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OVERVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On behalf of the Study Group on

ORGANISATION OF RURAL LABOUR

AND

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT,  
UNIONS AND VOLUNTARY AGENCIES

under the National Commission on Rural Labour

Prepared by  
**M.V. Nadkarni**  
(Chairman of the Study Group)

**Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore**

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MEMBERS OF THE STUDY GROUP

on

'Organisation of Rural Labour and the Role of  
Government, Unions and Voluntary Agencies'

under the

National Commission on Rural Labour

\*

(in alphabetical order)

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## 0. Preface

0.1 The Study Group on 'Organisation of Rural Labour and the Role of Government, Unions and Voluntary Agencies' was set up by the National Commission on Rural Labour with Prof M V Nadkarni as the Head of the Group with the following Terms of Reference:

- i) To examine and study the nature and characteristics of rural labour and the disabilities suffered by them on account of their being unorganised;
- ii) To study and analyse the factors, economic, social, political, administrative, legal and others, that are responsible for poor organisation of rural labour and the problems arising in the formation of organisations by rural labour;
- iii) To study and assess the measures and policies pursued so far and the role played by states, unions and voluntary organisations in the formation and strengthening of rural organisations;
- iv) To examine the legal and administrative measures taken so far in the direction of organising rural labour and suggest modifications in the existing laws/propose legislations for the purpose; to examine in this regard, the Trade Union Act 1926, for safeguarding the interest of rural labour and facilitating the formation of organisations and, make recommendations, if necessary, for incorporating modifications in the Act for this purpose;
- v) To make recommendations for enabling rural labour to overcome the constraints in forming organisations and making the existing ones more effective in (i) checking exploitation in different forms and (ii) contributing, in a positive way, towards better working conditions through raising competitive position, creating greater awareness, and protecting their interests;
- vi) To study and suggest the nature and types of organisations most suited to rural labour, with special reference to labour cooperatives and unions, and to examine the desirability of forming rural labour organisations on the basis of
  - (a) skilled, semi-skilled and un-skilled labour,
  - (b) main occupations in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors in rural areas,
  - (c) types of agricultural labour like contract

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  - (c) types of agricultural labour like contract

labour, casual labour, rehabilitated bonded labour etc.

- (d) geographical or regional considerations,
  - (e) most under-privileged classes, like the scheduled castes and tribes, and
  - (f) special problems encountered by certain classes of rural labour.
- vii) Organising and involving the rural weak in Common Property Resource Management and Environmental Improvements.
  - viii) To make recommendations on any other aspect considered important by the Study Group.

0.2 The Study Group started functioning since April 1989 with the following members:

Prof Deepak Banerjee, Calcutta  
Dr Sucha Singh Gill, Patiala  
Mr Jagdish Joshi, Representative of the Ministry of Labour  
Mr B V Kakkilaya, Mangalore  
Prof R S Morkhandikar, Aurangabad  
Prof M V Nadkarni, Bangalore (Head)  
Dr Jagdish Prasad, Patna  
Prof D Narasimha Reddy, Hyderabad, and  
Prof Joseph Tharamangalam, Bangalore

Mr H C Jayal of NCRL served as Liaison Officer

0.3 Seven special studies prepared respectively by Prof Banerjee, Dr Gill, Mr Kakkilaya, Prof Morkhandikar, Dr Prasad, Prof Narasimha Reddy and Prof Tharamangalam have been sent earlier to Shri G Asvathanarayan, Member Secretary, NCRL. Together with the present overview paper, they constitute the Report of the Study Group. In view of the pressure of time, a common document signed by all the members could not be prepared. It was also felt that it was not necessary.

0.4 The present paper, "Overview and Recommendations", draws from the special studies by the members of the Study Group as well as other relevant literature and from my own field experience during the last several years in the southern states and Maharashtra. The special studies have covered the experience of organisation of labour and the role of government, unions and voluntary agencies in a few

selected states, - namely, West Bengal (Banerjee), the northern states in general and Punjab in particular (Gill),

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Karnataka (Kakkilaya), Maharashtra and Gujarat (Morkhandikar), Bihar (Prasad), Andhra Pradesh (Reddy), Tamil Nadu and Kerala (Tharamangalam). It was not possible for the special studies to cover all the states and territories of India, but it is felt that the areas covered by them are vast enough to bring out policy implications for the country in general. They will naturally have to be modified in the light of the special problems faced by respective states.

0.5 I wish to heartily thank the National Commission on Rural Labour for assigning this task to us. In particular, I am grateful to Prof P C Joshi and Prof Pradhan H Prasad, Members of the Commission, Mr Suresh Mathur, previous Member-Secretary, and Mr G Asvathanarayan, the present Member Secretary, for valuable discussions and kind encouragement. The Commission and its officers, Mr Jayal and Mr R Tandekar, also helped by providing a few useful documents on the subject. I am specially grateful to all the members of the Study Group for their valuable help and collaboration in this effort. Apart from the studies prepared by them, discussions with them during a Meeting of the Study Group on 12th Dec 1989, were very helpful. Mr Jagdish Joshi, Representative of the Labour Ministry, made available a few relevant documents and gave good suggestions for the Study Group. I am grateful also to the Institute for Social and Economic Change, its Director and Administrative Staff for their very kind co-operation. I had the benefit of discussions with several colleagues in the Institute's faculty, in particular, V M Rao, Ramesh Kanbargi and Abdul Aziz. Discussions with Mr M Maheshan, Labour Commissioner and a few other officials of the Government of Karnataka were also helpful. Mr Krishan Mahajan kindly allowed me access to some of his writings on socio-legal investigations into labour problems in the informal sector. We are very grateful to the spokesmen of a few organisations of workers in rural industries and voluntary agencies engaged in rural areas, with whom we had interviews. Thanks are due to Mr E N Ashok Kumar for his bibliographical assistance as well as his help in field work, and to Mr S Arun Kumar for diligent typing.

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1. In the second part of his study, Kakkilaya also draws from the experience of Kerala in suggesting legislative measures, since Karnataka does not have a similar experience.



## 1.0 Definition, Criteria and Coverage

1.1 A definition of rural labour is needed here not so much as an academic exercise as for the policy purpose of identifying households and persons in actual field situations with a view to promote their organisation, so that their bargaining power can be increased vis-a-vis those who dominate and exploit them. A useful criterion from this point of view is whether or not a household has a command or possession over means of production (principally, land), other than its own labour, which are adequate enough to provide for its livelihood. The households and persons who do not have such assets, or do not have them adequately, are poor and vulnerable and are forced to depend on selling their labour power either as a main or subsidiary source of livelihood. Such households can be easily distinguished from those who derive their income by owning productive assets like land, to work which they depend more on hired-in labour than on their own labour. In other words, the latter class of households mainly employs labour, in contrast to the former who sell their labour power. Small farmers may occasionally hire-in labour during peak seasons, but if they hire-out more labour on the whole than they hire-in, they are a part of Rural Labour.

1.2 Definitions of Rural Labour have varied from a broad one to a narrow one. The definition as given by the International Labour Organisation Convention 141 of 1975 covers 'any person engaged in agriculture, handicrafts or a related occupation in a rural area whether as a wage earner or as a self-employed person such as tenant, share cropper or small owner-occupier'. This is a broad definition and can include even small and marginal farmers provided that they cultivate their land mainly with their own labour, so that they qualify to be self-employed rather than employers. But such of those self-employed persons, who are not forced by their inadequate means of production to hire-out their labour to supplement income, cannot be put in the same class as rural labour who are exploited in the labour market.

1.3 On the other hand, a narrow definition would strictly include only those for whom wage paid work is the main economic activity. This would exclude households whose main activity is self-employment, but have to supplement their income through sale of their labour power. It would even exclude those whose main activity is not economically productive in the sense of directly income generating, such as house-work, but who have to hire-out their labour in busy seasons to supplement their incomes in terms of a 'secondary activity'. Thus, women and child labour in rural labour households or even in marginal farmer households would be

excluded from rural labour in terms of the narrow definition. Neither the broad nor the narrow definition sounds appropriate for our use.

1.4 These considerations suggest the identification of a rural household or a person on the basis of hiring out more labour than hiring in, that is, on the basis of being a net seller of labour. In actually identifying rural labour so defined, a direct question to this effect about net selling of labour, is not easily understood by respondents. It would require detailed recording of mandays hired out and hired-in during a year to arrive at the net status. But the same purpose is served by an alternative approach which, we believe, is easier in field work, and therefore, more workable.

1.5 A workable definition would be to take rural labour as including those rural households and persons for whom hiring out manual labour is normally either the main or secondary (and yet a significant) means of livelihood or income. Income is not to be interpreted here in terms of cash earnings alone. 'Source of livelihood' is a better word than 'income'; the former is also better understood in rural areas. Rural Labour so defined has two components. The first component of rural labour consists of those for whom manual labour is normally the main source of livelihood or income, even if they have some means of production which brings them meagre income. They constitute the hard core of rural labour. The second component of rural labour consists of those who are mainly self-employed and work their means of production mainly with their own or family labour, but, since this income is not adequate enough, have also to depend on hiring out manual labour in lean seasons making it their subsidiary and yet a significant source of income. The term 'significant' is added here only so that extremely occasional and rare hiring out of labour is excluded. The second component may not be as vulnerable as the first, but should be included among rural labour as they are still weaker vis-a-vis those who do not have to sell their manual labour at all. Besides, the line of distinction between the two components is hardly stable, since the second component is forever in the danger of lapsing into the hard core. If both are united in organised struggles for improving their bargaining power in the labour market, they would have more strength and better chances of success than if the hard core fights alone. Since both components can gain from an improvement in the bargaining power in the labour market on wage related issues, they have common interests which provide the basis for their unity.

1.6 Rural Labour is so defined here that it is independent of the forms of remuneration of labour, piece-rate or time rate, annual wage or daily wage, wage in kind or in cash. But rural labour would exclude those like school teachers and government servants (including regular employees of local government like Panchayats) who are on salaried employment and those covered by the Factories Act. We would also exclude crop sharers. Though crop sharing is a way of remunerating labour, they - as crop sharers - are not in the labour market as employees. They can be included only if they also need to hire-out their labour besides crop sharing. Rural Labour would cover both agricultural labour and other rural labour such as in brick-kilns, beedi making and other rural industry, quarry work and construction. It would also cover women and children whose main activity may not be directly economic in the sense of fetching any direct income for themselves, but offer themselves for occasional and seasonal employment. It would cover even migrant labour who have a base in rural areas, but seasonally migrate to other places including urban areas for construction and other work.

1.7 The concept of labour should also be flexible enough to cover such cases as in bidi industry where workers have, in some places like Gujarat, have to buy, with their own money, raw material like tobacco and leaves, and sell it to given traders or middlemen. It may apparently look like trading, but they are paid essentially for their labour on piece rate basis, and they are tied to particular middlemen. Even if in such cases, workers may appear to receive sale price, they are essentially in the bidi market, and not labour market. This position is recognised by the Bidi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act 1966. Further, the bidi workers are employees even if they work at their own dwelling places, and they are employees of the principal employer, the bidi company, and not of the middlemen or contractor. (Mahajan, 1988, ch.3; Patwardhan and Mahajan, 1982, ch.4). The responsibility for implementing labour laws rests on the principal employer, who should not get away from it through resorting to contractor system.

1.8 It may be recalled that the Rural Labour Enquiries of 1964-65 and 1974-75 used the criterion of major source of income. While the First Agricultural Labour Enquiry (1950-51) used the criterion of major part of working time spent on wage employment, the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry (1956-57) used the criterion of major source of income. While the time and income criterion may broadly go together, they need not actually tally. This was seen from the fact that while the First Agricultural Labour Enquiry estimated the number of agricultural labour households to be 17.90 million in 1950-51, the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry estimated it at a lower figure of 16.31 million though the number should have increased in six years.

1.9 Between the two criteria, source of income or livelihood is a better indicator of the welfare of a household. Where the two indicators do not tally, the assetlessness of a household is better indicated if wage employment is its main source of livelihood rather than its main activity in terms of time spent. It may also be noted that it is not necessary to actually estimate income by sources to know the main and subsidiary sources of income or livelihood; 'Work' or time spent on work may be a clear concept in the context of formal employment in the organised sector, but not in a semi-feudal, pre-capitalist, informal or unorganised sector, particularly when work is multifarious and undefined with fixed hours. A 'source of livelihood', on the other hand, is more easily understood in rural areas. Moreover, the concept is applicable both to a household and to an individual person, but more particularly so to the former since incomes within a household are normally pooled together. In contrast, the time spent can only be individually reckoned, and is not easily applicable to a household collectively. It probably explains why the Population Censuses, which count persons, find it more expedient to go by the main activity in terms of time spent.

1.10 While our Population Censuses of 1951 and before broadly used the concept of earning or livelihood for the classification of workers, the recent Censuses have preferred to use the concept of main activity in terms of time spent on economically productive work. A major problem with this criterion is the consequent underestimation of the economic role played by female and child labour because their main activity is not directly economic. The nature of their secondary activity which is directly economic is not often properly recorded by enumerators.

