

**Anilkumar Choudhuri\***

## **Seasonal Migration—A Technique for Self-Preservation by the Rural Poor : A Case Study in West Bengal'**

### **Introduction**

FOR a long time there used to be a seasonal movement by the rural poor belonging to agriculturally backward areas to relatively developed areas for seasonal employment during the peak seasons of plantations and harvesting in West Bengal (Schendel and Aminul, 1984). However, till the mid seventies mostly the tribal communities from Bihar used to migrate seasonally to work as agricultural labourers. But for the last two decades and half, the rural poor, mainly consisting of landless agricultural labourers from agriculturally backward districts seasonally migrate for employment as agricultural labourers to agriculturally developed districts in West Bengal. This is a new feature in this state and to understand the nature of this seasonal migration, a case study was undertaken in a virtually mono-crop area in the district of Bankura, an area with little agricultural infrastructure and low cropping intensity. In Southern Bengal, it has been observed that agricultural labourers from relatively agriculturally backward areas like Purulia, Bankura, parts of Midnapur seasonally migrate to Bardhaman and Hooghly districts with high cropping intensity and shortage of labour during the peak seasons.

In a little over two and half decades, the growth in agricultural sector has gained a significant momentum in West Bengal. In terms of cropping intensity and productivity, some areas in the Gangetic West Bengal can now be compared with that of Northern India. However, the growth has not been uniform in West Bengal. In relative terms, however, all the areas have made significant progress in this period.

The progress in agricultural sector in West Bengal, as in other parts of the country, has been triggered by administrative measures like land-reform and registration of the share-croppers,

\*Sociological Research Unit. Indian Statistical Institute. 203. B. I. Road. Calcutta-700 035.

provision of minimum price support for selected major crops, development of infrastructure for institutional financing for all categories of cultivators, introduction of new crops, HYV seeds, chemical fertilizers, insecticides and pesticides in the cultivation of crops, development of mechanised and semi-mechanised irrigational infrastructure, development of storage, transportation and marketing facilities and so on. Today agriculture even in the remotest part of rural India has been integrated with the national economy.

Though this growth in agriculture has proved to be a boom for almost all categories of land owning cultivators, its beneficial effect seems to have by passed the landless agricultural labourers and those marginal farmers and share-croppers who mainly depend on working as agricultural labourers for their subsistence. This segment in the agricultural sector form the bulk of the rural people living below the poverty line. The number of agricultural labour is increasing substantially (De Haan and Ben Rogaly, 1996) and together with the cultivators, they form the bulk of the working force in the rural areas as shown in the following table.

TABLE 1: CULTIVATORS, LANDLESS AGRICULTURAL WORKERS AND OTHER WORKERS IN RURAL WEST BENGAL IN 1971, 1981 AND 1991 CENSUS

<i>Workers</i>	<i>Census Year (in '000)</i>		
	<i>1971</i>	<i>1981</i>	<i>1991</i>
Total main workers*	9,065	11,252	15,091
Cultivators	3,904	4,524	5,727
Landless agricultural labourers	3,172	3,778	4,855
Household industry	239	399	736
Other workers	1,749	2,551	3,773

*Source : Census of India, 1991, 1981, 1971.*

\*[The term "main workers" is used for 1981 census. In the case of 1971 census the reference is to 'workers' only.]

\*[Main workers defined in 1981 census is "main workers were those who had worked for the major part of the year preceding the date of enumeration i.e., those who were engaged in any economically productive activity for 183 days or six months or more during the year"]

