of market; government should purchase handloom goods;
(2) Harijan control of PUNSUP and one shop for each 50 households;
(3) Minimum wages should be linked with prices;
(4) Loans should be provided without security;
(5) Dispensary facility within a distance of two miles;
(6) Cement distribution through fair price shops;
(7) House sites to be provided near basti;
(8) Grants for streetlights and panchayat's involvement in it;
(9) Government should ban dowry and community should control it;
(10) Industry to be set up at block level and training in various trades to be provided to children;

(11) Proper distribution and timely supply of educational facilities;
(12) Organisation;
(13) Distribution of lands of absentee landlords fallow-land and land in excess with panchayats; and
(14) Recruitment by government for overseas services.

In the long plenary discussion which followed the presentation of the solutions listed above by various groups, a consensus emerged that an organisation is the only effective answer to the various acute problems like unemployment and corruption in administration and discriminatory behaviour of administrators. In order to make participants aware of the various developmental schemes and to pave a way for two-way communication at a relatively equal level, we invited many district officials to the camp.

On the third and fourth days a number of officials — district employment officer, district education officer, Harijan welfare officer, BDO, SDM, etc. — visited the camp and talked with the participants. Their presentations revealed that through various schemes, government help is provided to SCs. They included (i) for income generation activities — loan for purposes like animal husbandry, tailoring, etc; (ii) for education — free text books; (iii) for welfare — old age pensions; (iv) for increase in land productivity — better seeds, fertilizers, etc. at very subsidised prices; and a few others. The discussions by the participants which followed the presentations, however, manifested that there is rampant corruption and discriminatory behaviour by the administrators. To get a loan is a nightmare for a common person unless one is ready to part with 20-25 per cent of the sum as bribe for the concerned officials. To cite just one example, in village Bhunno, seven harijans were sanctioned Rs. 4,000 each for a piggery, but disbursement of the loan could take place only when each of them sacrificed Rs. 1000 as bribe. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to imagine how the beneficiaries were really benefited. Either they would utilize the loan for consumption purposes or would simply become indifferent to loan facilities. Similarly, it was observed that in practice, book grant turns out to be a misnomer in the absence of timely support. It was a general complaint that the text books grant, which starts after fifth standard, usually reaches recipients at the far end of the season thereby defeating the very purpose of the scheme. By the time a student reaches beyond fifth standard, he enters into economically viable age group. In this situation, when the government grant does not reach in time, the parents, whenever they get such an opportunity, are tempted to take the children off the studies and send them to earn something. The working of other schemes like old-age pension and supply of farm-inputs etc. was also discouraging.

On the third and fourth days, in addition to speakers, a simulated game was administered, and discussions on the necessity of an organisation and identification of friends and foes took place.

The idea behind the simulated exercise, called 'Disarmament', was to provide experiential learning about the importance and necessity of horizontal unity. The game played between two parties of similar interests is so structured that only under the condition of 'unity' between the two groups, both of them win at the cost of their common enemy, the third party in the game. In the absence of unity, either both the parties lose bringing gains to the enemy or only one of the groups gain at the cost of the other. The message was well taken.

Discussion on friends and foes of the organisation and on the question with whom to unite, resulted in identification of five groups in the society. It was further discussed that the top group shall never collaborate, the second will be independent, the third one can be persuaded to cooperate, and the fourth and fifth groups, comprising of the poorest can always go together. Grouping was on the basis of landholdings.

On the last day an organisation 'Pendu Sudhar Sabha' (Village Reform Council) crystallized, an executive was elected and an action programme was also formulated. A heated debate preceded the formulation of organisation wherein the NLI faculty did not participate. Various issues like the name of the organisation, membership fee, code of conduct for members, demands to be included in demand charter, action to be taken for realization of demands were discussed. The meeting concluded after electing an executive body, collection of membership fee, and decision for place and time of next meeting.

Notes:

1. For this see the various camp reports published in the NLI Bulletin over a period of six years from 1975 to 1981.
2. Date for this section has been taken from K.G. Iyer and Manjit Singh, "Agrarian Conditions in Hoshiarpur District and the Tribal Migrant Labourers". Paper submitted in a seminar on Tribal Migrant Labour in India organized by Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, at Central Secretariat on 16th November 1981.
3. This is the reason why right after the primary stage almost 50% students drop out and thereafter, every year the dropout rate continues unabated.
4. For a state-level picture of tenurial conditions which are different, see: Changing Agrarian Scene by Indradeep Sinha, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 19.
5. For a example, late Shri Swaran Singh had eight acres of land in Tutomazara village. He had three sons who are all settled abroad and one daughter who is settled in Rajasthan. Although no family member is living in the village for the last 15 years, they are still the owners of land. Every year after each harvest, one or the other family member comes and collects the rent.

6. One of the main problems cited by the participants of village Maili during problem-identification related to this aspect. It was disgusting to note how government servants for their petty benefits force the poor people into the clutches of landlords and moneylenders. Maili village is situated in a far corner beyond which lies unfenced forest area. In the economy of the people, goats play a vital role, but there is an acute problem of cattle grazing. Many times, goats enter the unfenced forest area. The owners have to pay each time the incident occurs either a fine of Rs. 6-12 per cattle or a sum to forest guards. And to meet this expenditure, the poor people invariably take shelter of landlords-cum-moneylenders who oblige them in circles not only to ensure labour supply, but cheap labour supply. In their own words, such labour is 'used by the moneylenders like animal labour'.
7. In one particular village, for example, 11 SCs owned one buffalo each on share basis. They got these buffaloes from the better-off households, mainly Jat Sikh landlords, at the time when the buffaloes went dry, by paying half of the price determined for each buffalo at that particular time. SCs fed the buffaloes till the beginning of the lactation period when the price of each buffalo was again determined. Now under the system either of the two owners could retain the buffalo by paying the other party 50 per cent of the determined cost. However, as SCs did not have enough money to pay, all the 14 buffaloes in the village were retained by the previous masters. This appears to be a general phenomenon in the village studied.

Seeking a Strategy for Rural Development

*Navin Chandra & Ashok Khandelwal**

Introduction

The National Labour Institute (NLI) became operative in July 1974. Since then it has been involved in developing an alternate strategy for rural development through research and experimentation at grassroots level. Over 10 years of experimentation is satisfying to the extent the methodology developed by us has been found to be quite effective and successful.

In the following few paragraphs of introduction, an attempt has been made to briefly provide some important aspects of the critical thinking which has been responsible for the present NLI methodology.

The problem of rural development[1]

The agrarian question is the crux of the development problem of the developing world as it was for the developed world during the 17th and 18th centuries. Whereas the first world could solve the problem of agrarian transformation through colonization, untrammelled by state welfarism and socialism, this option is not available in the present social context to most of the developing countries. Since any other viable alternative strategy within the established framework has not precipitated, the problem of agrarian transformation in these countries has become extremely complex and difficult and India is no exception to this.

Ever since India became independent, rural development has formed the major part of national planning. From the Community Development Programme of early fifties to the present Integrated Rural Development Programme a number of strategies have been tried during the past three-and-a-half decades of planning. But despite some achievements in isolated pockets, the solution of the agrarian question remains elusive till date.[2]

Considering the huge sums invested nationally and internationally in the rural development programmes and research, the results appear to be rather baffling. All the resource investment and voluminous research outputs have failed to design and implement an effective rural development programme. The total failure of different rural development projects and programmes exposes their irrelevance and puts a question mark on the utility and authenticity of the statistical information gathered through sophisticated research techniques. This does not imply that all the research findings are absolutely meaningless.

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The point we wish to highlight here is that these 'objective' researches miss the most vital aspect of rural reality — the reality of the living, conscious peasant. He has been reduced to a statistical entity in these researches. Instead of making him a 'subject' he is made an 'object' of research and as such is just considered as the complement of land and instruments of production, *instrumentum vocale,* as it were. The researcher administers his research instrument and records the responses. This gathered knowledge is utilized for building models of development which are then handed over to the government machinery for implementation. Unaware of what is happening, the poor peasant naturally fails to implement the model he does not comprehend.

The authenticity of the information collected by such scholars is also in question. There is enough evidence to show now that the highly exploitative conditions of existence of the rural poor forces them to be cunning, rather than brave. They hide the truth from outsiders who by definition are exploiters. In fact, the peasant's conception of morality, vice or sin does not cross the boundary of their 'moral' community. Their interaction with outsiders is not informed by these concepts. Their dealings with outsiders is neither moral nor immoral, it is simply amoral[3]. In such a situation it is but natural that their responses to enquiries by outsiders are not authentic.

Myth of value-free research

The limitations of so-called 'objectivity' were exposed by the Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty and theory of relativity.[4] The former clearly demonstrated that the very act of observation changes the system observed and the latter proved that the relation of the observer to the system affects the observed values. These discoveries though related to physical sciences have lately been found to be equally applicable in social sciences. Although one of the great social scientists, Karl Marx, had recognised the effect of the observer in social research long before the physical sciences discovered it[5], the pretence of value-free objective research in the sense that the observer does not influence the result of observation survived in social science research for several decades after the above-mentioned discoveries.[6] Not surprisingly, however, these concepts are still in vogue in the majority of social science researches especially in developing countries for obvious reasons.

Development of participative research

Once the myth of value-free objective research was exploded, it was no longer tenable to pretend that the observer is outside the things observed. The problem now faced by the researchers was how to ensure authenticity of the observation. The search for the answer yielded the concept of participant observation. It was realized that by knowing how and to what extent the observer affects the results of the observation, the authenticity of the observation can be ensured.

Realization by the social scientists of the reality that they are part of the observation and the emergence of the concept of participant observation has brought about a qualitative change in the functioning of social science researchers. Now, it is a scientific truism to say that the circumstances and milieu you do not understand control you. You may feel that you are doing what you will but in fact your behaviour is dictated by the circumstances you do not comprehend. To the extent you know and realize how you are constrained, you can manipulate the constraining factors to your will. This is why it has been said that freedom is the recognition of necessity; now that the necessity of the observer being the participant has been recognised, the technique of participant observation to comprehend the reality and transform it can be used.

These developments in the social sciences made the social scientists realise at a later stage that for any effective decision it is necessary that it is taken by those who would implement it. If a decision is made and then sold to those who will implement it, it is bound to be ineffective. This is more so in the case of decisions affecting the peasants or, for that matter, any group of the oppressed. This thinking on the part of the policy-makers and experts has led to the concept of participative rural development.

Mobilising the peasantry for self-help

Social history has undoubtedly proved the necessity and importance of participation in the context of rural development. The success stories of China, Cuba and Vietnam have made this crystal clear and many more examples can be cited at a lesser level. But translating this concept into praxis is not a simple task. Eliciting participation from peasants is itself a job demanding circumspection and expertise.

Experiences suggest that in the face of outsiders' exploitation from generation to generation, it is almost next to impossible for an outsider to elicit wholehearted cooperation from the peasants. For anyone who aspires to get the peasants' cooperation it is imperative that he first enters their moral community – i.e. he becomes one of them. Gandhi, Mao, Ho Chi Minh and others, became successful peasant leaders only because they could successfully enter their moral community. Indeed, unless this aspect of 'peasant psychology' is understood, appreciated and taken care of, the problem of agrarian transformation would remain unresolved for a long time.

In any attempt at mobilising peasantry, therefore, the transformation of "for us" into "of us" is the most crucial variable. The peasants would become 'subjects' of research only when they would accept the researcher as one of them. It is no doubt a difficult task for a researcher, but can be surmounted if he is able to educate and equip himself.

Outsiders as facilitators

The difficulties involved in this process have led some people to think that peasants of themselves would transform their situation from one that exploits them to one in which they would exploit. Just because peasants do not accept the outsider who does not live among and like them, it is inferred that they do not need outside leaders or change agents. Such an inference however is contrary to the world-wide experience of peasant participation. In all the successful endeavours the involvement and contribution of outsiders was most vital. In fact, it is this limitation of the peasants to be led that has, as Eric Wolf has vividly demonstrated[7], made them change in most cases only their exploiters after successful rebellion. All this means that peasants need outsiders who can become one of them.

The outside leaders, however, should not discount the role of the peasants themselves which is most important. Their own role, in accepted behavioural science terminology, should be that of facilitators. The masses experience and perceive the social reality of their existence every moment in all its manifestations. Only they perceive it individually as an isolate. Each experience is unique and apparently related to only the individual peasant who experiences it; the peasants are unable to relate their experiences horizontally and vertically, spatially and temporally. This is behind the peasant's inability to think or act collectively. The important role of the outsiders – call them leaders or facilitators – therefore, is to develop in peasants perception and articulation, aggregation and integration of their individual experiences into a collective experience both horizontally and vertically so that effective self-mobilization of the peasants can take place for collective action on their own.

The need for an organisation

Once the peasants acquire this critical awareness, it becomes easy to make them perceive that their problems can be solved only by collective action which in turn would require an organization. At this point the facilitators' own perspectives on the socio-economic transformation become a critical variable. Understanding of the social reality and its dynamics, on the part of the facilitator will determine the type and path of development of the society in question. Whether the peasants' dependency syndrome is broken or not will depend upon this perspective.

The transformation perspective

Depending upon his perspective, a facilitator or leader may develop the peasants' organization through his interventions into (i) a repository for states' assistance; he may shape it into a terrorist organisation, and (ii) a medium for self-action for their liberation. The first kind of organisation may marginally improve the conditions of the rural poor at a given point of time. The

dependency syndrome as well as the material conditions of their exploitation would persist.

On the contrary, a terrorist or adventurist type of an organisation will ultimately throw the peasants back into the state of hopeless fatalism. This would make any fresh attempt to organize more difficult and would thus further delay the process of their emancipation from exploitation. Thus neither of the above two types of organizations provides the ultimate answer. For that the facilitators need to understand transformation as a process and a social reality.

Transformation is different from reformism and adventurism. To achieve the objective of transformation, it is imperative that reformism and adventurism are both carefully avoided as both would only delay the process of change or liberation of the oppressed peasantry. A facilitator therefore needs to develop a transformation perspective. This entails development of an organisation as a medium for collective action by peasants for their own emancipation from exploitation. A facilitator needs to provide interventions to this end.

One can have the transformation perspective only if one recognises that there are conflicts in the society and in the resolution of these conflicts alone lies the transformation. Since the most important and basic conflicts are such which cannot be resolved within the established social relationships of a given society, the task of transformation becomes very complex and difficult. The transformation will be incomplete until the organization of poor peasantry becomes strong enough to alter the social relationships in their favour. This has to be the culmination of the organising process. This culmination point can be reached by gaining confidence in the organized action. This is achieved in the process of resolving the other minor conflicts for which the established social relations do not become a hurdle. For instance, whereas exploitation cannot be eliminated so long as a relation of exploitation exists, organized action in the process of development can reduce the enormity of exploitation either through achieving relatively better working conditions or higher wages.

Use of behavioural science techniques

For a facilitator operating within the 'transformation perspective', the Freirian concept of conscientization becomes a meaningful operational category. But the mere awareness of the necessity of conscientization alone does not solve the problem of a facilitator which is how to conscientize the mostly illiterate peasants, not used to articulation and unable to draw necessary generalisations from their experiences. Here, one notes that there has been a lot of work in the behavioural science in the post-World War I period through which this problem can be tackled. Using these techniques, an individual can be deeply sensitized thereby stimulating his speech and action in a short period.

Simulation exercise, one of the many techniques used in behavioural science, has proved to be very effective in conveying collective messages as an certainly simplify the situation but every understanding of a complex situation involves abstraction and simplification. There are many instruments and techniques in the kits of behavioural scientists which can be used according to the need of the facilitator.

The NLI experience

The National Labour Institute has successfully used some of these techniques in its research and experimentation for promoting and strengthening rural workers' organisations. These research and experimentation programmes have been conducted by the faculty at the grass-roots level. The perspective of these programmes is based on the conflict model. In other words, ours has been a 'transformation perspective' as explained earlier. The Freirian concept of conscientization, has been an integral part of these programmes, popularly known as Rural Labour Camps.

To sum up, the NLI has attempted – and indeed successfully to quite an extent – to evolve an alternative approach for rural development through its various rural labour camps at the grass-roots level. The methodology of these camps which some scholars have christened as "N.L.I. Methodology"[8] has been based on critical evaluation of earlier approaches to rural development strategies on the one hand and integration of the three approaches – Freirian dialogical conscientization, conflict-based perspective and behavioural science techniques of group learning on the other hand. Through a five-day programme designed on this integrated approach it has become possible to activate and mobilise the peasants, especially the poor peasants and agricultural labourers, with a certain degree of success.

The following pages testify to the strengths and weaknesses of this pioneering approach of the NLI in promoting and strengthening rural workers organisations for effective rural development. The reader may not find formidable statistical tables. But the oppressed peasantry comes alive at every page. The reader will get the knowledge of not only the objective world of the peasants but also of their subjective world — how they feel and what they think. And indeed these are the most important variables for those who even care to organize the peasants and agricultural labourers.

Though the papers have been classified into three categories, this classification should not be taken too strictly. We emphasise the completeness of the integrated approach which can be gleaned only from reading all the pages. The reader alone however is the best judge.

Notes and references

1. Rural development has a different meaning for different people. For us, rural development means overall change in the socio-economic position and conditions of the rural poor; development for us does not mean any consumptions, but development of personalities and social positions as well.
2. A vast literature is available in support of the failure of various strategies of rural development formulated and implemented in India since independence. Development has taken place, but without the distributive justice. For a detailed discussion, see (i) A.R. Desai, India's Path of Development, Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 1984, specially chapters 12, 13 and 15 (ii) W.F. Wertheim, 'Betting on the Strong' in A.R. Desai, (ed) Rural Sociology in India, Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 1963, (iii) Dandekar, V.N. and N. Rath, Poverty in India, Economic and Political Weekly Vol. 6 Nos. 1 and 2, 1971.
3. See Bailey, F.G "The Peasant View of the Bad Life," in T. Shanin, (ed.), Peasants and Peasant Societies, Penguin, England, 1973.
4. Many critiques of value-free 'objective' research are available. Few writers, however, have related development of this critique to these discoveries. For this relation see P.V. Panajape, et. al., Grassroots Self Reliance in Shramik Sanghatana, Dhulia District, India, Working Paper, W.E.P., I.L.O., Geneva, 1981, Chapter 2.
5. Anyone having a little acquaintance of the Marx's methodology would be able to appreciate this aspect of the research method. In fact, dialectical materialist cognition theory explicitly states it. See Mao Zedong, On Practice, Peking, 1978.
6. In social science research, the concept of the participant observer was first talked about in early 1940s.
7. For details see Eric R. Wolf, Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century, Faber and Faber, London, 1973.
8. See Abdul Aziz, Labour Problems of Developing Economy 1984, pp. 54-56.

Rural Workers Organisation: An Alternative Development Strategy

*P.P. Ghosh, A. Khandelwal and Mahaveer Jain**

Introduction

After the Second World War, a large number of states in Asia and Africa were liberated from the colonial yoke. After independence, the new governments of these countries have no longer kept their interests confined to the maintenance of status quo and have been pursuing the policy of planned development with emphasis on distributive justice. The devolution of this new responsibility has necessitated radical changes in the structure and functions of various organs of the national governments; the labour administration, in particular, occupying a key role. It can no longer afford to confine its attention to organize labour only. It is being increasingly felt that the unorganized labourers, who form the majority and of whom the rural workers constitute the largest part, must be brought under its protective umbrella.

Viewed against this background, labour administration in most of these countries is inadequately equipped in terms of personnel as well as expertise. It is only in the fitness of things that ILO in its role as the international conscience-keeper should initiate through ARPLA measures to strengthen labour administration in these countries. The approach to the problem of rural workers has to be radically different from organized labour. Rural workers, as the ILO Convention 141 defines, comprise agricultural labourers, tenants, share-croppers and rural artisans. The labour administration in this sector has to grapple with the problems of the unemployed, underemployed, employed as well as self-employed. While the problems of rural wage-earners is somewhat amenable to legislative and administrative interventions, others can benefit only through the initiation of development projects designed for them. However, in spite of a number of pious social and economic legislations, in at least some of these countries, the problems of rural wage earners and other categories of rural workers remain as before. Indeed, the continuing process of exploitation of rural workers, who are not only economically poor but socially backward and educationally almost illiterate – and hence bereft of any resisting power – is resulting in an increasing number of such workers being pushed below subsistence year after year. It is against such a background that the ILO Convention 141 conceives of rural workers' organizations as a potent weapon to attack the problem of poverty. It is indeed a viable rural workers' organization that would strengthen labour administration more than any legislative or administrative innovation or augmentation of budgetary resources.

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The present paper is an attempt to show how relevant the Convention 141 is in the context of most of the Asian countries. To begin with, we present in Section 2 some broad national figures indicating the overwhelmingly rural character of the continent and a brief note on some of the common elements of development strategies and experiences in some of the Asian countries. A description of the character of rural society, the scenario of that development story, is in Section 3. Thereafter, in Section 4, we move to a discussion of the characteristics of rural workers' organizations and how they can hope to fulfil the objective of ensuring participation of rural workers in the process of development. Finally, in Section 5, the rationale of an alternative development strategy – i.e., the participation of rural workers in the process of development through their organization, is presented through a brief report about Bhoomi Sena, a rural workers' organization engaged in creating and strengthening people's power. While Bhoomi Sena is not the only one of its kind operative in India, its experiences have been documented more elaborately both by national as well as international experts and hence the choice.

Asia—the rural continent

Rural faces of Asia

Notwithstanding the ascent of some of the countries in the underdeveloped regions of the world, euphemistically christened as the Third World, to the latest flow of technology, the stark reality is that they are predominantly rural. If we judge particularly in terms of the two more relevant indices — the proportion of the labour force engaged in agriculture and the contribution of agriculture to Gross National Product (GNP) — this fact becomes more than obvious[1].

As an illustration to demonstrate the predominance of the rural character of their economies, we present in Table 1 the proportion of the labour force engaged in agriculture in 12 Asian countries.[2] As the figures indicate, nowhere is this below 50 per cent. For at least five countries, the proportion is as high as between 70 and 90 per cent; and finally, in Nepal, the population reaches its maximum 94 per cent. For India and Bangladesh, the two most populous countries of the region, the proportions are 69 and 86 per cent, respectively.

Table 1

Percentage of Labour Force in Agriculture and Percentage of Rural Population

	Percentage of Labour Force in Agriculture		Percentage of Rural Population	
Country	**1960**	**1975**	**1960**	**1975**
Nepal	95	94	97	95
Sri Lanka	56	55	82	76
Afghanistan	85	82	92	88

	Percentage of Labour Force in Agriculture		Percentage of Rural Population	
Burma	68	67	83	78
Pakistan	61	59	80	73
Bangladesh	87	86	95	91
India	74	69	82	78
Malaysia	63	50	-74	70
Thailand	84	80	87	83
Philippines	61	53	70	64
Republic of Korea	66	51	72	53

Source: Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific, 1978 by United Nations, p. 98, Bangkok, 1979.

While the above figures relate to the year 1975, the Table also reports corresponding proportions in 1960 and two further columns in the Table present the percentage of rural population in these countries in 1960 and 1975.[3]

If we look at the moment and the trend of these two characteristics, it becomes clear that not only are these economies rural but will continue to be so in the near foreseeable future.

The other index — the contribution of agriculture to GNP, figures for which have been presented in Table 2 simply confirms the above. In 1976 agricultural sectors in five of the countries listed in the Table were contributing almost 50 per cent or more to GNP including India and Bangladesh, the two most populous countries of the region. Among the rest, except for Fiji, the corresponding share was about 30 per cent or above. It should, however, be remembered here that a few of these countries, which are placed seemingly in a better position, have the "advantage" of being what we call "enclaves". As regards the trend of the proportions over the period 1960-75, it is again apparent that the upward movement is painfully slow.

Table 2
Percentage Share of Agricultural Production in GNP per Capita Income

	Percentage Share of Agricultural Production			Per Capita Income (1976)
Country	**1960**	**1970**	**1976**	**(US$)**
Afghanistan	67	63	55	160
Bangladesh	61	59	61	113
Burma	33	38	47	120
India	50	43	47	150
Nepal	65	AR	65	120
Pakistan	45	33	32	170

	Percentage Share of Agricultural Production			Per Capita Income (1976)
Sri Lanka	38	31	37	200
Malasiya	40	32	29	860
Philippines	26	27	29	410
Thailand	40	28	30	380
Republic of Korea	40	31	27	2,110

Source: Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific, 1978 by United Nations, p. 240, Bangkok, 1979

The dependence on agriculture by itself, however, is not always a pointer to backwardness.[4] A more reliable index to demonstrate the positive correlation between the dependence on agriculture and the level of absolute poverty is the difference between the percentage of labour force engaged in agriculture and its contribution to GNP. The obvious techno-economic explanation of this discrepancy in terms of low productivity of agriculture often makes one forget a serious implication of it, viz., the highly inequitable distribution of income between the urban and the rural sectors. However, to ascertain the extent to which the fruits of development percolate to the lower levels we have to take account of the inter as well as the intra-sectoral inequality. It is only then that we discover Dickens' "poor relations" or Marshall's "Patron saints" — our target population.

Development strategies and experience

The importance of the rural economy being so overwhelming in terms of population, output and finally its disadvantaged status it has received some, albeit less than due, attention of the national planners in all of these countries. Most of these countries, as we know, were under colonial domination. Before independence, the banal explanation bandied out for the poverty of the masses was the colonial drain. It was, thus, only expected that the ex-colonial governments eschewed the much-vaunted principle of laissez faire and embarked on planned development. The experience, however, was an unmitigated tale of woe or the opening of a Pandora's Box; the economy often registered impressive increases in GNP, but a progressively larger majority of the population, huddled at the rock bottom, continued to slide down below subsistence, known officially as the "poverty line". The emergent nation-states could learn to produce, but not distribute.

An ex-post facto analysis of the development strategies adopted by these countries indeed confirms the logic behind the abyss they have reached. If we include the countries where peasant revolutions were successful, then on the basis of major trends in terms of objectives, implementing institutions and targeted beneficiaries, various programmes of rural development can be broadly categorised into three types of strategies — (a) structural, (b) reformist and (c) technocratic. Out of these three broad categories, structural changes were

mainly attempted in countries which had peasant revolutions, as in the Peoples Republic of China.[5] In most other countries, in the initial stages, reformism was the creed. Grandiose statements were made and almost revolutionary laws were enacted. However, in the configuration of classes holding power, they turned out to be merely declaratory rather than mandatory, following the adage that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions''. The populist outbursts against the emerging socio-economic trends were such as to put to shame all those statisticians measuring inequality through the Gini Coefficients and the like.

The disillusionment with the programme under the reformist approach gave rise to the other one — the technocratic approach, implying thereby the irrelevance of the existing social system and the importance of "technical inputs over human inputs". The denouement of the approach were the so-called Green Revolutions. This new technique could increase the agricultural productivity but it could not overcome the constraint of the in-built inequality in the rural social structure. The fact that the inequality continued to grow – and probably at a faster rate – completely shattered the much-publicised myth of size-neutrality of the new techniques.

This technocratic method, of course, failed only in the sphere of distribution while in the sphere of production its performance was commendable and thereby earning it the sobriquet "revolution". The planners, of course, then realised that this malady had to be attended to and thus to forestall the question of increasing agricultural productivity and paradoxically increasing poverty, the shift in the policy decision was heralded in the technique of emphasis on "target group population" approach. The end-point is, however, as disappointing as to say "the dodo is dead".

The literature on the character of development in the Third World countries in general and Asian countries in particular is replete with observations telling us that story of death. However, principally as an illustration, we would like to quote below the findings of one such study:

Briefly speaking, as far as rural development and agrarian reform in Asia are concerned, the following points should be emphasised:

— The basic goal of most countries has been increasing agricultural production (emphasis added);

— Very few efforts have been made to build people's organizations. Rather, bureaucracy has been used to implement government programmes;

— Even now there is wide difference between theory and practice. The policy pronouncements about the rural poor have not been effectively implemented;

— It is only recently that the rural poor have emerged as the target group;

— Cooperatives, rural local governments, community development, Green Revolution and bureaucratic dominant government organizations have not been able to reach the rural disadvantaged;

— Land reform programmes in most countries have been a dismal failure;

— From the point of view of the rural poor, the achievements are rare among the selected countries.

Even a casual familiarity with the conditions prevailing in the Asian countries is sufficient to know how true those (under) statements are. However, should it be necessary to buttress those observations with records of statistics, we reproduce here, again by way of illustration only, one Table giving the percentage of rural population below the poverty line in some Asian countries (Table 3). The time-points used in the Table for each country are about a decade apart but even within that, the increase is indeed staggering in two regions in India (Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) and in Bangladesh. Elsewhere, the increase is not that high, but increase it is.

Table 3

Percentage of Rural Population below Poverty Line in Selected Asian Countries

Country / State		**Year**	**Rural Population below Poverty Line**
Bangladesh		1963-64	40
India	Punjab	1960-61	18
		1970-71	23
	Uttar Pradesh	19 0-61	42
		1970.71	64
	Bihar	1960-61	41
		1970-71	59
	Tamil Nadu	1960-61	70
		1970-71	74
Malaysia		1957	30
		1970	37
Pakistan		1963-64	72
		1971-72	74
Philippines		1961	61
		1971	64

Source: International Labour Organization, Poverty and Employment in Rural Areas of the Developing Countries (Geneva. 1979, doc ACROIX11979/1l, mimeographed) and Problems of Rural Workers in Asia and the Pacific (Geneva, 1980), p 4.

Quest for alternative

Even after about three decades of development, we are at the same place we started from. Poverty continues to be an inexorable phenomenon of social life, with an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, in spite of not too unimpressive national growth rates in at least some of the countries. For example, India not merely stepped out of the food grain deficit trap, but also achieved more than self-sufficiency in regard to agricultural production. It even started the export of food grains.[7] However, the attainment of such self-sufficiency does not imply elimination of absolute poverty and it seems the poor, in the Biblical idiom, "will always remain with us".