1.11 We conclude the section now by bringing together its operative parts. For the purpose of identification of the most vulnerable and the exploited class, whose need for organisation is most urgent, the practical approach in a field situation is to first focus on rural households, which, not having productive assets, or having them very inadequately, depend on the sale of their labour power to make a living. Having done so, the aim should be to involve all labouring members of the household in such organisations of labour, and not the heads of households alone who happen to be males generally. As we shall see, the need for organising female and child labour is no less great. By 'labouring members', we mean not only those for whom earning through hiring out manual labour is a 'main activity', but also those for whom it is a secondary and yet a significant activity. It means that not only women and children whose main activity is not directly economic (income

Table 2.1 Rural Workers in India

	in Million				As % of Rural Workers				
	Agric. Labour	Culti- vators	NonAgric workers	Margi- nal wor- kers	Total Rural wor- kers	Agric Lab- our	Culti- vat- ors	NonAgric workers	Margi- nal work- ers
-----1961-----									
M	16.8	65.2	24.7	-	106.7	15.7	61.1	23.1	-
F	13.8	32.7	9.0	-	55.5	24.9	58.9	16.2	-
P	30.6	97.9	33.7	-	162.2	18.9	60.3	20.8	-
-----1971-----									
M	30.4	67.5	22.6	-	120.5	25.2	56.0	18.8	-
F	15.2	9.2	3.6	-	28.0	54.3	32.9	12.9	-
P	45.6	76.6	26.3	-	148.5	30.7	51.6	17.7	-
-----1981-----									
M	32.8	75.5	28.5	3.1	139.9 (136.8)	23.4 (24.0)	54.0 (55.2)	20.4 (20.8)	2.2 (-)
F	19.9	14.7	5.0	17.8	57.4 (39.6)	34.7 (50.3)	25.6 (37.1)	8.7 (12.6)	31.0 (-)
P	52.7	90.2	33.5	20.9	197.3 (155.5)	26.7 (29.9)	45.7 (51.1)	17.0 (19.0)	10.5 (-)

M: Male                      F: Female                      P: Persons

Source: Population Censuses of 1961, 1971 and 1981 respectively

Notes: 1. 'Total Rural Workers' between 1961 and 1971 are not comparable. For 1981, two sets of figures are given; those outside parentheses include marginal workers and are therefore comparable with the corresponding figures for 1961, but those in parentheses exclude marginal workers and are thus comparable with the corresponding figures for 1971.

2. The category-wise absolute figures are comparable only between 1971 and 1981; they cannot be compared with 1961.

3. The category-wise percentage of 1971 are comparable with corresponding percentages of 1981 which are given in parentheses. Other percentages are not quite comparable between the three Censuses, but the margin of error involved in comparison is rather small in the case of male, though much wider among female workers.

2.2 We can see from Table 2.1 here that the number of agricultural labourers defined by main activity increased from 45.6 million in 1971 to 52.7 million in 1981, while their proportion to total rural workforce declined marginally from 30.7 per cent to 29.9 per cent during the same time. Their proportion to total agricultural workers inclusive of cultivators also declined from 37.3 per cent to 36.5 per cent during the period. This marks a reversal of trend because, between 1961 and 1971 this proportion had increased. This is seen even if we take the proportion of only male agricultural labour to male agricultural workers, which is much more comparable than the proportion in respect of female (because marginal workers are mostly female as can be seen from the 1981 Census data in the table). The former proportion increased from 20.5 per cent in 1961 to 31.1 per cent in 1971. This is generally attributed to the impact of the so-called land reforms during the sixties which allowed personal resumption of holdings by landlords in the leased-out lands, resulting in the expropriation of tenants and their conversion to the status of agricultural labour. The horse had already bolted from the stable, and nothing much could be done to correct this by the subsequent supposedly more radical land reforms of the 1970s. But inspite of a substantial addition to the number of agricultural labour during the 1960s, they were still outnumbered by cultivators even by 1981 when the ratio was 1.71 cultivators for every agricultural labourer. If small cultivators with secondary activity as labour are counted among agricultural labour, the ratio may improve in favour of labour but not enough to reverse it. For example, even if all marginal workers are added to agricultural labour, they would still be outnumbered by cultivators. This fact has a major significance for organisation of agricultural labour. Let alone the economic power based on the ownership of means of production, even the political power of agricultural labour is weaker in any democratic number game. This trend is likely to continue with increasing poverty and landless of rural labour pushing them to urban areas, leaving behind weaker labour to contend with the increasing power of farmers. Though agricultural labour, being more vulnerable, needs greater protection from the state, the greater political power of the farmers may not allow it unless the state is more determined and can resist farmer power in this regard. But unless the rural labour are organised to bring pressure on the state, the state is not likely to act effectively on their behalf.

2.3 An interesting thing emerging from the Census data is the increase in the proportion of female workers defined by main activity from 18.9 per cent in 1971 to 25.5 per cent in 1981. Even among the agricultural labour by main activity, their proportion increased from 33.3 per cent to 37.8 per cent during the period. What is remarkable here is that such an increase in their proportion is not seen when marginal workers are included in the workforce. Actually the proportion of women declined between 1961 and 1981 (taking comparable years) among total workforce inclusive of marginal workers from 34.2 per cent to 25.5 per cent. In the face of this decline, an increase in the proportion of female workers by main activity suggests actually an increasing desperation of rural labour pushing their women into the labour market from the status of mainly housewives, making them labourers even in terms of main activity. It also suggests that since female labour is becoming more prominent in the labour market, they need more attention in organising them than before.

2.4 The Rural Labour Enquiry Report of 1977-78 is another source of data on rural labour, from which we can know the magnitude of both agricultural and nonagricultural rural households. This can be seen from Table 2.2 here, which presents data for both 1974-75 and 1977-78. The changes during a short span of 3 years may not necessarily denote reliable trends, but our interest here is more on the broad structure than on the change during the short interval. The fact of rural labour - including both agricultural and nonagricultural labour - being outnumbered by other households, is seen here too, corroborating the observation in respect of agriculture seen from the Census data. Yet, the rural labour households formed an enormous 36.8 per cent of all rural households in 1977-78, the bulk of them (81.3 per cent of rural labour) being in agriculture alone. Another major fact seen from the table is that around half of the rural labour households belong to SC & ST communities which are socially also vulnerable. Also, a much higher proportion of SC & ST households work as rural labour households than in the general population.

Table 2.2 : Agricultural and Non-Agricultural Rural Labour Households - All India

	1974-75	1977-78
1. No. of Total Rural Households (hhs)	82,083	95,675
2. No. of Rural Labour hhs	24,835	35,171
As percent of (1)	30.3	36.8
3. No. of Agricultural labour hhs	20,739	28,587
As percent of (2)	83.5	81.3
4. Percent of Non-Agricultural Rural Labour hhs	16.5	18.7
5. No. of SC & ST Rural hhs	24,148	27,685
As percent of (1)	29.4	28.9
6. No. of SC & ST Rural Labour hhs	11,686	18,535
As percent of (2)	47.1	52.7
As percent of (5)	48.4	66.9
7. No. of SC & ST Agric. Labour hhs	10,132	13,522
As percent of (6)	86.7	73.0

SC - Scheduled Castes

ST - Scheduled Tribes

Source: Rural Labour Enquiry Report 1977-78 (from excerpts provided by the National Commission on Rural Labour)



2.5 It would be useful to know inter-state differences in the proportion of rural labour, as it would reveal where they are more prominent. Table 2.3 below presents, among other things, statewise proportions of rural labour households to total number of rural households based on the data from Rural Labour Enquiry Report for 1977-78, and the proportions of agricultural labour to total number of agricultural workers based on Population Census of 1981. In an attempt to decipher patterns in the inter-state differences in the proportions, they are presented under four categories of states - (i) states with a relatively advanced level of politicisation and organisation of rural labour under leadership of mainly the leftist political parties, (ii) states with higher levels of agricultural productivity per hectare, indicating a higher level of agricultural development, (iii) states with lower levels of agricultural productivity per hectare or lower levels of agricultural development, and (iv) other states. States are categorised according to level of productivity on the basis of a recent study by Bhalla and Tyagi (1988). Though the study pertains to three reference years, we have used only the figures relating to the triennial average of 1980-83. The ranking of states in this respect is presented in the last column of Table 2.3 here. It may be noted that though Kerala ranks second in this regard, it is placed in the first category. Obviously the state can be included in both categories. Similarly, though only two states have been placed in category (i), it does not mean that there is no politicisation or organisation of rural labour in other categories, but comparatively it is at a lower key there. It may also be noted that within each category, states are arranged as per their ranking in productivity per hectare.

2.6 It is interesting that the three southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh have the highest proportion of both rural and agricultural labour. Though not as much as in Kerala and West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh have also witnessed organised struggles of agricultural labour. A numerical prominence of agricultural/rural labour seems thus to be a factor in favour of their organisation. Another factor favouring their organisation seems to be higher levels of agricultural productivity resulting in higher demand for labour. Higher productivity can not only enable higher wage payments, it can also improve the bargaining power of labour who are also numerically prominent in such states to make their bargaining power felt. A strong correlation between numerical strength of labour and per hectare productivity need not, however, be expected. For example, Punjab and Haryana with high ranks in productivity rank lower in respect of the proportion of labour. Jammu and Kashmir, also high ranking in

productivity, comes lowest in the proportion of labour. The nature of the crop and extent of mechanisation also have a decisive influence. States with a high productivity on account of rice demand labour power more than other states with equally high productivity on account of other crops. In fact, farmers are known to reduce their requirements of labour through shifts in cropping pattern.

2.7 Table 2.3 here also shows the proportions of female labour among agricultural labour in rural areas. Not only rice growing states like Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have higher proportions of female labour, even predominantly semi-arid states like Maharashtra and Karnataka also have this feature. While technical conditions of rice production generate demand for female labour particularly, low productivity in semi-arid tracts induces greater supply of female labour in the labour market. On the other hand, the northern states of J & K, Punjab and Haryana have low proportions of female labour which seems to be due partly to social factors that prefer to keep women behind the veil, and partly due to high productivity which relaxes the supply push of female labour. On the whole, the states south of the of Vindhyas seem to have a higher proportion of female labour.

2.8 Participation in economically gainful work by children is a special characteristic of the Third World Countries. India is no exception. Child Labour is defined as participation in gainful activity in ages of 5 to 14. Though children also work at home considerably on household chores, they are not a part of the labour market as such and are not included in the definition of child labour. According to the 1981 Census, there were 10.2 million children as 'main workers', i.e., working the major part of the year, 6.7 million of whom were male and 3.5 million female. This means a child work participation rate of 9.2 percent for male and 5.3 percent for female children. If marginal workers are included, the participation rate increases to 10.0 and 7.8 percent respectively for males and females. It is higher among illiterate children than among the literate. The bulk of working children are in agriculture and livestock, accounting for 84.3 percent of total working children. It may also be noted, however, that in 1981 there were as many as 1.6 million children working in other industrial categories like mining and quarrying, manufacturing, trade, transport and other services. Next to agriculture and livestock, manufacturing is a major employer of children. There were 0.34 million male children in this sector (equally divided between household and other manufacturing) and 0.24 million female (0.15 in household manufacturing and 0.09 in other manufacturing) (Srikantan, 1990).

Table 2.3 : Inter-State Differences in Rural Labour

	Proportions (%) of			
	Labour households to Agric. households (Rural) 1977-78	Agri. Lab to Agri. Workers (Rural) 1981	Female Agric. Labour to Total Agric. Labour (Rural) 1981	Ranking of States as per Value Productivity per hectare in 1980-83
(i) States with relatively advanced level of politicisation and organisation of Rural Labour:				
Kerala	47.4	68.0	37.6	2
W.Bengal	44.7	45.5	15.5	7
(ii) States with higher levels of Agri. Productivity per hectare:				
Punjab	31.8	37.4	4.1	1
TamilNadu	47.9	51.3	47.8	3
Jammu & Kashmir	11.8	5.2	6.0	4
Haryana	30.8	26.1	10.6	5
Andhra P.	46.7	52.3	51.0	6
(iii) States with lower levels of Agric. Productivity per hectare:				
Karnataka	45.2	40.4	47.4	13
Bihar	41.0	44.7	26.7	14
Mahara-shtra	46.3	42.3	51.7	15
Madhya P.	30.9	31.4	47.5	16
Rajasthan	15.4	10.3	32.1	17
(iv) Other States				
U P	22.9	20.8	19.9	8
Assam	30.1	-	-	9
Gujarat	36.7	37.0	35.5	10
Himachal Pradesh	13.4	3.8	17.0	11
Orissa	41.7	36.8	31.7	12
All India	36.8	37.5	37.7	-

Note: In categorising states with high and low agricultural productivity, states were ranked according to their productivity per hectare during 1980-83 (triennial average) as given by Bhalla and Tyagi (1988, Table 2.) Since Kerala ranks high (second) in terms of productivity, it can be read in Category (ii) as well.

2.9 What are the prospects for the future as far as the number and proportion of rural, particularly, agricultural labour are concerned? Though expropriation of tenants and their conversion to the status of agricultural labour during the sixties seems to be a once-over process, there could be an increasing trend in the number as well as proportion of small cultivators who depend on agricultural labour as a source of livelihood due to increasing pressure of population on land. Unless employment opportunities outside agriculture increase fast enough, holdings would continue to be sub-divided and the number of non-viable holdings will keep on increasing. This is a point which Professor V K R V Rao has often been making, reiterated in his recent Inaugural Address at the Golden Jubilee Conference of the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics. (V K R V Rao, 1989, pp.379-384). He has shown that the number of marginal holdings of less than one hectare increased from 19.8 million in 1961-62, to 44.5 million in 1976-77 and further to 50.9 million in 1980-81, accounting for 39.0, 54.6 and 56.9 per cent of total holdings respectively. Though the area under them also increased, it did so less than proportionately compared to the number of holdings, so that there has been a continuous fall in the average size of marginal holdings. Rao warned that this tendency is likely to continue in the near future. While in the Western countries there took place a significant emigration of population from agriculture to other sectors, this has been much less marked in India. Agricultural labour, including both those having it as main and subsidiary activity, will soon out number cultivators. These economic forces also push more women into seeking wage employment. While numerically rural labour may become a greater force, economically they will be the weakest.