There are varied reasons for the increase in the bulk of the landless agricultural workers in rural areas. However, the most important factor is that with better health facilities and increase in life span, there has been huge growth in the rural population. But apart from agriculture jobs, the other sectors in villages have remained almost stagnant. The potential rural workers have hardly any alternative than to work as agricultural labourers. They cannot move to urban areas as employment in urban West Bengal has also remained nearly stagnant during the period 1970-1990. During these two decades, the total employment in the public and private sector increased from 2.3 million to 2.6 million. Employment in public sector has almost reached a point of saturation. Employment in rural sector actually declined by over three hundred thousand (G.O.W.B., 1990-91). The schemes generated by the Central or State Government for the rural poor are mostly targeted to provide some additional man-days of

work for them to supplement their income without creating an alternative job opportunity. In the two major employment generating schemes, NREP and RLEGP, a total of 340000 man-days of work was created in rural West Bengal in 1986-87 (Mid Term Appraisal of 7th the Five year plan by the Government of West Bengal). With an estimated population of over 3.7 million agricultural labourers, the insignificance of the achievement of such schemes need to be emphasised. By end of 1990 the State Government has already distributed 364 thousand hectares of vested land to 1.9 million beneficiaries (G.O.W.B., 1990-1991). This small gift of land has changed their official status from 'labour' to 'cultivator', but not their economic status. This, however, benefitted the rural poor as all such families have legally obtained a homestead.

The landless agricultural labourers still has the major share in the agricultural labour force in West Bengal. The petty farmers or share-croppers with a little bit of agricultural land also depend for bulk of their income working for other farmers with large holdings. In certain cases, it has also been observed that some dependent members of farmers having economic holdings also work as agricultural labourers to supplement the family income. The 'quality' of life for the landless agricultural labourers has always been a continuous struggle for mere survival in a hostile environment. Agricultural employment is seasonal **and** these people cannot hope for a sustained job throughout the year even in agriculturally advanced districts. At the most, an agricultural worker can hope for a little over hundred man-days of work in a year (Basu, 1994). Studies previously undertaken by the author revealed that all the betterment schemes earmarked for these people have been pocketed by a small elite group among them (Choudhuri, 1983) and apart from working as agricultural labourer they survive by food-gathering, begging, taking loan, resorting to petty crime and even collecting cereals from rat holes, eating unusual things like rats etc. (Choudhuri, 1992,1995).

The growth in agricultural sector has benefitted the agricultural labourers in a particular way. It has already been said that such growth has been uneven. In some of the districts with high cropping intensity and cultivating short duration cereals etc. there is a scarcity of agricultural labour during peak agricultural seasons. Workers from neighbouring agriculturally backward districts seasonally migrate to these districts for employment. In South Bengal such movements have been observed to take place from districts like Purulia and Bankura, part of Midnapur to Bardhaman and Hooghly districts. Similar such workers also seasonally come to Bardhaman from Birbhum, Murshidabad and Dumka district in Bihar.

The present case study was taken up to (a) comprehend the nature of such seasonal migration; (b) whether such movements are beneficial for them; (c) whether such visits in new and relatively developed areas have helped them to find new ways for improvement of the condition of life at home; and (d) whether these periodic absence from home causes any hindrance for the schemes earmarked for them in their own villages.

A village was selected for the study which was undertaken in 1991-92. The methodology of the study consisted of firstly undertaking a detailed socio-economic survey of all the families to find out some of their demographic features, economic status, occupation, level of literacy etc. This survey also helped to identify the agricultural worker families who seasonally migrate. The survey also provided socio-economic data of the migrating families. This was

supplemented by some special surveys of these families. Apart from this, each family was thoroughly interviewed several times all through this year. Interviews were arranged with their employers, the panchayat officials, leaders of peasant organisations and other relevant persons, both at their places of residence and the places where they seasonally migrate.

The following section will present the findings of the survey and the conclusions drawn from the study. All data presented in this paper, unless otherwise stated, is based upon the study conducted in Satami.

## 2. Location and Socio-economic Features of Satami

West Bengal falls within the rice belt of India and the major part of the state is cultivated under rain-fed condition. The village Satami, in Hatgram Anchal, under Indpur police station, in Khatra Sub-Division, Bankura district was selected for this study as this district is more or less a rain-fed mono-crop area with a very low cropping intensity and hardly any industry, particularly in its rural areas. Most of its workers are engaged in agriculture and during Boro and Aman paddy transplantation and harvesting seasons a large section of these agricultural workers seasonally migrate to Bardhaman and Hooghly for work as agricultural labourers. Given this background, it was felt that a study of the seasonally migrant labour force in this village may provide some meaningful answers to our query. Incidentally, Satami is a rain-fed almost mono-crop area with hardly any infrastructure for agriculture or industry. The following table presents caste-wise distribution of the total households, persons and workers in Satami.

