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THE CONCEPT OF UNEMPLOYMENT IN A DEVELOPING ECONOMY

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Analytically, unemployment implies, in the absence of market imperfections, a situation in which labour supply is perfectly elastic at the current wage rate. Following the neo-classical approach, if we assume a normal production function, the proximate cause of unemployment would be the tenacity of the floor to wage rates. Like the sellers of other commodities, the labourer may have a reservation price below which he prefers involuntary idleness to employment. Where marginal productivity of labour falls below this price, we have an excess labour supply situation. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the level and significance of the reservation price in the context of labour markets in a developing economy and the form in which labour supply and demand imbalances express themselves here.

Unemployment is essentially a market phenomenon which is contingent on the growth of labour market and of a sizable class of 'wage labour.' So far as the rise of 'wage labour' is necessarily implied in the process of economic change and modernization, a very concrete problem of unemployment may soon arise in the developing countries. However, so long as there exists a sizable traditional sector with households as the units of production which give to their members a natural right to work irrespective of their marginal productivity, it may continue to provide a cushion against unemployment of those exposed to the risks of competition in the modern sector.

THE VULNERABLE CLASS

It has been pointed out that in India three major factors have been in operation over the last century which "led to a rapid proletarianisation of the working force, and thus to the emergence of unemployment as an open phenomenon These are the rights to individual property recognized by the British legal system which facilitated the break-up of joint families; the emergence of a market for land, which led to the gradual dispossession of small peasant proprietors and technological changes which caused the displacement of labour from traditional occupations. The people uprooted in these ways have either migrated to the towns in search of employment or joined the ranks of a new class of landless agricultural labourers, also in search of work."¹

Agricultural labourers form the most vulnerable section of the rural community. In the words of the I.L.O. Report, they "constitute the core of the employment problem in the rural sector, because they are actively seeking employment in the employment market."² Some of them have cultivating rights in tiny bits of land where they are employed for a part of the year, but the extent of employment and earnings secured on their farm is so limited that they are

1. K. N. Raj: *Employment Aspects of Planning in Under-developed Economies*, National Bank of Egypt, Cairo, 1957, p. 8.

2. I.L.O. : *Employment Objectives in Economic Development*, 1961.

compelled to supplement it by hiring out their labour on others' holdings. Landless agricultural labourers obviously depend exclusively on wage employment in agriculture or such other employment as they can manage to procure. Agricultural labourers are classified into two categories : attached and casual. Attached workers, about 10 per cent of all, are bound by a contract which generally ensures them regular employment, though at lower wage rate. Casual labourers, on the other hand, are employed on a daily wage basis in holdings which are often small and scattered. They have little chance of making an organized effort to secure an improvement in the terms and conditions of their employment. They do not have many assets on which to fall back in lean periods. They are generally conservative and custom bound but inexorable economic necessity impels them to move from place to place in search of employment, or higher wages. In short, they are exposed to all the hazards of a competitive market and provide interesting laboratory material for testing well-known hypotheses regarding determination of wage and employment levels in a competitive situation.

WAGE DETERMINATION : SUBSISTENCE MINIMUM OR MARGINAL PRODUCTIVITY

In the neo-classical model of perfect competition unemployment is a short run phenomenon which appears only on account of frictions and rigidities in the labour market. Given wage flexibility and normal production function, market forces would always tend to establish a state of full employment. In this model, excess labour supply is reflected in a downward adjustment of wage rates which tends to correct the initial imbalance. No doubt, "the inelasticities of the time patterns of primary production"³ as well as rigid resource complementarities in agriculture limit the effectiveness of wage flexibility as a tool of adjustment in agricultural economies. But wage reductions could stimulate employment in several ancillary agricultural functions related to hedging or general upkeep of the farm and buildings or livestock as well as non-agricultural occupations into which the agricultural workers are always willing to move. However, there may exist in all societies a floor to the wage rate corresponding to the classical notion of a subsistence wage. This floor may be conventionally or institutionally determined or, as is more likely in countries with chronically overcrowded agriculture, it may be a physiological minimum. Whatever the factors which determine the level of the floor, once it is established and wages refuse to fall below it, however considerable the pressure in the labour market, excess labour supply tends to assume the form of open unemployment.