2.10 We conclude the section by bringing together its salient points. There are no proper data corresponding to our definition of rural labour which includes not only those who are labourers by main activity but also those who supplement their income significantly through hiring out their labour as a secondary activity. While the Census provides data on agricultural labour by main activity, employment status of nonagricultural rural workers and marginal workers is not available to distinguish the employees from the self-employed and employers. According to the Rural Labour Enquiry Report for 1977-78, rural labour families constituted nearly 37 per cent of all rural households in that year, while as per the 1981 Population Census, agricultural labour formed 36.5 per cent of all agricultural workers. Interestingly, both the proportions are close to each other. In absolute terms, agricultural

labourers by main activity alone were as many as 53 million, but the number of cultivators exceeded 90 million. If the number of marginal workers are also counted as agricultural labourers, the total amounted to nearly 74 million. Thus, while agricultural labour account for a significant part of the rural society, they are still outnumbered by cultivators. Cultivators have both a larger economic power and numerical strength giving them more political power. They are also much better organised both within political parties and outside party framework. They have launched successful movements and have a strong nation-wide lobby even otherwise (Nadkarni, 1987). On the other hand, rural labour are unorganised by and large, and over half of them belong to the socially weaker scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. In a few states like Kerala however, agricultural labour outnumber others and are in a relatively powerful position. Numerical strength and higher demand for labour following higher productivity per hectare, both facilitate organisation of labour. The role of female labour defined in terms of main activity seems to have improved over the years, indicating increasing desperation of rural labour - forcing those who were mainly housewives to seek wage employment. The role of female labour is particularly more prominent on the whole south of the Vindhya. Their role is likely to be more and more prominent as economic forces push women into seeking wage employment. This is coupled with the overall trend of an increase in the number and proportion of marginal holdings and a decline in their average size, pushing more and more cultivators into wage employment. Thus rural labour may soon outnumber the self-employed and employing cultivators with the dim prospects of diminishing employment available per head, unless ofcourse employment opportunities expand both within and outside agriculture.

### 3.0 Disabilities on account of being unorganised and Factors behind Poor Organisation

3.1 There is no dispute about the fact that rural labour is the weakest and most vulnerable among all workers dependent on wage or salaries employment. They account for the bulk of

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the rural poor, and have lower incomes and security than any other section of the working class. Not having any significant means of production other than their own physical labour power, they rank lowest in social status. The labourers belonging to scheduled castes are even more vulnerable as they suffer from double disadvantages. In times of emergencies, they have nothing else to depend upon

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or draw from. This vulnerability makes them even more

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2. In a socio-economic survey of 15 villages spread over Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, it was found that the average income per household in the reference year (1978-79) was lowest for Agricultural labour among all classes of households at Rs 2236, the next poorest class of marginal farmers (with less than 1 hectare) having Rs 3116. In contrast, the average annual income of all rural households together was Rs 4359, and that of large farmers (with 10 hectares above) Rs 51,464. (Nadkarni, 1985, esp. p.202). In another survey of four villages in a forest region in Karnataka again, with 1985-86 as the reference year, it was found that the income per agricultural labour household, including the imputed value of forest produce collected was a mere Rs 8911, compared with Rs 26,776 per household for all classes, and Rs 11,731 per household of poor peasants of marginal farmers, and Rs 87,193 per landlord household. (Nadkarni et al, 1989, esp. p.152). Agricultural labour had invariably the lowest income among all classes.

3. In a study of a village (Adul) severely hit by the 1972-73 drought in Maharashtra, it was found that the value of assets per household (animals, tools, jewellery etc) during the year immediately preceding drought was as low as Rs 218 in the case of landless labour, compared to Rs 1044 for all rural households. The drought forced many households to sell their assets as a result of which, the value of assets declined by 36 per cent among landless labour and 23 per cent among all rural households together. Thus landless labour were left with a mere Rs 139 worth of assets per household in 1973. (See Borkar and Nadkarni, 1975, esp pp 28-29).

dependent on the very classes which exploit them. Such a dependence exposes them to further exploitation both through lower wages and usuary, and increase their bondage whether formally so recognised or not. Faced with such circumstances, any organisation of rural labour is difficult as it involves confrontation against the classes who provide them not only employment but also credit in emergencies. The 'security' provided by the exploiting classes is extremely costly in terms of breaking their resistance to exploitation and consequent wage losses." But very often they have no alternative. Thus the unorganised rural labour are usually trapped in a vicious circle of landlessness and sole dependence on sale of labour power, making them vulnerable particularly in emergencies; this lack of security breaks their resistance to exploitation and creates impediments to organisation, which in turn lowers incomes and makes them even more vulnerable.

3.2 Not only Marxian literature, even neo-classical economics also has shown how unorganised labour is exploited in the labour market by a monopsonistic employer. That is, the situation is one where an employer faces little competition in buying labour, but the latter compete among themselves. Neoclassical theory also shows how organisation of labour and collective bargaining can help in fixing a higher wage which need not necessarily reduce employment even while eliminating monopsony profit of exploitation. (see Robinson, 1933, esp.ch.26). The rural situation, especially in agriculture, may not apparently look like one of monopsony, since there are several farmers in a village all of whom need to employ labour, and there is no single employer as such of agricultural labour. However, competition among employers is reduced in several open and subtle ways, converting the actual situation to one of virtual monopsony for each labourer giving him little choice. Usually each village is dominated by one or two landlord farmers who are the main employers; they do not allow other smaller farmers to compete with them. Since usually farmers belong to a dominant peasant caste, appeal to caste solidarity, social interaction, and mutual help are some of the main ways in which competition between farmers is reduced. They also work out arrangements like crop sharing, grant of consumer credit and bonded labour by which labour is tied and guaranteed for each farmer. (Prasad, 1973; Bharadwaj, 1974, pp 3 & 4; Bardhan, 1984) They also try to see that landless labour do not acquire enough means of production so that they are not self-employed and supply of labour is not reduced. The rural society functions in a way that reduces competition among buyers of labour, but increases it among sellers and supply of labour is also maintained or increased. The monopsonistic power is often wielded with the help of extra-economic coercion. Some big landlords in a few regions of India are even said to be maintaining small private armies mainly to terrorise agricultural labour and force them into submission.

3.3 If the monopsonistic situation is bad enough in agriculture, it is worse still in rural industry, unless agriculture itself is taken as a competitor to rural industry in the labour market. To attract labour from agriculture, rural industry usually offers higher wages, but also exploits them to the bones. Their working conditions are worse, more exacting and even risky to their health. Take the instance of Cashew industry in its initial years in Kerala:

"Work in the 'factory' had to be started in these early periods as early as 4 a.m. which continued till 6 p.m. or even later. The 'factory' consisted of a few thatched sheds and an open ground for roasting and drying of nuts. The thick smoke coming out of the open roasting pans engulfed the whole place and suffocated the workers. ... Hardly any protective clothes were provided to the workers. The hands of women, especially those engaged in shelling, would bear the marks of the burnt skin and would get disfigured by the black shell oil of the roasted nuts. The workers were liable to heavy penalisation for mistakes, even minor ones, committed during work. A certain payment had to be made for drinking water. Deductions from wages were made on several pretexts: as rent for the use of baskets supplied by the employer; as contribution towards payment of a lump sum during Onam, etc. .... Over and above the deductions made by the employer, the workers had to placate also the mooppans who had recruited them. For the cashew worker, the overall deduction came to about 25 per cent of the wages shown in the accounts. Wages differed substantially between men and women..... If a worker was found tempted to eat a kernel or two, severe punishment followed, which varied from a few blows for children to defacing and parading in the open for others. Instances were not rare in which the mooppans and the employers sexually exploited the hapless and defenceless women workers. The workers were housed in rows of thatched sheds constructed in areas not far from the work place which presented a sordid spectacle of filth, disease and hunger and moral and cultural degradation". (Kannan, 1981, pp.3-4).

3.4 The passage above lucidly brings out the conditions of female labour also. Fortunately, unionisation has changed this picture drastically in Kerala, though problems remain (as we shall note later). But the lack of adequate organisation and collective bargaining elsewhere has been responsible for keeping the rural labour under deplorable working conditions. Though overall economic constraints



bearing on the industry have also an important influence on the wage levels and magnitude of employment, unionisation has the potential of removing the worst forms of exploitation and improving the working conditions. Beedi industry in Karnataka presents an instance both of impediments in organising rural labour, and how these impediments helped the continuation of their exploitation and how at the same time organisation of labour has the potential to substantially reduce exploitation.

3.5 Beedi rolling is a cottage industry in Karnataka particularly in Dakshina Kannada district. About 6 lakh workers are said to be engaged in it. In the initial years of the industry, the beedi factories directly employed the workers, mostly male, within the premises of the factories. As the industry expanded, a system of contractors developed and women workers, particularly from the muslim community, were entrusted with the job of beedi rolling, who did it on piece rate basis sitting at their own home and at a time convenient to them. Even if the 'factories' are in urban areas, workers are mostly rural. The 'factories' or Beedi companies give the contractors raw material including leaves to roll the tobacco in, and also the wages, and other benefits to which the workers are entitled, like PF, bonus, maternity and medical allowances. The contractors are supposed to keep a log book to keep a record of work done by beedi rollers and to pay the benefits due to them accordingly. The contractor system became so widespread as to cover about 95 per cent of the beedis manufactured by 1988.

3.6 In spite of the flexibility given to workers, doors were opened for worse forms of exploitation by the new system. The contractors did not keep log books for all workers, and also put lower figures of output in log books even in cases where records were maintained, thus depriving workers of incidental benefits. The beedi companies have not bothered to check log books and pay to contractors on that basis, output of beedis actually handed over being the criterion and not entries in log books. Contractors even gave less leaves than required, also torn and unuseable leaves, forcing the workers to buy the difference in the market at their own cost. Then there were notorious cuts on several counts (charity, lottery etc), apart from insisting on an extra bundle of 25 beedis free of charge each time, alleging defective work and not paying for it but at the same time giving so-called defective bundles to the companies for realising their own commission and other payments. During our interviews with spokesmen of beedi worker unions, it was complained that contractors harassed particularly those who tried to become members of Unions, rejecting many beedis as badly rolled, or, worse still, refusing them to give them work. The different forms of exploitation added up to a

considerable loss for poor workers who struggled day and night to make a living.

3.7 The beedi workers are covered by the Beedi and Cigar (conditions of employment) Act of 1966 passed by the Parliament, and implemented since 1974, which provides for minimum wage and other benefits. The workers have been organised to some extent mainly by the trade unions led by political parties. Both AITUC and CITU represented to the Karnataka Labour Commissioner asking for abolition of the contractor system, to be replaced by a system of depots for supply of raw material to workers under the direct management of beedi factories. The factories have opposed this move because the present system suits them. They are afraid that salaried managers will not do the job as efficiently and cheaply as the contractors. The replacement would also involve greater investment on the part of beedi companies. A Committee consisting of Mr B M Idinabba (MLA), Mr A Parameswara Mayya (representing beedi manufacturers' association, Mangalore), and Mr V Ganapati Prabhu (an industrialist) went into the question of abolition of contract system and submitted its report to the Karnataka Labour Commissioner in 1989. It did not have a representative of beedi workers or trade unions. The committee considered the abolition of the contract system as impractical, but at the same time recommended reforms in the system. Interestingly, the Committee felt that the organisations of beedi workers and their representatives can themselves expose such of those of contractors who indulge in malpractices, or organise themselves into co-operatives who can directly deal with beedi companies to take delivery of raw material and give delivery of finished products, thus replacing the contractors. The latter, ofcourse, has not materialised and the contract system has still continued (see Kakkilaya, 1990 a). In contrast, conditions of beedi workers in Kerala is much better where they are organised as co-operatives. (Kannan, 1988, ch.9). But the high cost of beedi labour in Kerala has also exposed its footlose character. Not only has beedi industry expanded in other states particularly in Karnataka, it has also been attracting landless families from Kerala.

3.8 As already observed, beedi workers in Karnataka too are tending to be organised particularly in Dakshina Kannada, but more so as Unions. Apart from the possibility of vindictive treatment by contractors, numerical dominance of women among beedi workers has been one of the impediments in organising them, particularly because it is not possible always to have women leaders as organisers. It was reported during our field work that it was not easy for women, particularly muslim women, to get the permission of husbands and in-laws to attend union meetings after the sunset where men are present. Unions have been striving hard to reduce

exploitation particularly by making the workers aware of the piece wage rates and benefits they are entitled to. Unions also succeeded in reinstating workers who were dismissed on account of their becoming members of unions. But even today the contractors are the final authority to decide anything relating to workers' problems, and workers have no direct link with factory owners.