TABLE 2: CASTE-WISE DISTRIBUTION OF TOTAL HOUSEHOLDS, PERSONS AND MAIN WORKERS IN SATAMI.

Caste community	Total Households	Population			Worker		
		Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Bengalee Brahmin	15	91	53	38	47	30	17
Kshatriya	37	212	118	94	82	78	4
Napit	7	49	25	24	23	15	8
Kamar	2	11	5	6	4	4	0
Sunri (SC)	13	79	46	33	28	23	5
Bauri (SC)	19	132	60	72	92	47	45
Bhumij (ST)	41	203	99	104	138	69	69
Total	134	777	406	371	414	266	148

More than 50 percent of the families in this village and more than sixty percent of the workers belong to the schedule caste (SC) and schedule tribe (ST) communities. Out of the total female workers, over 75 percent belong to Bauri (SC) and Bhumij (ST) communities. The Kshatriyas constitute, around 25 percent of the families, total population and total workers. It will be evident from the following table that communities which have relatively more diversified occupations and who have less dependence on land or caste occupation (Brahmin),

have very few female workers. Incidentally, 454 persons among this village people are illiterate and 197 are hardly literate (caste/community wise 55 out of 91 Brahmins, 103 out of 212 Kshatriyas, 24 out of 49 Napits, 7 out of 11 Kamars, 28 out of 79 Sunris, 112 out of 132 Bauris, 125 out of 203 Bhumij are illiterate. There are 3 male graduates among Kshatriyas and 3 male and 1 female graduates among the Sunris (SC). The following table presents caste/community and landholding pattern of families in Satami.

TABLE 3 : CASTE/COMMUNITY WISE HOLDING SIZE AND HOUSEHOLD WISE LAND OWNERSHIP AND NUMBER OF FAMILIES ENGAGED IN AGRICULTURE

Caste / community	Landless	<i>Marginal Farmer Families</i> ( <i>&lt;2.5 acres</i> )	<i>Small Frmer Families</i> ( <i>&gt;2.5-&lt;5 acres</i> )	<i>Medium Farmer Families</i> ( <i>&gt;5-&lt;10 acres</i> )	<i>Total</i>	Family engaged in agriculture		
						<i>Cultivator</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Total</i>
Bengalee Brahmin	11	1	3	0	15	2	0	2
Kshatriya	5	23	6	3	37	17	7	24
Napit	1	4	2	0	7	2	0	2
Kamar	1	1	0	0	2	0	0	0
Sunri(SC)	0	7	3	3	13	5	2	7
Bauri (SC)	11	7	1	0	19	6	12	18
Bhumij (ST)	6	34	1	0	41	16	25	41
Total	35	77	16	6	134	48	46	94

Out of the 134 families residing in Satami, 94 families are fully or partly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. It is interesting to note that some of the families having small or marginal holdings. Apart from working as cultivators, they also work as agricultural labourers. There are 19 such families among the Bhumij, 1 among the Bauris, 2 among Sunris and 2 among Kshatriya. Among the Bengalee Brahmins, 13 families, including two land-holding families, do not work either as agricultural labourer or as cultivator. Two of them are engaged in service, four in petty business, 5 in caste occupation i.e. they work as priests and two are full-time beggars. Among the Kshatriyas, 8 such families work as skilled labourer, 3 are in business of some kind and 2 are in service. The 2 Kamar households work as blacksmiths, their caste occupation. Among the Napits 3, families are engaged in petty business and two work as hair dresser, their caste occupation. Among the Sunris, 3 of the 6 families are in service, two in petty business and 1 as skilled labourer. One Bauri household depends on service as their main occupation.