The chronic imbalance between labour supply and complementary resources in agriculture is normally expected to result in the setting up of wage floors at subsistence levels over large parts of the country. We do not have a long term series of wages and cost of living to examine this hypothesis. The first Agricultural Labour Enquiry (ALE), however, gives data on wages and prices of foodgrains (on which the labourer spends the major part, about 60 per cent, of his income) at two points of time, 1938-39 and 1950-51. It shows that while wages have gone up three to five times, they have generally lagged behind the rise in foodgrain prices. What is more interesting for our purpose is that wages in terms of foodgrains given in Table I show a decline even in the most poverty-

3. L. E. Howard : Labour in Agriculture, Oxford University Press, London, 1935.

stricken States of Bihar and Orissa where they are very likely to have touched the subsistence minimum even in 1938-39. Such a decline appears to suggest that there is no rigidity about the subsistence floor and wages have probably adjusted to changing levels of marginal productivity.

The hypothesis of wage sensitivity to relative demand and supply variation may also be verified with the help of cross-section data of various States, by fitting a regression equation of the form :

$$W = \alpha + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 \dots\dots\dots(i)$$

Where W is the average wage rate, x_1 is the value of output per holding, x_2 is number of agricultural labourers per holding, β 's are coefficients and α is a constant.

Assuming rigid complementarity between land and labour, x_1 demand factor in equation (i) could be measured by average size of holding and x_2 by the number of labourers per holding. But, as we know, labour requirements in agriculture also vary with the intensity of farming. Hence we take the value of output per holding, *i.e.*, the size of holding adjusted for productivity per acre, as our measure of demand.

The demand for labour may be met either from the family or the hired labour. To arrive at a precise measure of demand for hired labour, due adjustment must be made for the extent of family labour available for operations on the farm. However, we observe that as between different States the size of family varies only between 5 and 6, and further, if account is taken of the inhibiting effects of prosperity on economic activity rates among women and children in bigger families which are generally associated with larger holdings, the range of variations in the volume of family labour per holding as between different States would be lower still. Thus, output per holding may be related to the number of hired labourers per holding to indicate the relative demand and supply situation.

The regression coefficients derived from fitting equation (i) to the Indian data at two points of time, 1951 and 1961 are given below :

$$W_{1951} = 37.69 + \begin{matrix} .093x_1 \\ (.022) \end{matrix} - \begin{matrix} 17.25x_2 \\ (16.24) \end{matrix} \dots\dots R^2 = .84$$

$$W_{1961} = 120.74 + \begin{matrix} .06x_1 \\ (0.01) \end{matrix} - \begin{matrix} 41.98x_2 \\ (27.65) \end{matrix} \dots\dots R^2 = .68$$

The values of R^2 indicate that inter-State variations in agricultural wages are significantly explained by value of output and supply of labour per holding. The regression coefficients of output per holding are significant both in 1951 and 1961: they point out that a rise of 100 paise (one rupee) in output would secure an increase of 9 paise in 1951 and 6 paise in 1961. As expected, the regression coefficients of labour supply are negative, but they are not statistically significant. But these values relate to average wages which conceal a large amount of seasonal

variation. It appears likely that in the off-peak season when there are labour surpluses, wage rates touch the floor determined by subsistence levels. If this floor is a physiological minimum, it should exhibit a smaller regional spread. Wages for lowest paid agricultural operations show, according to first ALE data, a wide range from 60 paise in Madhya Pradesh to Rs. 1.61 in Punjab; in terms of foodgrains, they vary from 3.5 lbs. to 10 lbs. A wage which, when spent entirely on cereals, procures less than one pound for each member of the family (assuming a family size of 4) evidently falls short of a bare subsistence minimum. It might be labelled as 'distress wage,' not a subsistence wage, which the workers accept under compulsions of economic necessity. At the other limit, a wage which provides 1.5 pounds of foodgrains per family member, when the worker spends only 60 per cent of it on cereals, is clearly above the bare physiological minimum, though not satisfactory by other standards. If the workers succeed in resisting further wage reductions in spite of sizable off-season unemployment, it only shows their waiting capacity acquired through higher earnings at the peak which leave them a margin to cover periods of unemployment.

