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Abstract of Doctoral Dissertation

Origin Growth and Condition of Living of Agricultural Labourers in Orissa — A Village Study*

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CORRESPONDING TO THE controversy on the nature of transition in the Indian economy a debate has been raised, of late, in respect of the historical genesis of the growth of a class of agricultural wage workers in India. To account for this phenomenon a number of theories have been advanced. Out of these a few of them have been associated with controversy in relation to the origin and growth of these categories of labour force. At one level the origin of agricultural wage labour has been traced back to the pre-capitalist labour-employer relation. However the dynamics of colonial capital penetration in introducing new property relation have been ignored. At the one end, the reason for the growth process of agricultural labour category is ascribed to the pernicious aspect of the British colonialism bound by imperialism in disintegrating the traditional Indian agrarian society. Again in recent years attempts have been initiated by the academics in equity the rapid growth of agrarian wage workers with that of development of capitalist relation in agriculture. The spatial variation of the category is equated with the uneven development in the growth process of capitalism. In essence they provide evidence of capitalism in agriculture by measuring the wage labour employment.

To examine some of the above mentioned issues the structure of the economy in Orissa through a case study of two villages has been taken: one a wet village and the other a dry village located in Sambalpur district. The study begins with the agricultural labour situation during the last three censuses in Orissa. It is discerned that there has been a growth of agricultural wage worker category over time at the aggregate and percentage level as well. Spatially both advanced and backward districts are having higher proportion of agricultural labourers to the state average. Hence contrary to the view point expressed in many quarters no correspondence between the level of development and growth of agricultural wage workers has been found.

The agrarian structure during British colonial periods indicates that the process of change centered around revenue settlements, commercialisation of

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agriculture, in addition to the communication net work. They contributed to the restructuring of the economy, though the restructuring was not to the extent of disintegration of the feudal hold over the area. Capital penetration failed to transform the socio-economic structure in its own image. Rather it compromised with the existing pre-capitalist production processes. Hence internal colonisation, caste dominance, high land revenue, Bethi and Begar system, extraction of surplus through extra economic coercion were identified as some of the devices through which the tenants, share croppers, and landless agricultural labourers were exploited. There was little change in the old pattern of social relation of production.

Post colonial Orissa witnessed a series of state interventions aimed at developing the economy on capitalist lines, princely state were integrated with the Indian Union and land reform measures were initiated to give a blow to the feudal land relations. Later on, technological intervention i.e. HYV seed fertiliser and irrigation water were introduced.

The post colonial state intervention, capital penetration and its consequences had been reflected in the structure of the villages that were studied. The significant structural changes as observed in the wet village displayed the growing importance of the non-cultivating peasants and the stability of the middle peasants households over time. The rich peasants as a special group is weak one in transforming the forces of production and production relation.

The structure that emerges from the dry village depicts the strengthening on the non-cultivating peasants households and the disintegration of the middle peasants. However, the capitalist - rich peasant structure does not appear to have gained in economic strength.

Wherever capital has gone it has restructured the feudal economy. In the process of the operation of capitalistic law of motion there is a differentiation among the peasantry in the agrarian economy. However, capitalism in an ex-colonial country like India has developed with a compromise with pre-capitalistic mode of production. Hence there is a simultaneous co-existence of advanced productive force along with backward production relation.

The differentiation in the peasantry has been due to the state intervention in the productive forces and legal structures. More particularly, changes in the legal structure in respect of common property resources introduced during the British period and continuing till date in its minor amendments have further differentiated the peasantry each of these developmental processes have two dimensional effects: At one level it integrates and at the other it disintegrates. In India the latter process is at work and not the former one. Because the 'developmental projects' have dislodged a substantial section of population without re-integrating them in the economy. More particularly poor peasants and agricultural labourers have been marginalised over time. This marginalised section is not purely on account of the capitalist differentiation of the peasantry. The dynamics of structural change are not strong enough

to dissolve the feudal remnants nor it can bring about a differentiation of the peasantry in its pure form by introducing capitalist rich peasant culture.

Summing up all these findings, it is found that the presence of middle peasant economy provides a narrow base for sustained expansion in the economic activity in the wet village. This has been manifested in the rigidity in the cropping pattern, low level of farm mechanisation, narrowness of the home market etc. Hence there is no clear evidence of the acceleration in the economic growth leading to a major structural change. Hence the difference between the wet and dry village is rather marginal. Similarly the production relation that is existing in these two villages are not qualitatively different. The employer-employee relations, the mode of wage payment, wage rate, quantum of employment, household budget, incidence of indebtedness etc. are backward and archaic as in the dry village.

In the ultimate analysis, the above mentioned historical events rather than the growth of capitalist relations in agricultural production alone have contributed for the immense growth of agricultural labourers. Therefore, the nature, growth and dynamics of agricultural labour have more to do with the socio-economic context in which growth is taking place. This is more important than the growth itself.