In Table 2, 414 persons have been shown as workers. Among these workers, 86 work as cultivators and 187 as agricultural labourers. Bulk of cultivators come from Kshatriya, Bhumij, Bauri and Sunri households Numbering 32,22,12 and 11 respectively. Bulk of the agricultural labourers come from Bhumij and Bauri households numbering 104 and 4 respectively. The agricultural labourers come both from landless agricultural and marginal farmer households. Other major occupations are Bagali, petty business and skilled labourer. These occupations provide work for 32,45, 19 workers respectively.

### Seasonal Migration

It was worked out that in 1991-92, the total man-days of work in agriculture available in Satami was 22000 man-days, for 86 cultivators and 187 agricultural workers to support their families. They average man-days of work available in the year for this workforce was 80 man-days. These man-days of work are again seasonal and mainly available during the peak seasons of plantation and harvesting. Even with two or three workers per household, this work could not provide adequate food for the worker families. Even if the workers were paid Rs. 18/- per day, the rate fixed by the government in 1990, a household with an annual income of Rs. 3600/- calculated at on the assumption that they get 200 man-days of work, could hardly pay for their minimum food requirements, and nothing to pay for their other necessities. In real terms, they get much less than Rs. 18 per man-day of work and after repayment of loans, taken earlier, their net annual earning is much less than Rs. 3600 calculated above. In an earlier study it was estimated that such families' average annual earning, through cash and kind, was no more than Rs. 1500/- in the village (Choudhuri, 1992).

In the seventies two things happened which opened a new source of employment for these people. Firstly with diversified cropping pattern along with introduction of short duration High-Yielding-Variety (HYV) of crops and opening up of agro-based industries, seasonal scarcity of agricultural labour was created in the two nearby agriculturally advanced districts of Bardhaman and Hooghly, creating job opportunities for agricultural labourers from other districts. Secondly, with the development of bus service net work these districts became easily accessible to persons living even in remote areas of the districts like Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum etc. This encouraged agricultural labourers from these districts to seasonally migrate to these developed districts on a regular basis. This migration is from rural to rural area, twice or thrice a year, for a short duration. These workers generally do not think in terms of permanent emigration, as they have some stakes in their villages of origin. They have a legally held homestead, a product of the land reform in West Bengal and within their villages they are entitled to get benefits of different beneficial schemes earmarked for persons living below poverty line.

In the village Satami a total of 56 families have been identified who seasonally migrate to Bardhaman and Hooghly to work as agricultural labourers. This is normally referred as "Pubey Jaoa" or "Namal Khata" i.e. going to the "East" i.e. Bardhaman and Hooghly. The following table presents caste/community and landholding pattern of the seasonally migrant households in Satami.

The table shows that all the landless families are not seasonal migrants and more than 50 percent of marginal farmer families seasonally migrate for job in Bardhaman and Hooghly. One Brahmin female migrate along with the Bauri migrants to work as agricultural labourer. The Bauris, with about 7 members per family, have 4 to 5 workers and the Bhumij with 5 members per family have almost 3 workers per family. This indicate that among these families a large number of children below 14 years of age and adults over 59 years of age work as labourers.

TABLE 4 : CASTE/COMMUNITY AND LANDHOLDING PATTERN OF MIGRANT HOUSEHOLDS, TOTAL NUMBER OF PERSONS AND WORKERS

<i>Holding size</i>	<i>Persons and Workers</i>	<i>Caste/community</i>	
		<i>Bauri (SC)</i>	<i>Bhumij (ST)</i>
Holding size :	Small farmer (>2.5-<5 acres)	1	0
	Marginal farmer (<2.5 acres)	7	31
	Landless agricultural Labourer	11	6
	Total	19	37
Persons :	Male	60	90
	Female	72	88
	Total	132	178
Workers:	Male	47	65
	Female	45	63
	Total	92	128

In this village there are three categories of migrants including seasonally migrating agricultural workers. One or two members of a small number of households have permanent or semi permanent employment in Asansol, Durgapur complex and are residing in those places. But they have not taken with them their families in their places of work. This indicates that some rural to urban migration has started in the village. The Brahmin families working as priests etc. also seasonally migrate to different places for their caste occupation. This is not a new phenomena. The seasonal migration by agricultural workers started about one and half decades prior to when this study was undertaken. The features of this migration is distinctly different from the other two categories of migrations observed in the village.