It is, indeed, interesting to note that like average daily wage rates, minimum wages also move in close association with value of output and supply of agricultural labour per holding. If minimum wages were rigid and determined by subsistence levels, they should show an asymptotic tendency at the lower levels. The values of regression coefficients given below are, however, statistically significant for both 1951 and 1961, suggesting wage flexibility in areas of low productivity.

$$W'_{1951} = 30.83 + .083x_1 - 18.76x_2 \dots\dots\dots R^2 = .90$$

(.015) (11.09)

$$W'_{1961} = 109.80 + .05x_1 - 41.40x_2 \dots\dots\dots R^2 = .65$$

(.015) (22.37)

where W' stands for minimum wages.

WAGE FLEXIBILITY AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Assuming that aggregate demand consideration (in the Keynesian sense) are not quite relevant for developing countries, that market for agricultural labour is broadly competitive and that production function over a wide range of occupations taken in their aggregate is normal, wage flexibility would ordinarily ensure full employment. Whether open unemployment persists in the Indian context in the face of observed wage flexibility in backward areas may be seen from a review of the unemployment data. Data on unemployment for 1951 and 1961 (for which wage rates have been presented) available from the first Agricultural Labour Enquiry and 1961 Census respectively are presented in Table III. In South India and Bombay, the first ALE reveals the expected relation between concentration of agricultural labour families, low productivity and wage levels and high rates of unemployment. But in other States notably Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, where demand and supply conditions are equally unfavourable and wage rates are very low, the incidence of unemployment is also significantly low. In these States low wages seem to encourage a liberal and perhaps irrational use of labour. At the same time, when we observe heaviest

incidence of unemployment in a prosperous State like Punjab, wage rigidity suggests itself as a plausible explanation. Our findings are also confirmed by 1961 Census data on unemployment as given in Table III. It includes, among the rural unemployed, persons who have not had some regular work of more than one hour a day throughout the greater part of the working season but were available for work. It reveals that the proportion unemployed in rural areas (which may give a broad indication of the incidence of unemployment among agricultural labourers) varies directly with wage rates, the heaviest incidence being observed in States like Punjab, West Bengal, Assam and Kerala which report highest wage rates. While there are limitations of unemployment data from both the sources cited and not much reliance may be placed on the magnitudes obtained, the regularity with which we observe the same relation between wages and unemployment rates gives a measure of confidence in our results.

The coexistence of a large volume of unemployment and high wage rates (both average and minimum) in areas of high agricultural productivity appears anomalous at first sight. But the fact of the matter is that it is in these areas that workers are in a position to fix a reservation price below which they refuse to offer their services for employment. Wages do fall in off-season in prosperous areas, but they remain substantially higher than the peak in other areas and seem to discourage employment in periods when labour cannot be utilized at high levels of productivity. Low wages coupled with some measure of flexibility perhaps ensure longer duration of employment in areas of low productivity.

Dr. Raj is of the view that the amplitude of seasonal variation in wage rates would provide "a rough index of the extent of unemployment and of the magnitude of surplus labour in a region."⁴ This subsumes (1) a rigid floor determined by subsistence minimum and (2) a competitive wage determined by labour scarcity at the peak. In prosperous areas, off-season wages appear to be relatively high, and perhaps rigid, and excess demand does lead to a rise of competitive wage during the busy season. In the backward areas, however, our analysis reveals that minimum wage itself is flexible. There is thus a two way adjustment mechanism. The amplitude may rise due to upward revision of wages during periods of labour shortage in areas of high productivity and downward adjustment of the floor in areas of distress. It is no accident then if the data show significant seasonal variation in wage rates even in backward States (see Tables IIA and IIB).

However, even if we assume a rigid floor, seasonal rise of wages would be an index of overall labour surplus or shortage, not of open full time unemployment *per se*. Unemployment in the western sense implies a perfectly elastic labour supply at the going wage rate. If it persists even at the peak, there should be no rise in wage rates. Actually, we observe a significant gap between the minimum and the maximum even in economically depressed States. While this may be attributed to market imperfections, it is very likely that there is no open full time unemployment and higher wage rates have to be paid to convert the latent reserves of manpower in tiny holdings into open employable surpluses for meeting the peak demand of the bigger farms. However, the distinction is a matter of theoretical nicety. The fact remains that there exists in poor States a

4. K. N. Raj : Employment Aspects of Planning in Under-developed Economies, *op cit.*, p. 11.

large number of workers whose employment and earnings are inadequate to keep them going throughout the year.