While success makes men dizzy, failure breeds reflection. Now that the logical consistency of the earlier growth theories stands blasted by the stark experience of practice and the planners have been rendered to the state of Hamletian dilemma, "to be or not to be", the search for an alternative approach to human progress has become more frantic than ever. One particular outcome of this intense search has been the emergence of the thinking among the world of economists, planners and international agencies that growth in order to ensure social justice must be participatory. It is almost impossible for a development plan to attain its objectives when its executors are some/ones from above and its intended beneficiaries are some others below. The two groups — executors and beneficiaries — are often not only distinct but are at a great social distance from each other and each must move towards the other to ensure success. The importance of organizations of rural workers lies in the fact that they are probably the only motor-force which can cause or even force that two-way movement. The sleeping giants, as Napoleon once described the Chinese population, must be forced out of its Rip Van Winkle situation. This is a social task but the primary responsibility for its fulfilment will probably lie with the labour administration.

Structure of rural society

Resource base of rural sector

Land is the crucial resource base of the rural sector. Its cruciality emanates from three factors — first, the majority of the rural population are dependent on it for their livelihood; second, it is in short supply in most Asian countries; and third, in spite of the great demand, its supply cannot be easily augmented. We have already shown in the previous section the extent to which the rural population is dependent on land. As regards its short supply, suffice it to mention here that in many countries the average per family availability of land is less than three acres, an amount insufficient either from the point of view of the family's requirement or of optimal use of resources. Finally, most of the Asian countries have been so densely populated that attempts at reclamation of fallow land have been occurring for a long time and at present they have

nearly reached the saturation point. The only direct way still open to augment the supply of land is to make an intensive use of it, through multiple cropping. Moreover, whereas the large farms having the capacity to invest in irrigation, do not feel its necessity for their land, others often lack the economic capacity to do it. In other words, those who need water cannot afford it and others who can afford, do not need it.

Though land is the most important resource base for rural economy, it is not the sole one. There are a few others, which can be broadly divided into two categories – those complementary to land and others which supplement it. Since it is mainly the latter which can augment the employment potential and the land-based income of the rural sector, its importance is more. The two most important elements, included in this category, are livestock resources and artisans' tools. In some areas, forestry and fishing resources also gain some prominence. However, at the aggregate level, it is animal husbandry which contributes the second largest part of rural income, followed by rural household industries, most of which are artisan-based. But even these non-land resources are also limited in rural areas.

The fact that the resource base of the rural economy is neither broad nor expandable, however, does not mean that every rural household is resource-poor. The distribution of these resources among different sections of the rural society is skewed enough to create a small group of resource-rich households, even at that low level of average resource endowment. And, as we will discuss later, this inegalitarian distribution of resources really determines the character and dynamics or the rural society.

Distribution of resources

As land is most important, its distribution becomes the most crucial base of the stratification of rural society. In the three Tables presented below, we have the data showing the highly inegalitarian nature of land distribution in three Asian countries – Bangladesh (Table 4), the Philippines (Table 5) and India (Table 6).

Table 4

Size Distribution of Landholdings in Rural Bangladesh (1967-68)

Size Classes (in hectares)	Percentage of Holdings	Percentage of Land
Less than 1.0	25.0	4.3
1.0-5.0	57.9	47.1
5.0-12.5	14.4	33.1
12.5- and Above	2.7	15.5
Total	**100.0**	**15.5**

Source: International Labour Organisation, Poverty and Landlessness in Rural Asia, Geneva, 1970.

Table 5

Distribution of Farms by Size in The Philippines

Farm Size (hectares)	Percentage of Farms	Percentage of Area
0.0-4.9	81.0	43.1
5.0-19.9	18.0	39.0
20.0 and Above	1.0	17.9

Source: K. Griffin. Political Economy of Agrarian Change, McMillan, London, 1979.

Table 6

Size Distribution of Land Ownership in Rural India (1960-1961)

Holding Size (hectares)	Percentage of Holdings	Percentage of Area
Below 0.20	29.7	0.5
0.20 - 1.01	25.1	7.1
1.01 - 4.05	31.7	32.9
4.05 - 8.09	8.6	31.2
8.09 -12.14	2.7	12.9
Above 12.14	2.2	15.4

Source: National Sample Survey, India, 17th Round.

In Bangladesh, 56.1 per cent of the rural households own less than 2.5 hectares each and their share in the total land is only 21.4 per cent. At the other end of the ladder are 7.9 per cent rich households, each owning more than 7.5 hectares and accounting for 32.0 per cent of the total land. The next country, the Philippines, is not a particularly land-poor country. But even there, farms of less than five hectares account for 81.0 per cent of the farms and only 43.1 per cent of the area. On the other hand, the thin upper layer of 20 hectares plus big farms, accounting for only 1.0 per cent of the total farms, enjoy control over 17.9 per cent of the total area. Finally, the situation in India probably presents the worst case. There, 54.8 per cent of the land holdings, each below 1.01 hectares, account for only 7.6 per cent of area, making way for the top 4.9 per cent of land holdings, each above 8.09 hectares, to gain control over 28.3 per cent of area.[8]

This acute concentration of the land resource, however, is not the end of the story. The distribution of other land complementary resources makes it even more acute. To substantiate the contention, we present in Table 7 the distribution of such resources in India by three broad categories. As regards the two livestock resources, their distribution among these categories might suggest a rather militating effect on land concentration. But this would be a somewhat misleading conclusion. A considerable part of these resources, maintained for agricultural requirement of animal power, is characterised

by the indivisibility of large unit inputs and thus smaller farms are forced to work with a sub-optimally high factor proportion (bullocks per acre). In the case of ploughs, the distribution is nearly similar to that of land. But in the case of comparatively more divisible inputs like agricultural machineries and highly productivity raising capital resources like electric pumps and tractors, the distribution is more skewed than land and, thus, it only strengthens what is already strong.

Table 7

Distribution of Economic Resources among Rural Households by Land Holding Categories in India (1971-72)

Items	Up to 2.5 Acres	2.5-10.0 Acres	More than 10 Acres
Households	60.3	29.4	10.3
Area cultivated	9.2	37.5	53.2
Cattles (value)	8.7	44.0	47.3
Buffaloes (value)	15.4	43.5	41.2
Ploughs (iron)	7.4	47.5	45.2
Ploughs (wooden)	10.8	56.6	32.6
Electric Pumps or Tractors (number)	3.7	20.1	76.2
Agricultural Machinery (value)	4.4	33.3	62.2
Transport Equipment (value)	11.1	33.7	50.2

Source: Quoted from Swami, D.A., "Differentiation of Peasantry in India'', Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay, December 11, 1976.

Implications of resources distribution

The implications of the inegalitarian distribution of productive resources among the various sections of society can be divided into two spheres – of production and distribution. In the sphere of production an analysis of such implications can be attempted through the enquiry on the factor proportions and the productivity on the farms of different sizes. A number of empirical studies have shown that small farms (unless too small) generally employ much more labour per acre and thus have a relatively higher per acre productivity.[9] Under the conditions prevailing in the rural sector, such an inverse correlation between farm size and productivity is not unexpected. The source of higher labour input per acre for the smaller farms is the unemployed or under-employed family labour and such labour, contrary to the zero-marginal-productivity hypothesis, can possibly have a positive marginal productivity through more intensive cultivation. The big farms, being run with hired workers, cannot afford this intensive use of labour, for economic rationality demands employment of labour only up to that point where marginal productivity is not only positive, but equals the wage rate. Admittedly, the big farms have a larger capital base (both working and fixed) and, hence, are in a position to raise the productivity of labour to the existing wage level; but they have reasons not to attempt this

method of augmenting their income. The alternative methods of rack-renting and usury offer them enough scope for not only augmenting their income but also increasing their resource base and thus progressively pauperising the rest.

The working of this mechanism of pauperisation, having a bearing on the distributive implication of land concentration, starts from the initial distribution of resources which is very skewed. The poor households with smaller farms are so poor that they are in a state of perpetual indebtedness. The initial cause of a loan might be either a consumption loan (say, drought year) or a social exigency (like marriage expenses) or a working capital requirement.

But once they are indebted, they fall prey to the mechanism of usury which starts draining their already meagre stream of income. When the stream dies, the next casualty is the meagre land resource of the poor household and this finally reduces the land-poor to the landless. This process, however, does not operate through the mechanism of cash transfers from the debtor to the moneylender. The transfer can take the form of produce (valued at low prices), labour (paid at low wages) or rent (charged at high rates) depending more upon the convenience and necessity of the moneylender.

Realising that the initial land endowment plays a vital role in the operations of this mechanism, a number of countries in Asia have tried to initiate land reform measures which could thwart this growth But it is the growth of this mechanism which has instead thwarted the proposed reforms.

Land reforms

Among all the strategies which have been applied to change the character of rural societies in Asia, land reforms have the longest history,[10] though the nature of these reforms has been varied among the different countries. But in most of the countries, the legislations have made provisions for a direct intervention in the rural society in contrast to many other methods (not necessarily legislative) aimed at changing its character. However, barring the Republic of Korea and Taiwan, the proposed reforms have remained almost inoperative and we discuss below the case of India.

In India, the basic objectives of land reforms were:

(a) abolition of zamindari and other intermediaries,
(b) redistributing land to the poor after obtaining surplus land through the laws on ceiling and, finally,
(c) granting of security of tenure to tenants or sharecroppers.

However, among these three it is only the first which was achieved; though the existence of large-farm estates is still found in India in forms other than zamindari and the achievement in regard to the other two have been minimal. A large volume of literature is now available analysing the causes of this failure. Broadly speaking, four among these can be identified as central – first, ironically,

the statutes themselves; second, class character of the bureaucratic machinery; third, rural oligarchy; and fourth, the absence of rural organizations.

Land reform legislations in India were passed against a strong opposition from the landed elites. The battle was fought not only in the legislature, but on the legal floor, too. Though it was finally won by the protagonists of the law, the opponents had bought enough time in the process and, secondly, the nature of the legislation had also become tardy due to a number of modifications introduced into it later. The process was further worsened as the bureaucracy, the sole agent of the land reform measures, had sided more with the status quo. And its job was made only easier by the absence of any effective organisation in the rural areas. In particular, the second objective remained inoperative because of the extensive unscrupulous legal practices of the landlords (transferring their holdings to fake owners) and the third remained inactive because of the sheer superiority of power of the renters against their weak tenants or sharecropping.

The nature of the legislations being weak, the bureaucratic agents being non-responsive, the rural elite being so powerful and, finally, rural organizations being conspicuous by their absence only, it was not at all surprising to note the increasing concentration of landholdings, in spite of the "land reform". Thus India, which already had the highest concentration of landholding during the beginning of the sixties, increased it further at the end of the decade. As the figures in Table 8 indicate, in other Asian countries (except for Thailand) the story is similar.

Table 8

Movement of Land Concentration in Selected Asian Countries

Land Concentration		
Country	**Year**	**Gini Coefficient**
Bangladesh	1960	0.47
	1974	0.57
India	1960	0.89
	1970-71	0 63
Republic of Korea	1963	0.30
	1974	0,32
Philippines	1960	0.52
	1971	0.46

Source: International Labour Organisation. Problems of Rural Workers in Asia and the Pacific, Geneva, 1980.

Stratification, of rural society

Unavoidably, we have been using the terms landlords, share-croppers and the like in our previous discussions, though we are yet to identify them. Generally, it is the land resources of a family which is considered to be

basic in determining the specific stratum which the family belongs to. But it is important to note here that more than land, it is the manner in which a householder combines his labour and resources with land (owned or unowned) that determines his socio-economic character. Though highly simplified, the three-fold classification of the rural society — landlords, farmers and labourers — as suggested by Thorner, signifies the three possible relations an agriculturist can have with land. The first category constitutes those who own land but do not work on it themselves; the second, those who own land and also work on it; and the third, who practically do not own any and work on others' lands.

However, between the two extreme (and pure) categories — landlords and agricultural labourers — it is possible to think of a number of categories of agriculturists depending upon the extent to which their income is derived from rent or self-employment (on owned land) or wage employment (on others' lands). As a breakdown of the total income figure is a rather difficult exercise in rural conditions, an indirect way of categorisation based on the "extent of use of hired labour" (either in or out) is often very useful. Such an exercise will generally lead us to the following categories:

(a) **Landlords:** Those who do not work on their land but live mainly on rent earnings.

(b) **Rich farmers:** Those who do not work on their land but get it cultivated through hired labour. The land resource of both the categories a) and b) are not substantially different but the way they make use of their land necessitates a distinction between the two.

(c) **Middle farmers:** Those who work on their own land and employ hired labour only to the extent it is necessary over the supply of family labour. Generally, such farms employ hired labour in peak seasons only, due to the unpostponable nature of agricultural operations.

(d) **Small farmers:** Those whose land resources are so small that they need not hire labour even in peak seasons; on the other hand, they themselves look for off-farm employment during lean seasons.

(e) **Marginal farmers:** Those whose land resource is so tiny that even during peak seasons, the family labour cannot be fully employed in their own farm and hence they look for employment almost throughout the year.

(f) **Agricultural labourers:** Those who depend only on wage employment throughout the year.

Though shacropping is widely practised in many Asian countries, the above classification generally holds good, as sharecroppers are mostly small farmers or marginal farmers.

The ILO Convention 141 defines the rural workers as all wage earners and those self-employed persons who derive their income either from agriculture or handicrafts or related occupations with the help only of their family or with occasional outside labour. The Convention categorically excludes those who employ permanent workers or employ a substantial number of seasonal workers and also farmers who have any land cultivated by share-croppers and tenants. Thus, it is not difficult to see that "rural workers" cover all the agriculturists, barring those belonging to the two top categories (landlords and rich farmers) and all the rural artisans who are practically self-employed. The category, thus, is a broad one; but it is not difficult to see that the common characteristic of all these people lies in the fact that all of them work on land (or tools), in contrast to others who only live on land.

Aspects of rural workers' organization

Given the development experience of the past, the nature of stratification of rural societies and the socio-economic forces operating there, one can realise that, in the absence of a new approach to the problems of development, the phenomenon of growth with increasing poverty will continue unabated. If the basis of that new approach has to be found out in the causes of the malady, then we can always identify the role which rural workers must play in that new strategy. It will require intense participation on their part in the whole process of development. But since the process of development is social, it only demands a collective participation and this is possible only through an organisation. As Myrdal notes: "No society has ever substantially reformed itself by a movement from above; by a simple voluntary decision of an upper class, springing from its social conscience, to become equal with the lower classes and to give them free entrance to the class monopolies. Ideals and social conscience do play their very considerable roles, which should not be forgotten. But they are weak as self-propelled forces; for originating reforms on a large scale they need the pull of demands being raised and pressed for. When power has been assembled by those who have grievances, then is the time when ideals and social conscience can become effective".[11]

Basic characteristics of organization

Prima facie, an organization is a collection of individuals who agree to interact among themselves within some specified codes ensuring the subjugation of the individuals to the collective. A rural workers' organization probably requires a few more qualifications than above, but even within this general definition, one might ask, what is collectivity? It is not at all improbable for the individual and the collective to have conflicting interests. But an organization proper requires that "the collective exists to the extent that individuals acquiesce

in its sovereignty, and develops as individuals acquire more of this collective spirit.[12] The presence of specified codes in the organisation, howsoever rigid or informal, can only regulate the interaction pattern of the members of the collective, but it can never generate, as some might believe, the collective spirit. If one further asks "what is collective spirit?" we will be entering into another area of subjectivity, but probably not a realm of utopia. "...the collective spirit" is not an abnegation of individual interest in favour of a mystified concept of "society"...(it is) a method of serving individual interests while at the same time raising individual consciousness so that one progressively aspires for fulfilment of higher orders including fulfilment in developing together. The individual will contribute his utmost to the collective output from which he will in turn receive goods and services that enrich him materially, culturally, emotionally; this includes material products, social services, security, a sense of belonging to a society, pride in national achievement, fulfilment in helping one's distressed neighbours, and so on. To thus serve every individual, according to principles collectively determined to which every individual is a party is indeed the very objective of the collective.[13]

When we come to rural workers' organizations, the existence of such a collective spirit, thus, assumes a role of fundamental importance. But that apart, the basic characteristics of such organizations must also reflect the fact that they are basically a "reaction to inequalities either in land tenure situations or the social structure and particularly to the growth of such inequalities".[14] Thus, save for those objectives which involve the joint activities of the members for some mutual benefit, rural workers' organizations are often pitted against situations when the acting for the fulfilment of their collective objectives implies acting against the collective objective of another group, whether they are formally organized or not. Thus, an element of conflict cannot be separated altogether from the rural workers' organisations. Indeed, the efficacy of an organization depends to a great extent in demarcating properly the areas of cooperation from conflict and acting accordingly. Attempts at co-operation where conflict is in-built alternatively, raising a conflict when co-operation is possible, can both be frustrating.

Yet another distinction, which merits attention, is that between mobilisation and organization. It is not difficult to think of situations where the former has acted as a first step towards the latter but such a progress has never been either automatic or universal. Indeed "the history of agrarian societies is replete with protest movements which have mobilised the rural poor for some specific action, and have then petered out, allowing the status quo to be restored, often in an even more repressive form". Broadly speaking, while a mobilisation is possible even at the level of a naive consciousness of the people, an organization requires a much higher level of consciousness.

Finally, let us note that a rural workers' organization is not merely the agricultural counterpart of the industrial trade unions. The difference lies not

merely in the diverse socio-economic environments (like nature of employment, legal set-up, etc.) in which they operate, but also in composition and, what is more fundamental, in the objectives which each of them pursue. A trade union is generally restricted to the employees of a particular organisation, whereas a rural workers' organization is likely to have within its fold not only employees, but self-employed and unemployed as well, the level of aggregation probably being the village or a group of villages. Further, the inclusion of an individual in a rural organization often implies the inclusion of his family, a phenomenon neither relevant nor present in a typical trade union. As regards the objectives, a trade union is primarily interested in the question of its members' general working conditions; but this is indeed too narrow an objective for rural workers organizations whose primary concern should be an overall improvement of the living conditions of its members. Admittedly, the question of general working conditions is important even in the case of rural workers but it can neither retain its supremacy over nor become inseparable from other objectives of the organisation.

Objectives of rural workers' organization

We have already mentioned before that the basic reason behind a rural workers' organization is the existing inequality and the growth of such inequalities in the rural areas. Thus, the objectives of a rural workers' organization can indeed be very wide, each part of which should be a small but coordinated attempt to arrest that growth of inequality or even to lessen it. Broadly speaking, these attempts can be divided into the following four groups.

Attempts for improving the existing social laws regarding appropriation of benefits: The three basic categories of rural workers can be identified as agricultural labourers, share-croppers and self-employed artisans and the social laws determining their share of benefits are those of wages, rents and prices (of artisan-made products), respectively. Thus, the rural labour organizations are always likely to make an attempt to chance in their favour the existing levels of wages, rents and prices. Since the maintenance of such laws is generally ensured by the existing distribution of resources, such attempts may lack strength, but the immediacy of the problem often makes them the maiden attempt of the organization.

Attempts for development of cooperative-like institution for their mutual benefit: Such attempts may include the building of a consumer cooperative, starting such simple social institutions as a school or developing such local infrastructure as a feeder road. In most such cases, the activities of the organisation generally do not involve opposition (at least direct) from others and thus it becomes easier for the organization to pursue such objectives in the beginning when it is still at an infant stage.

Attempts at ensuring the proper implementation of various governmental plans: In most Asian countries there have been a number of governmental welfare plans, meant for the rural population in general, or even some specially disadvantaged sections of them. But even here the rural elite has dominated the execution of these development plans so thoroughly that the benefits have either not reached the target population or, still worse, have reached those who could very well do without them. Such maladministration is indeed the result of a complete separation of the development administration from its object — the target population. It is impossible to fill up this gap by a movement of only one of the two partners and a rural workers' organization can probably bridge this gap by involving the large sections of the rural population in the implementation of various rural plans. The element of conflict is not completely absent in such attempts, but it is probably less than in attempts of the first kind.

Attempts at vocalising the interest to reach concerned institutions: As experience would show, the realisation of any of the objectives mentioned above can indeed be difficult if the organization restricts its activities to the village level only. The social or political institutions operating above are as much responsible for the conditions below as are the local administration or the rural elite. Consequently, a substantial part of their activities could also be directed towards those organisations (like the legislature or top administration) which play an important part in the legislative or policy formulation stage.

Prerequisites for rural workers' organization

Consciousness

By its very nature, the formation of a rural workers' organization has to be voluntary. To make an organization possible, it is very necessary that its members are first attracted to it by some faith they attach to the organisation, either innocently or consciously. However, an innocent faith must be converted into a conscious faith if the individual is to continue this participation in the organization and this consciousness of the participants is of primary importance to the life and effectiveness of an organization. Thus, any programme for raising the level of consciousness is almost the first prerequisite for forming an organization and it is here that the labour administration can play a substantive role in promoting a rural labour organization.

As regards the specific methods of raising the level of consciousness, it should be mentioned that, contrary to popular belief, the concept of "consciousness" is not an altogether academic one, with limited applicability. Admittedly, the literacy level being very low in the rural areas, most of the formal methods of communication are almost inoperative there. Thus, "rural workers" education should not be seen simply as a process in which outside "educators" and "trainers" come to "teach" the rural workers by a transfer of knowledge and by telling them what to do and how". This may be necessary on occasions, but, generally speaking, the aim should be to stimulate a dialogue

with the rural poor by encouraging them to discuss their own problems and by placing at their disposal external knowledge and experience for them to consider and adapt to their needs. This approach in turn makes the external "educator/trainer" aware of the real and specific needs of the rural workers. The whole process becomes even more effective if the person concerned is well integrated into the rural society.[15]

Self-reliance

A society works through a network of relations among its members. Thus, a drop-out of any section of it is likely to disturb the rest and, as such, the relation of dependence among them is always mutual. But since within the present socio-economic set-up some people can endure the non co-operation of others for a slightly longer period of time, a sense of one-way dependence is common among those who cannot afford that endurance and they feel that their existence is always at stake. This feeling of dependence takes its worst form in rural areas where the rural poor feel that their existence is at the mercy of a single individual (the employer or landlord), not even a group of them. The immediate consequence of this dependence syndrome is the pervasion of self-pity in the minds of the rural poor. Obviously, this psychological stage is completely antithetic to the formation of a rural workers' organization and it needs to be replaced by its counterpart, "self-reliance". Thus, "self-reliance is a quality and not a quantity. It means building up material and mental reserves that enable one to chose one's own course of evolution uninhibited by what others desire".[16]

Here again it must be mentioned that the building of this "material and mental reserves" is a process in which the role of the labour administration cannot be insignificant. An over-enthusiastic response of the administration to help inasmuch as the organization starts looking at the administration as the "new point of dependence" restrained help, leaving enough scope for low initiative, can always be useful. While at the material level such help can take the form of fine which should be amply supplemented by the organization itself, at the mental level it requires an amount of success to reinforce the initial faith which had made the members join the organization. A nascent organization can, of course, defeat the very purpose of such help.

Organizational structure

"Whatever its objectives, an organization to function continuously and effectively must have a rational structure with well-defined constitutional end parts, a constitution defining the relationship between them, a system of administration and control and a system of finance." The necessity of having a sound structural base, however, does not imply a "rigid" structural base, and codified in writing. Adherence to rigidity or codification in writing may sometimes act as a detracting force for the rural workers who are generally illiterate. A more appropriate approach towards the soundness of the structural

base is to ensure the compatibility of the proposed structure with the general culture of the people concerned. While the task of evolving a suitable structure should be left to the workers themselves, sharing with them the knowledge of possible alternatives is likely to be helpful.

A particular aspect of the constitution which should merit special attention, more so in the initial formative periods, is the question of membership of organization vis-a-vis its specified objectives. If, for the sake of increasing numerical strength, the organization embraces members with conflicting interests, it is likely to impair the much-needed coherence of the organization and thus make it rather ineffective to realise an objective which interests the majority of its members, but not all. On the other hand, an organization with a narrow base trying to attain a general goal also might lose the vital co-operation of others who share the goal but not the organization. Thus, a matching between the objectives of the organization and its membership pattern is very essential to ensure its coherence and effectiveness. Finally, we should mention the crucial role of "participation" in maintaining the structure of the organization, "participation is a form of social behaviour that needs to be promoted and developed through actual practice". In general, participation can be both direct and indirect. But in rural workers' organizations, this participation should be direct even at higher levels as far as possible. This importance of direct participation is again necessitated by the fact that all other modes of communication between the leadership and the rank-and-file members are practically non-existent.

Problems of rural workers' organization

The rural workers' organization is not an island. It has to maintain its existence within itself; it has to sustain the pressure generated by its own functioning. The sources of these internal pressures are the elements which we have discussed just before. For example, if self-reliance is a necessary prerequisite for the formation of a rural workers' organization, its absence or disappearance causes the organisation great problems. However, in this section we would like to discuss the problems which are external in nature and ·which are practically universal to all rural workers' organizations.

Broadly speaking, such external problems can be classified into four categories — a) Multi-interest coverage and conflicting ideological objectives, b) Legal and administrative set-up, c) Economic dependence, and d) Social backwardness.

Since the coverage and objectives are decided by the organization itself, it might appear paradoxical to include them as external problems. But not all rural workers' organizations are autonomous local ones, serving a specific local cause without a framework of broader region or wider causes. Many, in particular the ones with affiliation to political parties, work within a broader geographical and social set-up and it is not at all unlikely for them to be

influenced by the objectives of those broader set-ups. Since the socio-economic conditions vary widely from one region of the country to another (especially in a big country like India), such influence might really cause harm to the local movement, when the member workers fail to appreciate the divergence between the national and the local goal or the causes behind it.

The second kind of problem, posed by the legal and administrative set-up, probably constitutes the most severe one to cope up with. Both law and administration are basically aimed at the maintenance of the status quo. Indeed, their eagerness to maintain the status quo or law and order is so great that at times they only maintain the status quo and order, leaving the responsibility of maintaining law to the expensive and long procedures of the judiciary. Even with regard to implementation of those statutes or administrative guidelines, aimed at improving the lot of rural workers, the record is very poor, most of them enjoy neither the political will nor the administrative support – both of which are essential – and thus remain inoperative. The problems posed by the legal and administrative set-ups, however, are not caused only by their inaction. Instances of even active resistance to the functioning of the rural workers' organization are encountered quite often.

While the first two types of problems of the rural workers' organization are external in the sense of being even outside the boundary of the village, the remaining two are external to the organization, but not to the village. We have discussed in Section 3, how the clutches of economic dependence force the rural workers to look up to their master for practically every activity he indulges in. The perpetual indebtedness of the workers not only push them down continuously below subsistence, but it also makes it difficult for them to join a rural workers' organization for the obvious fear of being even physically assaulted. Thus the solution really demands a much greater level of sacrifice than what most of them can really bear.[19]

The last type of constraint to the emergence and functioning of a rural workers' organization is, of course, the social backwardness of the rural workers. In India, the majority of the agricultural labourers and sharecroppers belong to the Scheduled Castes or the Scheduled Tribes, most of whom are not only placed socially at the bottom of the rural sector, but are also illiterate. Centuries of oppression have made them so poor that the only positive features about their socially secluded existence is their ability to exhibit a certain degree of cohesiveness and militancy in their collective behaviour which are absent among upper castes. Because of the presence of these factors, such groups have some potentialities of developing into interest groups if properly led and guided.[20]

These are probably some of the problems why, notwithstanding the necessity of rural workers' organizations which have prompted the ILO to adopt the Convention 141, such organizations are yet to emerge nationally. However,

a beginning seems to have been made mostly by voluntary organizations and political parties and a few such organizations have also made some notable achievements. A review of the workings of such organizations indicates the possible course of action both for the rural workers and labour administration and in the next section we discuss one such organisation.

Bhoomi Sena: A case study of a rural workers' organization

The organization of rural workers is yet to emerge as a viable force in India. While there are pockets with such organizations, they are not a phenomenon viewed against the broad canvas of India. During the struggle for independence, peasants of various strata were drawn into the vortex of it. The euphoria created as a result of the advent of independence, however, had a dampening effect on the expansion and consolidation of peasant organisations. The inauguration of an era of planned development carried with it the message that growth and social justice would move in parallel. The result, however, belied such hopes. Instead, progress and pauperisation moved together. The increasing incidence of absolute and relative poverty could not be contained through such palliatives as a "target population" development approach. The villain of the piece, creating conditions of progress simultaneous with pauperisation, has come to be identified as the absence of participation of rural workers in the process of development. While viewed in terms of the presence of rural workers' organization, the Indian scene partakes of the character of Sahara, there are several cases still alive and kicking. These organizations, circumscribed in various microcosms, owe their allegiance to some political parties or voluntary organizations. There are, however, organizations independent of either of them. While the mortality rates, or to be more precise, infant mortality rate, among such organisations is very high, there are exceptions to the rule such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in Bihar, with its ramifications extending beyond the geographical frontiers of the State, the Shramik Sangathana in Dhulia in Maharashtra and the Bhoomi Sena in Palghar in that very State. Interestingly, all these independent organizations, having overcome the teething trouble, are almost wholly tribal. However, it is hoped that a case study, such as this one of Bhoomi Sena rather than an exercise in generalities, would be more appropriate to those engaged in organizing the rural poor as well as the functionaries of the department of labour operating in the rural areas.

The locale

Palghar, the theatre of Bhoomi Sena's activities, is one of the 13 talukas of the district of Thane in Maharashtra. It lies in close proximity to Mumbai, India's premier metropolis. As a matter of fact, the city is perched on the south-west tip of Thane. The railway lines and important highways connecting Mumbai to the rest of the country pass through Thane. This high level of infrastructural development, however, is no indicator of the level of economic progress of the district, except for a thin strip of land along the Arabian Sea.

Thane is characterised by a mono-crop agriculture geared to the caprice of the monsoons. The terrain of the district is undulating. Only 30 per cent of its geographical area is available for cultivation, with forests claiming another 40 per cent. The two most important crops are rice and grass, the former accounting for about half the cropped area and the latter about one-third.

Demographically, according to the 1971 census, the district is inhabited by 22.8 lakh persons of whom 8.3 lakhs are in the urban areas. This high ratio (36.4 per cent) for the urban population is mainly due to a number of suburbs of Mumbai being included within its administrative domain. Thus, leaving the south-west tip of the district adjoining the metropolis, the rest of the district is largely rural. A particular feature of the district is the high proportion of the tribals and in five of its 13 talukas, tribals outnumber the rest and in two more the proportion of tribals is more than 30 per cent. For the district as a whole, the tribals account for 30 per cent of the total rural population. These tribals live mostly in the hilly and forest regions of the district. The non-tribal population are those who had migrated there after the establishment of the British colonial administration when "the emergence of a centralised state apparatus that not only legalised the land settlement, but reproduced the conditions necessary for the maintenance of 'law and order' and perpetuity of the land revenue system attracted a large number of settlers into the district. Most of them came as traders, moneylenders and shopkeepers and later many of them turned, through their control over trade and moneylending, into landlords.