Earlier, these agricultural worker families used to go to the Arambagh (Hooghly) and Bardhaman town and assemble at the bus terminus. At this points, the would be employers used to meet them and after negotiation for wages and other facilities, they moved to their new work place. It is interesting to note that there was and still is no middleman involved when such contracts are made. Today firm contacts have been established between these households and their employers and they generally work with the same employers year after year. The employers, if necessary, drop a letter informing them when they require their service. In a sense for the employers there is a panel of migrant workers of their choice and for the migrating households also have a panel of employers also of their choice.

In Satami or in most part of Bankura, the practice is cultivation of long duration, rain-fed low yielding Aman paddy using broad casting method for plantation. After this plantation is over, they move to Bardhaman and Hooghly, having short duration HYV. Paddies and plantation of other categories of cereals, vegetables etc. for work. The migrant families move to their place of work in groups of 10-15 families alongwith all members of the family.

These families migrate at least twice a year as their services are required both for transplantation and harvesting. On an average, the workers in these families get 85 man-days of work in a year. This means that they stay at the place of their work for three to four

months in two or three different periods of time. During this entire period their children do not get any benefit of free education in the schools provided for them at home. Secondly, these families fail to get any benefit from any long duration benefitted schemes, available in their village. It was observed that goats given to them as loan from the panchayat under government income generating schemes, were sold out.

The agricultural workers working in these places, usually get Rs. 10 and 2 kg of rice per man-day of work. They also receive accommodation, fuel, mustard oil, vegetables and bidi tobacco. Both the genders receive the same wage. Two kg of rice paid to worker in Bardhaman and Hooghly is usually consumed by these families at their place of work. However, from the cash amount paid, i.e., Rs. 10 per day's work, with an average of 85 man-days of work and each Bauri household having an average of 4 workers, the cash income of such households will be around Rs. 3400 and that of the Bhumij having an average of 3 workers per households, an average Rs. 2550 per household. This is a substantial income for these households.

During their stay at Bardhaman or Hooghly, they come into contact with the local agricultural workers and this prove to be beneficial to them as they learn from these people how to organise themselves to pursue their employers at home for better wages. They also come into contact with the reasonably successful local peasant organisations through the local workers. This contact prove helpful to them when they get into some trouble. They have become more aware about their rights and this is reflected in their dealing with the employers at home. The employers in Satami sometimes express their misgiving and say that "Pube Gia Mathay Uthechay" i.e., these people have become a nuisance after going to the East.

It is well known that in Bardhaman and Hooghly districts the political movement, panchayat system, land-reform, registration of share-cropper are better organized compared to other districts of West Bengal. This tend to have a remarkable influence on these migrants' behaviour. It is observed that the migrant labourers became linked with socio-political-cultural organisations in "East". As a result of this they got politically more matured and are motivated to use this knowledge for collective bargaining. They have learned that as voters they have some political leverage over the local political leaders and while bargaining with their employers, they force such leaders to help them for a better deal with their employers.

However these contacts with the people in the "East" does not make them merely militant. They learn new and better techniques of cultivation, farm management etc. and they try to introduce such techniques at home after convincing their employers that these will be beneficial to them. The migrant labourers always advise for better seeds, fertilisers etc. to their employers. The local cultivators admitted that they have learn the new technology from migrant labourers. Here is an example of such diffusion of knowledge through the migrant labourers. One cultivator had some "Jola" land (low land) with irrigation facilities. His labourer advised him for Boro paddy cultivation and helped him in the proper use of HYV seeds, fertilizer and the new technique of Boro paddy cultivation. Through their advice new HYV of wheat, potato and boro have been introduced in this village. Both labourers and landowner admitted that this has created extra 3-4 man-days work per household per year.