3.9 Though some female labour is engaged in a few rural industries like cashew processing and beedi making, a predominant proportion of them is in agriculture, even greater than in the case of male labour. They are employed generally in unskilled and low-paid jobs, which are also more tedious and back breaking. (Bardhan, 1977; Jose, 1989, pp.13-14). This explains why female labour is more prominent in rice growing regions. A major problem with women is that their increasing participation in workforce even as 'main workers' does not absolve them of their responsibility for household chores. Even where men are idle or unemployed, the household chores of cooking, looking after children, fetching water, tending cattle at home, and fire wood collection, have all to be performed by women whether they also have to act as bread winners in addition or not. If the men folk have not earned their day's wages, the money for their evening boose at the liquor shop is often given by women under duress even at the cost of food for children. Women's exploitation thus, is not only outside their homes, but within homes too. Such depravity on the part of males is often a reflection of the larger exploitative environment of which men too are victims. Yet, it does not reduce their own guilt and the enormity of oppression to which they subject their women. It acts as a great impediment in the organisation of female labour.

3.10 The condition of child labour is worse still. Child labour plays an important role in the third world countries including India, both as 'main workers' and in supportive roles in performing household chores. Their supportive role in household work has an economic value in so far as it releases adult women for remunerative wage employment (See Mamdani, 1972; Nadkarni, 1976). Children are removed from school to play this role, even where they are not 'main workers'. A Study in rural Karnataka clearly established a negative relation between schooling and child labour. It also showed that girls bore the greater brunt of this, as they were withdrawn more from schooling than boys for doing household work. On the whole, non-school-going children worked four hours more than school going children on household chores. (Kanbargi and Kulkarni, 1986). An interesting finding of the study was that not only children from poor families, but even those from relatively better off rural families, had to put in a significant amount of work

at home, affecting their schooling. Clearly organisation of children to fight the exploitation by their poverty stricken parents is no solution here. On the other hand, a policy of compensating parents for withdrawing their children from work and putting them in schools can be too expensive to be feasible, even if the scheme is restricted to poor families alone. The study referred above makes some sensible suggestions here: '...a more practical alternative would be to eliminate the need for some of the work done by children. ....A policy which would provide better water and fuel facilities for villages, clean and ready-to-cook foodgrains, and arrangements for communal tending of cattle would make a contribution to a reduction in the need for children's labour and allow them time to attend school. This would ultimately contribute to a reduction in fertility...' (Kanbargi and Kulkarni, 1986, p 136).

3.11 The problems of child labour working outside home are on a different footing. Their working conditions are far more killing as compared to the agricultural sector. It is the children from families with little or no land who are more likely to be working in the labour market as seen from a study of child labour in Lucknow Carpet industry (Kanbargi, 1988). The negative relation between possession of land and children's work participation is less strong in agriculture. Children are preferred to adults in manufacturing because of low wages and their inability to resist exploitation. The Factories Act 1948 prohibited employment of children below the age of 14, but this could not be applied to the household industry. As Kanbargi has shown, as a result of the Act, the carpet industry shifted from the factory to the home. 'A loom can be installed...today without a special permit and the number of looms can be increased or operations closed at will at any time' (Kanbargi, 1988, p.95). Child workers constituted about 37.5 percent of the total labour in the carpet industry in 1985 and there was an increasing trend in their number. The working day consisted of nine to ten hours, with no paid holiday. While apparently minimum wages were paid, possibly 8 to 10 percent of wages were deducted regularly on various pretexts over which the weavers had no control. Continuous squatting for hours led to leg and back

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4. It may be noted, however, that quite a few children, particularly those counted as 'marginal workers' combine schooling with work. A study of selected villages in Dakshina Kannada showed that 26 per cent of boys and 17 per cent of girls, in the age group 6-15, combined schooling with work either after school hours daily or during vacations (Dinesh, 1988, pp.125-6).

deformities and water retention in the knees. Constant attention to intricate designs led to eye fatigue. There were health risks associated with constant inhalation of wool dust, handling chemically treated raw wool, poor lighting, lack of ventilation, and lack of proper sanitation. Apart from working conditions, the living conditions of children too were very poor, particularly of migrant children. They wore dirty clothes and could not bathe regularly. There were no facilities of bath room or toilet for them. Majority of respondents said they received no health care whatsoever, though less than half of the children reported that the factory owners provided medical assistance in times of need (Kanbargi, 1988, pp.100-3). Though children in general shared the poor living and working conditions with the adult labour, it is necessary to note that they were much more vulnerable to exploitation and health risks, and what is more, their work participation was at the expense of any opportunity for play, recreation and education which could provide an outlet from their misery.

3.12 Migrant labour from rural areas form another category which also have difficulties in organising themselves to improve their bargaining power. We can come across them easily in construction works almost every where - buildings, canals, dams, railway tracks etc. Even where the construction is sponsored by the government, it is done by private contracting firms. An interesting instance of migrant labour is found in the case of sugar factories who seasonally engage thousands of labourers for sugarcane harvesting and transport. Jan Bremen has analysed in detail the working conditions, organisation of work, reasons for employment of migratory labour and the nature of their exploitation in South Gujarat involving two co-operative sugar factories (Bremen, 1978 and 1979). Here also, as in bidi industry, they are engaged by brokers, and are exploited at every level by brokers, the farmer and the factories. Coming mostly from landless families in Maharashtra, cash advances paid to them literally trap them. "The degree of poverty and the lack of any reserve by which to tide themselves over the periods of unemployment during the slack season..make it impossible for them (especially members of smaller households) to free themselves from the yearly necessity to migrate. The earnings to be had from cane cutting are so little that the mukadam's cash cannot be done without during the rainy period that follows and in this way a large section of rural population is more or less condemned to migrate every season as it comes round" (Bremen, 1978, p.55). The migrant labourers are poorly paid inspite of the high level of prosperity of sugarcane cultivators and sugar factories (Bremen, 1979, pp 195-7).

3.13 Though minimum wages are themselves very low, considering the heavy work and responsibility involved in the sugarcane harvesting, there was no check on whether they were in fact given. Though it is understandable that such checking is difficult in the case of normal agricultural operations spread over extensive areas, it was not difficult in such cases as cane harvesting and transport where thousands of labourers work for a given factory. The reason as Breman explains is that 'the way government machinery operates is determined for a large part by the distribution of power in society. The cumulative inequality - both economically and politically - of employers and workers in the harvest campaign explains why the migrant workers are neither seen nor heard by officials...' (Breman, 1979, p.201). Breman notes further that any hesitant effort by officials to forestall extreme partiality for employers/farmers encountered fierce opposition from the dominant farmers. 'The way in which government manifests itself presently fits with what is to be expected at this stage of rural capitalist development; which is to say, a total subjection of agricultural labour to agricultural capital' (Breman, 1979, p.202). It is pertinent to observe here that members of this Study Group have unanimously been critical of how any attempt by rural labour to organise themselves to resist oppression and improve their working conditions and wages was treated as a law-and-order problem by the government supporting quite openly the employers. Apart from the helplessness and vulnerability of the poor labourers themselves, the attitude of the government machinery at the ground level has been a major impediment in the organisation of rural labour. Even labour officers, who ought to be more concerned about the problems of labour and ensure the implementation of labour laws, come often from the same class background as the employers of rural labour and share the perceptions and prejudices of the latter.

3.14 A telling example of how unorganised workers are exploited and how even the government machinery meant for implementation of labour laws is indifferent to the whole problem, is provided by stone quarries of Faridabad district (Patwardhan and Mahajan, 1982). The workers are mostly immigrants from different states and recruited by Thekedars, ie, agents of lease holders, who also supervise their work and distribute wages. Through a system of advances, workers are tied to the agents and through them to the lease holders. The workers carry out most hazardous tasks including blasting the rocks without proper training and safety precautions, and have to perform several functions. The study referred points out that minimum wages are prescribed for each function separately, but miners are paid for only one minimum wage though required to perform several jobs. Since they are piece-rated workers, their output and wages fall because of the other jobs they do. The investigation showed that as miners they are denied not only minimum wages for other

human dignity. The role played by middlemen between manufacturers and labourers is a complicating factor acting against organising labour and ensuring them whatever little the law provides. The saddest part of the whole story is the attitude of the official machinery at the ground level which is utterly indifferent to the woes of rural labour in industry or agriculture, rushing into action only whenever there is a conflict between employers and employees, but siding with the former under the pretext of law-and-order. This is also a serious impediment in organisation of rural labour. On the other hand, when labour is organised, the official machinery is also more respectful to them, and the labour department also may be better disposed to take the monitoring of labour law implementation more seriously.

#### 4.0 Measures Taken by Political Parties, Voluntary Agencies and State

4.1 In this section, apart from critically reviewing the measures taken by the three main actors here - political parties, voluntary agencies and the state, we shall also look into the factors of success and failure in organising labour, and into the strengths and limitations of each actor. Since the organisation of labour can take different forms, we shall also review the strength and limitations of at least two major forms of organisations - Unions and Co-operatives.

4.2 As in the case of organising peasants against landlordism and rack renting, it is the political parties which took a leading role in spreading class consciousness among rural labour and organising them into unions. Their eminence in this role still continues particularly in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and W. Bengal (Reports by Tharamangalam, Reddy, Gill, and Banerjee; 1990). Voluntary Agencies have also now entered the arena in other states particularly Maharashtra and Gujarat (Morkhandikar, 1990). In playing this role, the political parties as well as voluntary agencies had to fight not only against the might of landlords, but often also that of the state. Since political parties have not been quite successful in organising women workers in both their roles as women and workers, voluntary agencies have stepped in to accept this challenge (See, for example, Mies, 1987 for the experience in Andhra Pradesh).

4.3 The state also has to play an important role. The Convention 141 of International Labour Conference, known also as the Rural Workers' Organisations Convention, adopted in 1975, has been ratified by India. It requires member

countries to 'adopt and carry out a policy of active encouragement to these organisations, particularly with a view to eliminating obstacles to their establishment, their growth and the pursuit of their lawful activities, as well as such legislative and administrative discrimination against rural workers' organisations and their members as may exist'. (Article 5). Moreover, 'steps shall be taken to promote the widest possible understanding of the need to further the development of rural workers' organisations....' (Article 6). In pursuance of this Convention the Government of India has even taken initiatives in directly organising rural labour by instituting a network of Honorary Rural Organisers, and for imparting proper awareness and knowledge among rural labour. But the more important role of the state, however, consists in creating a proper legislative and administrative framework for announcing and implementing minimum wages and other benefits to rural labour, recognising their organisations and their legal rights to improve their bargaining power, providing legal aid and protecting them against atrocities by landlords and rich farmers. Our main concern in this section, however, is with presenting a critical review of the role played by all the three actors - Political Parties, Voluntary Agencies and the State - in directly organising rural labour.

4.4 The organisation of agricultural labourers for a struggle separate from that of farmers is a later day development. When agriculture was dominated by tenancy, the major issue was one of securing justice to tenants, more than improving the wage rates. In the earlier semi-feudal stage of agricultural development, a distinct - clearly proletarianised - class of workers had not emerged. Their organisation as workers or labourers, a distinct from peasants, could be logical and also easier only when such a class had emerged clearly. Thus, in the early days, Communist Party of India and other national leaders like Sardar Ajit Singh and Lala Lajpat Rai who took initiative in this area, mobilised peasants as such and not labourers alone. Even today, though the Communist parties which have formed separate organisations, agricultural labourers, have affiliated them with the broad front of kisans or peasants. This is justified on the ground that kisans do not include landlords (even if they may include rich farmers) and that there are common problems affecting both farmers and labourers. It is quite justifiable to have a common platform of both labourers who earn their livelihood mainly through labour and of small or marginal cultivators whose land is inadequate, and who have, therefore, to supplement their



income through wage labour even if as a secondary source. But to include farmers who employ wage labour in common workers' organisations can only be at the expense of labourer's interests in such issues as wage rates, conditions of work, though the contradiction between the two is tried to be reduced by giving benefits like old age pension at government expense. In fact it has been the major weakness of peasant struggles in that they ignored the interests of the weakest in rural society, and only the tenants with recorded rights, who were in the upper strata, cornered the major benefits.

4.5. It was the awareness of this weakness which led to separate organisation of agricultural labourers on issues particularly affecting them. The major form of organisation promoted by particularly the Communist parties is that of Unions. The Kerala experience shows that apart from certain favourable factors like extensive landlessness of workers, and absence of a single 'dominant caste' of rich farmers which could have resisted unionisation on a caste basis (Kannan, 1988, p. 312), certain initiatives taken by the Communist Government which came to power in 1957 also triggered their formation. The government prohibited police interference in industrial and agrarian disputes in a partisan manner on behalf of employers or owners. Secondly, tripartite bodies were formed for settling conflicts which led to institutionalisation of collective bargaining by Unions with employers. Their influence reached the peak during 1960s and 1970s which influenced the implementation of land reforms too (Tharamangalam, 1990). The demands of the Unions were not restricted to wage issues, but extended to giving land to the tillers and the landless. Since the implementation of ceilings was more difficult, encroachments on government lands including forest lands, and claiming titles to land brought thus under cultivation also became a major activity of these Unions. There is an in-built contradiction in taking up this activity in so far as when the landless become cultivators and own large enough land to employ wage labour, they may stop supporting the Unions. In most cases, however, when encroached lands are very small, as usually happens when the landless labourers encroach under the Union banner, the land obtained is hardly enough to make them viable cultivators, and they continue to depend on wage labour as a source of income.

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5. The Report of the Sub-Committee headed by Gurudas Dasgupta says, 'There is no sharp distinction between agricultural labour and landholders as quite a large number have small holdings and have to work as agricultural labour at least for a part of the year'. (Dasgupta et al, 1988, Preface, p. 5). This philosophy seems to be more evident in West Bengal than elsewhere.