Palghar is situated in the western part of the district and thus a part of the taluka falls within the relatively developed thin strip of area bordering the Arabian Sea. But the major portion of it is hilly as is typical of the district. Palghar is also very backward agriculturally and forestry plays an important role in the subsistence maintenance of its population. Out of its 1.9 lakh population, about 0.7 lakh (38 per cent) are tribals and here again, if we leave out the coastal strip, the proportion of tribals in the rest of the taluka population would by around 65 per cent.

While agriculture, the plinth of the pyramid of rural economy, still wallows in backwardness, what we encounter there is not the phenomenon of shared poverty, but of acute relative deprivation. The landlord, moneylender and trader – more often the same person combining the three roles – occupy the apex position in the socio-economic hierarchy. They have intimate links with the towns. They act as suction pumps to funnel the expropriated surplus to urban markets. Moneylending, or rather usury, is widely practised not as a source to augment income, but as a device to obtain control over the labour of those condemned to the perpetually deficit sub-sector of the rural economy. The result is that a tribal – whether in need of and on a sharecropping basis or a job as a hired labourer or a loan to meet the economic and social exigencies – has most frequently to contend with the same person. Thus, it only perpetuates

the dependence syndrome reducing the labouring poor to the state of virtual slavery.

The bulk of the tribals in the area are able to eke out a sub-human living through super-human labour. Even those with small holdings have to be amphibians — operating both as cultivators or sharecroppers and wage labourers. With employment opportunities drastically limited, the labour market is always a buyers' market. Before the emergence of Bhoomi Sena, the wage rates were as low as a rupee a day, hardly enough to enable the wage earner to keep the wolf from the door. Besides low wages and unsteady income, rack-renting and usury help the ruling triumvirate siphon off as much surplus as the traffic would bear. In a situation characterised as such, the bulk of tribals were in a state of abject dependence on the rural rich. In many cases, this enabled the landlords to extract from the tribals huge amounts of even forced labour.

The above conditions of the tribals, however, have not arisen suddenly. It has been the result of a century-old process, first initiated by the colonial administration and then allowed to be continued by the post-independence political powers. At least till the turn of the last century, the tribals were left in their natural economy set-up. The level of absolute poverty must have been low even at that time, but not the relative poverty. But thereafter began their disastrous exposure to the world outside. The then British administration could not be indifferent to the substantial land revenue and forest produce of the area and thus made a survey of the district during 1852-60. The survey was only a prelude to migration of a large number of traders and moneylenders in the area with whom the British had settled a large part of the land at that time, the British administration had also settled some land with the local tribals and, as incentives, special privileges were also granted to them for wider regions. But, thereafter, the tribals could hardly retain their original position in the race of new migrants who utilised fully their own economic superiority and the tribals' innocence and ignorance to gradually alienate them from their lands. The increasing commercial importance of forest produce also made the British curtail forestry rights of the tribals, thus depriving them of an activity which was so crucial to the maintenance of their subsistence. Thus, within a span of a century, the tribals were reduced completely to their present position where wage labour is practically their only means of living.

The first awakening

Since the present condition of the tribals has actually been the result of a century-old process, their reaction to this ever-increasing monstrosity also has a history which is not too short. The present stage of the reaction in the form of the Bhoomi Sena movement must be embodying in itself the hard-earned experience of the previous struggles. It will not be possible here to detail the various forms of resistance and struggle by the tribals during the last century,

but a major step in the process has been their struggle during 1945-47. Since many of the tribals who had participated in that struggle are in the Bhoorni Sena movement today, a continuity between the two is to be noted both at the societal and individual levels.

The 1945-47 movement owed its initiation to the activities of the All India Kisan Sabha workers in the area, notably the Parulekar couple. It consisted of field trips by the Parulekars and their comrades to tribal villages and making them aware through small meetings about the plain illegality of the various practices of the landlords and the possibility of removing those through united action. The existing discontent among the tribals was so deep that the dimension of their response completely outdid the intensity (though not necessarily sincerity) of the Kisan Sabha call and almost the entire rural area of the district was characterised by an unprecedented mobilisation of the tribals. Among other things, their demands included: first, the abolition of forced labour; second, the abolition of payment of rent in excess of the share-agreed upon; and third, a rise in wage rates, especially for grass-cutting. The success which the movement achieved was substantial regarding the first two demands, whereas for the third it was rather modest. But the gains of the struggle were not limited to these economic dimensions only. This short, but intense, period of activity also helped the tribals to realise by themselves at least two important aspects of a united struggle. First, it gave them an opportunity to know the nature of response of the State administrative machinery (in particular, the police) towards their struggle against the landlords, because, towards the later period, the police had to put its most repressive face forward to pacify the struggle. And, secondly, the struggle also demonstrated to its participants the strength of united action in contrast to individual acts of revenge which many of them had done or seen before.

But if the success of the movement taught them a few lessons, its subsequent disappearance must also raise some question...regarding the limitations of the methods used during the struggle: the role of the outsiders versus the creation of internal cadres; the emergence of new dependency relationships; the difference between sporadic mobilisation through topical agitation and painstaking organization for sustained struggle; and, finally, the meaning of consciousness... The fact that the tribals raised these questions themselves and have been trying to answer them in their own way is born out of the decade-old history of the Bhoomi Sena movement which started after a gap of about a quarter century.

Genesis of Bhoomi Sena movement

The political climate of India during the end of the sixties was characterised by the near breakdown of the Congress party's 20-year long monolithism, but an alternative was yet to emerge. This politically soft state of affairs and the mounting discontent had combined to cause a number of struggles during this

period and the "Land Grab" movement of 1970, by the communists and the socialists, was one such movement. In Palghar, the movement took the form of about 150 socialists offering satyagraha on land owned by a Muslim religious trust. Most of the trustees were outsiders, the chairman actually lived abroad and the trust had a vast area of about two thousand acres. The movement, in general, was rather inconsequential and it caused an innocuous 15 days' imprisonment for those 150 persons. But not for a small number of tribals who were among those imprisoned. For them and their fellow tribesmen, the question of land was much more serious than their non-tribal socialist friends. The differing perception about the nature and intensity of the problem and the consequent divergence of opinion about the future action took place in the jail itself and when they came out of it, this difference became sharper. The tribals, particularly those with socialist connections, learnt rather painfully that their struggle was their only remedy and they could launch it only after raising themselves by the bootstraps. Thus was born the Bhoomi Sena (literally, Land Army) in 1970. In the last 10 years, the organisation has not only achieved considerable success, but has also acquired the much-needed organizational maturity through a process of constant introspections and reorientations. We will first describe below a few of its achievements and would then discuss the salient stages of its development from spontaneous awakening to organizational maturity.

The success story

Since the movement had started as a sequel to the Land Grab movement, the first programme of the organisation was the "restoration of tribal land" from landlords. This they had tried to achieve by forcibly harvesting the standing crops on lands which were illegally held by landlords. The sheer numerical strength of the tribals participating in these forcible harvestings had compelled the landlords to remain helpless spectators to these scenes. But once such harvesting had become wide, intervention of the district administration was unavoidable. But even at that stage, the tribals had kept up their pressure by duly registering innumerable cases of illegal occupation of tribal land by the landlords. In the face of the tribals' united strength and plain illegality of the landlords' actions, the administration had no option than to decide the case justly and, as expected, in favour of the tribal owners. During the same period, the Bhoomi Sena had also started the formation of grain banks to store the harvested crops and these banks again had further augmented the community feeling generated in the beginning.

In the second year of its existence, the organisation had turned its attention from further restoration of tribal land to making arrangements for cultivation of land restored in the first year. This shift of attention was basically due to the consideration of "immediacy" and was largely unplanned and had thus caused a serious damage to the movement. First, a number of tribals who

had gained some land had become indifferent (after their personal gains) to the organisational objective; and secondly, they perceived the problem of cultivation of land as a purely technical problem and tried to solve it by methods incompatible with their social base. This method was the formation of the Shetakri Mandal (literally, Farmers' Association), which was like a co-operative. The association was formed primarily due to the suggestion of a social worker who had come from Mumbai to work among the tribals and it was also promised financial cooperation of a local bank, again mainly through the good offices of that social worker. It functioned in the area for three years but with disastrous consequences, both economically and organisationally. Since the financial operations of the association were looked after by the social worker without taking its tribal members into confidence, soon the association landed into huge debt which shattered the confidence of the tribals not only in the Shetkari Mandal, but in the Bhoomi Sena movement itself.

This forced some central figures in the organization to a second round of introspection just like the one some of them had done while in jail after the Land Grab movement. At this point they were joined by an ex-socialist party worker and, after days of discussions, they ultimately decided to take the struggle back to its earlier phase of fighting for restoration of tribal land and this time with an organisational preparation which would insure against any retrogression, as had happened before. The specifications which were included in the programme were forcible harvesting of illegally occupied tribal land, legal action for restoration of such land, and fighting some specific cases of atrocities by the landlords. This new phase of the movement started around the middle of 1975.

At this point, it should be mentioned that initially the landlords' response to the Bhoomi Sena's activities was silent. But gradually they were also preparing for the defence of their illegal land rights and other economic privileges, first, by summoning the help of the administration and then by raising their own private army. This had made the activities of the Bhoomi Sena in the later period more difficult and the success less impressive, but, at the same time, this counter-force also helped them to make their methods more rigorous, mainly through higher levels of organizational coherence.

Till about the end of 1976, the movement had primarily focussed its attention on the land question. But it was being increasingly realised that the exploitation of the tribals through low wages was no less severe and, moreover, for a large number of tribals such wage earnings formed practically the only means of subsistence. Thus, from 1977 onwards, the movement had included the wage struggle within its fold mainly in the form of a demand to implement the minimum wages in the area as per the existing Minimum Wages Act. However, experience had taught the Bhoomi Sena leadership that legal action by itself was a weak weapon to attack the exploitative proclivities of the

ruling triumvirate. Thus, they had always supplemented their legal activities with intense organizational ones. However, when the landlords exhibited their stubborn defiance to pay the minimum wages, the Bhoomi Sena was forced to organize a strike during the 1978 paddy season. Since the paddy transplantation was being delayed, the landlords had ultimately conceded to pay the prescribed wages and in a few places even more than that.

Organizational development

We have already alluded to the fact, while describing the successes of the Bhoomi Sena above, that the present state of its organisation is considerably different from what it was in the beginning. It was mainly because for the first time these tribals had participated in a movement not as dumb millions under the emotional spell of revenge but as a clearly articulate group.

But even here at least the initial period of the struggle was characterised by spontaneity. Indeed, this has been true of practically every rural organisation or movement in any country or time. The general psycho-economic atmosphere of most of these tribal societies is characterised by a complete sense of dependence of the large number of people below (i.e., the base) on the few landlords and their allies at the top (i.e., the superstructure); though, as an analysis of the socio-economic system will clearly show, the relation of dependence is indeed the other way round. The stake of the superstructure in the continuance of the base is much higher than of the base on continuance of the superstructure. But as long as the people are yet to come out of this illusive perception of the structure of society, it is indeed difficult for them to react to the oppressions in an organized manner. Thus, under such circumstances, the most natural form of the reaction is of spontaneity and the present case of the Bhoomi Sena movement was no exception. The absence of a right perception of the structure of society and a planned course of action can always cause an equally fast disappearance of the initial mobilisation; but if some of them are able to survive, it is mainly because sometimes the enormity or intensity of the initial response gives enough lease of life to the movement and thereby leaves scope of revitalisation before it dies out completely. This "Lease of Life" for a movement not only includes temporal life but a taste of success too, which earns the movement a vital label — credence. The Bhoomi Sena's first year of activity did earn this vital label and, thus, it could reverse the retrogression which had crippled the movement in the next two to three years.

If the first phase of the movement was based on spontaneity, characteristics of an illusory perception of the "poor being dependent on the rich", the second phase had exhibited some unwarranted complacency which was again based on yet another illusory perception that, once the land has been restored from the landlords, they could depend on institutions like banks and other delivery agencies for the improvement of their lot. In essence, the whole process meant a perceptual shift from one-point dependence (landlords) to another (delivery

agencies), with the illusion of dependence itself still holding its roots in tribal minds. The three-year-long working of the Shetkari Mandal actually manifests this second period of the movement when the tribals had put all their hopes on the so-called welfare activities of the Shetkari Mandal. Besides this impairing of the local initiative, the movement had also developed at this stage some divisive forces within its rank and file. First, the process of restoration of land was yet to be complete which implied two sections of people — those whose land was already restored and others whose land was yet to be restored — and, secondly, the financial benefits distributed by the banks through the Shetkari Mandal also did not reach — indeed, could not reach — all the tribals. Thus, by the end of 1974, the movement had already lost its momentum and was almost on the verge of disappearance. All these had aroused in the minds of the leaders of the movement an intense feeling of helplessness which really acted as the starting point of the third stage of the movement by indulging in a thorough introspection about all that had happened before.

The process of introspection, however, is not a structured one and much less so for people making their almost maiden attempts. Thus, it took a considerable time to organize their discussions in a fruitful manner so that rounds of deliberations would gradually bring them closer to a clear perception of the "rural society which they were a part of", "the specific objectives which their movement should aim at in the short as well as the long run", and, finally, "the methods by which they should best hope to achieve those objectives". But pending these long discussions, as a first step towards reviving the movement, the leaders had already decided during early 1975 to at least revive the same set of activities with which they had started in the beginning of the movement in 1970 — viz., forcible harvesting on illegally occupied tribal land and legal actions for the restoration of such lands. Thus, the process of reactivisation of the movement and introspection about it started simultaneously and, over the years, these two components have always acted in an intertwined manner. However, by the end of 1975, after about a year-long discussion, the leaders had systematised a large portion of their thoughts on restructuring the movement and had reached some conclusions. These conclusions, by themselves, were not at all startling; but what lent them importance was the fact that they were reached "by the people themselves", and were not a product of "indoctrination". The people, in general started realising the importance of "analysing their previous activities", knowing the nature of socio-economic relations existing in their villages, "exchanging information among themselves regarding socio-economic relations in different villages or experiences of struggle in those villages", and the like. The two specific actions which were planned out of these deliberations were: 1) widening the organizational base of the movement through the formation of Tarun Mandals (literally, Youth Associations); and 2) increasing the social consciousness of the concerned tribal population, in general, by organizing brief shibirs (literally, camps) where a large number

of participants from a group of villages would interact with each other regarding their problems. It was hoped that once the participants realised the "commonness" of their problems, the idea of "uniting to form an organization" would strike them almost automatically. The process was not simple, for the participants' readiness to discuss their problems was very often followed by the realisation of their commonness but the next step of striking the idea of uniting to form an organisation was not that automatic. But after conducting a number of camps, the Bhoomi Sena workers had gradually improved upon the method of conducting such camps and the participants were further requested to continue their discussions even after going back to their villages. The method did succeed to some extent and thus it was not surprising to note that though basically the Tarun Mandal was an idea of the Bhoomi Sena leaders, their formation at the village level was generally inspired by the villagers themselves.

Thus, organizationally speaking, the movement rests at present on its own workers and members of the Tarun Mandal. At the activity level, the participation of the general tribal population is, of course, very wide and a continuous process of raising the level of consciousness of all these people by informal education is on through the running of the camps. The fact that the movement has been able to build an organizational structure of its own, out of its decade-long experience, is manifest in its present workings in a number of ways. The particular method by which the Bhoomi Sena has been conducting its struggle for minimum wages in the last two years is one such manifestation. These struggles are generally not conducted in the whole area simultaneously. Usually, the demand is raised at the village level, involving only a few landlords or rich farmers. But once a village has been chosen the Bhoomi Sena members from neighbouring villages always join their counterparts in that particular village to exhibit their utmost solidarity to the cause. This not only helps the generation of the all-important sense of collectivity, but, at the strategic level, this also implies "mobilising the maximum of the organisational forces against the minimum of the landlords".

Yet another characteristic of the present organization of the Bhoomi Sena is the way it has been able to combine the organizational and the daily activities of its members. Any organizational activity demands from the actors not only material and mental resources, but a part of their limited time and thus interferes with their bread-earning activities. The conflict can, of course, be partially resolved by timing the organizational activities to match the gaps in the bread-earning ones, but a more appropriate response is to create an "ethos" in which the members really need not differentiate between the two. The Bhoomi Sena's success in this regard has again been commendable.

As regards the institutional base, let us note that it is still a leader-based movement. There is at least one person in the movement whose leadership

is accepted almost universally and a chain of leadership next to him is yet to emerge. In addition to the leader, there are a few full-timers. Others have only tenuous links with it. Membership criteria are not formalised and financial contribution is exclusively voluntary. Tarun Mandal, the youth wing of the Bhooml Sena, is a village-based organization with its programmes tailored to the local needs. The parent organization, however, guides and coordinates its activities. Besides, it also trains the youth activists in drawing up petitions and understanding the intricacies of the legal rigmarole. The membership fee is Re. 1.00 per annum with a part of the proceeds shared with the parent organisation. Thus, on the whole, the institutional base of the movement is rather slender. The intimate interaction between the leader and the village cadres is probably the only reason behind their as-yet-steady organizational functioning which is possible only because of the small zone within which the movement exists.

The future

The decade-long journey which the Bhoomi Sena has made was not smooth, and it has a long distance yet to cover. It is not necessary at this point to make a "forecast" of the coming events, but the progress of the movement will probably require continually rising levels of consciousness. At least two important dimensions of this higher consciousness should be to convert the present ethnic base of the movement into a wider one embracing all the rural poor, tribal and non-tribal alike, and also extending its geographical coverage. These two important extensions of the movement of social base and geographical area are, however, not just pious desires of a concerned mind. Indeed, the present "enclave" character of the movement will probably threaten its existence to such an extent that the only option left open for this movement will be "survival through growth".

Notes and References

1. The range of the proportion of labour force engaged in agriculture is between 40 and 60 per cent in Latin America, 60 and 80 in Asia and 60 and 20 in Africa.
2. Two countries in the region, Singapore and Hong Kong, are primarily urban conglomerations and the rural sectors are practically non-existent there.
3. Since agriculture and allied activities like animal husbandry, etc., form the livelihood of a majority of households in rural areas, ¯agriculture and non-agriculture and urban and rural are practically co-terminus dichotomies. However, for obvious reasons, the rural sector is wider than its near synonym agricultural sector.
4. For example, Australia and Denmark are too widely-cited counter- examples to the relation between dependence on agriculture and backwardness.

5. For a critique of the structural strategies adopted in the People's Republic of China, see Towards a Theory of Rural Development, pages 66-83, by W. Hague, N. Mehra, A. Rahman and P. Wignaraja (United Nations Asian Development Institute, 1979).
6. The Rural Poor, Peoples' Organisations and Development Analysis of Asian Experiences by G.S. Cheema, prepared for FAO world conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, University of Stains, Penanag, Malayasia, 1978. Quoted from FAO monograph on Participation of Rural Poor in Rural Organisations, p. 16, Rohe, 1979.
7. The so-called volte-face culminating in the import of a substantial quantity of food-grains this year is more to provide the government with a leverage to deal with the unscrupulous traders than to fill the food-grains' gap.
8. The data for size classes of holdings in India were available in acres. Their conversion to hectares has thus yielded some unusual size classes in the Tables.
9. In Sri Lanka, for example, output of paddy in 1966-67 averaged 36-37 bushels per acre on farms of up to one acre and 33-34 bushels on larger farms. In central Thailand, yields were reported to decline from 306 kg. per cal on holdings of two to six acres to 194 kg. per rai on holdings of 140 acres or more. In the Philippines, farms of less than two hectares produced 2.9 tonnes of paddy per hectare, whereas farms of more than four hectares produced 2.2 tonnes per hectare. Quoted from Problems of Rural Workers in Asia and the Pacific, p. 86, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 1980.
10. For example, in India it started during the early fifties, in the Philippines in 1963, and in Taiwan and Republic of Korea in 1949.
11. Rich Land and the Poor, p. 71, by G. Myrdal, Harpers, New York, 1956.
12. Towards a Theory of Rural Development, p. 12, by W. Hague, N. Mehta, A. Rahman and P. Wignaraja, United Nations Asian Development Institute, 1975.
13. N. Mehra, et al., op. cit., p. 13.
14. Peasant Movements and Their Counter Forces in South East Asia, p. 5, by Gerrit Huizer, Marwah Publications, New Delhi, 1980.
15. Problems of Rural Workers in Asia and the Pacific, p. 91, International Labour Organisation, Geneva, 1980.
16. N. Mehta, et al., op. cit. p. 16.
17. International Labour Organisation, op. cit., p. 91.
18. This section is largely based on an article "External Impediments to the Growth of Organisation of Rural Poor in India" by D. Bandopadhyaya,

National Labour Institute Bulletin, pp. 413-423, New Delhi, October, 1977.

19. D. Bandopadhyaya, op. cit., p. 422.
20. lbid, p. 422.
21. All the agro-economic and demographic data on Thane district and Paighar taluka are from District Census Handbook, Thane, Census of India, 1971.
22. According to statutory regulations, talukas with more than 50 per cent Scheduled Tribe population are given special non-relapsable planning funds for "Meso Projects", meant for the uplift of the tribals. Areas with 26-50 per cent tribal population again qualify for "Modified Area Planning" funds. Similar privileges are absent in other areas.
23. See A Critical Analysis of the Social Formation and Peasant Resistance in Maharashtra p. 206, by S. Brahma end A. Upadhyaya (unpublished), Shankar Brahma Samaj Vidnayan Granthalaya, Pune.
24. Sea S. Brahma and A. Upadhyaya, op. cit., pp. 193-236.
25. All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) is a communist-dominated peasant organization with its base ranging from middle peasants to agricultural labourers. The two Parulekars were S. Parulekar and his wife G. Parulekar.
26. A detailed, sympathetic and participant view of this struggle is available in Adivasis Revolt: The Story of Varli Peasants in Struggle by G. Parulekar, National Book Agency, Kolkata, 1975.
27. See Bhoomi Sena: A Struggle for People's Power. pp. 21-22, by G.V. deSilva, N. Mehta, A Rahman and P. Wignaraja, National Institute of Bank Management, Mumbai, 1975.

Organising the Rural Poor

Vijay Kumar Kulkarni

Agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, marginal farmers and artisans constitute the rural poor. They are mainly drawn from scheduled castes, tribes and those of the backward classes that figure very low in the social and economic hierarchy. Their exclusion from the mainstream of the freedom movement perpetrated their social and economic backwardness. According to the Rural Labour Enquiry Report of 1974-75, only 2% of those interviewed exhibited any knowledge of Minimum Wages Act, 1948.[1]

In the post-independence era, however, the Union and the State governments, particularly the latter, acting on the guidelines from the former put a host of social legislations on their statute books, dealing with the problems of social discrimination, bonded labour, minimum wages, debts, distribution of surplus land, government land for house sites and cultivation, etc. The scheduled castes and tribes were conferred some special privileges relating to education, reservation in government jobs, etc. These privileges were enshrined in the Constitution itself.

The scheduled tribes divorced from the national mainstream came in for a still greater attention of the founding fathers of the Constitution. To improve their economic conditions the government initiated various schemes to generate additional employment and provide them with subsidiary sources of income. Care was taken to eschew exploitative proclivities of the vested interests through recourse to multipurpose co-operatives to take care of credit needs and remunerative prices for their produce.

The government, however, relied on bureaucracy inherited from imperial days to give a new meaning to the lives of the rural poor. The result, to say the least, has been disappointing. Agricultural wages continued to register a decline.[2] The big industries accentuated the process of rural de-industrialisation set in motion by the British. Thus swelling the ranks of agricultural' labourers. To circumvent tenancy reform laws, tenants were evicted en masse[3]. The per capita consumption of the rural poor, in spite of the rise in agricultural productivity, declined.[4] The average per capita income of an agricultural labourer is only 42 per cent of the national average.[5]

This is not the result of their apathy to work; on the other hand it is the result of involuntary unemployment, i.e. the incidence of unemployment and underemployment is very high.[6] The agricultural labourer is in an unenviable position – he has to seek his livelihood from land without having any access to it. To quote Bhatia, land distribution is highly skewed in favour of the upper and middle castes. According to Agricultural Census Data, 2.7 million large operational holdings out of a total of 705 million, or roughly 4 per cent of the

total accounted for 51 million out of 162 million hectares, or nearly 31 per cent of the total land area under 35.7 million occupational holdings. At the other extreme were holdings of less than one hectare accounting for nine per cent of the total area of agricultural land.[7] The extent to which land laws have been flouted and institutional credit cornered is clear from the following editorial remarks in The Statesman, "Punjab's Co-operatives Minister, Mr. Jaswinder Singh Brar, was probably not exaggerating when recently he complained that people not only registered land in the names of cats, dogs and buffaloes but also applied for cooperative loans on their behalf."[8]

The passage of lofty laws is a necessity but not a sufficient condition to give the village a new facelift. What bureaucracy on its own can do has been very succinctly put forth by a Vietnamese intellectual in the quotation that follows, "Economic experts from the United Nations have been known to amuse themselves by lavishing advice on the governments of developing countries, recommending this or that formula for land reforms. As if it were enough to formulate sound laws and leave their enforcement in the hands of bureaucrats! Do not forget that underdeveloped countries are characterised by inefficient centralised bureaucracies and that power is entrenched in local feudal principalities which are controlled by land owners and village notables, as a result of age old traditions. The best of laws passed by central government will remain a dead letter if they conflict with the interests of the local oligarchy. In these countries, no government possesses an adequate army of able and loyal bureaucrats capable of breaking this resistance. Reforms are likely to be swallowed up by the centuries old bogey of feudalism."[9]

The problem, though very difficult, is by no means intractable. All that is required is to launch a two-pronged attack — legislation from above and pressure from below. Gunnar Myrdal's pertinent observations below concretise this aptly, "No society has ever substantially reformed itself by a movement from above: by a simple voluntary decision of an upper class springing from its social conscience, to become equal with lower classes and to give them free entrance to class monopolies. Ideals and social conscience do play their very considerable role, which should not be forgotten. But they are weak as self-propelled forces, for originating reforms on a large scale they need the bulk of demands being raised and pressed for. When power has been assembled by those who have grievances, then is the time when ideals and social conscience can become effective."[10]

The fact that the increase in wage rates in Kerala is higher than that in Punjab notwithstanding the fact that the level of productivity in Kerala is not of that order as in Punjab, lends credence to Myrdal's observation.[11] The ILO also feels that unless the agricultural labourers and other categories of the rural poor are organized, only then their participation in development programmes can be ensured and they would get their appropriate share in its fruits.[12] Kerala

again bears it out, while it has the most progressive legislation for agricultural labourers in the country, it has also the strongest pressure from below mounted by organized agricultural labour.[13]

As for the rest of the country the picture on this front is rather a dismal one. According to the Rural Labour Enquiry Report of 1974-75, only one per cent of the agricultural labourers are unionised.[14] This, however, does not give us any indication as to the effectiveness of the organisation.

It will be too late if we do not turn our face to the rural poor. These have already started feeling the pinch and find it unbearable. The numerous cases of assault on this section of population including arson, roasting alive and implications in false court cases are manifestations of land owners' reactions to the elementary demands of the rural poor.

It is heartening to know that the Union Ministry of Labour is seized with this problem with all seriousness. The various trade union organisations have also come to the realisation that much greater attention has to be devoted to this task. Voluntary organisations are also contributing their mite.

The congenial atmosphere for the organisation of rural poor requires a thorough overhaul of the Indian Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure. The former lists 112 offences against property. If we add up offences against public order in the rural areas, arising mainly out of occupation of land and sharing of crops, the figure will swell up to 134. That is, more than 33 per cent of the operative sections of the Penal Code relates to offences against property rights.[15]

The Code of Criminal Procedure, even though drastically amended in 1973, has a chapter on, 'Maintenance of Public Order and Tranquillity'. It arms the district administration with draconian powers to prevent any breach in peace and public order and to disperse any unlawful assembly by use of force.[16]

Land being the sole source of sustenance in the village, it is no wonder that the rural poor are land hungry. Share-croppers want to be registered to obtain security of tenure and the right to sharing of produce as prescribed by the law. Many agricultural labourers still have a vivid memory of how they lost land to usurers and cherish in their hearts the desire to get it back. Many of them operate as sharecroppers or agricultural labourers on the lands they once owned. This is particularly true in tribal areas, whenever such elements launch an organized struggle for the security of their tenancy rights or recovery of land illegally alienated, or to obtain minimum wages, the provisions of the Indian Penal Code or the Code of Criminal Procedure are immediately invoked. A struggle for change in the patterns of assets and income distribution often leads to the involvement of militant elements in criminal cases.

In Rohtas district of Bihar, we ourselves found that militant agricultural labourers had been roasted alive for their temerity to ask for minimum wages

as prescribed by the law of the land. Such inhuman cruelty and harassment are enough to scuttle any attempt to organize the rural poor. Their organisations either hibernate or die – slowly or suddenly. The legal battle that ensues is so expensive in terms of time and resources that the scales of justice often come to be weighed in favour of the rural rich.

The situation described so far arises out of the fact that the countryside is largely under the control of rural elites. They have scant respect for the social legislations relating to wages, land, debt, etc. for it is their informal laws rather than the laws of the land that get the precedence.[17]

Apart from their poverty and dependence on the rural rich, their ignorance also stands in the way of organising themselves, as pointed out earlier only two per cent of those interviewed had any knowledge of minimum wage; with regard to other pieces of legislation as revealed by our experience, the situation is no better. Many of them do not even know that India became independent more than 30 years ago or the names of such eminent national leaders as Mahatma Gandhi, Jaya Prakash Narayen, etc. Only an infinitesimal per cent of them ever make use of public utility services like railways, post office, etc.

There is, however, a silver lining. The rural poor in the various parts of the country are growing restive, which makes them receptive to new ideas. It is against this background that the National Labour Institute (NLI) enters the countryside.