As these migrant labour force constantly move to Bardhaman and Hooghly, a legitimate question may arise: is there any clash of interest between them and the local agricultural workers? No such clash of interest was noticed between the two groups. Cultivation both in Bardhaman and Hooghly districts depend largely on canal irrigation. The irrigation department of the state government permits use of canal water for short and fixed period for cultivation in each area and all operations involving cultivation has to be completed within this period. The local labour force cannot cope with the situation and unless these migratory workers come and work with the local labour force, cultivation will be jeopardized in these districts. These two forces are complementary to each other and at present there is no reason for clash of interest between the two labour groups. With land-reform being implemented in West Bengal, part of the local agricultural workers have their own piece of land. Apart from this, the local labour force get alternative job opportunities in the newly developed agro-based industries, transport services and many other non-agricultural activities. All this provide ample scope to the migratory agricultural workers to work in these district, for several months, without disturbing the employment requirement of the local workers.

The migrant agricultural workers earn a reasonable amount of cash from the work they do in the places where they seasonally migrate. They save part of what they get as payments in kind and take this back home. They also bring back a large portion of what they are paid in cash. However, often this saving is used upon their way back home on such purchases as radio-sets, tape-recorder, cosmetics, ornaments, costly kitchen utensils and many other non-essential items from the towns and markets they visit. Part of the cash is also spent on alcoholic drinks.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomena of seasonal migration by the agricultural workers seems to have proved to be a blessing for them. Instead of starving at home they work at a higher wage rate at least for 3 or 4 months. They are also making some money to spend on a few luxuries as this adds a little spice to their life. They are also learning certain new ways to improve their lot at home. They have become aware of their rights as agricultural labourers and also learned to make collective demands for fulfillment of these rights as an organised group at home. They have also learnt new-techniques of irrigation and cultivation and they are trying hard to introduce these new techniques at Satami. In a sense this seasonal migration has even given them a new meaning of life for their self preservation and an elevated self esteem. They are eager to act for changing their environment by their new social awareness; they no longer have to wait for something to turn up for them.

Although their condition has improved a lot, this cannot be thought of as a break through to take them out of the monotony, drudgery and the poverty of their life. In an earlier study, it was observed that their annual expenditure was much higher than their earnings and they always had to fall on a debt trap. This additional work due to seasonal migration may provide some relief to them but cannot take them out of this debt-trap. There is definite need for creation of alternative job opportunities which will provide employment to part of this labour

force so that each household have some steady income throughout the year. Otherwise they may earn a little more but they will always be on the move from home to the "East" and back throughout the year. This has proved to be a hindrance for education of their children. Their constant movement has also hindered adoption of any long-term employment and development schemes targeted to improve their life style. However given the existing situation they cannot stop their seasonal migration unless they are provided with some additional income at home.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Dr. Suraj Bandyopadhyay, Dr. P. K.. Majumdar and Alok Banerjee for their constant encouragement and suggestion in this study.

### **References**

- Basu, Ajit Narayan, 1994, Desh Parikalpanar Utsa Manush. *Utsa Manush*. Oct.-Nov.
- Choudhuri, Anilkumar, 1983, Roadblocks to Tribal Development: A Sociological Inquiry. *Unpublished Ph. D. thesis*.
- Choudhuri, Anilkumar, 1992, Socio-economic Mechanism for the Survival of Landless Agricultural Labour in Rice Area of West Bengal: Two case studies. *Unpublished post-doctoral thesis*.
- Choudhuri, Anilkumar, 1995, The storage of loss food grains from rat menace. *Journal of the Indian Anthropological Society*, **30** (3).
- De Haan, Arian and Ben Rogaly, 1996, Eastward Ho ! Leapfrogging and seasonal migration in Eastern India. *South Asia Research*, **14** ( ).
- Govt. of West Bengal, 1990-91, Economic Review, Statistical Appendix.
- Govt. of West Bengal, 1986-87, Mid Term Appraisal of 7th Five Year Plan. Development and Planning Department.
- Van Schendel, Willem and Faraizi, Aminul Haque, 1984, *Rural Labourers in Bengal 1880-1980*. Erasmus University, Comparative Asian Studies Programme, Rotterdam.