4.6 Forming Unions is no doubt a difficult task particularly where the labourers and their castemen are in a minority in the concerned villages. In such places it leads to their victimisation, violence, or at least to preference of migrant labour over the local unionised labour in employment (Aziz, 1979). Yet, the achievement of these Unions is not insignificant particularly in Kerala and West Bengal. They have given a degree of self-respect and confidence among workers which could not have come about otherwise. The landlords can no longer dictate terms to them either about wages or hours of work. The unions have made the workers aware of what they are entitled to under the law, and have tried to ensure that they do get it. These unions are not restricted to agriculture alone, but have covered rural industries as well in Kerala. Imparting class consciousness through Unionisation has reduced the significance and role of caste, and has made the public life of the state more secular. West Bengal is a glowing example of this. Though unionisation is not as vast, it has made significant inroads into the rural areas of Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab. The Rural Labour Enquiry for 1974-75 had estimated that only 1 per cent of rural labour were unionised. The figure today must have gone up somewhat at least as seen from the rise in the membership of Unions as reported by our Study Group members. For example, the membership of Punjab Khet Mazdoor Sabha (PKMS) in 1961 (before it split following the split in the Communist Party of India) was 42,000. The membership of CPI led PKMS increased to 1,12,620 in 1985-86, while that of CPI(M) led Punjab Dihati Mazdoor Sabha (PDMS) increased to 43,000 in the same year, in spite of some year-to-year fluctuations. If the membership of both is added, it constitutes a rise of over 178 per cent in 25 years. (Gill, 1990, p. 44). Taking the case of Andhra Pradesh, the combined strength of Unions led by CPI and CPI (M) increased from 4,43,110 in 1975-76 to about 6.6 lakh between 1980 and 1982. (Reddy, 1990, pp 19 and 25). Two important weaknesses of Unions have, however, emerged: inter-union rivalry and lack of a strong village base as evidenced from the absence of a stable or enduring village level committees. The latter weakness is particularly crucial in the event of disputes with employers since prompt and active support is required which can come only from village level committees of workers. A distant Union leader does not inspire confidence. A cadre of grass root level leaders is essential for the purpose. CPI(M) seem to have given much more attention to this problem. In spite of the indications that unionisation is showing an increasing rather than a decreasing trend over the last twenty or twenty-five years taken as a whole, there is still a vast ground to cover particularly in states other than those mentioned here.

4.7 Kerala's experience also shows, however, that even the success of unionisation has economic limits in delivering

benefits to rural labour. As Kannan says, 'organisation of rural workers by itself constitutes a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for improving their economic status' (Kannan, 1988, p.312). He has listed factors which have contributed to the relative success or failure of organisations of workers in securing economic gains. (See Table 4.1 below).

Table 4.1 Factors behind the Success or Failure of Organisations of Rural Workers in securing Economic Gains

Factors	More Successful Cases	Less Successful Cases
1. Social Status	Intermediate Castes	Lowest Castes (Harijans)
2. Male/Female	Wholly/Largely Male	Wholly or Largely Female
3. Criticality of Labour in Production Process	Critical (eg. toddy tappers)	Not Critical (beedi making)
4. Skill Requirement	Skilled	Unskilled
5. Role of the State	A direct stake in the industry/ economic activity	Only general interest in terms of labour legislation and welfare
6. Product Market	Price inelastic	Price elastic
7. Mobility of Capital	Less mobile in terms of relocation	Highly mobile in terms of relocation
8. Multiplicity of Unions	Single Union or dominated by one Union	Large number of competing Unions
9. Leadership of Workers' Organisations	Largely from the ranks of Workers	Largely dependent on those from outside the ranks of Workers

Source: Kannan, 1988, p. 319

Though organising intermediate castes is stated to be easier here, they mostly belong to the class of farmers and get organised as farmers as such rather than as labourers. Rural labourers belong in most cases to lowest castes and this is no doubt makes organising them against higher castes a difficult task. But Kerala experience itself, as also elsewhere, indicates that it is not an impossible task. Even at the lower levels, there is no caste homogeneity but it is not a necessary condition. Wherever farmers form a caste distinct from those of labourers, unions have taken the shape of caste-cum-coolie unions (Morkhandikar, 1990, p.28). This was the case not only where the workers were mobilised by Dalit organisations, but also in the case of Unions organised by communist parties, when activist leaders came from Dalit castes. In such cases, caste has been a favourable factor behind the solidarity of Unions.

4.8 The economic status of the agricultural sector, the industry, the state concerned and even of the country in general has also a bearing on the success of organisations of rural labour. A growing and prosperous economy with expanding opportunities of employment is a very favourable factor for success, while a stagnant economy spells failure. There is a certain critical level upto which an economy can easily absorb increase in wages and other benefits to workers, but not beyond. But this critical level cannot be an excuse to put down all demands of the working class, and certainly not of the most deprived among them - the rural labour. This is particularly so when the bulk of the gains of economic growth are usurped by owners and managers of capital both within and outside agriculture and organised urban labour and bureaucracy. Organisation of rural labour, by increasing their bargaining power vis-a-vis the other classes, can to some extent improve not merely their absolute share but also the relative share of gains of growth. But if the economy is stagnant, this may be a very difficult task. It is difficult to force a cut in the share of the rich in a given cake, but relatively easier to do so if the cake is enlarged.

4.9 It is the failure of political parties in organising women labour and in attending to child workers' problem that created the need for voluntary agencies in this sector. This is apart from the fact that the political parties were not quite successful in some regions even with regard to male rural labour. An important difference between organisations of rural workers affiliated to political parties and voluntary agencies is that the former are linked with mass base organisations. This is both a weakness and strength of the latter. It is a weakness because they cannot muster mass support from outside the village, and their political influence is also negligible compared to party based unions. It is also a strength because the voluntary agencies focus on

the local problems uninfluenced by broader political policies and alliances which may divert attention from grass root issues and the need for village based organisations. Moreover, for voluntary agencies, organising weaker sections is a part of the broader process of rural development - of conscientising them, educating and giving them skills, and developing their asset base. A focus merely on collective bargaining leads often to confrontation and weakens rural development efforts. However, a focus on rural development and developing their bargaining power as incidental to this process is less confrontationist and more effective.

4.10 There are said to be 252 registered voluntary organisations in Gujarat and 382 in Maharashtra (Morkhandikar, 1990, p.16). Even if the number is a little higher in these states than in others, it gives an indication of their spread. Though they are far from having covered all rural areas, they have at least established their presence by now. Brief case studies of selected voluntary agencies have been presented in the Reports of our Study Group members, which need not be repeated here. Women are active members of these organisations, and the issues and activities taken up by them cover fighting land alienation, implementation of minimum wages, acquisition of cultivable wastelands and forests for cultivation, implementation of Employment Guarantee Schemes, supply of foodgrains, provision of legal aid, informal education, health care and even fighting drunkenness of husbands (see also Mies, 1987). A few of the organisations have taken up the cause of forest workers and forest dwellers, and have tended to take an anti-statist stance. This is particularly evident when bureaucracy has not co-operated in preventing land alienation, in granting increased access to forests, and in approving encroachments. On the other hand, there are also voluntary agencies, which are really agencies of the government for implementing official programmes, who do not bother about empowering the rural workers and improving their bargaining power. The forms of organising rural labour are flexible, - Unions, Sanghas or village level committees, and Co-operatives. Where situation demanded, the organisations have been on a caste or tribal basis. Ideologically they do not toe the communist line, but quite a few of them are consciously Gandhian, - advocating decentralisation to the point of giving much greater autonomy to villages than even under Panchayat system, and direct participation of people at large in decisions on rural development.

4.11 As far as child labour is concerned, the government has started some projects under the Ministry of Labour in the concerned areas and industries, since merely passing legislation to prohibit child labour is hardly effective by itself. These projects aim at improving the income earning and employment opportunities of parents so that the need for

child labour is reduced. They also include programmes of rehabilitating children withdrawn from work, improving the terms and conditions of their employment, giving them formal and informal education, imparting training and skills, providing health care and enforcing legislation. Case studies of Sivakasi and Varanasi projects on these lines are presented by Narayan (1988). The Government has also been encouraging nongovernment agencies through financial support to take up such projects. The experience of two such agencies (The Indian Institute of Rural Workers and Rag Pickers Project in Bangalore) shows that apart from development programmes, they have also aimed mainly at weaning the children away from risky and demeaning jobs. (Narayan, 1988). On the other hand, the emphasis of SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association, Ahmedabad) is more on imparting skills in home-based manufacturing to young girls, which has given them greater job security as also higher earnings. (Narayan, 1988). Yet the situation is far from promising. Let alone economic exploitation, even minimum health checks and working conditions are not ensured so that children continue to be exposed to health hazards. There is not even a health insurance scheme in operation. (Kanbargi, 1988).

4.12 The scheme of Honorary Rural Organisers (HROs) was launched by the Government of India in 1981-82 in eight states with 415 posts of HROs. By 1986-87, the scheme covered 14 states and the Union Territory of Pondicherry with 1500 posts. The HROs are not regular employees and receive only a nominal honorarium (Rs 200 + Rs 50 for conveyance, a rate which has continued to date since the inception of the scheme). They are supposed to be recruited from socially motivated local persons, who are expected to educate rural workers about their rights and various labour laws, and to motivate them in organising themselves. The Study Group has felt that their presence in rural areas is hardly evident anywhere. This is not due to the inadequacy of their number, though ofcourse 1500 organisers can hardly be expected to do justice to India's nearly 6 lakh villages. The basic problem lies elsewhere. A member of our Study Group has observed: "The very conception of the scheme trying to equate lack of organisation of rural or agricultural labour as lack of organisers and that such organisers could be offered by matriculates working for an honorarium, was entirely ill-conceived and totally ignores the social and political dimensions of Indian villages, where real change may not be possible unless there are strong political and democratic initiatives. Expecting improvement in the organisation of rural labour through a bureaucracy of 'Honorary' organisers is too simplistic a notion. And no wonder nothing is being heard about its achievements" (Reddy, 1990, p. 60). The scheme has not met with any sympathetic response from organised labour. The Bharatiya Kisan Mazdoor Union, at its fifth conference in 1981, condemned the scheme 'as a move to have rural workers' organisations under the control of the

government'. Since workers' unions are organs of struggle against their class oppressors, the conference felt that no government sponsored organisations can become organs of such struggle (Reddy, 1990, p.60). About how the scheme is actually in operation at the ground level, an observation by our Study Group member for Bihar is apt. : 'Since 1985, no (new) appointments of HROs were made. In the course of field visits, it was found that most of them discontinued their jobs. ... Those who are continuing seldom visit the villages and contact the labourers. ... It was found that even block officials do not know their whereabouts. ... The rural labourers expressed their unawareness about the scheme". (Prasad, 1990, p. 31). Labour officers in Karnataka felt that the scheme has achieved nothing except by way of giving a little support to matriculates in search of jobs. Let alone organising rural labour, they have not been useful even in making them aware of labor laws. The scheme is hardly taken seriously by anybody including the Government and its officials.

4.13 It would be interesting to learn from a study of the Gujarat Scheme of Honorary Rural Organisers, which is somewhat different (Hirway, 1990). The Gujarat scheme was started even before the central scheme, but was modified in the light of the latter. Instead of appointing HROs in an isolated way under the Labour department or the block development officer, they are made in charge of Rural Workers' Welfare Centres under the Rural Workers Welfare Board at the state level. This gives them an opportunity to function in a more systematic and effective way. (p.9). Organising rural workers is supposed to be only one of the formal tasks of the Centres, which are more concerned with education, health, economic programmes for income generation, and even entertainment, games and other social activities. They conduct two day and five day awareness camps where workers are introduced to Minimum Wages Act, Abolition of Bonded Labour Act, rural development programmes, significance and need for organising themselves, health, family planning etc. These multiple roles attract the workers more and makes the functioning of HROs also more effective. At the same time, the multiplicity of rules tends to lose the focus on organisation. A common weakness with the central scheme is that it does not necessarily attract socially motivated persons, but mainly unemployed youths who want a job for a salary. For the persons who would genuinely take it up, there is not enough protection against harassment from the rural power groups. (pp 38-39). Except for Balavadi, the activities of Rural Workers Welfare Centres are not even known to all rural labourers in the concerned and neighbouring villages, let alone creating pressure groups of rural labourers to improve their bargaining power. The HROs tended to consider other activities as more important,

possibly because they are capable of showing quicker and visible success than an activity like organising which is more difficult.

4.14 Hirway's study concludes, 'the scheme has not only done very poorly in achieving the objective of organising rural workers, but its implementation and designing also show a poor capacity of achieving its objective (p.78). ... The honorary organiser, who is expected to be the kingpin of the scheme is too weak to implement the scheme successfully' (p.93). The study also observes that the major weakness of government's role in organising rural labour is its inability to protect the poor against the rich in a sustained way particularly in a situation of conflict, and it does not have the flexibility of approach and necessary autonomy at the micro level (p.98-99). In spite of these limitations of government's role, it would be rather preposterous to conclude that a government in a democracy can do little to help the poor. In fact Hirway also indicates the scope for government in not only social welfare schemes, but also in other respects like information and publicity on labour laws, monitoring their implementation, giving legal aid, and providing infrastructural support for rural labour organisations (pp 99-100). Thus it would appear that the indirect role of the government is far more effective and important than a direct role in organising them, - the latter task best left to political parties and voluntary agencies. The government machinery at the local level can aid the process by being at least nonpartisan in the event of conflicts between labour and their employers, without having to give up the function of maintaining law and order. This can to some extent be helped if the government staff at this level are drawn mainly from rural labour and if they are properly oriented through training camps to sympathetically understand the problems of rural labour. However, unless the rural labour are organised, even the government may remain indifferent and casual about them.