We hold six-day residential camps for the training of the potential organizers of the rural poor in various states of the country. Each camp is preceded by a field survey of the area from which the NLI seeks to select participants, numbering between 30 and 80. In the course of the pre-camp survey, we interview officials having to do with the implementation of laws and schemes for the benefit of the rural poor; and try to get their assessment of the situation and their prognosis. We also meet social and political workers operating in the region we are surveying.

Once these interviews are over we fan out into the interior parts of the countryside. Normally the interviewing of the rural rich is done during the course of the day and that of the rural poor in the evenings or when they are at work. Most of the interviews of the rural poor are done in groups. Since their dwellings normally are huddled at the outskirts of a village, we seldom face any interference from their masters.

The group interviews of the poor begin with innocuous questions, which do not lead to answers that the interviews may fear to volunteer. Deliberate attempts are made by us to seek their hospitality like drinking water, exchange of beedies, etc. to make the atmosphere a relaxed one. Once the atmosphere warms up, we move on to more substantive questions relating to their life situation.

Our experience reveals that the Indian countryside is both an iron curtain and an open book. The rich have a convenient money and courageous conscience and are very careful in their responses – the constant refrain being that their land holdings are small; the government policy regarding inputs and procurement militates against their interests; that farming is an unprofitable occupation, that they treat their agricultural labourers, whether bonded or otherwise, as members of their family; and so on.

The poor on the other hand are open-hearted and have hardly anything to hide. We have a look inside their huts to get an idea of their asset position. If there are any livestock, the only enquiry to be made is, whether like land the animals also belong to their masters, who claim them back after they have been well fed for some years. We collect figures relating to wages, indebtedness, employment, unemployment, social discriminations, social ceremonies and attended expenses, the degrees of vertical and social integration, horizontal violence, knowledge of laws and schemes, political, geographical and administrative horizons and myths to which they cling tenaciously.

They are very frank in telling us the different wage rates for men, women and children, the number of days each season they are employed. They have no qualms in declaring their debts, source from where borrowed and the rate of interest charged. From their debt position we proceed to find out whether they are in bondage or free labourers. Figures relating to literacy, the state of housing, clothing and medical facilities are of course, obvious to the naked eye.

We also collect information relating to the web of socio-economic ties they have with the landed gentry. The women agricultural labourers, we find, are in a worse position. They have to function both as housewives and agricultural labourers. Most of them have hardly more than one tattered saree to drape on themselves. In the rainy season, when they have to engage in transplanting operations, they are drenched from head to foot and have to pass the night on a cold earthen bed. Their lot during the pre- and post-natal stage is, to say the least, unenviable.

The camp

The accent in the selection of participants, to the six-day residential training camp, is on youth with some modicum of literacy skills. Older persons enjoying respectability in their village, though illiterate, but with some potential for organisation, are also taken. Care is also taken to persuade some articulate women to attend the camp. Initially, we depended on government officials to select the participants, learning through our experience, we have given a miss to this approach altogether. In the course of our pre-camp survey, we identify potential organizers numbering between 30 and 80. To participate in the camp,

they are paid actual travel expenses, minimum wages prescribed by the State for the duration of the camp and free board and lodging. The faculty shares the same facilities that the participants have in the camp. The venue of the camp is always a village school or some such public building.

The entire camp strategy is based on a dialogical model designed to help participants reach the following successive stages:

(1) Interest identification;
(2) Interest aggregation;
(3) Interest articulation;
(4) Organisation;
(5) Action.

To achieve the first, we request each participant to recount his/her own problems. Our intervention is limited to the extent of helping them present the totality of problems and prioritise them. The participants are generally subdued. The camp experience they undergo initially is something entirely new to their life experience. They are subdued in the expression of their interest and quite often give the impression that NLI faculty would help them solve their problems through their intervention with the persons placed in the higher position in the administration. This impression is created partly because of the state co-operation in the holding of such camps and much more because they still nurture a strong faith in the power of the administration to deliver goods. What they feel is that if the unholy alliance between the lower echelons of the bureaucracy, policy and the rural elites could be broken, it would be right for them. Whatever the level one may refer to, it again largely acts as a lightning conductor for political leaders in power, unless their involvement in the perpetration of any crime or shielding breakers of minions of law is direct.

The formal session relating to interest perception is supplemented by informal chats which do not merely bring out more ugly facts but also makes them more vocal. The next session is a small group session. Each group consists of persons having frequent opportunities of face to face interaction as they come from a definite cluster of villages. Before the participants are divided into groups they are briefed to think of the problems of all those in their area who are placed in the same or similar situation. Each person is asked to participate actively in the discussion and contribute his/her mite. Group sessions generally extend up to two-three hours. The NLI faculty is a silent observer just to assess the degree of the participants' involvement because it is our earnest endeavour to see that the discussions are not monopolised and that they are free and frank. Once the discussion is over, each participant is expected to list the problems in the order of priority on a flip chart. In case a particular group consists only of illiterate persons, one of the faculty members gives the necessary assistance. Language difficulty is overcome with the help

of interpreters, preferably local village school teachers. In this process we also ask each group to give us an approximate idea of the proportion of the village population divided into rich and poor. It is not always black or white, there are other shades also. The group session is followed by a plenary one in which each group presents its report, and the written chart from each group is displayed on the wall. In this session everybody is free to raise questions if his or her experience is different from that of others. In the process of helping the participants to come to interest aggregation, we intervene in a matter that they may be able to have an idea of the class composition of the village and that there is an inverse correlation between effort and reward. Care is also taken to debunk false myths and to give an understanding of voluntary and involuntary unemployment etc. At the end, one of the faculty members sums up the whole session with the pinpointed objective of demonstrating to the poor why they remain so.

There is an interlude between the sessions on interest aggregation and interest articulation. It is used to provide the participants with information relating to various laws and schemes and the administrative procedures. To give authenticity to what the participants receive, we try to make use of the officials concerned. It is immediately then linked with interest articulation. We again leave the participants to deliberate in small groups as to why with such laws and schemes and an army of officers to implement them, the situation remains not merely unchanged but goes on deteriorating. This brings varied responses from the different groups. They prescribe it to ignorance, illiteracy, poverty, large family, fate, etc. Here at this stage we administer some simulated games to generate an atmosphere to seek answers to the central question of poverty. For illustration, the Star Power game. It brings into sharp focus the following issues: (a) why the poor remain poor; (b) what is the way out of this vicious circle. This game concretises that in a system in which inequality is inbuilt, the less privileged group or strata will be forced to engage in unequal exchange, which will, in turn, widen the gap between the two. It will ultimately bring about a situation in which the bulk of the wealth will be appropriated by a miniscule minority and the vast majority of the population will be reduced to the state of near penury. We, however, administer it in a manner that a small intermediate group exists throughout the game. After this polarisation has taken place, we leave the scene entrusting the economically most powerful group with an absolute power to determine the future course of the game, i.e. how a new equilibrium has to be established. The process through which the game ends is a series of negotiations among the three groups. The group with absolute power is hardly prepared to grant any concession more than what may be called crumbs. The role of the intermediate group is very interesting; its loyalty lies with the most economically powerful group as long as the poor do not get totally exasperated and prepare for a common stand to achieve a common goal. Once the poor are united to struggle, the intermediate group

throws its weight behind them. Once this happens, the game is stopped. Once the game is over we ask the participants to relate the game to their life situation.

They are clearly able to see through the mechanism of exploitation and the remedy out of it. Through the Star Power game, the participants have realised why they are immersed in the culture of poverty, so we administer another game— Disarmament Game. This game is administered by a person supposed to typify the triumvirate – the landlord-cum-moneylender-cum-trader, i.e. the rural elite. He divides the participants into two factions representing the rural poor. He provides each faction with a number of weapons, signifying factors that impede horizontal unity and promote vertical integration. He provides them with money and advises them to engage in a zero sum game but at the same time he tells them that once they cease to engage in the zero sum game, they would all collectively gain at his expense to an extent that he would disappear as a class The two factions are asked to elect their respective spokesman and are given time to discuss their further game strategy after every three rounds.

Initially they start with the zero sum game but after two or three consultations they see through the reality and take recourse to a positive sum game. This hurts the interests of the rural elites, who plant spies to torpedo their unity. Quite often the participants are taken unawares and switch on from positive to zero sum game. The game is considered to be over when the two groups return to a positive sum game. Finally, when the game is over, we ask them to relate it to their life situation. Through a process of dialogue it becomes clear to them that vertical integration and horizontal struggle pays to a small minority among them in the short-run and that too to an extent not enough to keep them out of the woods. It brings into sharp focus the internal obstacles to horizontal unity and organized struggle.

There are many other games which we administered depending on the local situation. Once these games are over we ask the participants to assemble in groups and discuss the internal and external obstacles that impede the growth of their organisation. The first factors that are to be more prominently highlighted are myths, extravaganza on social occasions, alcoholism, etc. Most of all, the lackeys of the rural elites who act as the communication channel and divulge all the information regarding the activities of the organisation are exposed. The external obstacle consists of the various legal impediments which thwart any struggle for social justice and the tie-up between the rural elites and those beyond village frontiers either in administration or politics etc. This requires some inputs on the part of the faculty to debunk the fiction that all who know law are equal before it.

The concluding sessions of the camp are devoted to the discussion of organisational problems — strategy and tactics, in the context of the solutions to their problems which have attained a high level of subjective discontent

on the part of the rural poor. The primary task being the identification of the obstacles that impede their horizontal unity, it is necessary, inasmuch as, the rural poor do not constitute a homogeneous mass. Extra economic factors like castes, sub-castes and tribe, and subservience to various kinds of food, drink and even distance taboos render them into a position of what Marx called a sack of potatoes. Our endeavour at this stage is to engage in a dialogical discussion with them in a manner that they see through the reality and come out with solutions to overcome the constraining factors standing in the way of social interaction and horizontal integration.

The next step is the identification of the external obstacles — power of the rural elite; the nature and magnitude of repression they might let loose in the wake of any attempt made by the rural poor to change the status quo; the attitude of the government officials and so on. Just as the rural poor do not constitute a homogeneous mass the rural elite too are divided. The counter elite – viz., lawyers, school teachers, committed officials, social workers and so on – are to be identified by the organization of the rural poor and make use of these positive resources.

The organization also has to make collective efforts to maximise the gains from various projects and schemes purporting to protect and promote the interest of the rural poor. The initiation of action has to be preceded by the acquisition of information, its dissemination and finding appropriate tactics to achieve the objective.

In late 1976, the ILO deputed Prof. Gerrit Huizer, its consultant on peasant organisations, to evaluate our camps. He stayed with us for three months and visited several places where we held camps. Also he attended one such camp in Bihar. We quote below certain extracts from his report:

One of the outstanding aspects of the preparatory work and the actual conducting of the training camp is the fact that the development workers of NLI staff involved try to be maximally sensitive to the opinions and grievances of the poor peasants to use the ‘dialogical approach’ as they call it themselves (following Paulo Freire). They consciously try not to have preconceived ideas or plans as to how peasants should conduct their affairs. Unfortunately a training in the art of dialogue, particularly listening, has not been a crucial element the preparation of social planners and administrators and even social researchers have been taught to work with preconceived questionnaires and other research techniques which block rather than foster a sensitive rapport with local informants, not to speak of dialogue. The camps give ample opportunity to correct this bias. The camp situation was a good occasion for the NLI staff and particularly the officials present to get a deeper insight into the poor peasant situation and their efforts to overcome it. It was encouraging to observe how even completely illiterate peasants know how to describe (often in colourful language) and analyse their situation and to verbalise their grievance once

they are in an appropriate climate for doing so. They have a surprisingly clear awareness how land and other resources are wasted or not optimally utilised particularly by the big landlords. They are also quite aware that much of the yield of their own toil is being wasted on consumption and the acquisition of status symbols in the cities.

Their bitterness about these things was generally mixed with a measure of good humour even when they talked about the risk they were running of retaliation from the landlord because of the fact that they had dared to attend the camp. It was a confirmation of their own and their peers' dignity that they took risks. In several cases it was found that the participants' village attracted some people of neighbouring villages from which no one had participated in the camp to inquire and ask for assistance in organising activities. The camps clearly have a radiating effect in the areas where they are held.

An interesting side-effect of the camps is that a few district and higher level officials who generally deal with local problems through their subordinate officials are confronted directly with a good number of village life situations. After a few days together with their peers and some officials in an informal atmosphere, peasants speak out their minds with great frankness and surprise many officials in an informal atmosphere with their cunning and often witty but sharp analysis of their own situation... (Camp) particularly corrects their bias that peasants are as stupid and ignorant as they appear to be in the normal setting which is characterised by an oppressive climate. The 'conflict-solution strategy', as applied by NLI's Rural Section in Rural Labour Camps appears an imaginative and effective contribution in this respect which deserves national and international support.-1

Table 1

Changes in Agricultural Wage Rates 1960-61 to 69.70 (Rs. per day)

State	Money 1960-61	Wages 1969-70	Real wage rates 1969-70	Changes in real wage rates over 1960-61 in 1969-70
1	2	3	4	5
Andhra Pradesh	1.46	2.45	1.40	-0.06
Assam	2.29	3.80	2.04	-0.25
Bihar	1.30	2.70	1.34	+0.04
Gujarat	1.97	2.94	1.73	-0.24
Karnataka	1.67	2.35	1.34	-0.33
Kerala	2.10	4.67	2.31	+0.21
Madhya Pradesh	1.32	2.11	1.02	-0.32
Orissa	1.26	2.15	1.01	-0.25
Punjab	2.81	6.34	3.24	+0.43
Tamil Nadu	1.43	2.65	1.39-	-0.04
U.P.	1.31	2.61	1.32	+0.01

(Source: National Commission on Agriculture, Vol. XV. Table 69.1 pp. 242-43).

Table 2
Household Income of Agricultural Labour 1963-64 and 1970-71

State	Income in 1963-64	Income in 1970-71	Income in 1970-71 at constant prices of 1963-64
1	**2**	**3**	**4**
Andhra Pradesh	689.82	876.93	508.38
Assam	1170.05	1603.37	801.68
Bihar	607.93	960.75	476.09
Gujarat	1108.14	1290.66	719.43
Punjab	927.64	2308.80	1153.82
J & K	–	2267.51	–
Kerala	818.82	1382.18	622.02
Madhya Pradesh	471.51	928.65	464.32
Maharashtra	805.16	1178.56	588.74
Karnataka	690.22	1051.09	538.74
Orissa	593.58	1113.55	624.18
Rajasthan	–	875.22	–
Tamil Nadu	551.93	828.06	
Uttar Pradesh	555.73	1111.02	578.65
West Bengal	–	1174.57	–

Sources: Data for 1963-64 are from NSS draft Report No. 134 Data for 1970-71 from NSS 25th Round. Quoted from G. Parthasarthy Et G.P. Ram Rao – Minimum Wages Legislation for Agricultural Labour EPW, September 27, 1975.

Notes

1. Rural Labour Enquiry-1974.75; Summary Report: Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour, G.O.I., Chandigarh. p. 21.
2. See tables 1 and 2, above.
3. Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and Social Change ; Edited by H.A. Landsberger, MacMillan Press Ltd. London, 1974, p. 362.
4. Corroborated by Dandeker and Rath in their book entitled Poverty in India.
5. G. Parthasarathy and G.P. Rama Rao – "Minimum Wages Legislation for Agriculture Labourers"; Economic and Political Weekly; September 27, 1975.
6. It is very difficult to give a precise estimate of the incidence of underemployment. Our field experience, however, convinces us that it is fairly widespread. Only for agricultural operations, which have to be completed within a strict time span, the landowners after a whole day's work, other operations are staggered over time and the labourers are

employed only for part of the day. The figures for the days unemployed were 90 days in 1950-51 and increased to 128 days in 1956-57 (Source: P.G. Herbst. A Note on Rural India, National Labour Institute Bulletin, Vol. II, 1976, p. 356.) However, our experience shows that these figures are underestimates. For other estimates, see D. Bandyopadhyay-Vettichakeri of M-K; NLI Bulletin, Vol. II, No. 3, pp. 99-103. Arvind Narayan Das; Kuttanad: Survey of Watery Field; NLI Bulletin, Vol. If. No. 6, pp. 216-220.

7. B M. Bhatia; "Rural Unrest – Irrelevance of Land Reforms"; The Statesman, Delhi, 22nd February, 1979.
8. Op, cit.
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15. D. Bandyopadhyay: External impediments to the growth of organisation of rural poor in India; NLI Bulletin, Vol. III No. 10, p. 414.
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18. It is a normal practice, when a cow or buffalo dries up, it is given in the care of the agricultural labourer who tends it with utmost care. When it calves, the owner comes and pays a certain compensation and takes it back. The same applies to goats. Such contracts again are found with different conditions varying from region to region.
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A Few Glimpses of the Dark World of Jeeta Gadus in Medak District

(From : RURAL WING. NLI)

"This Day. 26th January, 1948 is Independence Day. This observance was quite appropriate, when we were fighting for independence we had not seen, nor handled. Now we have handled it and seem to be disillusioned. At least I am, even if you are not"

(Mahatma Gandhi, quoted from Vol. VIII, page 33E, from D.G. Tendulkar's book entitled,* Mahatma*).

Let Thousand Roses Bloom

Scene: One

Place: A foot-track leading to Musalapur Village, about 90 k.m. from Hyderabad.

They were confronting the reality. Today, the sun was setting in the west. The daylight was ebbing away fast. A few human figures clustering behind one another were moving towards the village leaving behind them vast paddy fields to be enveloped by the fast approaching dark. These moving figures combined composed; a limping human body, exposing its upper half always to all odds, scorching our torrential rains, master's flogging; lower half wrapped in the tattered clothes, bare-footed, and aged before the age. Perhaps, they lacked the perception of time; the days, the months and the years, come and slip out finally lost into the world of unending miseries and suffering, sorrows and pains. In their life, everything happens as usual — a destined fate... They were between the seven and 75 age-group.

We stepped further and went a little nearer to them. They stopped. They had fixed up their eyes down on the earth.

"Where are you coming from?"

No response. We repeated the question.

"From fields," shyly muttered one of them. "Where are you going to?" "Home," the reply came pat this time. "What is your name?"

"Pentiya, saab," turning towards the rest, "my friends: Pochaiyya, Narayan, Nagaiya, Durgaiya, Joyaiya Malaiya, saab; all of us are Jeeta Gadu."

Yes, they were Jeeta Gadus — the child-bonded labourers; the only easily available commodity in human form, all over the Medak district. All the villages in Sidipet, Medak and Gogipet talukas we surveyed had this tender humanity chained by landlords and moneylenders. We discovered a substantial number of child bonded labourers, in every village without exception. In some

of the villages, landlords were found solely thriving upon the child labour. In reality, the child bonded labour has plagued the entire region.[1]

Pentiya's appearance was a mere apology for a child and his childhood life: a shattered look, unkempt and dry hair, sunken eyes, hollow face, blister-torn hands and chilblained feet and private parts half covered by a worn-torn country-made towel.

He was barefooted, measured up nine years of his life. And, one more year, as usual, was going to be rolled up, quietly and quickly. He would be 10 years old in the next few days.

Pentiya had begun opening up himself bit by bit.

The accounts of one day – from dawn to dusk — in his life which he narrated to us in broken and inarticulate words, but with a depth of a single emotion — a longing for freedom, make out a world of semi-serf human beings. The accounts can now be pieced together.

"Dorra (sahib), I have to get up early every day. I must be in the fields before the tellari (dawn). Before leaving for the fields, 1 have to take care of idlu (bullocks) and barre (buffaloes) also. I have to feed and take them along with me to chenu (fields).

"Sometimes, I am asked by Ihe Bhoo Swami (landlord) to do domestic works in his house. These domestic duties include the clothes washing, utensil cleaning, removing of cow-pats, clearing of cattle herd, sometimes removing of faeces of babies of Bhoo-Swamloo and so on. There are several jobs and things to do in his house. I do not remember them all, for most of them are still to be known to my family; throwing the left-overs to the animals, donating the old used clothes to the sweepers and baby-sitting, have never occurred in my family. I came across, for the first time, such things when my father handed me over to the Bhoo Swamloo, about two years back.

"I am not allowed to visit my house freely. I have to sleep in the master's house. I never go to bed before midnight. During special occasions or festivals, I have to do hard work. I am permitted to visit parents and spend a night at my own home, only once a week. If I get late in returning, I always get a beating. Sometimes, I am severely punished. One-day salary is locked up.

"My first day's experiences are still haunting me. One early morning, my father asked me to accompany him to the Reddy's house (landlord's). The Bhoo Swamloo was relaxing on the wooden cot in the courtyard. He was chewing something, perhaps a piece of dry coconut. When we entered the door, we were greeted with shouting and insulting words from him. We were ordered to sit at a distance from the cot he was lying on. We were not allowed to come nearer to him.[2]

"Father was cringing before him to employ me as a Jeeta Gadu in lieu of a loan given to my family some years back. Master threw a piercing look at me

from top to bottom. 'I believe he is as much as my yadhu (bullocks) to work', he enquired from father sitting on the ground with folded hands.

"'Yes, yes, Dora (Malik). He will do all types of work.'

"'In case he runs away from the field, you treat him roughly... pull him up.'

"And father left me there and went out of the courtyard. That was my first encounter with any Bhoo Swamloo.

"I was immediately attached to a young Jeeta Gadu who took me to the fields.

"That evening, I got bit late in reaching the master's house. He got annoyed. All sorts of abuses 'lamadi-kodaka' (son of bitch) were heaped upon me. I was slapped twice. I went to sleep without having anything to fuel the belly. Generally, we have to survive on left-overs given by the masters and others. I was never given the fresh roti and dal or mitku (meat). I get rotten food all the time.

"In the morning, one-fourth piece of bread of last night is always given to me. I get one-and-and-a-half rotis of jawar in the afternoon and rice in the evening. Sometimes, evening passes without rice or bread or dal.

"Yes, my master has three children. But I cannot mix up and go for playing with them. Once, they tried to befriend me but they were pulled up by their parents later. I have no contact with them since then.

"No...n-no I can't read. Though, I have some schooling, but very little. I did attend the school for two to three months. But it could not last long. I was asked by my father to help him in earning the bread for our family. And I became Jeeta Gadu at last. Today, I have no desire to restart study. I do not like books, school, teacher, any more. Yes...yes, they (master's children) go to the school every day. Sometimes, I like them going to the school, They put on white clothes and use good shoes. I wish I could buy those very clothes from the market. My father says, he will get white clothes for me some day.

"You know, father collects money from my master. In the beginning, I was bonded for Rs. 50 yearly. After two years, it increased to Rs. 100 per year.

"Half of the wage is always taken away and adjusted against the loan. He has not given us any receipt for the money he has deducted. We have no idea about the remaining balance."

"How long it will go on?" we enquired.

"We do not know. It may go on till I grow old like my father."

Let them celebrate Children's Day, let them plant the thousands roses in Shantivan, with the sceptre in their hands. And, also let thousands pentiyas grow old in their childhood. Youth has lost its way. Tender humanity — being yoked — bonded.

VEER BHOGYE VASUNDHARA

Scene: Two

Place: Residence of A Bhoo Swamloo.

"It is really good that our government is taking an interest in solving their (bonded labourers') problems. We too want to help; if they require we are prepared to offer. Please convey it to them," a host landlord said.

"Yes, yes, we certainly want their welfare," added other landlords sitting by him to chime in with our host's views.

While talking to a bonded labourer in the field, we came across a landlord. He requested us to accept his invitation for tea, at his residence. Host Bhoo Swamloo was middle aged. He was well educated. He got his education in Hyderabad.

The drawing room we were sitting in was nicely decorated and furnished. Framed portraits of all important leaders were gracefully hanging on the wall. A brass replica of the Tirupati god was reverently kept in a big alcove.

Some more landlords had also collected there as they heard about us. They were also presenting a semi-urban look; English-style hair, gold-chain at the neck, pen in pocket, wrist watch, golden ring, white long shirt and kurta, dhoti and pyjama, Nehru jacket, chappals and sandals. They were extremely courteous and polite. "But the government is not taking a full view of the problem," said the host.

"How?"

"They (government people) are doing injustice to us by ignoring our problems."

"What problems?"

"There is very little earning from agriculture these days. Expenditure on fertilizer, seeds and agricultural implements is very high due to an increase in the prices of the items. We have to spend also on transporting the grain (paddy, wheat, oilseeds, sugarcane etc.) from the village to the mandi.

"To maintain our status in society we have to spend a good portion of our income on education.

"One has to live it up as his family at social position demands. My father was a Police Patel. I am also a Police Patel.[5] There was a time when we had sufficient land. But it is now divided among brothers."

"So you must be facing a hard time," I tried to prod him. "Yes, yes, very hard time, I have a small piece of land". "And bullock?"

"Three pairs. One bullock is out of use as it is always ill. I have spent Rs. 100 on its treatment so far, but of no use."

"How much does it cost you for the upkeep of a pair of bullocks?"

"Three to four rupees per day. Sometimes, I have to spend more, particularly during the peak seasons."

"Why don't you have some tractor and electric pump?"

"I have one electric pump. I am also toying with the idea of having a tractor. We (along with brothers) may have jointly purchased a tractor by the time of your next visit to this village," he hoped feeling a little elated.

"Yes...yes, a tractor will help you in fetching more income from the agriculture. I suppose you do not employ any servant" (I intentionally avoided using word bonded labour) "like others."

"No...no, I have six male (two minors) and one female servants. I am paying them good wages?"

"How much?"

"I do not want to hide anything from you as you belong to us"(by saying this, he wanted make us feel that our caste and class origins separate us from the bonded labourers and Harijans, and identify with the landlords). "Adults get Rs. 450 and minors get Rs. 200 yearly, but females gets a little less, Rs. 350. Besides, I give them food as well – pooled food from whatever we cook and eat in our home.

"In fact, none of them are Jeeta Gadus. They are free to leave me any time whenever they like. But they are with me for the last seven to eight years since I always treat them nicely. I give them money in advance whenever they come to me. Sometimes, I have got to give them extra paddy."

"Yes...yes, we always give them more paddy," others supported him. "In "In fact, they themselves are responsible for their poverty, miserable conditions and backwardness. Whatever they get from us they spend on liquor and other useless things such as marriages, death rites and entertaining of guests. One should cut the coat according to the cloth. They refuse to follow this principle. They don't save anything for the future. We can't help it.

"Sometimes they misuse the kindness we show to them. Once, I tried to be a bit friendly with a servant. But he aspired to be equal to me. He began wearing clean-white clothes and shoes like us. One cannot work in the field like this."

He was trying to convince us of his arguments.

"Once they are allowed to come up to the equal level, nobody would go to the fields. Fields will be left uncultivated everywhere. We have to keep them under our strong thumb in order to get work done."

And he has truly represented the traditional Indian ethos of veer bhogye vasundhara (might is right).

You may now tell the farmers you'd be slaves no more;

The starvation wages you will not endure.

Though you worked night and day, you could not satisfy, They treated you worse than a pig in a sty."

(The Painful Plough; selected by Roy Palmer, Cambridge University Press),

Scene: Three

Place: Labour camp

"I became Jeeta Gadu when I was seven years old. My family conditions did not allow me to live as a free man in the world."

Jeeta Gadu Kistaiya is 25 years old. He was interviewed while he was participating in the labour camp. During the five-day camp, the awareness he acquired was clearly reflected in his manner of expression.

He belongs to a traditionally bonded family. His father was also a life-long bonded labourer. During the period of 18 years of the bonded life, he changed four masters. His description of each:

"First master: He was a member of the backward community. His name was Balaya. He was a middle-class farmer. He had two pairs of bullocks, sheep and some land. I was given Rs. 25 as an annual wage plus one roti. My jobs for him was to look after the cattle grazing

"I had very bitter experiences with him. I was always given rotten food, and never allowed to move outside his courtyard and field. I had to work round the clock. I hardly got four hours to sleep.

"After some time, I decided to leave the master. Since I had not borrowed any loan from him, the compulsion was not there.

"The second person was a woman belonging to the backward class. Her name was Veeramma. She had five acres of land, one pair of bullocks. Here, the annual wages was a little increased by Rs. 30. I started getting Rs. 28 yearly. She was very kind to me and started giving me fresh roti and rice. She always treated me nicely and affectionately.

"After some time, I requested her to increase the annual wage from Rs. 28 to Rs. 30 as requirements of my family had increased. But she refused to give me this negligible increment. I ultimately decided to leave her too.

"My third master was more affluent than the earlier ones. This new master had 30 acres of land, four bullocks and some milch cattle. Besides me, he had two more Jeeta Gadus, aged between 30 and 40. Their annual wage was between Rs. 100 to 125. My annual wage was fixed at Rs. 35.

"I had grown up enough by now. I had started understanding life. I was deeply pained when I used to see the children of upper castes going to school.

I also desired schooling. I used to dream of becoming an educated person. But my dreams were too hard to be realised. When I asked my father to get me into school, he scolded me. He told me that I was born to serve the landlords and remain a bonded labourer throughout life.

"Here the untouchability was practised. The new master never allowed me to touch his utensils and even the earthen pots. I was beaten up several times during the period of four years. Once, I was severely beaten up with a stick, and lifted up very high then thrown down on the ground leading to a leg injury. I had to be confined to bed for quite some time. As a result, a substantial amount was deducted from my wages. This deduction again created serious problems for our family. To solve the problems, we had to borrow money from different moneylenders.

"I started demanding money from my master. But he refused and abused me for demanding more money. Finally, I decided to change the master.

"Fourth and last master: He is a very rich landlord. He has 30 Jeeta Gadus, 200 acres of land and 20 pairs of bullocks. When I got bonded to this master I had become 15 by that time. My mother started pressing me to get married. Marriage means a further strengthening of the shackles of bondage. Once you have borrowed the money for marriage you would never be able to get rid of the master or moneylender. A loan of Rs. 1000 was borrowed from the master. The money was spent on the following items:

1. Bride price Rs. 200
2. 2 quintals rice Rs. 150
3. Clothes Rs. 300
4. Goat for mutton Rs.
5. Mangal sutram Rs. 120

The rate of interest was Rs. 2 per Rs 100 per month.