4.15 There is at least one sphere where the government played a somewhat significant role in organising labour in collaboration with either political parties or voluntary agencies. This is in promoting labour co-operatives. Compared with trade unions, the role of co-operatives is more constructive and also more difficult. The role of co-operatives may apparently look less confrontationalist and may be preferred for this reason (Aziz, 1979). Yet, labour co-operatives have to cope with several odds posed by classes which traditionally exploit them, and have to overcome powerful competition from them. Often, the formation of co-operatives is more a stage which is next to Unions, rather than an alternative as such. After having carried out protracted struggles, unions some times face the prospect of closure of business, in which case they have to undertake the challenge of running the business themselves. While the



initial spur to the formation of co-operatives may come from the political parties backing the unions, they need substantial support from the government through not only the provision of credit, but also managerial know-how and even market support.

4.16 Kerala Dinesh Bidi Co-operative (KDBC) Society offers an interesting example of a successful society, on account of which is available in Kannan's study (Kannan, 1988, ch.5). When the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Condition of Employment) Act 1966 was decided to be implemented in Kerala, the employers responded by withdrawing from production and 12,000 workers in Cannanore were rendered jobless. The workers had already been unionised. The pro-labour state government and the major trade unions led by CPI and CPI(M) had to think of starting a workers' co-operative to absorb the displaced workers. Mr T V Thomas, the Minister of Industries in the left-wing government, took personal charge of the problem, and KDBC Society was started in 1969. Actually twenty primary societies were started for producing beedies, the central society being in charge of procuring raw material and marketing of beedis. Each worker contributed a nominal sum of Re.1 towards capital, and the government advanced the rest of each worker's share - Rs.19, as a loan, and further gave an additional loan of Rs.0.71 million towards working capital. A competent and dedicated government officer was made available as the Chairman of the Society. Apart from credit and administrative backup, the political support provided by the government was crucial in starting the society. Another favourable and crucial factor for success was that the workers were also already unionised, the union representatives could take active role in the functioning of both the primary societies and the Central Society. Starting with providing jobs for 2000 workers, the Society absorbed all the dismissed 12000 workers within five years. By 1983-84, it had 27,000 active workers and 40,000 members. It introduced several benefits - paid holidays on Sundays and a few other days, maternity benefit, bonus, and even assistance to family in the case of death of an active worker. Government loans were repaid within four years. A Thrift Fund was started to give interest free loans to workers for marriage, education of children, house-repair etc. Financially too, it was a success, though having a little lower profit margin than private beedi factories. The beedis of KDBC Society are so popular that pirating of its label by small private manufacturers has become a big problem. There is a similar example of a successful co-operative in W. Bengal in Sonali Tea Estate where also the trade union under AITUC took the bold step of organising it in 1974 on co-operative basis when management had decided to close down the Estate because of losses (Banerjee, 1990). Unfortunately, all instances of labour co-operatives are not equally successful. For example, some attempts at organising weaker sections into co-operatives were reported to have failed

in their objective of eliminating middlemen, since the middlemen and contractors themselves took charge of the Societies as key office holders. The societies were not given the necessary credit support by co-operative credit societies and commercial banks, forcing them into the clutches of the same ex-contractors who used to exploit workers (Borkar and Ambewadikar, 1985, esp. pp 43, 45, 47 & 49). This happened because the labourers were not prepared for it through prior conscientisation, organisation and training, and the official and political support for the co-operatives was hardly serious enough.

4.17 We conclude the section now by bringing together its salient points on three main issues: (a) strengths and weaknesses of the three main actors in organising labour - the political parties, voluntary agencies and the state, and the role that each can play; (b) factors promoting success of organisations and factors behind failure; and (c) strengths and limitations of two main forms of organising labour - trade unions and labour co-operatives, and the role for each.

4.17 (a) Traditionally, political parties have played a leading role in conscientising and organising rural labour compared to other actors, though they too have given prominence to organising peasants particularly in early days, when tenancy was a major agrarian problem. They have not only organised them into unions, but also - when occasion demanded - into labour co-operatives as in beedi industry and tea plantations. They have the advantage of both flexibility and ability to provide political support from macro organisations at the state and even national levels. They can raise more resources in the event of a strike or lock-out to sustain labour resistance and to increase their bargaining power, particularly since their macro level organisations derive strength from the support of urban industrial labour too. A solidarity between urban industrial and rural labour can be a major source of strength for organising the latter, which only the political parties can provide. They have, however, relatively neglected the problem of child and female labour, where voluntary agencies have done much greater work. They have also been active in states where political parties have been relatively passive in organising rural labour. Their advantage vis-a-vis political parties is that they are much more based in the villages where they operate, giving more attention to grass-root level problems, uninfluenced by political alliances, equations and ideologies which affect the working of political parties. As such they can be even more capable of taking bold initiatives and being more flexible than political parties. But their weakness is that they often do not have support from the large parent organisations at the macro level. This lacunae can be remedied by external funding of voluntary agencies which does not compromise their autonomy and flexibility without

necessarily affecting accountability. Both political parties and voluntary agencies have at times had to confront the state and its bureaucracy, particularly when the latter was insensitive to the problem of rural labour and played a partisan role siding openly with the exploiters and oppressors of the rural labour in the name of maintaining law and order. But in states like Kerala and West Bengal, left-wing governments worked in close collaboration with political parties in promoting organisation of rural labour - both unions and co-operatives. Whenever and wherever, the state gave good political support, in addition of course to administrative, infrastructural and financial support, to political parties and voluntary agencies, the latter two actors have been more successful. The role of the state consists more in creating a proper legislative framework, a proper administrative machinery for monitoring the implementation of labour laws in the interest of rural labour, desisting from using the law-and-order machinery in a partisan manner whenever there is a conflict between labour and employer, than in directly organising rural labour. The scheme of Honorary Rural Organisers has been more or less a farce, nobody being serious about it. Even where it has been somewhat visible as in Gujarat, their role has been more to be in charge of totally harmless and passive schemes like balavadis, with no focus on conscientising and organising rural labour which is supposed to be their major task, - a task which is best left to political parties and voluntary agencies.

4.17 (b) Even the political parties and voluntary agencies have not succeeded everywhere in organising rural labour. Kannan has identified on the basis of his case studies factors behind success or failure of rural labour organisations (see table 4.1 above). Though organising lowest castes of rural labour and women labour has been a difficult factor, experience shows that it is not insurmountable, especially when they are organised separately. When competition among labourers themselves is intense and cannot be regulated, organisation is difficult. If on the other hand, such a competition is limited either due to the demand for specific skills which are scarce, or because of caste monopoly in certain jobs (eg toddy tapping), organisation is easier. If leadership is evolved from among rural labour at the grassroot level, organisation is easier and can be sustained. A distant leader, on the other hand, does not inspire confidence. If organisation gets split or there is multiplicity of unions, it is a very unfavourable factor for the success of organisations. Larger economic factors bearing on the industry concerned and even on the state or the country as a whole are also important. If the burden of increased wages consequent on union demand can be passed on to consumers without prejudice to the future of the firm concerned, organisation of labour can be successful. Unfortunately, the economic sectors in which rural labour

works, do not often satisfy this condition. Yet, if there is already a fairly high profit margin and productivity of labour is increasing, wage increases can be absorbed more easily. Similarly, problems arise if the industry is of a foot-loose nature, that is, if capital is mobile shifting from one state or area to another trying to avoid high wage cost areas. This also means that all states should as far as possible be equally strict in the implementation of labour laws. Attracting capital into the state should not be at the cost of either labour or environment, as some states are prone to do by lax implementation of labour and environment laws. The health of the economy as a whole too has a bearing on the success of organisations of labour. If employment opportunities and labour productivity tend to increase significantly, organisations of labour are more successful in securing more gains for labour. The role of the state is also a very important factor behind the success of organisations. The political, legislative, technical, administrative, infrastructural and even credit support it provides to labour organisations makes a crucial difference, even if it is not involved in directly conscientising and organising labour. If on the other hand such support is lukewarm, any scheme of directly organising rural labour such as through HROs would amount to institutionalised hypocrisy.

4.17 (c) There has been some debate about the desirability of organising rural labour in the form of trade unions, suggesting that labour co-operatives could be preferred (Aziz, 1979). It is argued rightly that Unionisation invites reprisals, and moreover, the problems of rural labour do not end with increasing wages and improving working conditions; they have also to secure full employment or at least for the best part of the year. Apart from industry-wise co-operatives, it is suggested that even for agricultural labour, they could be organised as co-operatives at the revenue circle level, which could even take contracts of work from the government especially during lean seasons and provide supplementary employment to rural labour. It could also create opportunities of self-employment and secure proper technical advice and marketing support. Experience, however, shows that even to ensure the success of labour co-operatives, they need to be first conscientised and organised in the form of unions. Trade unions have successfully launched labour co-operatives in Kerala and West Bengal. In the absence of such preparation or prior organisation, directly launching a co-operative as an initiative from above has often failed in eliminating exploitation and oppression, since their earlier exploiters themselves usurp key positions in co-operatives and whisk away government benefits and doles. On the other hand, prior organisation of labour on class lines has ensured government support both in launching and operating the co-operatives.

## 5.0 Recommendations and Concluding Observations

5.1 The last paragraphs of Sections above (Para No.s 1.11, 2.10, 3.15, 4.17a, 4.17b and 4.17 c) present a summary of findings and salient points of respective sections. No separate summary of this paper is, therefore, presented here. This section mainly recommends measures for improving the organisation and status of rural labour, drawn from preceding analysis as well as the reports made by the members of our Study Group. Insights obtained from other literature too have been made use of for this purpose. In particular, the Report of the Parliamentary Sub-Committee (Dasgupta, 1989) and the measures suggested in the course of a few socio-legal investigations (such as by Patwardhan and Mahajan, 1982) have also been kept in mind in making these recommendations. Some of the measures suggested may not be directly for organising labour as such; they also deal with organisation of state machinery which could help in improving the status and living conditions of rural labour, since this area too cries for a lot of improvement, and can indirectly help organisation of labour. Social security to labour, employment guarantee and such welfare programmes, if ensured by law, can break the patron-client relationship between employers and rural labour and enables the labour in overcoming a major constraint in getting themselves organised to increase their own bargaining power. It can embolden them to demand what law provides and makes them less vulnerable to exploitation. Forces of commercialisation taking the economy towards capitalist development in agriculture also tend to break the patron-client relationship, but with a vengeance leaving the rural poor high and dry and destroying their earlier 'security'. The need for social security provided by the state becomes urgent in this context too, and is equally a source of strength in getting themselves organised.

5.2 There has been a loud clamour in the country in recent years demanding parity between agriculture and industry, or between rural and urban areas. The whole emphasis is however on improving the incomes and privileges of farmers; the need to improve the 'terms of trade' of rural labour vis-a-vis farmers and other employers has been neglected. If it is a part of our agricultural policy to improve the status of agriculture vis-a-vis other sectors and reduce the disparity between the incomes of the two sectors, it should equally be a part of the same policy that the disparity between rich farmers and rural labour too should be reduced. This has to be done not merely by improving the wage levels of rural labour, but what is more, by increasing their employment, providing social security, including accident insurance, education opportunities for children, and above all, the right to live with dignity without ever being subjected to physical torture, arson, humiliation and threats of social boycott. These things cannot always be provided from the

above, and can be ensured only through the organised strength of rural labour. India has done well by being a signatory to the Convention 141 of International Labour Conference which requires the government to actively encourage the organisations of labour and provide such support as may be required (see part 4.3 above). However, the state of organisation of rural labour and of their living and working conditions are far from satisfactory in most of parts of the country, which needs to be remedied as a matter of utmost priority. Without this, rural poverty cannot be ameliorated.

5.3 Rural Labour Organisations should include not only those households/persons whose main source of livelihood is sale of their labour power, but also those for whom sale of labour power is a supplementary yet a significant source of livelihood. This means including marginal farmers and even to some extent small farmers who hire out more labour than hire in. Including rural labour in the same organisations as farmers would amount to keeping aside issues and problems of rural labour. While rural labour should have separate organisations, this need not rule out alliance on an equal footing with organisation of farmers on issues like securing greater development of rural areas or sectors, and in reducing disparity between urban and rural privileges and living conditions. Special problems arise at times in the case of nonagricultural rural labour, as for example in bidi industry. They should be recognised as employees even if they work at their own dwellings. They are also employees of the principal employer and not of the middlemen or contractor, and the principal employer should be liable for nonimplementation of labour laws. Bidi workeres should be recognised as employees even if they have to buy with their own money rawmaterial and sell it to given middlemen. Even if it may apparently look like trading, it is essentially labour paid on piece rate basis, and such workers should have the benefit of labour laws.