"The entire loan was paid in nine years. During the period I got nothing because the entire wage was adjusted against my loan. To meet the requirements of my family, my mother and wife and brothers had to work somewhere else Besides that, I had to again borrow six to 10 rupees from my master. The miscellaneous borrowings also continued for nine years. As a result, I am again under the new debt of Rs. 1000. To clear this debt, I will have to work for a few years more. One has to pull on with the life he is made for."

"Did any local government official ever inform you about the advantages of Bonded Labour Act and Debt Liquidation Act?" we ask

"I was never told about the existence of such Acts. In fact, Jeeta Gadus are always kept in a closed-door world. We have no access to them (officials) since they are friends of landlords. Once, one of my Jeeta Gadu friends tried to complain to the police inspector about the cruelties committed against him by his master. But he was beaten and thrown out of the police station instead.

Since then, none of us has dared to approach any government man and raise his head against the master.

"But, we will now no longer tolerate this world based on injustice, exploitation and violation of human dignity. We will get rid of this ages-long wretched life. We know who is our foe, who is our friend."

Yes, these heroes (hero of Premchand's Cow Gift) will have their own fields, own cows, own bullocks, and be master of their own breaths. Defying their Bhoo Swamloos' beliefs and orders, the sun will sink in the west, but, tomorrow, rise in the west.

Age vs. Period of Bondage

Age Group	Total No. of Labourers	Period of Bondage (Average)
15-10 years	5	1 year
10-15 years	10	2.6 years (R- 1-8 years)
16-25 years	22	5.5 years (R- 1-15 years)
25-40 years	34	6 years (R- 1-15 years)
Above 40 years	3	13 years (R- 1-35 years)

Age vs. Wage and Debt

Age Group	Total No. of Labourers	Annual Wage (Average)	Amount of Debt (Average)
6-10 years	5	Rs. 150;- (R. 100-220)	–
10-15 years	10	Rs. 230/- (R-200-300)	Rs. 150/- (R-200-300)
16-25 years	22	Rs. 430/- (R-190-500)	Rs. 833 - (R-200-1600)
25-40 years	34	Rs. 500/- (R-410-600)	Rs. 569/- (R-150-1500)
Above 40 years	3	Rs. 475/- (R-500-550)	Rs. 50 only one annual debt

Period of Bondage vs. Loan Period

Sl. No.	Age Group	No. of Bonded Labourers	Period of Bondage (Average)	Loan Period (Average)
1.	6-10 years	5	1 year	–
2.	10-15 years	10	2.6 years	2 years
3.	16-25 years	22	5.5 years	4 years
4.	25-40 years	34	6 years	3.5 years
5.	Above 40 years	3	13 years	1 year

Age vs. Reasons for Bondage

Age Group	No. of Bonded Labourers	Marriage	Poverty/Domestic Reasons
6-10 years	5	–	5
10-15 years	10	1	9
16-25 years	22	12	4
25-40 years	34	17	3
Above 40 years	3	1	2
Total	74*	31	23

***** *Twenty labourers have not given reasons.*

Notes

1. In the country, the total child working force (below 15 years) is about one crore seven lakhs and 40 thousands. Andhra Pradesh is a major employer of child labour. Out of its total working force, nine per cent are the child labourers.
2. In Bhojpur, the same situation exists. During my visit to some of its villages in last May, I discovered that the Harijans are not allowed to use coats, country-made muddas, and wear clean clothes. Even the Harijans are not supposed to wear shoes of any type while meeting the caste Hindu landlords or passing through their mohallas.
3 Experiences in other States also suggest that the Harijan children had to accept the life of bonded labour as their families had reached the verge of starvation. See Kanadiya's tragedy, page 458, N.L.I. Bulletin, No. 10, 1977. R.S. Joshi.
4. The annual wage for a child bonded labourer aged between seven and 15, ranges between Rs 25 and 250/-. In some parts of M.P. and Bihar, the situation is more pitiable. In those areas, the annual wage ranges between Rs. 70 and 1701 for the same age-group.
5. In the Telengana region, the village leadership is very strong. During the time of the Nizam, feudal rulers had a strong and tight control over the village people through leadership. It helped the Nizam and his scions in expropriating the labour of poor peasants and bonded labourers. The leadership consists of Sarpanch, Upsarpanch, Police Patel, Asal Dar and Vatandar. Besides, there are two more posts, Muskari and Nee Reddy. The latter two posts are considered the lowest in the hierarchy of the leadership. The executive posts like Sarpanch, Police Patel, Asaldar. Vatandar etc. are traditionally held by the high caste Hindu landlords. Some of these posts are still hereditary – the lowest post is Muskari and Nee Reddy whose job is to serve the village elders and release the water from the tank

respectively – are traditionally assigned to the poor people belonging to the backward and oppressed castes. The high-caste Hindu propertied class in rural India are not prepared to give up their traditional control over the socio- economic life of rural society. (R.S. Joshi – Tensions in Rural India: Frontier, Nov. 12th, 1977).

6. According to the unofficial estimate, there are more than one thousand tractors in the Medak district.
7. It is a reality that the human labour is cheaper than that of the animals. In the Jogipet tehsil, a landlord spends about 1100 to 1200 rupees yearly for the maintenance of one pair of bullocks, whereas a bonded labourer costs him only between Rs. 400 and Rs. 500 for the same period. If the time-factor is taken into consideration, the disparity will be further widened. A Jeeta Gudu has to work a minimum 12 to 14 hours every day, while a bullock is used not more than eight to 10 hours. As a result, the value of human labour is further reduced.

   In fact, for a Bhoo Swamloo, a pair of bullocks has more productive value than that of a Jeeta Gadu. He, therefore, takes all care to keep the bullocks in a good and healthy condition, but bothers least for a Jeeta Gadu.

   To know the inhuman and exploitative attitude of the landlord towards his bonded labourers, an incident may be cited here in passing.

   During the field survey we came across a Jeeta Gadu lying in a semi-conscious state in a paddy field, hardly 4 to 5 k.m. from Jogipet. We were informed by other Jeeta Gadus working nearby that he was suffering from acute stomach pain and fever for the last two-three days. He had no money to buy medicine from the market. The landlord had refused to sanction him leave or get him treated by a doctor. If he failed to come to the field, he would be marked absent, and money would be deducted from his annual wage. On our return to Jogipet, when we talked to the landlord at his residence in the town, he innocently said that he was never informed by the ailing Jeeta Gadu. He promised that he would get the labourer checked up by a doctor.
8. Findings of field surveys carried out in different parts (including the tribal areas) of the country suggest that the majority of bonded labourers at about 60% to 70%) have stated marriage as the principal reason for their bondage.
9. It was experienced that the local officials and lower functionaries in the areas we surveyed were found always adopting a callous attitude towards the bonded labourers. Even, on the very first day of the the officials coming from the Revenue, Agriculture and Education departments who were deputed by the collector to assist us in our work labour camp, were not prepared to recognise the reality of bonded labour in the Medak District.

According to them, "Jeeta Gadus are, in fact, contracted for one year. When the contract is expired they are free to go anywhere and choose any master they like." During informal talks with them, it was found that most of them were big farmers having tractors, Jeeta Gadus and a good number of bullocks and milch cattle.

On the other hand, a Deputy Collector frankly admitted the existence of bonded labour in all the Talukas (Medak, Jogipet and Sidipet). According to him, "No serious effort to solve this problem has ever been made In the district so far." The reason for his unreserved admission of the existence of bonded labour in the region was that he had not developed any vested interests for what were originally residents of Hyderabad. He was transferred to Medak a few weeks before our reaching there. He, therefore, adopted a positive attitude toward the problem and had sympathy for the bonded labourers.

Field Report from Rajgir (Nalanda, Bihar) Part I: The Rural Poor and their Problems

R.N. Maharaj & K. Gopal Iyer

Landless agricultural workers and poor peasants[1] constitute the Lazarus-layers of our rural society. They form the majority of the population in Bihar. They work under various handicaps. Their landholdings are tiny and they do not have enough of agricultural implements or draught-power. They have hardly any knowledge of modern inputs or wherewithal to make use of them. The pattern of their employment as wage-workers conforms to the rhythm of the agricultural cycle which, in turn, is ruled by the behaviour of the monsoon. The result is that in between the two peak periods of demands for labour coinciding with transplantation and harvesting of paddy, there are periods of trough demands. For two months at least it is a situation of total joblessness. What adds poignancy to this irregular employment pattern is the extremely low wage level.[2] There is a growing tendency to monetize wage payment or to substitute paddy with inferior grains khesari, an inferior quality of pulse, whose consumption has been banned for health reasons, is increasingly emerging as the substitute for paddy. The wage-structure in the agricultural sector is very complicated. There are wide variations in the amounts as well as the forms of payment. In the course of our visit to seven villages in the District of Nalanda we found that wages paid varied from 1 kg. to 1 kg.500 gms. either in paddy or in coarse grains. This is exclusive of perquisites[3] and access to a piece of land for cultivation ranging from five to 20 kathas.[4] The employer also makes available facilities for irrigation and seeds. This is recovered from the harvest, interest free. In some cases the employer provides draught power free and even pays wages to the agricultural workers on the days they are ploughing or transplanting their fields. No wages are, however, paid for harvesting".[5] Besides, attached workers also get interest free loan facilities and some gifts such as a dhoti or a sari on certain social occasions. Murkabra's – i.e. those who uproot paddy seedlings– are paid at piece-rates, varying from 1 kg 250 gms. to 2 kg. 500 gms. of paddy or coarse rice and khesari per katha. Harvest wages also register the same kind of variation ranging from one-eleventh to one-twentyoneth part of the gross produce. In Nalanda one can quite clearly see what "self-cultivation" means. The agricultural worker ploughs the field, transplants paddy, weeds, reaps, threshes, winnows, and finally delivers the grain to the employer's granaries. He also tends cattle. This clearly shows how the big employer is wholly a renter. Around Bihar Sharif, where the level of

commercialization of agriculture is very high, wage rates vary from Rs. 3 to Rs. 4.50 sans perquisites. This gives lie to the thesis that correlates wage levels to productivity levels in the agricultural sector.[6] One can clearly visualise the level of living which such an income level can ensure.[7] The result is that the periods of undernourishment are followed by long spells of starvation. The rural poor are able to keep the wolf from the door through recourse either to borrowing or to consumption of non-edibles. During the months of total joblessness agricultural workers eat bread prepared from mango stones or tender leaves. They also retrieve grain from dung or from rat-holes. Pebbles are spiced and sucked in lieu of vegetables. The leanest months are those that follow the transplantation and they are the months when indebtedness is a universal phenomenon. Debts contracted, however, are of small magnitudes, quite often a few maunds of grains and/or a paltry sum of money. Most such debts are really advances against harvest wages or the kharif crops in the fields of rural poor, the rate of interest being the rate of discount.[8] There is yet another kind of indebtedness. It is to enserf that number of agricultural labourers who will meet the landlords' permanent demand for labour, i.e. labour needed for tending cattle, etc. In such cases debt is a noose round the borrower's neck and he is never able to cut this Gordian knot.

One need not construct a composite index to get a dimension of the poverty of the rural poor. They live in hovels hardly fit for human habitation. Clothes are most sparingly used, the purpose being neither protection against the rains, sun or the cold nor beautification. It is merely a concession to strong social sanctions against nudity.

Woman agricultural workers engaged in transplantation even during periods of torrential downpour return home drenched to the skin but they do not have another dry piece to change into. They lie on the damp floor or on a straw mat all night in such condition. Women with a pregnancy of six or seven months or having delivered a baby even a week before, have to work under the same conditions. One can easily visualize the dimension of their hardships. Literacy and medicine are almost alien to the world of the rural poor. Their stark poverty is material as well as cultural. They are huddled together on the outskirts entirety cutoff from the socio-cultural matrix of the village life. Vertical social interaction is nil. The result is that they do not know even such small things as the names of the district, state etc. Many of them have not even heard of Mahatma Gandhi or that India was once a British colony and is now free. It is rather interesting that Mrs. Gandhi is known to all though they cannot exactly name the post she was occupying. All that they could tell us was that they were living under her rule and knew that she would be their saviour. There is hardly any sphere of their life where government policy has much impact, They buy little from the market. Their shopping list is limited to some clothes,

salt, a little bit of kerosene, etc. Deficits, as pointed out earlier, are met through grain loans or recourse to non-edibles. They are thus largely immune to the ravages of the inflation. They hardly make use of post offices, railways, and other forms of transport.

The various ameliorative legislations seeking to bring some spice to their otherwise arid lives turn out to be dead letters for them as they neither know them nor have they the guts to ask for their implementation. It is not the State policy that they fear or applaud but the landlord's policy which regulates their lives. It is no wonder that they see the State in the landlord. The bureaucracy and police in their eyes are institutions to maintain landlord power. This is not the end of their travails. Frustration and bitterness characterize their lives. There is too much of horizontal violence. Family and community institutions are extremely weak. In the absence of consciousness of their rights and because of a sense of total helplessness, they are an easy prey to the rapacity of the landlords.

They do not know of Emergency or of the 20-Point Programme but they do know that something has changed. The State government has revised the minimum wages for the third time and the various mass media such as radio, the newspapers, posters, pamphlets etc. constantly have been announcing the revised rates. The radio and newspapers are the most powerful media of communication but the rural poor have no access to them. It is mostly the landlord and rich peasants who listen to broadcasts or read newspapers. Announcement of revised wage rates come to them as a surprise. The issue is hotly discussed wherever employers congregate. A decision is taken to insulate the rural poor from the influence of the mass media or these discussions. If they just stop to listen they are chastised as they had been eavesdropping. We came to know of such occurrences in villages like Pawa, and Bindidih in Nalanda District where the rural poor were not allowed to listen to such talk or to radio broadcasts on minimum wages. Yet the news percolates and the revised rates come to be known to the potential beneficiaries. And then there are publicity vans blaring the new rates through loudspeakers, and State functionaries visiting the village disseminating information and drawing attention to the government resolve to implement them and to deal firmly with those that would violate the provisions. For the first time in living history something has been done that is likely to have a significant impact on the lives of all — employers and employees. There is only a small segment of the rural population that will elude this dichotomous classification. The C.P.I. is active at the grassroots. Cadre and resource constraints stand in the way of the proliferation of its activity in every village. Congress leaders co-operate with the C.P.I.

The outcome is fascinating. Apathy has weakened and a vague yearning for a better life has gripped their minds. There have been numerous cases of

spontaneous strikes to demand prescribed wages. In many villages the C.P.I. operating through its Bihar Raj Khet Mazdoor Union has organized strikes or persuaded people to complain against payment of wages lower than those prescribed by the law. Strikes or petitions attract official intervention. Labour Ministry officials or those from Revenue or Civil administration visit the village to persuade contending parties to reach an agreement. The Act hardly leaves room for a negotiated settlement because the demand is strictly limited to payment of prescribed minimum wages and nothing more. The landlord faces the Hobson's choice.[9] He wriggles out of this dilemma by feigning agreement. He has contrived various devices to circumvent the provisions of the law. He has imported tractable labour denying local hands jobs. He has made use of caste to strengthen his hands. Middle peasants onwards now are solidly arraigned against the wage workers. In the District of Nalanda most big landowners are of backward communities. Like their upper caste counterparts they also disdain manual labour and keep their women folk economically sterile. The wage policy of the government has given them a severe jolt. In numerous villages they have pooled their manpower and are found engaged in primary labour side by side with their hired hands. The collective disregard of the custom helps them save their face. Now they insist on the collective requirement of labour. They want to avoid any fissure in their rank and to weaken the bargaining power of the agricultural workers by reducing their demands for labour or by importing labour.

In village Kharjamma, P S. Noorsarai, the dominant cultivators belong to the Kurmi caste. The scheduled caste agricultural workers in this village went on a one-day token strike on 15th July, 1975 at the call of the Bihar Raj Khet Mazdoor Union. They went to their respective landowners on 16th July, 1975 morning for work. The Kurmi landowners refused to give them employment. In order to put pressure on the Harijan labourers they brought outside labour which was resisted by locals. As this attempt could not succeed, the Kurmi landowners formed their own co-operative in which they pooled their men and women labour power, and started working on different fields alternatively. The Kurmi agricultural labourers and poor peasants were solidly behind the Kurmi landowners and the Khet Mazdoor Union could not get them into its fold. Even the women of big Kurmi cultivator families who were previously economically sterile, were found engaged in transplanting operations during our visit. While this could be possible for Kurmi families, the Bhumihars were helpless. Not even their menfolk would condescend to work in the fields. This strategy, however, is self-defeating inasmuch as the pool has benefited the bigger fries more than smaller ones. It is rather curious that even in such hours of confrontation the rural rich prove short-sighted. The owl of Minerva will, perhaps, flap its wings only in the late evening.

We have all appreciation for the sincerity of the State government to implement the Minimum Wages Act. We could see it quite clearly in the course

of our discussions with the Labour Minister of Bihar and officials charged with this responsibility. Even the Chief of the Directorate of Agricultural Labour, reared in the classical Zamindar tradition of Bihar, showed concern. Yet we are somewhat diffident. It is the enormity of the problem rather than the concern of the bureaucracy that counsels such despair. Rajgir this year was experiencing a long spell of drought, which had not merely rendered the fields dry but had also dried up the employment stream. The drastically reduced demand for labour was militating against the effort to implement the Act. The rural poor constitute the deficit subsector of the village economy. They are wholly without reserves and any strike is not merely a test of their moral stamina to stand but more a test of how long they can go without food. We could know of it from the experience of the striking workers in one of the Patna villages. In a village, agricultural workers were on strike for a week to press their demand for minimum wages. After three or four days they ran short of food. The landlords saw to it that no grocer sold them anything on credit. A senior officer of the labour department who visited the village found that agricultural workers and their dependents were living on salt-mixed water. Many of them had hardly any strength left to move. The officer burst into tears but could do nothing. In many instances landlords burnt agricultural workers' huts, beat them and forced village shopkeepers not to sell anything to them. Women were special targets of humiliation. In one village striking workers were so desperate that they wanted to commit suicide by swallowing Endrin. It was only through the persuasion of the labour superintendent that they desisted from this suicidal attempt. The rural rich unlike their urban counterparts do not suffer from the Midas-mania. They maximize their status. They react sharply even to faint murmurings for higher wages and come down heavily on the recalcitrant elements. Denial of employment to strikers or petitioners is sometimes so ruthlessly practised that the poor victim is forced to beg.[10]

The landlords have never been on the losing side. 'Heads I win and tails you lose' – this proverb sums up the landlords' chances of success in any dispute with the rural poor. There is enough substance in such an attitude. Before the declaration of Emergency most State functionaries were either indifferent or hostile to the interests of the rural poor. The Minimum Wages Act had been there and in force since 1951. There were labour inspectors to act as enforcement agents but they hardly had any power or commitment. Some of them were engaged in activities that were hardly flattering to the reputation of the departments.[11]

Tractorization, paternalistic benevolence of landlords towards some of the agricultural workers, refusal by government agricultural farms to pay minimum wages, are other factors that stand in the way of implementation. Certain social taboos like women's refusal to divulge their husbands' or their own names, the plough taboo observed even by poor peasants among upper caste Hindus, and

the observance of various food and drink taboos by agricultural workers that impede horizontal social interaction also militate against implementation.

Law, that proverbial ass, was found to be heavily tilted in the favour of landlords and rich peasants. It does not empower even the Labour Commissioner to record evidence on oath. The result is that no evidence recorded by the Labour Inspector or for that matter any officer is admissible in court, only the Labour Commissioner or the Workmen's Compensation Commissioner or a judge or a stipendiary Magistrate can decide disputed claims. Even the Chief Inspector of Agricultural Wages or the Director, Agriculture Labour has no such power. An employee can be represented by himself or by a representative of the Trade Union or a Labour Inspector or an Advocate. Any one of the three authorised by the worker can file a claim. After the claim is filed both parties are heard in a judicial manner. If the authority is satisfied with the genuineness of the employee's claim, he issues a directive to the employer for the payment of the amount. He has also the power to direct payment of compensation up to an amount ten times the worker's claim. In case the authority finds that the worker's claim is vexatious or malicious, he can impose a fine of Rs. 25 on the worker or anyone representing him including the Advocate. Should the employer refuse to pay the directed amount, certificate proceedings have to be started for recovery. For this the aggrieved worker has to approach a Magistrate who has to satisfy himself about the legality of the claim. Sometimes the Magistrate starts hearing de novo. It is very time-consuming and expensive. Sometimes it takes even five years. The maximum penalty for violation of the provision of the Minimum Wages Act relating to the wage payment is six months' imprisonment or a fine of Rs. 500 or both. Prosecution, however, can be launched only after permission from the Chief Inspector of Agricultural Wages or the District Magistrate has been obtained. The Act empowers the employer to impose a fine on the employee if the latter causes any problem. The aggrieved worker has to move the court to get redress. This provision of the Act allows the employer much leeway to harass the worker. This does not protect the interest of expectant and nursing mothers. It has no provision for compensation against occupational hazards. It does not prevent the employer from dismissing the worker consequent upon the latter filing a claim. According to a judgment of the Punjab High Court, an employee can file a claim only if he is in service on the date such claim is filed. If the employer dismisses him before he has filed the claim, the court will not entertain it. Relying on this judgment the Patna Labour Court dismissed many such cases summarily. In March, 1975 the Patna High Court through its judgment removed this lacuna. There is an executive order issued in 1974 for the payment of travel expenses to the agricultural worker when he comes to attend court. No fund, however, has been placed at the disposal of any officer to defray such expenses. Again, if the inspector files the worker's claim, the government lawyer takes up the case. If somebody else does it, the worker must pay for the lawyer himself.

If the claim is not filed within six month, it is time-barred. No appeal can be against the decision the Labour Commissioner in regard to claims. This does not, however, stop the High Court from issuing writs.

The problems confronting the rural poor will be amenable to legal and administrative solutions only if they function as organized pressure groups. The dynamism and commitment imparted to bureaucracy by the Emergency, and greater political concern for the enforcement of legislations seeking to alter the pattern of income, and asset distribution in the village are factors that are creating more favourable objective conditions for the organization of the rural poor. As ideology and organization are tending to percolate to the grassroots, we have reasons to hope for a better tomorrow for the rural poor.

Notes

1. In the case of farmers the primary source of income is wage labour. In the latter case wage labour is the secondary source of income—only these two strata of peasantry wholly or in part work as wage workers.
2. These wage rates were fixed centuries ago. Even the oldest persons in the village cannot recollect if they were ever higher. The contraction of opportunities for wags employment and monetization of payment in some areas have rather reduced earnings.
3. Prerequisites refer to breakfast and lunch usually amounting to 500 gms. of satto or parched grain.
4. Only attached and bonded workers get land.
5. Harvesting operations also include threshing, winnowing, and carrying the grain to the employer's granaries.
6. While revising the agricultural wages, the Advisory Committee constituted by the Bihar Government also takes into account an employer's capacity to pay. Our experience, however, does not suggest any such thing. Wage levels in the agricultural sector are more regulated by the ability of the worker to press his claims than by employers' capacity to pay. Changes in wage levels for agricultural workers in Kerala and Punjab, as revealed through Rural Labour Enquiry Report (1963-65), testify to this.
7. From our field work we could discover that the average size of an agricultural labour household is 4.8 out of which there are two workers one male and one female. The two together get wage employment only for 350 days a year which shows that one worker has about three dependents to support.
8. In the course of our field work covering seven villages we found that an agricultural labour household, on an average raises a loan of Rs. 300 part cash, part kind. Such loans are invariably paid off at the harvest time. Cases of carryover are few except the ones in which professional moneylenders are involved. Loans raised by attached workers from their employers are interest-free. In other cases the rate of interest ranges from 37% to 100%. It

may, however, be pointed out that the professional moneylender accounts for more than 50% of the loans raised. In some cases debts continue to be unpaid for considerable length of time and the usurious rate of interest is a permanent deduction from income.

9. The various steps initiated by the government have not been able to push wages to the levels prescribed by the Act, except in one village of Islampur P.S. The prescribed rates are much lower than the prevailing ones. A ploughman's daily income in terms of rice amount to 56-67 per cent of the prescribed rate; in terms of paddy it is still lower. It ranges from 29 to 39 per cent. The same is true of differences between prescribed and prevailing wages for other agricultural operations. In some villages, however, wage rates have gone up by 10 to 15 per cent. Even the State Ministry of Labour is not quite hopeful that the Minimum Wages Act can be enforced. One of the circulars issued by the Director, Agricultural Labour, asks officers to strive for some increase in wage-levels rather than the implementation of the Minimum Wages Act.
10. In a village between Patna and Denapur some scheduled caste agricultural workers went on strike demanding minimum wages from the landowners. The landowners in collusion with the local officials not only resisted payment of wages but also removed some of the attached agricultural workers from work by importing outside workers. One old man who was working as an attached worker and was removed from employment was reduced to utter destitution. With no one else to support him he lay starving. In some of the villages we visited, we found landowners taking extensive recourse to such tactics.
11. There was a cases in which a few Labour Inspectors combined. One impersonated the Magistrate holding circuit court and others acted as prosecution officers. This is how they extorted money from contractors and others. Some of them took to trading, and hardly had time left to discharge their official duties.

Palamau Revisited

K. Gopal Iyer

We were in Palamau for four days during September 1976 to hold a camp for the freed bonded labourers, or sevakias as they are locally known. The last time when we were in Palamau for the first camp for the freed bonded labourers, Arun Sarkar was the Deputy Commissioner. The institution of Kamiauti or bondage is more than a century old in Palamau and we have a fairly well documented evidence of it. Since the Bonded Labour Abolition Act enjoins upon the District Collector to identify such victims and take stern measures against the perpetrators of such crime, Arun Sarkar identified and freed 581 bonded labourers and initiated legal proceedings against three such alleged offenders of law. He took whatever provisional measures he could to rehabilitate them.

During our second visit last month we could get a closer took at Palamau and also the change in strategy relating to the implementation of the 20-Point economic programme. The new Deputy Commissioner, B.P. Sinha, regards bondage not as the disease but a symptom caused by the savage exploitation of the poor tribals and Harijans by affluent upper caste Hindus and Muslims. The exploitation in this area takes the forms of usurious moneylending, land-alienation, rack-renting, and unequal exchange. The magnitude of exploitation is such that a paltry sum of loan within a very short span of time increases to astronomical amounts and not only standing crops are restrained but even livestock, wives and children of the defaulters are carried away. In the face of such barbarity, alienation of land, even though on a colossal scale turns out to be not so inhuman. Such barbarous forms and such a vast extent of exploitation are possible because Palamau is one of the largest districts of Bihar with very poor means of transport and communication. The undulating nature of this vast tract, hills and forests, all in a .way tend to shield the barbarous deeds of yahoos from the world outside. The exploiters have not merely a sizeable control over labour but even the local institutions of political power are under their thumbs. They have the lower echelons of bureaucracy under their control. They also establish symbiotic relationships with those in control of more potent organs of political power. The result, as such, has been complete absence of any constraints on their exploitative proclivities.

It is only with the promulgation of the 20-Point Programme now that we find that there is a flutter of panic among them. It is in the fitness of things that the present Deputy Commissioner should initiate measures that strike at the root of the problem. He has galvanized the District Administration and unleashed a war against moneylenders and land-grabbers. Many of the latter who could shame even Shylock have already had a taste of the Deputy Commissioner's

drive against them. In one single case in Ranka alone a moneylender was forced to return pledged ornaments valued at more than Rs. 50,000 to 250 borrowers. The most remarkable thing that he has been able to do so far is the arrest of a Panchayat Samiti Pramukh under MISA recently. This man is a multi-millionaire not by dint of any entrepreneurial talent he displayed but by carving out an empire comprising 65 villages. Of his two brothers one is a legal practitioner at Palamau and another is a veterinary doctor overseas. He had in his pay 65 musclemen who were paid Rs. 60 a week, a handsome emolument by Palamau standards.

The area which he controlled is characterised by partly pastoral and partly agricultural economy. The chief pastoral products consist of ghee (there being no market for milk) and goats which are exported to cities. The cropping pattern in this area is such that maize, oil-seeds, and pulses constitute the principal crops. His men would prowl about the area disbursing small amounts as loan to poor peasants against standing crops, livestock produce, or otherwise. The rate of interest charted varied from 1450 per cent per annum to 3200 per cent per annum. Since in the case of default the interest is merged with the principal amount every week, the compound annual rate of interest calculated would be much higher than the simple rate of interest we have referred to above The lard in the area is infertile and its technical base extremely poor. The livestock also consists mostly of the nondescript type. So the produce that the poor peasants and herdsmen can surrender to him individually would not be very large. This has an implication on the amount of loan or advance disbursed—quite often a paltry sum. Since realization of such dues, particularly when agricultural produce are not merely low but also fluctuating, is possible not through recourse to law but through the dispossession of land and livestock by sheer use of force, physical assault, threat of eviction from homestead land and arson are not infrequent. In many cases even wives and children of defaulters are carried away to be released only after the debt has been cleared off and the yahoo is propitiated.

This man has political patronage of bigwigs and this is how he could survive so long. It is to the credit of the Deputy Commissioner that he booked him under MISA despite all constraints. The man wanted under NSA was sleeping in the air-conditioned guest house of Japla Cement Factory with two most prominent political leaders of the area. Our impression based on an interview with the Police Sub-Inspector who arrested him quite clearly demonstrated that it was an uphill task. They tried to browbeat and cajole him but in the face of his unflinching devotion to duty they were frustrated and the wanted man was ultimately arrested. The index of the magnitude of his atrocities can be gauged from the fact that he was the virtual government. The amount of land he grabbed from the poor peasants was indeed colossal. Not only did he grab poor peasants' lands but he also leased them out to others on sharecropping

basis. Those who acquisced could get some produce and the recalcitrant ones were beaten and driven away, sometimes even from their houses.

This man is a multi-millionaire and in order to achieve this status, all that he had to do was to go on grabbing land and contrive devices to put primary producers under his thumb. From one village Cherain alone, which we visited along with the Deputy Commissioner and the film makers, we found that he had forcibly grabbed no less than 50 acres of land. In addition he deprived the rural poor of their cattle, womenfolk and also the produce of their livestock. Below we give some cases which would give an idea of the extent of exploitative proclivities of this fiend:

(1) The moneylender forcibly took possession of seven acres of Bhoodan land belonging to Guna Bhuiya six years ago leased it out to another poor peasant.

(2) Kangali Bhuiya who had taken a loan of Rs. 100 was dispossessed of 18 acres of land.

(3) Mangra Oraon and Sanichar Oraon were dispossessed of 20 bighas of their land.

(4) Mangra Oraon was deprived of his livestock consisting of 22 goats, 26 cows and 11 buffaloes.

(5) Another poor peasant had borrowed Rs. 300 from this moneylender and paid him back a sum of Rs. 700 within two months. He was further asked to pay Rs. 1500 which the poor man could not do. As a result the moneylender forcibly took away all his 11 buffaloes.

(6) A poor tribal named Ganori had borrowed Rs. 40 and had paid back Rs. 80. Still his goats were forcibly taken away.

(7) Raghunath Kherwar had borrowed Rs. 30 and paid him back Rs. 90 and also had surrendered his wrist watch to him. Yet the debt was not cleared off. So the moneylender took his thumb impression on a blank paper.

(8) Bishan Prajapati had purchased land for Rs. 1000 three years back. He was not only forcibly dispossessed of his land by this fiend but the latter also entered his house and assaulted him.

(9) A tribal who had borrowed Rs. 50 had paid back Rs. 160. Even then, the yahoo demanded Rs. 200 more and as a result of non-payment forcibly took away his wife and children. The poor wretch had to sell his goats to get back his wife and children.

(10) A tribal widow with tears trickling down her cheeks reported to the Deputy Commissioner that her husband had borrowed Rs. 40 and paid back Rs 270 during his lifetime. Still the moneylender was claiming Rs. 220 more and torturing her.

(11) A poor Parahiya tribal who had borrowed Rs. 30 had paid him back Rs. 90. Still the moneylender was demanding Rs. 10 for which he rendered

service without payment for two weeks. Yet the yahoo's appetite was not quenched. He forcibly took away his wife and returned her only after the poor tribal surrendered a goat to him.

These are only a few instances of the atrocities perpetrated by this moneylender in one village and such cruelty has been repeated by him in all the 65 villages. The yahoo is now, at the time of writing, a MISA prisoner and when we interviewed him in jail in Daltonganj he was replying to our queries as a dumb man. He still has the faith that his political mentors would be able to secure his release. What pained us most was the fact that even while this man was in jail he was enjoying royal privileges — a well-built body, well-nourished and dressed in spick and span clothes. His dress was much more expensive than what even a topmost bureaucrat can put on. When we went to his village accompanied by the Deputy Commissioner and a team of four film-makers, it was a heartening sight to see that his musclemen were immobile and the poor peasants, whose lands he had grabbed and leased out to others of the same class, were harvesting their maize crops. The fear which he had been able to instil in the exploited class was such that one of them fell at the feet of the Deputy Commissioner with only one demand that this moneylender should stay where he was. The film unit photographed the field which this moneylender's victims were harvesting. Their houses were in a dilapidated condition and the valuables inside consisted of only a few cooking utensils. They also filmed what they ate and the quality and quantity of food revealed the extreme poverty that characterized these households. We do not know how long this man will remain inside the prison walls but we do certainly know that once he is out, fear will grip all his victims and his musclemen will once again be activised.

Another instance of savage exploitation we witnessed was when we accompanied the film unit to a village named Jogikhura controlled by a very high political satrap. He is not only the most powerful political bigwig of the district, but also perhaps the worst exploiter of the weaker sections. Through the use of sheer force and with bureaucratic and political patronage he has amassed a huge fortune. We could not have an inventory of all his assets spread over several villages. We could know a little bit only about the Bhoodan, kodkar[1], adidhokta[2] lands expropriated by this political bigwig and his close relatives. They have not only grabbed 1400 acres of Bhoodan land but also lots of kodkar, raiyati[3] and other kinds of lands of poor tribals and harijans. His nephew and son are real yahoos. They grabbed land, raped women and even went to the point of allegedly killing these poor people. They are so powerful that nothing howsoever obnoxious would be beyond them. Here we did not encounter sevakias but dharmarus, i.e. catch hold of them and beat them in case they showed any recalcitrance to work on their illegally usurped farms. They also made

free use of beggar, i.e., work without payment. Every ploughman has to contribute a day's labour gratis.

Others have to abide by the same condition. They have usurped all authority and can even make primary producers do whatever they like. They have fingers in many pies. They carry on trade in kendu leaves and lac in a manner that, while primary producers are starved, they make their millions. In some cases even after the High Court's judgment against them, they could keep the land in their possession with the collusion of karamacharis. They seized poor people's lands and destroyed their nursery. The local administration, particularly the police, is rendered inactive because of threats from them.

On September 4, 1976, the Deputy Commissioner held a Grievance Mitigation Meeting in Ranka. The nephew and the son of this high political satrap used brutal force to stop people from Jogikhura from going to that place. They know that the modes and the extent of their exploitation would be exposed. They not only seized lands but were also getting free use of human labour on certain specified days during the season. They forced the rural poor in the village to keep their cattle on land of this political satrap to get organic manure. He is an arch-beast who can mobilise money, lumpen and political power all over the district to gain his ends. He even publishes a weekly newspaper with the sole purpose of extolling his non-existent virtues sky high. He makes a lot of money in the lac trade by virtue of being a very high official of Bihar State Lac Marketing Cooperative Federation. Lac forms an important part of Palamau's forest economy. The producers are mainly tribals and Harijans. In order to ensure that the primary producers were remunerated fairly for their labour, the State government fixed the price of lac at Rs. 3 a kg. and appointed agents who were to buy the stuff straight from the producers. In order to have full grip over the power structure in the district, he has recruited Banias' low-paid servants as the agents of the Lac Corporation. These so-called agents did not go to the producers. The producers were exasperated and sold the stuff at throwaway prices to the Banias. These Banias in turn sold the produce to the Corporation at a high price so that the bigwigs mint money. In order to give legal semblance to all transactions bogus thumb impressions are put on the Purchase Register (Haldar, June 19, 1976). The producers were thus forced to take recourse to the market and fall victim to unequal exchange. It may incidentally be mentioned that Palamau accounts for 50 per cent to the total lac production of Bihar and 30 per cent of the lac production of the country. It is a profitable source of earning foreign exchange. More than 50,000 persons in Palamau are engaged in it. Because of the exploitation by the bigwigs there has been gradual decrease in lac production and also reduction in the employment opportunities of the tribals and Harijans. Whereas in 1951-52, the total production of lac in the country was 6.5 lakh tonnes, it dropped to the low level of 15,000 tonnes in 1975-76.

While this political satrap makes lots of money in lac-trade, the real source of his income is his link with the Irrigation Department. Almost half the members of his joint family are contractors. His own son-in-law occupies a high position in the Department. This political leader knows the value of propaganda. One of his relatives controls the Teachers' Union and with his help he is able to deliver his message all over the district. This relative does not possess even the requisite academic qualification to hold the post, but with the political patronage black and white lose their distinction. This political satrap lost the last general election to a young man who later joined the Congress Party but he did not have to nurse his wounds for long. He got himself elected to the Legislative Council from the local bodies constituency. In order to ensure his victory he got the status of the municipality in a local town degraded to the status of Notified Area Committee whose members were nominated in a manner that could serve his electoral ends. When we visited his village with a team of film-makers and the Deputy Commissioner, some of the poor tribals and Harijans narrated their woeful tales, some of which are given below:

(1) SPT, nephew of this political satrap, has forcibly occupied a 25-decimal plot of land belonging to Sita Singh Kherwar, since 1956.

(2) GPT, son of this political patron, has grabbed a 103-decimal plot of land belonging to J.K. Singh Kherwar, a 105-decimal plot of land belonging to Sevak Singh and Jitu Singh (both tribals), since 1966.

(3) SPT grabbed two acres of ghair mazalua can land reclaimed by a tribal Kapildev Narair Singh Kherwar. He also grabbed his 56-decimal plot of raiyati land.

(4) SPT crabbed three acres of land belonging to two tribals Kardmchand Singh and Ramchand Singh. These lands which he has grabbed since 1966 are most fertile. Another plot of two acres of Bhoodan and allotted to these two tribals six years back was also grabbed by him.

(5) SPT grabbed two acres five decimal plot of land belonging to Devsharan Bhuiya in 1966.

(6) Four years back SPT entered the house of Gulab Chand Bhuiya with two musclemen and is alleged to have raped his daughter-in-law and beat his wife severely. This poor man being scared left the village for a few months. The woman who was narrating this tale of woe remarked: "Beti bahan ki kuchh izzat nahin, /hami/ hi murgi chengna," i.e., our daughters and sisters cannot protect their honour; we are like fowls who can be smothered any moment by the bigwigs.

(7) Dukhi Singh and Sumeru Singh were alleged to have been murdered by this political satrap and SPT in 1974.

The facts mentioned above point not merely to the extent and magnitude of exploitation but also to the far-reaching consequences that the Prime Minister's

20-Point Programme has. The Deputy Commissioner of Palamau, B.P. Sinha, deserves our thanks for his painstaking care to implement it both in letter and spirit.

Glossary

1. Kodkar — Upland reclaimed with strenuous care to grow paddy. It is entirely labour-intensive.
2. Adibhokta — Their ancestors were the first people to reclaim land and they resemble in many ways what is legally known as the khunt-katti system.
3. Raiyati — The land over which the cultivator has occupancy rights.
4. Gliair Mazrua Aam — Government land not settled to any person nor meant for communal use. In case it is to be settled, weaker sections are to be given preference, particularly tribals and Harijans.

Kuttanad: Survey of a Watery Field*

Arvind Narayan Das

The setting

For a person who is familiar with agrarian conditions in North India only, at first sight Kuttanad is an unbelievable never-never land. For one, the term 'land' itself is something of an inaccuracy in describing Kuttanad, for much of it is water, the great expanse of the Vembanad Lake and backwaters to the Arabian Sea from which little islands have been laboriously extracted by sustained human labour using the most primitive of equipment. Surrounding these islets are clusters of paddy fields — padashekhararns — which have been similarly culled out from under the water and are still under the mean sea level. And, more striking than either the villages or the padashekhararns is the water: canals and rivers held back from the fields and houses by bunds made of earth dredged out from the river beds manually by divers, and the great lake itself. In this criss-crossing system of water, man floating about in tiny canoes is at once both puny and strong: puny because his existence is predominated by the water, strong because he has to an extent tamed it.

Legend has it that the sage Parashuram, having killed millions of Kshatriyas and also his mother, was struck with remorse and entered into penance on the shore of the Arabian Sea. Having suffered enough for his sins, he picked up his axe with which he had wielded havoc and threw it into the sea. The sea dried up to the point where his axe fell and thus Kerala was created by the most chauvinistic of all Brahmins who bequeathed it in perpetuity to the Namboodiri Brahmins, enjoining upon them respect for their mothers through the system of matrilineal descent.

How cleverly this legend was concocted and spread is clear now to those who study the history of the arduous reclamation of Kuttanad. The land was indeed brought out from under the water and the sea was indeed pushed back, but it was not done by the divine efforts of any Brahmin. It was the Poliyas and Paryas-ontouchables, who till the early part of this century were not allowed to come within 29 feet of a Namboodiri and 19 feet of a Nair — who pushed the sea back. They would go out into the river in leaky country boats, dive up to 40 feet and bring up handfuls of mud with which the marvellous system of bunds was built and dry land was excavated. The Namboodiris were merely

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*The somewhat random survey to obtain an impressionistic and qualitative, rather than minutely quantitative, account of Kuttanad was done mainly by boat between May 13th and 21st. We interviewed scores of people of all strata and covered almost all the parts of Kuttanad extensively, if a little hurriedly. For the interviews, we were ably assisted by interpreters provided by the State Labour Department and the 'Agricultural Workers' Trade Unions. We wish to particularly thank the District Labour Officer, Alleppey, Shri M.J. Sebastian and Shri Kartikeyan Nair, Asstt. Labour Officers, and Shri C.V. Vijayan, social worker, for the invaluable help they rendered to us.

the landowners who enjoyed the fruits of the untouchables' labour. Each such worker was made to get an average of 16 tons of each, working from early morning even up to midnight, and for his labour, till the 1930s, he was paid only four edangazhis[1] of paddy per day. Sometimes, when he did not please his master, he would be severely lashed, though at times the feudal masters were considerate enough to give him some oil to put on his lacerated body afterwards.

Having created the land, the untouchables also had to cultivate it, and in this along with them worked the other backward castes like the Ezhavas and even some of the poorest Nairs. Land had to be dewatered by manually-operated bucket-wheels. Its acidity had to be reduced by spreading lime which ate into the wet flesh. It had to be ploughed, levelled and made ready for paddy which had to be transplanted. Deweeding and manuring had to be done repeatedly and finally the paddy ears had to be harvested standing in knee-deep water, taken to the landlord's ground, threshed and handed over to the landlord. The work was arduous; the hours were long; the wages were low. In the 1930s women labourers used to get 21 edangazhis of paddy only. During the war, when the price of grain rose, the landlords switched over to cash payment, 10 paise per day.

The winds of change

But in this period there also occurred some other changes. For one, new instruments of cultivation like mechanised dewatering apparatus, started being introduced. Secondly, the expansion of the foodgrains market and overall commercialisation gave a fillip to the capitalisation of agriculture. Slaves were transformed to wage-slaves. The karshak thozhlali emerged as the antithesis to the handful of capitalist landowners. Agrarian relations started changing.

The first big events in this direction were not directly connected with agriculture but they all had a tremendous impact on the agrarian scene. The socio-religious movement led by Narayana Guru, the Temple Entry Agitation and Proclamation, the wider nationalist movement, and, more than anything else, the heroic struggle of the coil workers in Alleppey in which workers who were shot down at Punnyapare became legends in Kerala, started changing the outlook of the agricultural workers who had suffered in silence up to then. The era of agitations samaram – as the karshaka thozhlali call it — started under the guidance of the leader of the coil workers who, being fugitives from the repression in the towns by the Travancore police, found refuge in the inaccessible villages of Kuttanad. From that time the face of Kuttanad started changing till it has become today possibly the most advanced area in India as far as agricultural labourers are concerned.

The first demands were modest enough: small increases in the daily wage corresponding to the rise in prices. In the face of the united efforts of the

agricultural labourers, the landowners conceded it, but even then the wages remained abysmally low and the agitation for higher wages continued. One of the main points of contention related to harvest wages. Traditionally harvest wages were paid in kind as a share of the paddy harvested and threshed. The labourer used to get 1/11 of the grain he gave to the landowner. And, since threshing took place a few days after the harvesting, for subsistence in the meanwhile, the landowner used to give him a small quantity of grain once in three days. This amount was known as thirp. The organisation of the agricultural labourers, unambitious as they were, at first placed the small demand that thirp be paid on every alternate day. There was some resistance but the landowners were again forced to give in. Only after that, the demand for a higher share of the harvested paddy (padam) was placed but for a very long time it was not conceded. Only in 1957, thirp were linked to padam and the daily wages were fixed at Rs.6 and Rs. 4 per day for men and women labourers respectively. It was perhaps the irony of history, that this was done when a Namboodiri was the Chief Minister of the State!

The present

Having achieved this significant gain, the agricultural labourers of Kuttanad did not look back They continued to struggle and gain victories so that at present they have been able to get wages of Rs. 10 and Rs. 7 per day for men and women, respectively. At the same time, the working hours have been reduced to seven hours in upper Kuttanad, six hours in lower Kuttanad and five hours in the Kayal areas, the timing to be regulated by sirens installed by the State Labour Department and maintained and operated by the Panchayats.[2] Similarly, the padam for harvest was raised, thirp was linked to it so that now the padam stands at 1/8, thirp at ¼ of 1/8 of the crop harvested and threshed. For ploughing the notified and prevalent wages are Rs. 15 per day if the ploughman uses his bullocks or Rs. 9 per day if the bullocks are owned by the landowner. Such is the situation in Kuttanad.

The darker side

However, things are really not as rosy as they seem. The wages are high but the number of days work that is available is very little. Since most of Kuttanad is a single-crop area, the average availability of work does not exceed 90 days in a year. Similarly, if hours of work are less, it is because of the need to travel great distances by boat to work, just transport consuming up to three hours and Rs. 1.50 per day. Then there are regional variations. In upper Kuttanad which has more dry land capable of producing even three crops in a year, the wages are only Rs. 8 and Rs. 5 for men and women respectively for eight hours of work. In many areas thirp is not given. In fact, it is clear that the relatively high wages and shorter hours of work are not due to any generosity on the part the

landowners but due to the organisation and struggle of the labourers and the wages and conditions of work very closely correspond to the extent and nature of the workers' organisation.

At the same time there are aspects of the economy of Kuttanad which escape attention if the situation is viewed superficially. The workers seem to be better fed than in other parts of the country, better educated. Some even live in better houses. But one thing we came across invariably is the acute underemployment which reduces the workers' income drastically and forces them into debt. There is not much usurious exploitation per se in the region, though we did come across cases where moneylenders charged up to 150 per cent per annum interest and even one 'rural bank' run by an individual who lent money at 50 per cent interest against solid security of gold ornaments. The pincipal way the debt mechanism works is, however, different: through shopkeepers. The credit price of goods is substantially higher — even up to 25 per cent for three months or so — than the cash price.

Then there is the menace of mechanisation. Large numbers of tractors have come into the area recently: in about 15 villages there are estimated to be more than 250 tractors and these have drastically cut down the earnings of ploughmen who are able to get work for no more than 30 days in the year if there are two crops. If, as in most areas, there is only one crop, the ploughmen find work for only seven to 10 days in the whole year.

The land question

But the greatest inequity in Kuttanad relates to land. Most landowners have moral right to the land which was solely the creation of the labourers, but even if we leave the moral question aside, there is a widespread illegality as far as land is concerned. First of all, with a few exceptions, the big landowners today are the former substantial tenants of the erstwhile landlords. They themselves take no part in cultivation and in order to evade the Land Act, have created an artificial class of fictitious peasants with medium holdings. These are the black legs as far as the agricultural labourers' organisation is concerned. Then, there still are landholders reputed to control up to a thousand acres of land through benami transactions. Further, in order to evade the Agricultural Workers' Act, some of whose provisions are applicable only to agriculturists holding more than one hectare of land, there has been an artificial fragmentation of holdings. The landowners of Kuttanad are very well organized through their padashekharam committees and there are no less than five Karshaka Sanghams. At one time, one of these Karshaka Sanghams even faced the agricultural labourers in Veevapuram armed with guns. Although a direct clash was prevented, several workers lost their lives by drowning when force was used to disperse them. These organisations of the landholders and even individual big landowners are

always devising ways to evade the laws and deprive the workers of whatever legal benefits they are entitled to. For instance, the landowners are required by the Agricultural Workers' Act to maintain registers of the workers they employ in order to facilitate payment to their provident fund but, by and large, landowners in Kuttanad have failed to do so on the specious plea that registers are not available. A much more vicious thing on the part of the big landowners is to either leave cultivable land fallow or to grow grass on it for sale or to cultivate portions of their holdings indifferently so as to deny the labourers work and also evade provisions of the Land Act. Similarly, taking advantage of a lull in the movement of the agricultural labourers, landowners in some areas have started paying less wages than the prevailing rate. These may be straws in the wind, but unless timely intervention is initiated, the wind may develop into a veritable storm.

The situation mirrored in the sea

Though, strictly speaking, the fishermen of Kuttanad are not part of its agrarian economy, no review of the situation there would be complete without mentioning them because they provide an illuminating contract to the Karshak Thoziali of Kuttanad. Unorganized, exploited and unspeakably poor, the fisherfolk are a fair image of the agricultural labourers as they were before unionisation. Most fishermen do not own boats. They work in teams on boats which they hire and for that they pay a rent of 1/3 of the total catch. Since boats and nets are quite costly (amounting up to Rs. 25,000) no single fisherman can afford to get one and credit is not easily available even if he groups with others. The lucky ones who are able to obtain loans have to pay about 90 per cent per annum interest. The fishermen working on country boats are able to catch fish for only about 30 to 40 days in the year and for the rest have to subsist either on stray catches or on loans. The rate of interest on consumption loans is about 50 per cent against pledged gold ornaments. The average income per family works out to Rs. 1.50 to Rs. 2 per day throughout the year. There is no regularised system of marketing — fish being a perishable commodity. It is a buyers' market and lorryloads are carried away at throwaway prices. There is no co-operative and only nominal unionisation and at the same time stiff competition from the 'sea tractors' – i.e. the motorised fishing boats.

Some reflections

The agricultural workers of Kuttanad have come a long way in the march towards getting a decent human existence. But they still have a long, long way to go and the most important hurdle to cross: The question of the equitable redistribution of land, a question not even posed by the agricultural labour organisations save one. In Kuttanad what strikes one immediately are the immense possibilities of further progress. Considering the diverse

potentialities of the area in terms of natural resources, educational levels and the potentialities of agro-based industries; it should not be difficult to fairly easily raise the employment opportunities and thus levels of real earnings.

Kuttanad calls for innovations and one wonders, after seeing the industriousness of the workers as well as their education, if they could not evolve fairly inexpensive gadgets like the windmills of Holland which brought about the industrial revolution in a similar terrain.

But all these questions come only secondarily — after the basic question of land. In recent years, a particular weed — salviaia auriculata — locally known as the Africa Payal, has spread all over Kuttanand blocking up waterways and invading paddy fields. It is rootless, floats on the water and can proliferate from just a small section. It has become a menace to men, animals, ducks and even boats. Constant vigil has to he maintained against it and strenuous effort has to be made to remove it to allow healthy crops to come up. It is probably the most talked of menace in Kuttanad. But, as one agricultural labourer pointed out to us, there is an even greater menace Kuttanad — the African Payel, which breeds on land — the now-working landowners who make deliberate attempts to smother production. Unless these weeds are removed, he said, Kuttanad is fated for either stagnation or regression, for just as the water weeds block up canoes and even motor boats, the land weeds are choking up the propellers of progress.

Post Script: The Story of Kuttand in folk verse**

The past

Randidangazhi Kooliku Pandu
Thandellondinju Paninjavare;
Cherie Pooacha pauee'uduppikkuvam
Keerayum Chutti Nadannavare
(Thus for two edangazhi[1] of paddy
Once you broke your spine in hard labour;
To clothe the black mud in green velvet
You wrapped yourself in dirty rags.)

The present

Puthaniarn Chattam, Puthanalavattam
Pottividerinnu Keralathil
Pattinikka-am Krishi Thozdalikku
Pattayam Vitti Kietarattil

**We are grateful in Mr. Krishnamurti, Labour Commissioner, Kerala, who provided the Malyalam verses and to Mr. V.K. Srinivasan, Asst. Labour Officer, who translated them.

(Laws and acts all modern
are blooming up in Kerala;
The starving tiller has got it now —
The 'Pattyayam' right in Kuttanad.)

The dream

(Song sung by women workers in the fields)
Nammalu Koyyum Vayalellam
Nammuuz-thakurn Painkiliye
(The lands... here we reap paddy now
Should be ours, my sweet beloved)

The future

Nale Pan…yunna Purchayurnkayalum
Madathin Makkaikku Swanthurnakum,
Nale the icandathil Ponkathirokkaum,
Nadinte iromancha Mayirikum.
(Farms and fields which you do plough,
Tomorrow
Hutment-dwellers you shall get,
Golden corn the fields shall bear,
Our country's smile is coming yet).

Notes

1. One edangazhi is a little more than half a kilogram.
2. The regulation of working hour was started by the agricultural labour union. It was done by showing flags but at the insistence of landlords and in order to facilitate regulation of working hours all over Kuttanad, the system of showing flags was replaced by the present siren system. Government of Kerala Report of the Kuttanad Enquiry Commission, Trivandrum, 1972.

Cactus, Suction Pump and Invisible Man — Report from Ratlam

Anisur Rahman, K. Copal Iyer and R.N. Maharaj

Ratlam, a Madhya Pradesh District, is an amalgam of various erstwhile princely states. It is one of the smallest districts both in areal and demographic terms. While the entire Tehsil of Sailana and parts of Ratlam and Jawra are hilly, the rest of the district is part of the fertile Malwa plateau. The hilly areas are undulating and poor in fertility. They are inhabited predominantly by Bhils — a tribal community. The areas comprising Malwa plateau are very fertile. The rainfall is low but enough for the Kharif crops.

The entire plateau area is dotted with large diameter wells fitted with electric motors either of 3 h.p. or 5 h.p. In the case of farms owned by other urbanites the wells are bigger, deeper and fitted with more powerful motors. The irrigated areas are double or triple cropped. Jowar, wheat, groundnut, cotton, oilseeds, sugarcane, condiments, and spices are the principal crops. The district also grows opium on a considerable scale. The economy as such is highly commercialized, linked not only to national but to international markets. The pastoral content of the economy is also very high. Lots of processed milk and milk products are exported. The five mandis situated in the five towns of the district act as suction pumps operated by traders — mostly Jains. Only in the absence of the State trading in agricultural produce, these traders have a role. Otherwise they can be compared to cactuses in the world-famous Cactus Garden of the erstwhile Maharaja of Sailana.[1] These traders have monopolistic control over the market. Their relationship with the producers appears to be symbiotic inasmuch as they provide short-term credit facilities at reasonable rates of interest and also inputs such as seeds, chemical fertilizers etc.

Whoever spends a few hours in these mandis will come back with the impression that the relationship is not altogether symbiotic. Peasants have to borrow money for unproductive purposes from these traders at usurious rates of interest with the result that they not only lose control over their produce for a number of years but also control in many cases over their land. The way agricultural produce is disposed of is highly revealing. Once the produce enters the mandi compound all options for the peasants are foreclosed. They are faced with a Hobson's choice. The produce is auctioned and goes to the highest bidder. Only those who are members of the mandi – and they are not many – have the right to bid. Price fluctuations are staggering. We examined the records of Ratlam Grain Mandi We found the following sharp differences in prices between 1st September 1976 and 30th September 1976.

	Grains	Price per Quintal	
		Highest Price	**Lowest Price**
1.	Maize	Rs. 501.00	Rs. 109.50/-
2.	Gram (Desi)	Rs. 130.00	Rs. 85/-
3.	Gram (Shankar)	Rs. 212.00	Rs. 92/-
4.	Gram (Mung)	Rs. 165.00	Rs. 70/-
5.	Gram (Wind)	Rs, 260.00	Rs. 125/-
6.	Groundnut	Rs. 234.25	Rs. 69/-
7.	Chaunli (Beans)	Rs. 134.00	Rs. 65/-

Again, it is not obligatory on the part of traders to pay cash immediately. Peasants must wait for payment till the trader disposes of the produce. In most cases peasants insist on instant cash at 10% discount. Those who have borrowed from traders surrender their produce without any facade of auction. The mandi for the sale of khowa (solidified milk) in Ratlam is operated in quite a hush-hush manner. Peasants, mostly tribals from Sailana, come with their milk produce. One can see them waiting with their baskets and vessels in front of them. Traders would come and sit beside sellers. They would whisper something into the latters' ears and the deal would be struck. Nobody present there would be able to know the price. It has to be borne in mind that this mandi is virtually controlled by one person only — Seth Shaitan Mal. The petty traders in the far flung villages act as feeders of the suction pump. They buy the produce of those who do not have enough to carry to the market. For those near the mandi having a basket or two to sell, there would be agents of traders squatting at the mandi gates and buying at throw away prices. Since even the poor peasants produce for the market they are cruelly discriminated against. Market reforms greatly augment incomes of producers.

The economy of the district imbeded in its ecology determines its sociology. The size of the holding does not offer any reliable clue to the status of the household in the economic hierarchy. Among the tribals in the hilly tracts even those owning as much as hundreds of acres of land hardly employ wage labourer. To overcome labour constraint imposed by the rythm of the monsoon they take recourse to adji-padji – i.e. pooling together of labour resources. It is an exchange of labour. Each works on the field of the other sans wages. The only obligation on the person whose field is cultivated is to provide lunch to everyone at work. Beyond the tribal confine there are landowners and agricultural workers with or without land. Among the former there are traders and other urbanites owning lots of land within a radius of 10 kms around the towns. Such farms have a heavy capital investment and are usually fenced. In most cases they are ploughed by tractors. While there are a few pairs of bullocks on some farms for levelling, on others there are none. Bullocks in such cases

are hired. Stith landowners employ one or two agricultural labourers' families who have to act as watchmen and supervisors. The owners occasionally visit the farms. Even though the farm workers have to be present all the time there is no streak of bondage. Wages are paid on a monthly basis and in most cases there is no indebtedness. The workers as such continue to enjoy the freedom to seek jobs elsewhere. The wages on such farms vary from Rs. 80 to Rs. 120 per month for males. Female workers get only casual employment and, except during the busy harvesting season, they hardly earn more than Rs. 2 to Rs. 2.50 a day.[2] The bulk of the landowners, however, are poor peasants (peasants-cum-wage labourers), middle peasants (relying exclusively on the use of family labour), and the rich peasants (who make use both of the family and farm labour). It is interesting to note that rich peasants, irrespective of their status in the caste hierarchy, consider no agricultural operation dealing. Even their women folk are not economically sterile. There is little premium on education with the result that young sons and daughters are also available for farm work. The rich peasants, however, are greatly in need of hired labour since timely ploughing is crucial. Each of them has as many ploughmen, locally known as Halis, as the number of pairs of bullocks. Rich peasants are extremely keen to have absolute control over the life and labour of the segment of agricultural workers with or without land.[3] They find it easy because the chronically deficit nature of landless agricultural labour households and the helplessness of those with land without draught power.[4] They advance an amount equal to the annual wage of a ploughman (Hali) since his propensity to spend is very high, he is again forced to borrow at usurious rate of interest.[5]

At the end of the year he finds himself in debt. Quite often the amount of debt is far in excess of his annual wage income. Since he has no wherewithal to pay he has to work again for the same master without wages. Quite often his wife is his meal ticket or he has to take recourse to non-edibles or starve. As we have pointed out earlier, the pastoral content of the economy is very high. The rich peasants need herd boys. The tactics again are the same. Low wages or no wages, combined with heavy indebtedness at usurious rates of interest lead to bondage from which there is hardly any escape.[6] The Halis, even though so poorly remunerated, have to work from 14 to 18 hours a day. It is because ploughing in Ratlam is a day-long operation and agricultural fields quite often are several kilometres away from the rich peasants' households. They are indeed the invisible men of Ratlam whom we can meet only during late night in their huts. On the days when far off fields have to be ploughed they are not available during any part of the night in their huts. They sleep in the fields. Its social implications are serious. We came across several instances in which the sexually repressed rich peasants or their sons would exploit ploughmens' wives and daughters sexually. The total absence of the adult male population from the village makes it so easy.