5.4 While rural labour organisations should be firmly rooted right upto villages and units of rural enterprises or industries, with a separate micro-level organisation for each cluster of villages for agricultural labour and for each rural industrial unit, it would be desirable to have a federation of rural labour organisations at district, state and national levels. The need for a federation arises because local or grass-root organisations require political support of mass organisations and have to make their voice felt at aggregative levels. A village may have only five Dalit households and cannot by itself have the needed bargaining power vis-a-vis dominant castes and classes. But if these Dalits are linked to a mass organisation like a federation, they can overcome this numerical weakness. It cannot be 'recommended' or even visualised at this stage how this organisational structure will be brought about and who

will do this. Both political parties and voluntary agencies should no doubt play an important catalytic role in promoting grass root level or micro organisations. The left political parties can raise some resources to support such federations with the help of organised working class in urban areas. But they should avoid multiplicity of competing unions or other forms of organisations at a given level by adopting a code of conduct or nationally accepted conventions, and work to achieve federations where all political parties and voluntary agencies active in the field of organising rural labour will have a say. The uniting and dominating interest behind such federations would be that of rural labour and not that of political parties. Since there is no political party which represents the interests of rural labour alone and they reflect the interests of different classes, a federation dominated by any single political party will be subjugated to the policy and interests of the party rather than to the interests of rural labour. The need is for the emergence of an organisation operating both at micro and higher levels which will reflect the interests of rural labour and can make alliances and reach understandings with other interests on an equal footing.

5.5 Organising rural labour purely on class lines regardless of caste is undoubtedly the most desirable principle. This is particularly so when rural labour consists both of scheduled castes and tribes and other higher castes, and when the farmers seek to divide the ranks of rural labour on caste basis isolating the former. If only non-SC/ST rural labour are made class-conscious through proper education and can join their SC/ST class brethren, the lot of rural labour and particularly that of SCs in villages would have been a lot better than what it is today. Unfortunately, things do not always work in such an ideal way. Petty economic benefits offered by rich farmers of dominant castes to non-SC/ST labour and higher social status given to them (like sitting in the same row in community feasts), make it difficult to have purely non-caste or secular unions. Political parties and voluntary agencies have found often, and rightly so, that organising unions on class-cum-caste lines is more feasible and forms the first step in organisation. But their doors should be open to all oppressed classes and castes. In fact even Dalit Sangharsh Samitis do not define Dalits in terms of the former untouchables or SCs alone, but are inclined to accept within their fold as other oppressed castes and classes willing to join them. Once initial organisations are successful, they can be made more broad-based in caste-terms. Since, however SC rural labourers are most often singled out for victimisation and others do not necessarily come to their succour in times of need, a separate organisation by them both at micro and higher levels should be viewed with understanding and sympathy and not in purely casteist terms. There is similarly a need for a separate organisation of female labourers cutting across caste lines, particularly to

solve problems with which they are most concerned, such as provision of fuel and drinking water, protection against sexual assault, and drunkenness and cruelty by their own husbands. A separate organisation of child labour is more difficult, but need not be given up as impossible. Though leaders from the ranks of child labour may not be forthcoming, social workers and voluntary agencies can form special bodies for protecting the interests of child labour. Migrant labour may not pose the same problems as child labour, but they are also very vulnerable and difficult to organise and need special attention of organisers and monitors of labour laws. No a priori or fixed guidelines can be given as to whether each type of rural labour should have its own separate organisation. It will depend on viability in terms of numbers, the distinctiveness of its own problems, and on the question if leadership can evolve from its own ranks. Even if separate identity of such organisations is maintained, it would be desirable if they are a part of the bigger federations discussed in para 5.4.

5.6 The principle of a separate organisation for each economic activity may be impracticable when rural workers engage in more than one or two of them. For example, an agricultural labour household may also collect tendu leaves, may work on brick kilns, or carry loads at construction sites. Even if it joins an organisation in terms of its principal activity, it needs the protection of an organisation and labour laws in other activities too. The scope of an organisation of workers can cover more than one activity if bulk of them have similar secondary activities. Otherwise, there should be no bar on a worker from being a member of more than one union or organisation. This is a problem which is typical of rural labour, not shared by organised urban labour. The conventions and rules applicable to the latter cannot be mechanically applied to rural labour.

5.7 Any organisation of agricultural and other rural labour, to be effective, should have the features of a trade union, which can increase the bargaining power of its members vis-a-vis employers and otherwise more powerful sections of the rural society who tend to exploit labour. Without this first step, further or more evolved and multi-functional forms of organisation like labour co-operatives are not likely to be successful. However, organisation should not stop at or be content with being only trade unions. This is because an organisation of rural labour will have to secure not only increased wages and related benefits, but also more employment which may not necessarily be available from the same employer or set of employers by whom they were employed. The organisation will have to accept the challenge of reopening and running the industry if the employers have closed it down. Or, it will have to seek and even create new opportunities of employment by accepting labour contracts



from different parties including the government. Such organisations should be encouraged to manage the employment guarantee programmes of the government. They have to secure technical know-how and credit and marketing support for their activities particularly if they cover production and services. They will have also to educate the workers and their children so that they are not only literate, but also better informed about laws, acquire skills needed for livelihood, and can live with greater self-respect and dignity in the society. Since dependence of rural labour on landlords or rich farmers for consumer credit to meet emergencies is one of the major factors making them vulnerable to pressure, organisations of rural labour have also to become self-help societies, arranging to meet the credit needs of its members. Not all organisations need evolve into full fledged labour co-operatives with multiple roles. In other words, they cannot be posed as alternatives to trade unions at all levels and circumstances, and both may have to prevail depending on needs and circumstances, and stage of their development. But if an organisation should not run the risk of being stagnant and decadent, it has to be continuously active and alert, not necessarily in a negative or confrontationist spirit by picking up long drawn fights with employers, but essentially by being more and more useful to its members both in the short run and long run. If mass organisations at federal levels also develop, they can be a major source of ensuring the viability and sustainability of grass root organisations.

5.8 Whatever be the form of organisation, it is most important to see that a cadre of activist members, who are well informed about laws and who can exercise mature judgement to solve urgent and short run local problems, is evolved from within each organisation. A distant leader does not inspire the same confidence as a leader who is closeby and is assisted by local cadres. Irrespective of whether a political party or a voluntary agency promotes such organisations, in the ultimate analysis, the external actors can only be catalytic agents and the local organisation should continue even if the initial promoters withdraw from the scene later.

5.9 Since a separate Study Group is set up to go into further legislative measures needed to improve the living conditions of rural labour as well as their organisation, we have not found it necessary to go into this aspect in detail. The following suggestions are an indication in brief of what is necessary. There is already some legislative framework at the Union or central level like the Minimum Wages Act 1948, the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act 1966, The Bidi Workers Welfare Fund Act 1976, the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976, the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation and Employment and Conditions of Service)

Act etc, apart from state level legislations like the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act, 1974, and Tripura Agricultural Workers Act, 1986. It looks that legislation at the state level to regulate working conditions and to ensure the welfare of agricultural workers are more an exception than a rule, while the central legislation stands more prominently on paper than in practice. Both these conditions need to be remedied. In doing this, the state - both the Central and State governments - have to play a crucial role. Though admittedly organisation of rural labour itself is a major factor in determining the attitude of the state towards rural labour and in implementing labour laws, the existence of a proper legislative framework and also an administrative machinery to implement legislative provisions is also a crucial factor in improving the condition of rural labour and in supporting their organisation.

5.10 There is a general consensus that the Kerala Agricultural Workers Act, 1974 has been a useful legislation which can be adopted as a broad model by other states. It has established a tradition of healthy and constructive industrial relations in agriculture (Dasgupta, 1989, p.38). The Act, provides, apart from payment of Minimum Wages, security of employment, quick settlement of disputes, and agricultural workers' provident fund. It has accorded recognition to a system of Industrial Relations Committees constituted for specific areas which can decide about agreed rates of wages, and provides for the appointment of Agricultural Tribunals, conciliation officers and inspectors. It is desirable to have a Central Act providing guidelines requiring states to enact similar legislations with some modifications, if necessary to suit local conditions, but without watering down the spirit and thrust of the Central Act in the process. Even if a Central Act is not found feasible or acceptable to states, atleast common guidelines have to be evolved through Inter-state Council or Chief Ministers' Conference, so that all the states enact the necessary labour laws and provide for measures needed for their monitoring and implementation. As proposed by the Parliamentary Sub-committee (Dasgupta, 1989), the Central Law or the Guidelines should provide for a basic framework for the working conditions of agricultural labour and their safety, wages and social security; a mechanism for resolving disputes, old age pension, maternity benefits, accident benefits; and also a periodic and regular revision of minimum wages. The revision of minimum wages has to follow two principles. The short run revision, which should preferably be every year or atleast once in two years, should be linked to the cost of living index of agricultural workers. There should also be long term revisions, from time to time, based on minimum basic needs necessary to sustain the livelihood of an agricultural household. Thus, the adjustment of minimum wages on the basis of cost of living index should not be confused with, and does not obviate the need for wage

revision under section 4 of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. The law should also provide for free legal aid to rural labourers and their organisations. In case rural workers are employed through middlemen or contractors, the principal employer should be liable under law for its infringement or violation. Social boycott of rural labour and of scheduled castes in particular should be treated as a criminal offence. The Law should provide for collective and punitive fines on villages indulging in such boycott.

5.11 (a) The Central Law or the Guidelines should also provide for a minimum administrative framework for monitoring the implementation of labour laws. There could preferably be a separate Commissioner for Rural Labour for each state, supported by Rural Labour Inspectors for monitoring implementation and a system of circuit courts to try cases of infringement of laws. The administrative personnel in charge of monitoring labour laws for rural labour, should as far as possible be drawn from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and the officers dealing with agricultural labour should not be owning agricultural land beyond 5 rainfed or 2 irrigated acres. This is necessary because labour officers with agricultural background are generally, if not always, prejudiced against agricultural labour, and are most likely to be partisan in favour of landed classes. The state administration should not deal with labour disputes in the nature of law and order problems. Labour laws should define clearly the role and limitations of state administration or the law-and-order machinery. The administrative personnel including the police should be oriented through training programmes to understand and appreciate the problems of rural labour, so that they are properly sensitised about social issues like poverty, exploitation and rights of rural labour. Instances of harassing rural labour with the help of police force should be thoroughly probed through judicial inquiry, and the guilty landlords as well as officers should be given deterrent punishment.

5.11 (b) The administrative machinery has to be monitored and guided by a non-official, honorary machinery, somewhat on the lines of Panchayats. A member of our Study group has proposed Shram Panchayats at the Apex level in each state and also at district, block and even at the level of cluster of villages. (Prasad, 1990, pp 66-70). They should consist of representatives of rural labour, trade unions, political parties and voluntary agencies and Dalit Samitis, apart from prominent social workers nominated by the government, who are publicly known for their commitment to the cause of rural labour. Such Shram Panchayats should be distinguished from the federations of rural labour organisations proposed in para 5.4 above. These Panchayats are not mass organisations like the federations, but are more in the nature of

committees with powers of investigation and monitoring on their own, and of submitting cases of infringement of labour laws to Labour tribunals or courts.

5.12 One of the major problems affecting particularly the rural labour is the indifference to the implementation of even the existing laws. Para 3.14 above, shows, for example, how unorganised workers are exploited and how even the government machinery is indifferent to even ensuring minimum safety and basic needs like sanitary facilities and drinking water to workers. It also shows how the minimum wage law is flouted by enforcing multiple jobs on workers. Organisation of rural labour, imparting awareness of labour laws to them and encouraging and assisting them in demanding their dues will no doubt promote better implementation of labour laws. But the state machinery has also an important role to play in the meanwhile. First of all, it has to ensure that there is adequate administrative machinery to inspect and monitor the implementation of labour laws, and ensure that they are committed and psychologically oriented to this. The measures recommended in the preceding para are expected to help in this regard. It is also important for the labour department to bring a hand-book for every economic sector or industry on the labour laws applicable to it. These hand-outs or brochures for agricultural labour, migrant labour, bidi workers and so on should be in regional languages and written in an easy style intelligible to even non-matriculates. The employees in rural industries should be made to prominently display the major provisions of labour laws at their work place, and also show how they have implemented them. State administration should give systematic hearing to complaints made by individual workers and their organisations in this regard and verify and redress them. Legal aid committees should be set up for each cluster of villages and each industrial unit to help rural labour. The proprietors of rural industries, mine-owners and other employees nonagricultural rural labour should file periodic returns to authorities about the number of workers engaged by them, wages paid, and implementation of labour laws. These returns should be available to the representatives of labour organisations for verification.

5.13 The government scheme of Honorary Rural Organisers (HROs) has hardly been a success anywhere. It would probably make no difference to improving the organisation of rural labour whether this is continued or discontinued. Our Study Group could hardly see much potential for them even as agents for spreading the awareness of labour laws, monitoring their implementation in the villages allotted to them, or even in serving as channels of communication between unorganised or weakly organised workers and Labour Inspectors. If the workers are well organised, they may not need such channels as they can effectively and directly express their grievances and complaints before the state machinery and employers and

work towards a better implementation of labour laws. It is only political parties and voluntary agencies, or social workers under voluntary agencies who can more effectively deal with these issues, and can show the initiative and flexibility which HROs under the government can hardly be expected to have. It is a different matter, however, if some social activists have already taken initiative to spread awareness among workers and organise them. The Government, particularly the Labour Department, should give its utmost support to such persons and encourage them. But giving financial assistance to any one who comes forward and claims to organise workers will only amount to vulgarising and defeating the objective. Such assistance could, however, be given to voluntary agencies which have already shown concrete evidence of their commitment and capability for the task.