It is interesting to point out that prostitution in several villages in Jaora Tehsil is an organized rural institution. The prostitutes' hamlets are usually situated by the roadside a kilometre and a half away from the main village. There are also instances where Halis are beaten.[7] With the enactment of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1975, there has been some drive against bondage, for the liquidation of debts and the upward revision of agricultural wages to the level prescribed by the government. But in most areas there is hardly any drive and bondage continues. For instance, in the villages of Ayana, Pancheva, Mowkhedi, Dhodhar and Luhari in Jaora Tehsil and Dhelanpur, Dhamnaut Pal Sodia, and Dharad of Ratlam Tehsil, bondage seems to be widely prevalent. It is to the credit of the district administration that it asked its senior officers to accompany us during our field trips and we exchanged notes. The situation obtaining in the village of Dhelanpur in Ratlam Tehsil is particularly distressing. The District Collector had selected two Halis from that village to participate in our camp. The B.D.O. had been asked to ensure that they arrive. He in turn asked the village Sarpanch to discharge this responsibility. We went to the village in the evening accompanied by the agricultural extension officer. We met the concerned Hali. He promised to accompany us but he disappeared under the cover of darkness. We tried to contact his master unsuccessfully. The next morning the agricultural extension officer had again to go to that village and the master allowed the Hali to participate in the camp only on the condition that the latter's father worked as his substitute. Why was the Hali so mortally afraid even when he had all assurances from two senior government officers? This we could know only when a senior officer of the Labour Ministry, Government of India, was in that village interviewing the Halis at dead of the night and explaining to them the various implications of the Act abolishing bonded labour. At one stage, he remarked, "All I have told you is about the law made by the government in Delhi. It is law for your benefit and you must make use of it." Hearing this, a Hali stood up and said, "Sahib, dilli ki sarkar is kanoon ka maan liya. Lekin hamare gaon ke sarkar ne ise nahi mana (i.e. government in Delhi accepts this law but the government in my village does not)". The officer was flabbergasted. He again asked as a sort of clarification, "Who is the government of your village?" Pat came the reply, "Phul Singh Rup Singh." The implication is clear. In order that the government of the land governs, 'Phul Singh Rup Singh' shall have to be dislodged from power. So long as dyarchy prevails the government of 'Phul Singh Rup Singh' will always have the precedence.

As regards the liquidation of debts no comment is needed. Once it is done the system of bondage goes.[8] The Minimum Wage legislation in Madhya Pradesh suffers from two serious defects. It does not take into account varying levels of agriculture productivity over the State and it fixes the wage on the low side. Nobody can controvert that Ratlam cultivators have the capacity to pay

and they are indeed paying higher than the prescribed minimum wages to casual workers during peak seasons. The wages in Ratlam except for the bonded Halis are largely market determined rather than government determined.[9]

We have referred to the kind of relationship that subsists between the traders, and peasants with surplus to dispose of the latter have hardly any benefit of higher education. The storm of the freedom movement produced no convulsion in this part of Madhya Pradesh with the result that levels of political consciousness are very low. Peasants in the surplus sub-sector of the rural economy have hardly any need to think beyond Ratlam. They are interested only in the local institution of power with the result that Ratlam comes to be linked to the political mainstream of the country largely through the traders.

From our field report one can deduce the shape of society, polity and the economy of Ratlam. It is a world characterized by the coexistence of affluence and poverty. The abject poverty that afflicts a section of the labour population cannot be attributed to their indolence. In fact there is an inverse correlation between effort and reward. We had a camp from 25th to 30th June, 1976 for those who are on the wrong side of justice, i.e. the agricultural workers. The 75 participants in the camp constituted a microcosm from which one would get an idea of the macrocosm. While Harijans outnumbered all others, there were also tribals, Rajputs, and Pathans. The camp was inaugurated by Shri Mathura Dube, Labour Minister, Madhya Pradesh. He explained to them the entire gamut of protective legislations and exhorted them to make organized efforts to secure justice. Our face-to-face encounter with the participants was distressing. They were tongue-tied. The 'culture of repression' had planted in them the 'culture of silence'. With the resource personnel mingling with them at levels of equality, they could muster enough courage to import their vocal organ with the capacity to speak. They spoke of their life experience in a down-to-earth manner. The next followed the patient explanation of the protective legislation, and various schemes to augment their income. They seemed to take all these in good stride but the cat was out of the bag when we started our dialogue with them in search for solutions. The laws and schemes as explained seemed to suffer from major inadequacies to them. Their animal poverty after the enactment of plethora of such protective legislation and welfare schemes should have been part of history. But it was not. They blamed the village satraps and minor state functionaries for obstructing in creation of a new social order. They catalogued instances of high-handedness and atrocities of which they had bitter experience. "Why not get organized to frustrate the attempts of those who stand between the law and the poor?" The response was quick and unanimous. "Is the administration weaker than those who stand between the law and the poor? Can't it bring the culprits to book?" We had to explain to

them patiently and in detail that the success of any protective legislation was contingent upon the modicum of support it received from beneficiaries.

There were some government servants, it was true, who served two masters. The paramour always got precedence over the wife. They must become the watchdogs of their own rights and privileges. They must become the eyes and ears of the administration. They must expose the black sheep and also should have in mind that those of the State fiduciaries with whom they came in contact wielded the least quantum of power. There were many above them with enough powers to foist their mechanisms. Once they were convinced of the need for organization they held informal discussions among themselves as late as 3 in the morning. They came out with clear-cut organizational plans. The way they had outlined the task of the organization, the manner of its functioning and the selection of office-bearers was a surprise to many of us.

Notes

1. The garden at Sailana is famous for cactus plants of various sizes and kinds. A huge quantity of fertilizer and water is utilized in order that they may keep thriving. The employment the garden offers to the agricultural workers is again of the unproductive type. As far as our enquiry tells us, they have hardly any useful value. In fact to the extent use is made of land, labour and other complementary inputs to grow them, it is luxury consumption.
2. There are, however, farms which do not answer to the aforesaid description. One such farm on the Ratlam-Jaora road has a well which contains as much water as a tank can. Each plot of land is irrigated. Water flows through pipes mounted on brick pillars. Not a drop is wasted. From a distance it looks as if there were an oil refinery. We came across a farm near Jaora which is purely capitalistic. Most agricultural operations are mechanized. There is exclusive dependence on wage labour, hired and paid daily at rates prescribed by the government. Another one that we encountered in the same place – in fact contiguous to the farm referred to earlier – is of a different type. It is a very fertile farm having a large diameter well enough to irrigate all lands. The owner has his own bullocks and also provides short-term credit for the purchase of inputs. Unlike the first farms, however, he does not provide supervisory labour. He rents it out on an annual basis. The third one we encountered was again of a different type. It is a farm on which lots of land has yet to be reclaimed. The owner has constructed a large- diameter well and bought several pairs of bullocks. He has leased it out to five sharecroppers. Non-labour cost is shared on a 50:50 basis and so is the produce. Once the farm has been fully reclaimed sharecroppers will be evicted.

3. Mere ownership of land is hardly enough. The owner must have at least a pair of bullocks costing a minimum sum of Rs. 3000 and agricultural implements which again will cost no less than the amount needed to buy a pair of bullocks. The result is that, once a poor peasant's household – sometimes true of middle peasant households – loses its bullocks, its options are limited to hiring ploughs and bullocks or to leasing out lands or to accepting employment with a rich peasant on terms dictated by him on the condition that he would be provided with ploughing facilities. The charges would be debited to his wage account. The hiring charge for a pair of bullocks and plough is Rs. 20 a day. A poor peasant has hardly the means to pay this high amount.
4. It is because of the latter that we have a sprinkling of such persons in the agricultural worker population, free or bonded, as occupying a very high position in the caste hierarchy.
5. Advance is needed as much for productive as for unproductive purposes. While performing marriage and death rites the poor in Ratlam practise promiscuous hospitality.
6. Annual advances to Hali vary from Rs. 200 to Rs 2000 and that of herd boys from Rs. 30 to Rs. 100. The higher the amount advanced the lower the rate of monthly wages fixed and the greater the chances of bondage.
7. We would like to refer here to one case where a bonded Hali was dealt with atrociously by his employer. The Hali was one Mehtab Singh who was bonded to Kesarimal Bhandari of Village Simlawada, Tehsil Ratlam for 20 long years for a mere debt of Rs. 3 (which he had borrowed in 1955). He has to work for the master in lieu of the interest for this sum which could not be liquidated in spite of serving for such long years. In addition he had also paid back Rs. 1650 to his employer by selling his land). During October 1975, when Mehtab Singh requested his master to free him, he was brutally assaulted and driven out of the village. Now, for the last few months, this wretched of the earth is staying in another village Hijlawada. Recently when he came to see his wife and children at village Simlawada he was again brutally assaulted resulting in a fracture of his arm and severe injuries in several parts of his body.
8. While, as a consequence of debt redemption and upward revision of wages in some villages, bonded Halis have turned into free wage workers, no official cognizance of those freed from the bondage has been taken. The result is that the question of their rehabilitation has been completely bypassed. While fixing wages at the rates prescribed by the government, it has been overlooked that the rate obtains only for eight hours' work a day whereas a Hali normally works for more than twice that per day. Slackness in the drive for liquidation of debts has other implications also. This is

evident from what we discovered in a few villages where mortgages still continue to be in the illegal possession of lands belonging to Harijans and tribals. The particulars are shown in the table below.

9. The wage range of bonded Halis extended from Rs. 40 to Rs. 90 a month in a number of villages that we visited. However, in a few villages of Jaora Tehsil, where intensive drives to implement minimum wages was conducted, Halis were getting wages fixed by government.

Position of Mortgages

Name of the village	**Whose lands mortgaged**	**Mortgaged with whom**	**Area mortgaged**
Gariapara	Kaluji, tribal	Bhairu Gujar	23 bighas
-do-	-do-	Mangilal	28 bighas
-do-	-do-	Dula Gujar	17 bighas
-do-	-do-	Bapura Gujar	10 bighas
Dhodhar	Keso Ram, S/o Lachman	Ramchandra, Sarpanch	10 bighas
Sherour Knurd	Ratan	Shantilal Maharaj	A plot of land
Richha	Flames, S/o Mangu Harijan	Hiratel Maharaj	3 bighas
Borawna	Bhagwan. S/o Punaji	Badruddin of Village Semlia	7 bighas
-do-	Jagannath, S/o Bagdi Ramji Caste-Balai	Taj Mohd., S/o Chotte Khan	9 bighas
-do-	Govinda Sic) Kanchan Bai	Deep Singh, 24 Kholi, Datkipulia, Batlam	5 bighas
-do-	Amba Ram, S/o Onkarji	Lakshmi Bai	3½ bighas

Voice of the Voiceless*

Syed Akhtar and Mahaveer Jain

The past National Labour Institute (NLI) labour camps bear witness to the fact that alienative themes of powerlessness and normlessness pose as potent problems to the development of the rural poor. Powerlessness can be witnessed in relation to their socio-economic helplessness. Though actual situations may differ from place to place, the sense or helplessness is generated partly by unequal land distribution and partly by uneven distribution of means to achieve economic progress. National Sample Survey (1971-72)[1] shows that the 10 per cent rich farmers own 53 per cent of the cultivable land whereas sixty per cent poor peasants hold only nine per cent of the agricultural land. The sense of helplessness is heightened in situations where the rich peasantry has increasing control over productive means for achieving economic prosperity. It is no surprise that developmental programmes meant to improve the quality of rural life have benefitted well-to-do farmers owing to their money power. Similarly, normlessness can be perceived in terms of rampant corruption among government functionaries and their high-handedness in executing developmental schemes. The peasants have to bribe these functionaries before they can get their due loans. Instances of misappropriating such loans are numerous.

Both powerlessness and normlessness have relegated the rural poor to a marginal position in society. They have been bereft of their voice to the extent that they are unable to speak against the crimes of marginality. They often resort to self-depreciation, fatalism and superstition instead of looking into oppressive structures responsible for their marginality. Changing these structures would involve, however, a direct confrontation between the oppressed and the oppressor. It is in the context of this desired change that the NLI is actively conducting Rural Educational Camps in different parts of India. The philosophy behind these camps is to heighten people's critical awareness of their sense of alienation and to help them organize themselves and regain their voice to speak for themselves. One such camp was held at Pratapgarh, Rajasthan, from June 3 to June 7, 1979.

Pratapgarh: a silent past, a voiceless present

Pratapgarh Block is an erstwhile princely state situated to the north- west of Udaipur. This state was founded by a Rajput chief Pratap Singh in 1698.

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*The paper is a two-part report on a labour camp held by the National Labour Institute at Pratapgarh, Rajasthan. Giving a synoptic view of the countryside, the first part documents the pre-camp survey and participants' selection. The second part dwells on the educational focuses on the camp, highlighting the data generated through the exercise.

Between 1553 and 1698, the aboriginal tribes of Pratapgarh suffered the ravages of incessant invasions of various Rajput clans. Earlier than 1553, these tribes formed their own state called Deolia (Deogarh), Thus the tribals who once enjoyed their own voice were condemned to silence for four successive centuries until India achieved freedom in 1947. Even after independence their voice is not much heard. They are still dominated by landlords, moneylenders and government functionaries.

During a week's pre-camp survey, we visited 32 villages predominantly inhabited by tribals. Our survey yielded both observational and structural data lending credence to the tribals' vegetative existence. They brought to our notice harrowing accounts of scarcity and exploitation. In order to have a feel of the situation, a few first-hand accounts are presented here:

(a) Though most of the tribals possess land, it is wild, rocky, and hilly. The yield, therefore, is meagre. In times of scarcity the tribals are forced to live on fruits from the forest.

(b) Large-scale cheating by government officials is not uncommon. For instance, Kama Ram, a resident of Deogarh and an employee or the Large Size Adimjati Multi-Purpose Society (LAMPS), cheated 25 households of Jollar village. He promised them help in securing, co-operative loans but, in return, he demanded Rs. 200 from each household. In addition, he collected from them 2.5 kgs. of silver ornaments. The villagers approached him several times but every time he put forth plausible excuses. To date, he has not kept his promise.

(c) The Government of Rajasthan has set up several co-operative banks to disburse loans meant to help small farmers generate minor irrigation facilities. These loans are channelised through local panchayat samitis, each samiti comprising five villages. The samitis are responsible for selecting the deserving candidates from the respective villages. Along these lines, a panchayat samiti, called Rathajna, disbursed loans worth Rs. 1,00,000. After a period of three years when the bank officers went to recover loans from the villagers, they could hardly recover eight thousand rupees. The reason: most of the villagers denied that they had received any loans; the loans had been drawn in fake names. The panchayat samiti was allegedly involved in this fraudulent act.

(d) In Barunkhedam, Rameshwar, a destitute and a handicapped person, had mortgaged his five bigha plot to a landlord 20 years ago. Under the Agricultural Land Act (1975), the land was returned to Rameshwar and since then he had been cultivating it himself. But each year the landlord, supported by his gang, comes to reap the harvest leaving Rameshwar high and dry. He made several representations to the revenue authorities and the

police but he was disappointed every time. The authorities were in league with the landlord.

(e) One morning, before setting out for surveying the villages, we requested the owner of a nearby tea-stall to send us tea. Soon the owner's servant came with a kettle and we began conversing with him on his working conditions. Tall and thin Shamu told us that he had to work from 6 in the morning till late in the night. He earned a rupee a day. He would not think of leaving his employer because he owed him money. Nor did he have agricultural land to support himself should he decide to quit the job. Meanwhile, his employer arrived yelling at him and thrashed him right in front of us. We stood up in surprise not exactly knowing what to do. Shamu was accused of killing time and being late for his work. Unmindful of the employer's abuse and beating, he kept smiling. We wondered how he could afford a smile in this situation. Was he used to it? Or was he contented with a mere survival? Or did he smile to mock at the hgh-handedness of his employer? We began searching our souls. Precisely at that:

A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven,

Hands have no tears to flow.

These and many other accounts represent interwoven realities of rural life giving rise to the existing social structures. Our purpose was to help the rural poor, critically examine these structures and formulate strategies for their transformation. We thus concentrated on typical areas of oppression and exploitation to select participants for the camp.

Participants' selection

In keeping with the camp objectives, we documented not only predominant rural realities but also contacted a wider range of people for the selection of participants. Eftorts were made to locate young, educated, poor tribals capable of voicing the feelings of their oppressed community. From 32 villages, 56 such persons were selected and 48 of them finally turned up to participate in the camp activities.

Table 1 shows the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the participants selected. Most of the participants were relatively young. They had little agricultural land and abysmally low income. Many of them had run into debt. Considering these circumstances as general phenomena, it was hard to come by educated young tribals. Not all the participants, therefore, had a school education.

Educational features of the camp

Educational activities began on the first day by orienting the participants to the objectives of the camp. These activities pertained to intensifying here-and-now contact among the participants, delineating their latent need patterns,

problematizing existential situations, objectifying these situations through simulation exercises, and reflecting on the strategies of action.

Intensifying here-and-now contact

The first activity was centred around the theme of "Who are we? And what are we going to do during our stay here?" This preliminary exercise was aimed at —

(a) maximizing interaction among participants so that they would soon get to know each other and discuss the problems of common concern;

(b) breaking participants' expectations about receiving education from outside speakers while emphasizing the individual's own initiative for sharing knowledge and learning from one another;

(c) creating a trustful atmosphere for an open exchange of views;

(d) defreezing their fear of government officials to help them voice their oppression; and

(e) developing a community environment in which each participant would be sensitive to the needs of the other.

To meet these ends, the participants interacted with each other in five groups. Towards the end of the day, inter-group interaction was facilitated in order to generate a sense of community among the participants. The group continued on its own till late in the evening.

Table 1
Participants' demographic and socio-economic characteristics*

Categories	Number of cases (N=48)	Categories	Number of cases (N = 48)
Age (Years)		**Yearly Income (Rs.)**	
18-20	4(8.3)**	1-100	1(2.1)
21-25	10(20.3)	101-200	4(8.3)
26-30	17(35.4)	201-500	15(31.2)
31-35	4(8.3)	501 and above	7(14.6)
36 and above	13(27.1)	No Response	21(45.8)
Education		Caste	
Illiterate	10(20.8)	Schedule Tribe	41(85.4)
Primary	16(33.3)	Schedule Caste	4(8.3)
Middle	15(31.2)	Others	3(6.2)
Above Middle	7(14.6)		

Reported Indebtedness (Rs.)		Land Holding Pattern (In acres)	
Nil	5(10.4)	Landless	7(14.6)

1-100	5(10.4	0-2	9(13.7)
101-300	6(12.5)	3-4	9(13.7)
301-500	3(6.2)	5-6	12(25.0)
501-1000	4(8.3)	7-8	5(10.4)
1001 & above	4(8 3)	Above 8	5(12.5)
No Response	21(45.8)		

* *Adapted from P. Mehta - Education for Participatory Organization of Rural Poor: Tribal Youth Camps in Rajasthan, National Labour Institute, 1979.*

***Figures in parentheses indicate percentages.*

Participants' projected needs

The participants took the Thematic[4] Apperception Tests on the second day. The test consists of six pictures depicting different life situations coded from significant existential themes. Each participant wrote six stories linking the present situation to its past antecedents and future implications. Later, the participants assembled in a group and read out the stories. The stories revealed typical themes of personal concern, and hopeful future. A sample of such stories is presented below:

Themes of personal concern: (a) In this pictures a boy is shown sitting by the side of his father. The boy is careless in his studies. His father is advising him to be careful and improve upon his studies. The father knows that he is worried. But he wants that his son should receive education so that he can secure a good job. This helps them improve their economic situation.

(b) The boy belongs to a poor family. His father is taking pains to teach him. He thinks that if his son takes his studies seriously, he can improve home conditions.

Themes of social concern: (a) I can see a group of six persons discussing something relating to their community. They are thinking how to remove social evil and improve their society. Nothing as yet materialized due to lack of unity amongst the members of society. If they get united, nothing is impossible for them.

(b) These persons are holding a panchayat meeting. They have come to the conclusion that the problems of their community can be solved only when they take interest in unionization.

Themes of hopeful future: (a) A boy is shown reading a book. He comes from a poor family. His father is reflecting on his past. He thinks that schools did not exist in his childhood. Now, with the availability of education, today's boy could be tomorrow's minister.

(b) All the people shown in the picture are engaged in their work. In the past they worked hard to eke out their living. Now they think that they can

spend their life in comfort. The past miseries are vanishing and the poverty is being eradicated. In the future, everybody will have enough means to enjoy his life.

In the feedback session, the facilitators highlighted the above themes presented by the participants. They thus developed an insight into their dormant desires and reflected on societal means for their realization. It was a revelation to them that they were capable of thinking for their personal and social welfare. They were pleasantly surprised to encounter this new self-image contrary to the one they held in the past.

On the third day of the camp, each participant began examining his existential situation and listing a number of problems peculiar to his own contextual reality.[7] Once the individual task was over, the participants gathered in a group to share their problems with each other. A few of them even stood up and presented their problems to the entire group. To the surprise of many participants, the individual problems appeared to have a strong community flavour. Most of them faced almost similar problems in their daily life.

In the second session, the participants worked in five small groups in order to sharpen the focus on problems of common concern. Each group consisted of 9-10 members coming from different villages having geographical proximity. The individual group members then selected a leader who prepared a chart of significant problems facing the community. Later, five such charts were displayed for the benefit of the whole group. This was followed by a discussion stimulated by the individual reports of the group leaders.[8] In the process of discussion, many problems emerged as focal points of collective attention. At this stage the facilitators also intervened to help the participants pick up common threads running through their small group problems. The apparent problems of common concern were:

(a) Scarcity of foodgrains especially during the rainy season.
(b) Irregular income.
(c) Poor irrigation facilities.
(d) Dependence on moneylenders and landlords.
(e) High rates of interest.
(f) Absence of proper roads.
(g) No facilities for drinking water.
(h) Growing corruption among patwaris, forest officers and hospital administrators.
(i) Police harassment.
(j) Violation of the Minimum Wages Act.
(k) Low attendance in primary schools.

(l) Absence of adult education centres.

These problems are by no means exaggerated versions of actual happenings. Both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from various sources support the major contentions of the participants.

The tribal areas of Pratapgarh Block consist of unproductive rocky soils.[9] Two-thirds of the agricultural land remains unirrigated. The tribals, therefore, have little to eat, especially when the rains fail them. This situation makes them habitually dependent on moneylenders and landlords. The moneylenders lend them money on exorbitant rates of interest ranging from 30 to 50 per cent per month. The landlords turn them into bonded labourers. They cannot rise against their exploiters for fear of inviting more trouble from the police and the revenue officers. During lean months, the tribals work for government contractors and the forest department in order to supplement their family income. But not all the workers are paid their due wages. The daily wages range between 4 and 5 rupees for males and 3 and 4 rupees for females.

The tribal pockets of Pratapgarh are almost inaccessible even today. There are no proper roads connecting different villages with the Pratapgarh town. The peasants have to carry their patients all the way to the main hospital in Pratapgarh. The hospital administrators take advantage of their helplessness and charge them huge amounts for admitting their patients to the hospital. Small farmers have to spend one full day to buy a bag of fertilizer from the town. The attendance in primary schools is low because the children have to traverse long hilly tracks.

It was these circumstances that made the participants highly critical of the government machinery. They believed that their voice would not be heard unless they organized themselves against a callous bureaucracy.

After the first three days' work on optimizing social interaction, initiating self-analysis, and problematizing oppressive situations, the participants were introduced to a set of simulation exercises like Hunting and Tower Building. These exercises focussed on experiential learning for objectifying existential situations, developing participatory skills, and understanding the dynamics of individual versus collective action.

Objectifying existential situations: The participants were exposed to a series of five cartoons to help them gain distance from and critically reflect on their objective situation of oppression. The first cartoon depicted an animal inside a circle receiving arrows from outsite. Interpreting the caricature, the participants described the arrows as symbols of oppression and the animal as a victim. The second cartoon portrayed a man struck by arrows coming from outside the circle. Here, the man was characterized as an oppressed tribal. In the third cartoon an animal and a man were shown standing side by side. Both of them were bathed in a shower of arrows penetrating the circle. At

this instance, the participants identified the man as a tribal whose existence was no better than that of an animal. Like an animal, he fell an easy prey to the evil designs of oppressors. These oppressors were variously described as advocates, bank managers, black marketeers, bootleggers, contractors, land settlement officers, magistrates, mahajans, patwaris, police officers, sarpanchs, and wealthy men. The fourth cartoon showed a man hit by arrows coming from within the circle. This time the arrows were taken as intrinsic elements of oppression which the tribals inflicted on themselves. These elements were characterized by communal feuds, disorganization, excessive consumption of liquor, extravagant expenditure on marriage or death ceremonies, ignorance, pent up anger, revenge and uncritical acceptance of circumstances.

Analysing the situation of oppression in which the tribals find themselves in day-to-day life, the participants' spontaneous reactions were:

- Like animals, unthinking adivasis are victims of the injustice perpetrated by oppressors.
- One who thinks critically is a human being and one who does not is an animal.
- How can one exist if there are so many exploiters?

The participants were charged with excitement as they encountered the real causes of their sense of marginality. They exuded enthusiasm and promised to fight extrinsic as well as intrinsic evils of their community.

The last cartoon represented an apparently victorious person without a circle around him. The participants interpreted this situation as a happy augury. It symbolized a tribal hero who had transcended the narrow bounds of his community envisioning for its members a broader role in society. He would lead them to overcome oppression and transform the existing societal structures.

Understanding inter-personal dynamics

The participants were introduced to inter-personal dynamics through the Tower Building exercise. For this purpose, they were divided into 10 small groups to simulate various help situations. Each group consisted of a worker, a small farmer, a middle farmer, and an observer. The worker, blindfolded and working with his wrong hand, was supposed a build the tower while the small and middle farmers were prohibited from rendering any physical assistance to the worker. The observer's task was to note the emerging patterns of interaction among the group members in the process of tower building.

Before the actual work on tower building began, both small and middle farmers separately recorded their individual estimation about how many blocks they would expect their workers to pile up. Similarly, the workers too recorded their expected performance. These figures were displayed on a blackboard to enable small group members reach a mutually agreed target of performance for their workers.

The resulting data on tower building are presented in Table 2. It is apparent that both individual and group expectations were quite low in all groups except those of I and IX. In group I collective expectation was far greater than individual expectations. Analysing these data in terms of observers' notes, it became evident that the small and middle farmers had persuaded the worker to raise his target promising him help in the course of tower building. Once the work began, the farmers fall short of their promise with the result that the worker could not achieve the mutually agreed target. The farmers intended to extract from the worker as much work as they could.

Table 2
Performance Data on Tower Building (Pratapgarh Camp)

Groups	Targets				
	Labourer	Small Farmers	Middle Farmers	Agreed Target	Accom- plished Target
I	5	6	7	18	11
II	5	6	5	10	7
III	4	3	2	9	9
IV	6	4	7	4	14
V	5	4	6	4	12
VI	6	4	6	7	15
VII	7	8	9	4	14
VIII	3	3	6	7	12
IX	10	3	6	7	10
X	4	6	5	4	18

The performance of group IX presented a reverse situation. Here the worker had higher expectation than his collaborators but under their formidable influence he brought down his target by three points. Nevertheless, his self-confidence stood him in good stead in achieving the target he had set for himself.

Data obtained from the remaining groups suggest a classical exanple of self-fulfilling prophecy. The farmers repeatedly underestimated their workers' capacity to achieve more, whereas the workers, too unsure of themselves and their performance, had internalized the false self-image transmited to them by influential groups through the culture of domination. The dominant groups of farmers failed to see that their false definition of the situation evoked a consequence which persuaded workers to keep a low profile. As a result of this situation, the collective targets were destined to be low.

The tribals' false self-image is further corroborated by the data obtained from the participants of two other labour camps held earlier at Jhadol and Kotra tehsils of Rajasthan. Tables 3 and 4 show that, apart from certain deviations, both Jhadol and Kotra were manifested higher expectations than

their associates but under their pressure agreed to a lower target. In all cases — Jhadol, Kotra and Pratapgarh — the workers, however, achieved more than what they expected to achieve. Reflecting on their accomplishments some of the participants remarked:

- Now the myth of the under-achieving tribals is exploded
- The value of pre-judgement is a demotiving value.
- One must first try one's hands at something and then form an opinion about one's capacities.

Table 3
Performance Data on Tower Building (Jhalod Camp)

Groups	Targets				
	Labourer	Small Farmer	Middle Farmer	Agreed Target	Accomplished Target
1	20	10	10	9	17
2	13	12	12	8	11
3	12	12	10	15	17
4	14	9	7	11	14
5	10	9	10	10	15
6	12	10	7	7	18

Table 4
Performance Data on Tower Building (Kotra Camp)

Groups	Targets				
	Labourer	Small Farmer	Middle Farmer	Agreed Target	Accomplished Target
1	10	9	11	7	13
2	8	6	7	5	8
3	8	3	6	6	12
4	10	10	8	6	13
Groups	**Targets**				
	Labourer	**Small Farmer**	**Middle Farmer**	**Agreed Target**	**Accomplished Target**
5	5	3	2	10	8
6	9	9	5	5	12
7	10	11	9	5	13
8	5	5	4	4	
9	8	8	8	7	4
10	10	9	8	7	1

The participants became keenly aware that their roles in the Tower Building Exercise were micro-representations of a macro-situation They came to realize that outside this simulated situation, moneylenders and landlords continued to be seasoned with self-interest. They vowed to make them see the bitter truth of exploitation through the unionization of tribal community.

Promise for action

By now the participants had clearly recognized the need to form an organization for collective action. Earlier, they had projected this need in thematic stories and experienced its importance through simulation exercises. On the concluding day they reflected on the strategies and action plans for the formation of a viable organization called Adivasi Ekta Evam Vikas Sangh. This organization would:

(a) represent, promote, and defend the interests of rural workers;

(b) involve various categories of rural poor in its activities;

(c) work for the improvement of the quality of rural life; and

(d) fight against the intrinsic evils of the tribal community.

A first step towards the implementation of these objectives was facilitated by the organizers of the labour camp. They arranged a 'dialogue' between the participants and the government functionaries.

The participants while presenting their points of view, squarely blamed the officers for their inept functioning and indifferent attitude towards the poor peasants. They put forth a series of grievances which had been mishandled by the authorities. The officers were rather shocked to see the participants speaking to them straight and upright. One of them stood up and made an angry speech. The situation became tense and called for an intervention by the organizers. They made efforts to make the officers see the participants' viewpoint more clearly. After all, these people had never been given an opportunity to speak for themselves. The officers finally realized this fact and became friendly with the participants promising them every possible support for their cause.

Notes and references

1. Cited by G. Huizer, the Rural Training Camps at NLI. National Labour Institute Bulletin, 40. 3, 1977. 336-348.
2. Chittaurgarh Gazetteer of India, Jaipur: Government of Rajasthan. Director of District Gazetteers, 1971.
3. Some of the structural features of Pratapgarh Block are given be:ow :

(a)	No. of villages	357
(b)	Total population	20,000

(c)	Tribal population	52.33 per cent
(d)	Principal occupation	Agriculture
(e)	Secondary occupation	Casual labour
(f)	Crops:	
	(i) Rabi	Rice and black gram
	(ii) Kharif	Wheat, gram and barley
(g)	Forest produce	Teak, pipet, babul, mahua (a kind of forest fruit), and beedi leaves.
(h)	Educational infrastructure:	
	(i) Primary schools	105
	(ii) Middle schools	17
	(iii) Secondary schools	4
(i)	Medical infrastructure	
	(i) Primary health centre	1
	(ii) Dispensaries	2
	(iii) Sub-centres of dispensaries	8
(j)	Police stations	3

These data were collected from Tehsil headquarters.

4. The camp activities overlapped a great deal. No specific activity was carried out on the same day.
5. This test is specially designed by P. Mehta on the basis of the experiences in the rural sector. See P. Mehta, Scoring Stories, New Delhi: National Labour Institute, 1979.
6. These stories were translated from Hindi. No attempt was made to retain the original flavour of the stories for grammatical and stylistic considerations.
7. The illiterate participants were helped by the literate ones.
8. For exhaustive reports presented by group leaders, see P. Mehta, Education for Participatory Organizations of Rural Poor: Tribal Youth Camps in Rajasthan, New Delhi: National Labour Institute, 1979.
9. Chittaurgarh ... op. cit.
10. For a detailed description of the Tower Building Exercise see M.V.Deshpande, P. Mehta & M. Nandkarni, Behavioural Exercises and Games, New Delhi: Learning Systems, 1978.
11. R.K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure, New Delhi: Amerind Publishing Company, 1968.

Women Agricultural Workers of Bharatpur District: An Educational Camp

Mahaveer Jain & Meenakshi Nayar

The National Labour Institute has a long history of running Rural Labour Camps for conscientisation awareness building of rural landless labour. While being clearly focussed at the poorest, assetless, unskilled rural workers, the camps have nevertheless been male-biased. Though included occasionally in small numbers, women were never the primary target group of any educational or developmental efforts undertaken by the NLI.

Growing awareness of women's participation and exploitation in the economic sphere has, however, led to the recognition that developmental information and benefits reach women only when they are addressed directly and specifically to women Action programmes and educational camps for women workers have therefore been included within NLI's action priorities. The present report details one of the first efforts undertaken by NLI in this direction.

An educational camp for 55 women agricultural workers of some villages in Bharatpur district was held in March, 1984 in collaboration with the Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST). The ISST, who had been conducting a pilot project in health, social service, and income generation for women in these villages for about two years, experienced the need for development of local leadership for promoting effective implementation of the health and income generation programme. A collaborative effort was, therefore, planned with NLI providing educational inputs, and ISST taking care of infrastructural requirements.

Exploratory visit

An exploratory visit of the site by two members of the NLI faculty was undertaken in February 1984 with the purpose of (a) getting a feel for the readiness of the target group for participation in group activity, (b) sensing some of the issues of concern to them, and (c) locating a site for the camp

The target group

Mehtoli, Chentoli and Etrampura are located in Weir Tehsil of Bayana sub-division in Bharatpur District which lies in the mid-eastern region of Rajasthan. Bharatpur is divided into four sub-divisions, 12 Tehsils and 13 developmental blocks. The total population of the district as per the 1981 census was approximately 22 lakhs.

The 3 villages are located approximately 55 kms from Bharatpur and 20 kms from the Tehsil headquarters. They are connected to the Bhusawar

Chokharwada is four kms away. While Mehtoli and Chentoli each have a primary school, a post office is located only in Chentoli. The nearest medical facility, a primary health centre, is located five kms. away in Bhusawar.

While Etrampura is entirely a tribal (Meena) village, Mehtoli and Chentoli have a mixed Hindu population. In Mehtoli and Chentoli, land is largely owned by Brahmins, Jats and Gujars in medium-sized holdings Families from artisan castes like Suthar, Kumhar, Khewar and Vaish, present in small numbers, subsist on marginal holdings, craft work, and occasional agricultural labour. Jatays or Chamars, present in larger numbers, form the bulk of the landless agricultural labour.

In three villages, women of all caste groups belonging to land-owning as well as landless families engage in agricultural work. However, they all maintain purdah while at work in the fields. The status of women in village society is unquestionably inferior. They do not dare to speak in the presence of men. Attendance of women in Panchavat meetings is unheard of, except as litigants in family feuds, wherein also they are not expected to address the Panchayat directly. Even eight-year-olds feel superior to middle-aged women in knowledge and understanding and do not hesitate to reprimand them sharply.

This inferior status of women is clearly reflected in the prevailing male-female ratio of 741 in the three villages. The male-female ratio in these villages is much lower than the ratio prevailing in Bharatpur district and Rajasthan State which are in turn much lower than the national ratio as can be seen in the table below:

Population Distribution

Sex	* Chentoli	* Mehtoli	* Etrampura	Total	++ Bharatpur Distt.	++ Rajasthan
Females	340	287	135	752	680180	12282000
Males	445	416	166	1028	110026	13484000
Females per thousand males	762	090	813	741	840	911

**Source: CH, ISS, 1976*

++ Source: "Sankhikiya Ruprekha — Bharatpur 1981"

Discussions with the women of Mehtoli, Chentoli and Etrampura during the exploratory visit were very cordial. The women were found to be very trustful of the ISST Project staff and very receptive to us. They invited us to hold the camp in their villages, assuring us of their full support. In the course of our two-day stay, however, it became clear to us that the support was largely in the context of their expectation of material benefits from us. In other words, they saw us in the same dependence-expectation framework as they view the

ISST team and all government agencies. Most villagers appeared to depend on the government and all external agencies to ameliorate their conditions and bring benefits in the form of loans, subsidies, machines and materials.

Opportunities for income generation and self-reliance

In the exploratory visit it became evident that while a large majority of landless women work as agricultural labour, alternative means of livelihood for women appeared to be few. Some attempts were being made by the government directly and through voluntary agencies to promote income generation opportunities for women.

Information about the developmental schemes currently emphasized by the district and block level authorities, and the extent of involvement of women residents of the area was therefore collected. TRYSEM and IRDP were found to be the two major schemes involving women beneficiaries. Loans for purchase of milch cattle under the IRDP Scheme have been extended to a number of women in this district. Under TRYSEM, a few girls have been trained and provided with sewing and knitting machines. In addition, the Khadi Village Industries Commission has been promoting hand spinning of yarn through training and distribution of charkhas.

In this way, the women of Metholi and Chentol appear to be somewhat exposed to opportunities for income generation outside the agricultural sector. However, the awareness has yet to be translated into action as most of the machines and charkhas lie unused, and milch cattle remain ill or unproductive. Thus, a quick review of tie situation revealed that women in Mehtoli and Chentoil and Etrampura were concerned about, improving their socio-economic conditions and enthusiastic about involvement in an educational effort. As such we planned to hold the camp in the last week of March 1984 preceded by two days of village meetings for selection of participants.

Camp site

Mehtoli, Chentoli and Etrampura have no common village property large enough to house about 50 people. However, Mehtoli village had a common ground enclosed by the Hanuman Mandir, a one-room Dharamshala, a village well and the ISST centre. Permission for use of the site for camp activities was sought from village elders and the pujari who was the only resident of the dharamshala. Permission was granted freely. In fact, active support was also guaranteed.

Selection of participants

Participants were selected through a series of meetings with small groups of women. Criteria for selection were: employment as agricultural labour, age group of 15 to 45, ability to read and write, one woman from one family, and,

landlessness or small landholding.

In the course of selection, however, both criteria of selection and boundaries of the target group had to be modified. It was found that there were hardly any landless agricultural labourers in Etrampura. Approximately 95% of the 57 households in Etrampura owned over five bighas of land. In view of this, a decision was taken to restrict participation in the camp to women of Mehtoli and Chentoli villages only. Literacy of women in these villages is very low, as is evident from Table 2.

Further, it was found that the few literate women in Mehtoli and Chentoli belong to the landed upper castes. None of the women of marginal or landless families was literate. While literate persons were required to record the events in the camp, it was imperative to restrict participation to women from landless or marginal agricultural households. As such, we attempted to locate women of these categories from nearby villages. Finally, we selected third and fifth standards in Chokharwada.

Table 2
Female Literacy Rate

	*** Chentoli**	*** Mehtoli**	**++ Rural Bharapur**	**++ Bharatpur**
Total female population	340	287	5,86,710	6,80,180
Literate females	1	4	22,705	46,184
%age literacy among females	0.29	1.39	3.87	6.79

** Source: CHH, ISS, 1976*
++ Source: "Sankhikiya Rooprekha — Bharatpur 1981" Statistics pertaining to 1971.

Thus, participants were located principally in Chentoli and Mehtoli villages along with a few educated girls from Chokharwada. In this way, 42 women agricultural labourers between the ages of 14 and 45 were identified for participation in the camp.

The beginning of the camp, however, brought over 80 women and girls desirous of participating in the camp. They ranged in age from 10 to 80 years and included as many as four members from one family. Faced with the dilemma of turning away willing participants or conducting the camp with a large number of participants inclusive of many uneligible candidates, we decided to persuade the very young and the very old to leave. Also, we requested that not more than one member per family be present. This difficult process of persuation and negotiation was accompanied by attempts to clarify the objectives and methodology of the camp and the philosophy of working together.

During this discussion, a group of women separated themselves from the larger group with the demand that separate water and food arrangements

be made for them. While these six women were agricultural labourers from marginal farming households and had been previously selected for participation, they identified themselves as belonging to Kumhar and Suthar castes, thereby being superior to the other women who belonged primarily to Onamar or Jatav castes. Unable to reconcile to participating as equals, the Kumhar and Suthar women opted to withdraw participation from the camp.

As a result, the remaining group of 55 participants belonged entirely to the Chamar caste group. A detailed profile of the participants is given in the Appendix.

Camp process

The camp was visualised as an attempt at planned change from (a) individual to group identity, (b) passive acceptance to a proactive stance, and (c) dependence on external agencies to self-reliance. The change effort would involve unfreezing individuals for change, ensuring assesment of individual, group and environmental obstacles to change, and development of group identity as a supportive mechanism for planned change. To achieve this end, the tasks set before the participants were:

1) identification of problems;
2) deliberation on the causes of problems;
3) exploration of alternative strategies of change; and
4) interface with relevant agents in the environment.

The dynamics of interaction of participants among themselves and with the village community, the camp process including the problems identified, and the planned strategies for change, are described in the following sections.

Expectations from the camp

The expectations of the participants and the villagers were based on their previous experiences with external agencies, and were therefore incongruent with the objectives of the camp. The villagers perceived the camp as a five-day interaction process between some village women and the group of organizers which would result in accrual of material benefits to the participating women. These expectations persisted in spite of our repeated clarifications to various groups of villages encountered during the exploratory visit and the pre-camp selection meetings.

With the exit of Kumhar and Suthar women, the camp was completely associated with Chamar women. The higher caste people gradually perceived that their women were being excluded from the camp and the possibility of material gains. Denial of what they felt was rightfully theirs invoked feelings of righteous anger and distrust of the organizers.

On the other hand, the lower caste people saw in the camp an opportunity for righting some of the wrongs perpetrated on them for generations, by society. They viewed the camp in the context of government efforts for upliftment of Scheduled Castes. The lower caste women thus approached the camp with heightened expectations of "Sunwai" – i.e. of being heard by the powers - that - be, along with hopes of appropriate action.

Intrusion of caste dynamics in the camp process

The caste factor which had become visible in a mild form there on the exit of Kumhar and Suthar women showed up repeatedly in the course of the first day. The ugly face of casteism emerged during the very first meal taken by the participants in the camp.

After the inaugural ceremony and introduction, tea and snacks were served to the participants in the dharamshala adjoining the camp site. As previously indicated, permission of the pujari and village elders for this had been taken. While the meal was being served by the Brahmin cooks to the participants, a number of rude exchanges took place. The cooks seemed to resent serving good food to the lower caste women. Also, while the participants ate, village folk gathered in large numbers around the camp site. Children as well as grown-up men and women began peeping in and making derogatory comments about the well-known "stupidity" of women, and the sudden rise in "status" of the Chamars.

This conflict gained momentum rapidly. Suddenly, as though gripped by a frenzy, the onlookers pulled down the shamianas and denounced the organizers. A hysteria was whipped up by some persons who contended that a jhuta mud tumbler had been thrown at the mandir by childern of some participants. Others contended that the mandir and dharamshala were desecrated by the mere act of the Chamar women eating on the premises. As the situation became charged emotionally, the pujari was pressurized into objecting to holding of the camp on the premises. The villagers charged the organizers with destructive inclinations and demanded closure of the camp. A long and difficult process of negotiation with the village leaders finally led to the agreement that the camp site would be shifted away from the dharamshala, and closer to the ISST centre.

While this offer to shift premises seemed to please the villagers, resentment and distrust continued to brew. The villagers remained present in the vicinity of the camp in large numbers and continued to distract and disturb camp activity.

These happenings agitated the participants considerably. They also showed resentment at being shifted "gai bakri ki tarha" (i.e. like cattle and goats), though conscious that this humiliation was a regular feature of their harassment

by higher castes. A paradox which they highlighted was that though all of them had contributed through money and labour in the construction of the mandir and dharamshala, they were being denied access to the same.

The process of giving expression to this commonly felt subjugation helped generate feelings of closeness and togetherness in the participants. Thus, while the external environment was hostile, the participants began to find meaning in remaining in the camp. The women consciously decided unanimously in favour of continuing in spite of the opposition of the higher caste groups. However, fearing attacks on their persons in the dark, they chose to restrict camp timings from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. as against the originally planned timings of 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

The higher caste groups exerted pressure in various other forms. They summoned the ISST team to the village and presented them with the choice of either discontinuing the camp or leaving the village. This attempt failed to achieve its objectives as the ISST team opted to shift their belongings away from the village to the ISST centre. Following this, another attempt was made through a claim for damages by a Brahmin boy against the hurt caused to his buffalo by the camp jeep. Rude behaviour of the boy and his cronies was accompanied by threats to beat up the organising team.

In this way, the first day of the camp was dominated by incidents throwing casteism into sharp focus and jeopardising continuity of the camp. Faced with this, we dealt with the situation at multiple levels. Discussions were held with village elders to convince them to allow the camp to continue in the interest of the entire village. They were swayed by the logic that the camp would bring the entire village into prominence and closer contact with government officials and government schemes for the uplift of all the poor. Consequently, they promised that no further disturbances would take place.

Simultaneously, local governmental authorities were informed. As a result, the Tehsildar visited the camp on the second day morning and the B.D.O. deputed an Educational Extension Officer for camp duty. This had the required effect, and thereafter the villagers stayed away from the camp site.

Problems and causes identified by women agricultural labourers

The process of identification of problems begun on the first day was continued till the end of the second day. This task was accomplished in three groups of about 18 women each, with one literate girl taking detailed notes. At the end of discussions, the notes were presented in the large community. Problems identification was followed by discussions on causes/reasons for the existence of the identified problems. This task was also accomplished in small groups followed by presentations and discussions in the large community. Following is a list of problems and causes identified by women agricultural

workers through a process of sharing individual problems, understanding the commonality of problems, and exploring historical, social, and community level reasons for the incidence of problems:

(i) Paucity of land: A compelling problem listed by a large number was paucity of land. The few agricultural labouring families which own land had small plots of arid land or land located on river beds. The problem of paucity of land was understood by many participants to be related to the fact of their ancestral occupation being non-agricultural. Others blamed their ancestors for not having made any efforts to acquire land when it was available and relatively cheap. At the same time, they understood that the land that had existed in some families had gradually become less viable because of divisions among heirs. This problem was related to the existence of large families.

(ii) Lack of employment opportunities: In the absence of land, lack of employment opportunities was also identified as a persistent problem. As the village economy is primarily agrarian, the only employment available within the village is in agriculture. However, agricultural employment is available to women for only two months each year. Work is available to them for 10 to 15 days at sowing and weeding time and five to seven days at harvest time in each cropping season. Women do not get any other form of employment within the village and they cannot seek employment outside. Many social sanctions prevent them from seeking employment in the market place.

The problem of lack of employment opportunities was seen to arise from many factors. It was pointed out that, over time, the land-holdings of landlords had also become smaller. As such, a large part of the work required on their land was met from the labour of the family itself. Employment opportunities in agriculture were understood to have shrunk also because of the introduction of modern technology. For instance, before the introduction of flour mills, employment had been available for the milling of pulses and rice and grinding of grain. This source of employment has become virtually non-existent now. Further, increased employment opportunities for the educated have not become available to the participants' families.

It was recognised that the problem of employment and income generation has become acute for their families because of the fact that they had given up their traditional occupation of skinning and leather processing. This occupation had been given up at least for a generation in the entire community. While the reasons for giving up could have been many, none of the participants and their present families are prepared to return to this occupation as they consider it dirty, even though, they are aware that one of the principal factors responsible for their present condition is that they are unwilling to utilize their traditional skills and are unable to learn any new skills.

(iii) Low wages: Within the limited employment available in agriculture, women face many problems. They are paid very low wage – i.e., approximately Rs. 4 for a 12-hour day of sowing and weaving and up to approximately 10 kgs of grain for one day of harvesting. These wages are often not paid fully and on time. Farmers promised them Rs. 4 to Rs. 5 per day but pay only Rs. 2 to Rs. 3 and often keep wages pending till the next harvest.

(iv) Bad working conditions: Apart from low wages, the women agricultural continues till sunset. In the absence of community facilities, they have to carry infant children to work where they are not provided with any shelters and the children remain constantly exposed to the forces of nature. In addition, the women are not permitted to nurse their children. The land-owners keep a strict vigil on the workers and do not permit them any free time to rest, drink water, or take care of their children.

(v) Inhuman behaviour of owner: Another problem reported by the participants was that the landowners' behaviour is characterised by a high level of brutality. They hit, abuse and shout at the workers at the slightest provocation. In fact, a kind of bondage was reported to exist between the workers' family and the family of specific landowners. Workers, whether men or women, were reported to be unable to exercise any choice in their selection of employer, and landowners appear to consider certain worker families to be bound to work on their land at sowing/harvesting time. As mentioned elsewhere, the landowners are also moneylenders and in many cases, the workers have taken substantial loans from the moneylenders/ landowners. However, the specific linkage could not be established because the women were either hesitant to relate specific pieces of information or, as is more likely, they do not have knowledge of specific transactions. As explained by some women, their menfolk rarely share such details with them. Women tend not to ask, but when they do, they are told that money matters should not be of concern to women.

Unwillingness of a worker to work on a specific landowner's fields may cost him his life as was illustrated by a case reported by a participant named Kampuri. The case of Hukmi and Kampuri of Mehtoli is well-known in the area. A few years ago at harvesting time, when Kampuri fell seriously ill her husband Hukmi decided not to go to work. The landlord attempted to persuade and threaten him to no avail. Frustrated, the landlord asked Hukmi to work overnight at his house as night watchman; and Hukmi was beaten to death that night. While the landlord responsible for Hukmi's death is well known, no action has been taken against him. On the contrary, the case of Hukmi is cited as evidence of the consequences of refusal to work. Thus, it can be seen that the landowner-agricultural labourer relationship is semi-

feudal in character. This relationship is reinforced and maintained by a strict caste hierarchy.

(vi) Exploitation by higher caste: Absence of productive land, lack of employment opportunities, low wages and inhuman treatment by landowners were all perceived by the women agricultural workers to be linked to their placement within the caste hierarichy. In other words, the fact that they belonged to lower castes, was perceived by the participants to be the basic reason for their deprivations. As a result, they identified the higher-caste landlords as their exploiters.

Lack of facilities like education for children, drinking water from wells, electric connections, loans and other benefits from government schemes, were all perceived within the caste context. The participants noted that while the facilities exist in their villages, people of the Chamar castes were not allowed access to them. They further identified that their major problem was that they were almost fully dependent on the higher caste landlords. They observed that they were dependent on the landlords for employment, drinking water, firewood and fodder for cattle as well as toilet facilities. The problem was further compounded by the fact that they had to depend on the same landlord for consumption loans. The landlords tightened their grip on the agricultural labour families by giving them loans freely but at exorbitant interest rates such that the loans were very difficult to repay.

Dependence of the agricultural labour families on the landlord was so high that the community of landlords was placed in the position of exercising power in various ways like prohibiting bara-processions of Chamar families from entering the village, prohibiting bridegrooms from wearing new clothes, and not allowing the "Toran" ceremony in marriages.

(vii) Problems related to government schemes. A few women and their families had been exposed to various governmental agencies and developmental schemes. As detailed earlier, some women participants have received buffaloes under the IRDP Scheme of the Central Government. However, the fact of possession of milch cattle has neither raised their income nor the nutrition level of their families. The process of selection, resulting in purchase of ill and unproductive buffaloes was understood to be primarily responsible for this state of affairs. The selection process was seen to work to the advantage of the government official-broker-cattle seller combine, at the cost of the beneficiary, who only got deeper in debt and even more incapable of raising income.

Strategies for change

Recapitulation of the problem categories helped to paint a picture of the social and economic conditions of the community. While facing this scenario,

the participants were questioned whether they were happy as they were, or did they want a changed picture? Whether they wanted to act to change the situation, or were they content to wait for change to take place? Whether they believed that their conditions can be improved and their problems solved. And finally, who can solve their problems or how can the problems be resolved?

These questions generated a flurry of excitement and activity resulting in loud reiterations of unhappiness with the existing situation, as well as expressions of desire for resolution of problems, removal of the undesirable elements in the situation, and change towards better socio-economic conditions. The group appeared united in their unhappiness with the present and hope for a different future.

The group was, however, thrown into disarray while asking questions regarding strategies for change and about "who" can solve their problems. Faced with these questions, a good number of participants expressed feelings of helplessness and confusion, questioning the ability of "mere" women to take constructive action. Others aired the expectation that the government will introduce changes to improve their lives while others requested the facilitators to lead them, airing the confidence that the facilitators have the abilities to guide. Yet others voiced the thought that as a united group they can attempt to oppose the exploiting class and gain benefits from governmental schemes.

A long and heated debate ensued. Each alternative was dealt with in detail. The issue of helplessness of women was examined first. Examples of successful, high-achieving women were spontaneously given by some participants who argued that some of the popular conceptions about women were wrong. While debate on this issue helped to highlight some social factors like lack of formal education, the "purdah" system and the resultant lack of exposure to ways of the world, it also helped to identify the strengths and positive abilities of women who, if they wished, could achieve anything

Discussion also focussed on the issue of dependance on the government. The generalized expectation of benefits was weighed against specific experiences of exploitation and fraud and the resultant disenchantment aid distrust. Consensus on the point that the government has not succeeded in improving their lot, that on the contrary, their conditions are much worse than those of their ancestors, was finally arrived at. It was generally recognised that dependence on government was not likely to help resolve their problems. Following this, it was also recognised that dependence on any outsider for sustained efforts was unrealistic.

The notion of collective, mutually-helpful action had been voiced and supported by a group of young, articulate and smart women. Pitted against

older women, these younger women argued at a logical plane putting across their points of view and proposing counter arguments to others. While they succeeded in gradually highlighting the lacunae in the alternatives proposed by others, they were unable to successfully expand and clarify the notion of collective action. They seemed impeded by the fact that the other women had no awareness and exposure to instances of collective action. The experiences of the tribals of Kotra Tehsil were narrated to them. The tribals of Kotra had been subjected to severe exploitation by landowners, moneylenders and corrupt government officials, such that in 1976 they received only Rs. 2-3 as wages for agricultural labour, paid as much as 50 to 60 per cent interest on consumption loans, and were regularly beaten into submission by landlords and police officers. Awareness of the exploitative nature of existing relationships and the possibility of changing them through collective action having been achieved through a labour camp organized by NLI faculty, the tribals organized themselves into the Adivasi Ekta Eram Vikas Samiti. Through this organization, they have acted to ensure payment of minimum wages for agriculture labour, effective dealings with government officials for obtaining developmental benefits and removal of social evils like drinking and sacrificed killing of buffaloes.

The experience was intently followed by the participants. In the discussion that followed, the participants focussed on the objectives on end-states most desirable to them. They figured that their problems would be overcome if they had (a) sufficient land, and (b) regular income generation opportunities. They also recognised that though both these objectives were attainable under existing government schemes, they were not available to them because of their illiteracy, ignorance and, most of all, lack of strength. They reiterated their realisation that their problems had been magnified because of the lack of unity and that the landlords, moneylenders and high caste people were able to exploit them because of their failure to support each other.

As the emerging focus of group discussions was unity and collective action, a structured exercise was introduced to provide an experience of group cohesion. In the exercise, two groups were formed and placed in a situation of conflict with instructions to fight. Initially, participants in each of the two teams playing the game displayed a high degree of excitement and willingness to fight each other. However, as the game proceeded, leadership shifted from the participants favouring attack to participants highlighting commonness of the two groups. Increasingly, in both groups, votaries of peace and unity gained strength as the participants realised that in fighting each other, both groups would lose and the outsider party would stand to gain and that in fighting each other, they would only harm themselves. As such, the participants displayed a

high level of belief in collective action while demonstrating their capacity for maintaining unity.

Action planning

As a group, the participants had earlier identified regular income generating opportunities and ownership of land as being primary objectives which were attainable through collective action from existing government schemes. However, the participants were not entirely familiar with specific developmental schemes and administration procedures. Also, in the absence of any experience of direct interactions with government officials, the women felt hesitant to approach them.

A number of government officials from the district and block levels were therefore invited to interact with the participants. The Block Development Officer, Education Extension Officer and Irrigation Extension Officer along with an official from the Khadi and Village Industries Commission described various developmental schemes for income generation. Detailed descriptions of the schemes were followed by attempts to explain procedures. The officials also helped the participants consider each alternative means of income generation in terms of financial viability and marketing considerations. This discussion helped participants to evaluate the benefits available under various schemes like manufacturing of soaps, handloom and khadi weaving, tailoring, knitting, cloth printing, rope making and establishment of small commercial ventures.

In this discussion, the process of planning for the future had begun. Planning focussed at the level of the individual was continued in small groups. As each individual participant considered the most appropriate scheme, she also attempted to specify the procedure in terms of concrete action steps required to achieve it. Individually, the participants identified the purchase of buffaloes, manufacture of soap, rope making, weaving of handloom and spinning of khadi. Further, they affirmed that individual objectives could be met more effectively when all of them were supportive of each other and when they operated as a collective force against exploiters.

Thus, the participants formulated individual action plans in the context of a perception of mutual support. The camp helped the participants gain insights into their problems, perceive the unrealistic nature of their expectations and dependance on external agencies, and develop faith in self-initiative and collective action.

APPENDIX

Participant Profile

I. Village			II. Age Distribution			III. Education Levels		
	No.	**%age**	**Age**	**No.**	**%age**		**No.**	**%age**
Mehtoli	18	(32.7)	14-20	15	(27.3)	Illiterate	52	(94.5)
Chentoli	29	(52.7)	21-30	21	(38.2)	Up to Primary	3	(5.5)
Chokhawada	8	(15.5)	31-40	11	(20.0)			
Total	55		41-50	4	(7.3)			
			51-60	4	(7.3)			

IV. Marital Status			V. Family Type			VI. Occupation		
	No.	**%age**		**No.**	**%age**		**No.**	**%age**
Married	50	(90.0)	Joint	25	(45.5)	Agriculture	34	(61.8)
Unmarried	3	(5.5)	Nuclear	30	(54.5)	Student	3	(5.5)
Widow	2	(3.6)				Agri. + Non-Agricultural Labour	9	(16.4)
						Housewife Only	9	(16.4)

VII. Ownership of Land			VIII. Ownership of Livestock			IX. Sources & Size of Loan		
Size of Land (in Bighas)	**No.**	**%age**	**Livestock**	**No.**	**%age**	**Source**	**No.**	**%age**
0	12	(21.8)	1 Buffalo	23	(41.8)	Government	1	(1.8)
0.1-5.0	30	(54.5)	2 Buffalo	9	(16.4)	Moneylender	31	(55.4)
5.1-10.0	7	(12.8)	3 Buffalo	4	(7.3)	Goat+Moneylender	12	(21.8)
10.1 & More	6	(10.9)	1 Goat	2	(3.6)	None	9	(16.4)
			1 Cow	1	(1.8)	Don't know	2	(3.5)
			3 Cows	3	(5.4)			
			2B+3C	1	(1.8)			
			1B+2C	1	(1.8)			
			None	11	(20.0)			

X. Child Bearing

	Mehtoli	**Chentoli**	**Chokharwada**	**Total**
i) No. of pregnancies	112	160	32	304
ii) No. of births Male Female	 57 45	 86 67	 15 12	 158 124
Total	102	153	27	282
iii) No. of children alive Male Female	 39 26	 54 37	 11 6	 104 69
Total	65	91	17	173
iv) Infant mortality Male Female	 13(31.6) 19(42.2)	 32(37.2) 30(44.8)	 4(26.6) 6(50.0)	 54 (34.2) 55 (44.4)
Total	37(36.3)	62(40.5)	10(37.0)	109(38.7)
Male-female differential	(10.7)	(7.6)	(23.4)	(10 2)

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