5.14 Once such agencies or political parties organise workers into either unions, associations (sanghas) or co-operative societies, the government has to develop a due machinery for a formal recognition to them, give them the protection of law against boycott or reprisals by employers. The laws have to be tightened up to prevent such offences by employers against workers in the process of collective bargaining. Insistence on a recognition of such organisations by employers cannot be a feasible idea in rural conditions, particularly in the case of agricultural labour. Such a recognition should be given by the government itself. However, certain conditions may be desirable to expect before a formal recognition is granted, so that genuine organisation of labour is not thwarted by self-seekers who make an excuse of it to appropriate benefits for themselves, or by employers who float counter-unions of their henchmen, or by multiplicity of mutually competing unions. Conditions of recognition have to be worked out by a committee consisting of representatives of political and social workers who have been active in the task of organising rural labour, and have to be finalised after discussions with representatives of rural labour. However, a few principles may be kept in mind. In view of the low income of labourers, a regular contribution of membership fee or a minimum of number of such paying members need not be insisted upon for either membership or recognition of unions. The registration procedure for unions and other organisations should be simple, intelligible to workers and quick. In view of the helplessness and vulnerability of rural labour and their fear of reprisals, it need not be insisted that the office bearers should be from among labourers or workers themselves. However, there should be some check on whether they enjoy the confidence of workers and function in their interests. The recognition may also have to take into consideration the need to keep the nature and tasks of organisations flexible. The organisations may not all be in the nature of trade unions alone, but may take up multiple roles to keep themselves active and viable. These roles could cover imparting

education and skills, co-operative production, securing and extending credit and marketing support, undertaking contracts of official relief work programmes or employment guarantee programmes and even other contracts of civil works for official and semi-official bodies, management of common lands and running fair price shops for weaker sections. It is not necessary that a single organisation should manage all these functions. Nevertheless, they have to combine the two roles of waging struggles against their exploiters along with some constructive work. Relative weights to be given to the two functions may be left to organisations themselves depending on the stage of development of the organisation and circumstances. In any case, safeguards may have to be built to ensure genuine and efficient functioning, but they should not prove to be suffocating to initiative and enterprise. The existing Trade Union Act may not allow for recognition of unions engaging themselves in such multiple roles. Either through an amendment of the existing Act, or through a separate legislation for rural labour, unions or rural labour organisations have to be recognised as associations of the weaker sections and rural labourers as such rather than as unions for carrying out collective bargaining alone.

5.15 It is often ignored that in improving the bargaining power of the poor, in raising their survival capacity, and in giving them some degree of independence in meeting their basic needs, Common Property Resources (CPRs) play an important role. These resources consist of common grazing lands, drinking water sources, irrigation tanks, village woodlots and public threshing grounds. They have been managed traditionally by village communities as a whole. To the extent that village society or economy is differentiated, the access to CPRs too is bound to be unequal. It is, however, necessary to appreciate that the rural poor have derived proportionately more benefits from them as compared to land owned by them. Thus even if in absolute terms the richer households may own more animals than the poor, the latter generally possess proportionately more animals than their share in land, which is possible mainly because of CPRs. Jodha has shown how the rural poor derived a greater proportion of their total income from CPRs than the rich. (Jodha, 1986, p.1176-7). A study in a forest region showed that agricultural labour depended on minor forests, used as CPRs, to meet all their needs of fuel wood, grass and straw, which was natural as they did not have lands of their own. Even poor peasants, who had some land but depended also on hiring out their labour, secured a bulk of their biomass needs from CPRs. (Nadkarni et al, 1989, pp. 147-8 & 152; Nadkarni, 1990, p.36). Unfortunately, in the course of increasing commercialisation and break down of community management which used to ensure sustainable use, CPRs became open access resources with a free rider system operating. This led not only to declining productivity of

CPRs but also to encroachments on common lands. With the rural big playing the lead roles in this sordid drama and with the failure of ceilings legislation in releasing surplus land to the poor, populist solutions were sought at the expense of CPRs. Since the government could not touch the lands of the rich, it started giving away common lands and forests to the poor, sometimes by regularising the encroachments already made. This has not necessarily helped the poor, because what they secured were basically waste lands which needed investments in soil and water conservation to make them more productive. This has often been beyond the capacity of the poor in terms of both monetary and managerial resources when tried to be done on individual or household basis. Moreover, there is just not enough land to be given to all the landless or to convert all the tiny holdings into economically viable holdings. As such, even if some of the rural poor apparently benefited, other poor were deprived of their common lands and the produce it used to generate.

5.16 Attempts at regenerating village grazing lands and wood lots to the extent they have still remained, have been made for sometime now. One model of these attempts is the take over of grazing lands or parts of them by the Forest Department, enclosing them to prevent grazing, planting them with commercial tree species like casurina and eucalyptus, and then handing them over to Panchayats. The Panchayats look at them as sources of revenue, and the basic aim of regenerating CPRs -to serve as source of meeting the basic needs of the poor in respect of fuel wood and fodder, is ignored in the process. There have also been other attempts by voluntary agencies who formed associations or sanghas of local people to run and manage them and ensure both sustainable use and equitable access. (Nadkarni, 1990). The participative approach, though subject to initial inertia, is more successful in achieving the objectives of regeneration of CPRs and is also more cost effective. The crux of the problem lies in providing equitable access to the products of CPRs for the poor and land less families. An access based on the principle of equal quota for each household, rather than unit of land or animals, is more equitable and favourable for the poor. Taking over village CPRs exclusively for the benefit of the poor and the landless, has a more forceful moral justification because households owning lands can meet their biomass needs from their own sources, while CPRs are the main source for the landless. However, an exclusion of the land owning households from the CPRs runs the risk of sabotage by the rich. Such a course of providing exclusive access to the poor may have resorted to if the rural rich do not agree to arrangements for equitable access. In such cases, lands have to be earmarked as exclusive CPRs for the landless and tiny holders alone, and rural labour organisations will have to undertake the responsibility of managing them and ensuring

their sustainable and equitable use. The revival of CPRs could free the poor from their dependence on the big holders in meeting their bio-mass needs. If CPRs can also raise fruit trees, they can serve as a source of nutrition for the children of the poor.

5.17 Among the measures which make the rural poor less vulnerable and dependent on exploitative patrons and their improve their potential for organisation, a dependable **net work of fair price shops** in rural areas holds an important place. A policy of incentive prices for agricultural produce has tended to raise consumer prices too, including the issue prices of foodgrains in the fair price shops. To make available foodgrains of at least the minimum necessary quantity per capita at prices affordable by the poor, a scheme analogous to **food stamps** plan may be envisaged. These foodstamps should offer the quota foodgrains at discounted issue prices. Only goods normally consumed by the poor may be made available under foodstamps plan, like coarse grains or millets, and coarse varieties of cloth. Kerosene at discount rates upto a certain quantity should also be available exclusively to the poor under the scheme. The management of fair price shops may be entrusted to recognised rural labour organisations.

5.18 We may now bring together the **recommendations in summary form**. A summary cannot possibly bring out the reasoning that lies behind recommendations, nor the full details and the context of recommendations, for which the preceding paragraphs and sections have to be read.

(i) Any policy of giving due priority to agriculture and improving its status vis-a-vis industry, should give priority also to improving the status of rural labour too who are the weakest and most vulnerable in the rural sector (para 5.2).

(ii) Organisations for rural labour should be separate from that of farmers, but should include poor peasants and such others who depend on the sale of their labour power as a source of living. The concept of rural labour should be flexible enough to include those working at home or those who are paid on piece rate basis for their produce. (para 5.3).

(iii) A separate organisation for each type of labour activity may not be possible when workers engage in more than one labour activity. Either an organisation should cover more than one labour activity, or there should be no bar on a member of one labour organisation from becoming a member of other labour organisations (para 5.6).



(iv) A labour organisation, as far as possible should not stop at being only a trade union. Apart from collective bargaining, it should have other constructive activities too, like running an industry on co-operative lines, imparting social awareness and knowledge of labour laws, accepting contracts of employment oriented projects, management of common lands, and running fair price shops, with due care for viability and manageability. Labour co-operatives would need both political and material support from the government. (para 5.7).

(v) No a priori guidelines can be given as to whether each type of rural labour should have a separate organisation of its own. It will depend on viability, effectiveness, distinctiveness of problems, and availability of local activists and leaders. While casteist organisations are not desirable, a separate organisation of Dalits should be viewed with sympathy especially where they face social discrimination and rural labour from intermediate castes do not come to their succour. Separate organisation of women is necessary to fight sexual discrimination and assault, and oppression at their own homes. Child labour and migrant labour also need special attention. (para 5.5).

(vi) The micro-level individual organisations should federate into mass organisations at district, state and national levels. This will give them the necessary political and economic strength, and enable them to even tap resources from the organised urban labour, with whom they can enter into alliances. They should also form legal aid committees at various levels to help rural labour. The uniting and dominating interest in these federations should be that of rural labour and not that of political parties. These federations should look after the interests of not only their constituent units, but also of those rural labour facing constraints in organising themselves, such as female and child labour and migrant labour, and thus eventually draw them into their network. In particular, the federations should bring to the attention of authorities and Shram Panchayats all cases of infringement of labour laws, specially in the case of female and child labour and migrant labour (para 5.4).

vii) The task of organising rural labour is best left to political parties and voluntary agencies, which cannot be performed by government through a scheme such as that of Honorary Rural Organisers. The main task of the government, however, is supportive and indirect. Even the political parties and voluntary agencies should ensure that a cadre of committed and well informed local activists is evolved in each organisation promoted by them. The government also

could, on the advice of spokesmen of rural labour, identify social activists who have a record of effective work among rural labour for their organisation and welfare, and give them support and encouragement (paras 5.8 and 5.13).

viii) There has to be either a Central Law or Guidelines, evolved in consultation with states to which they should be signatories, expressing commitment to enact state laws on similar lines. This should provide for a basic framework for working conditions, safety, minimum wages and their periodic revision, social security, a mechanism for resolving disputes, recognition of rural labour organisations, and adequate administrative machinery. The principal employer should be liable under law for any infringement of labour laws, who should not get away from this responsibility through resorting to a contractor system. Even if the contractors infringe the law, the principal employer should still be answerable and liable for punishment. The Law should clearly define the role and limitations of law-and-order machinery in dealing with issues of rural labour and class conflicts. Harassing rural labour with the help of police in a partisan manner supporting the landlords should invite deterrent punishment. Any social boycott of rural labour and of scheduled castes in particular should be considered as a criminal offence, with a provision for collective and punitive fines. The law should also provide free legal aid to rural labour as a matter of right. (paras 5.9, 5.10 and 5.11 a).

(ix) There should be adequate administrative framework in each state for monitoring the implementation of labour laws, which should particularly give intensive attention to the working conditions of female and child labour and migrant labour. The personnel in charge of this should be from landless families as far as possible, and should be sensitised through proper training about the rights of rural labour. The local law-and-order machinery also should be similarly sensitised (para 5.11 a).

(x) There should also be a non-official, honorary machinery at the state, district, block levels and also at the level of cluster of villages. They may be called as Shram panchayats who should consist of only a few members in the nature of workable committee, drawn from representatives of rural labour, rural trade unions, political parties and voluntary agencies. Their main task is to monitor and guide the administrative machinery in charge of monitoring and implementing the labour laws. They should have the powers to inspect the working conditions and periodic returns submitted by employers. They should give special attention to non-unionised rural labour. (para 5.11 b).

(xi) Easy-to-read handbooks in regional languages should be brought out for each economic sector for the benefit of rural labour, explaining the provision of labour laws and the rights of rural labour. They should be made available at all work sites by the proprietors of rural industries or principal employers.

(xii) Proprietors of rural industries or principal employers of rural labour should file periodic returns to authorities about the number of workeres employed, wages paid and implementation of labour laws. These returns should be available for inspection by the representatives of rural labour organisations and Shram Panchayats. (para 5.12).

(xiii) Formal recognition should be granted to rural labour organisations by the government itself, so as to give them the protection of law. Conditions of recognition may be worked out in consultation with the representatives of rural labour organisations, but a few principles are spelt out above (para 5.14). A mechanical application of conditions of recognition in the case of urban labour cannot be made for rural labour.

(xiv) Common Property Resources (CPRs) should be revived mainly for the benefit of the rural poor. If equitable access by the poor is not ensured by others in the villages, common lands should be earmarked for exclusive access to the landless or tiny holders alone. Their management may be entrusted to local rural labour organisations (paras 5.15 and 5.16).

(xv) The government, political parties and voluntary agencies should give special attention to measures needed to enable rural labour to overcome the constraints in organising themselves, which arise principally from their patron-client relationship with the employers. These measures, in sum, are:

a) adequate employment opportunities in the economy, ensured if possible, by right to work;

b) credit support by official credit agencies to economic activities, and consumer credit through mutual-aid-societies with the support of voluntary agencies and political parties;

c) ensuring adequate supply of basic goods at discounted issue prices through a food stamp plan or a similar scheme (para 5.17);

- d) developing CPRs and their productive capacity and ensuring equitable access, to them;
- e) meeting their basic needs of housing and drinking water;
- f) a comprehensive social security legislation;
- g) protection of law in undertaking legitimate collective bargaining; giving formal recognition to unions by the government;
- h) material and political support to labour co-operatives and other organisations engaged in constructive work.

(xvi) These measures should invariably be coupled with an effective legislative framework to ensure adequate remuneration and proper working conditions, and also measures to properly acquaint workers about the provisions of law and their rights under law. While the government has to play a major role in the former task, and also in the measures listed in (xv), political parties and voluntary agencies will have to play a major role in the latter. The government has a major role particularly in easing the macro economic constraints on organisation of rural labour which arise from increasing pressure on land due to limited employment opportunities both in and outside agriculture and stagnant productivity per worker. But none of these three actors can afford to act in isolation. The task of amelioration of rural poverty is not one of extending doles, but essentially one of empowering the rural weak. In this task, all the three will have to collaborate in a spirit of co-operation and understanding.

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