Judged by the time worked criterion, the worker appears to be more fully employed in low wage-low productivity areas. But considering that his earnings are inadequate to keep him going throughout the year, he is *virtually* unemployed for a good part of the year. He is, therefore, forced to supplement his earnings by taking up all kinds of odd jobs; working as a petty trader in an already overcrowded market or going to service industry, for example, by joining the row of people who offer to shine shoes or work as domestic servants. In each case the characteristic feature is that the activities are already overcrowded, but that he can hope to divert part of the business to himself and so earn something. This implies that the pressure in overcrowded areas also goes to swell the ranks of what we may call the pseudo-employed.

Excess labour supply in backward areas may thus be reflected in downward adjustment of wage rates, and in overcrowding in those areas of self-employment (outside agriculture) in which capital and skill requirements are too low to prevent the entry to new workers. In such areas wages are hardly above the subsistence limit even at the peak, leaving the workers little margin for their maintenance out of season. They are, therefore, forced to accept any work that is available, and at any place, regardless of the rate of return which it yields. Their flexibility gives them more work, but it is work at 'distress wage rates.' Unemployment for long periods under these conditions, though theoretically conceivable, would imply nothing short of absolute misery and starvation, a comparatively rare occurrence.

The phenomenon of open unemployment emerges with the 'proletarianisation' of labour, the growth of a class of committed labour force which is willing to accept work only of particular types, in particular areas, and at specified levels of remuneration. Expropriation of peasants and artisans has led to 'pauperisation,' not 'proletarianisation' of labourers. For the pauperised workers, there is no choice but to work 'at any level of remuneration.' As economic development gets under way, however, there grows a class of workers that is conscious both of the range of jobs and of the minimum rates of return acceptable to it. This is particularly true of educated and skilled workers. It is this class which is most exposed to the risk of unemployment. But in prosperous areas, as observed in Punjab, even unskilled labourers seem to prefer a state of unemployment or 'no work' to work below what we might call 'the reservation price' of their labour. It is not expropriation alone but expropriation accompanying minimum levels of economic well-being and development with concomitant rise of wage-paid jobs and consciousness among the people of their right to work and minimum wages which leads to the phenomenon of open unemployment. It goes without saying, of course, that if a high rate of economic development is sustained for long, the incidence of unemployment would decline.

APPRAISAL OF NATIONAL SAMPLE SURVEY APPROACH TO UNEMPLOYMENT

Employment and unemployment data are now being regularly collected through the National Sample Survey in India. The survey is based on the opera-

tional definitions of 'employment' and 'unemployment' given by the Central Statistical Organisation.⁵ Among the 'employed' are included all persons who report work for pay or profit on at least one day in the reference week, unpaid family helper and all persons with jobs or own enterprises, professions or vocations, but temporarily absent from work during the reference week. The 'unemployed' in urban areas are said to comprise all persons "who, having no jobs or enterprises of their own, had not worked even on a single day and were earnestly looking for full time work." For the rural areas, however, "looking for full time work" criterion is replaced by that of "availability for work at current rates of remuneration in prevailing conditions of work."

A serious complication is introduced because current wage rates have been highly flexible both over time and space. More persons may "report work for pay" but it may be work at 'distress' rates which neither meet their conventional needs nor satisfy our concept of a 'technical minimum.' From the individual point of view, therefore, a true measure of employment can only be obtained by deflating the number of days employed by a suitable wage-index, as follows :

$$E' = E \times \frac{W}{W_s} \dots\dots\dots(ii)$$

where E' is the standard time-units of work, E is the actual time-units worked, W is the average daily rate in the reference period and W_s is the 'standard wage.' We may take for the 'standard' a 'technical wage,' determined by such considerations as the minimum nutritional requirements and the needs for clothing, housing, etc. This minimum would obviously vary with change of place and climate. Its serviceability as a 'standard' is, however, restricted. Where off-peak wages lie above the technical minimum, as is likely in more developed States, it is unfair to abandon the 'current wage' in favour of the latter. At the same time, where peak wage itself lies below the technical minimum the latter has to be rejected in favour of the former on grounds of economic feasibility. The 'technical minimum' could be used to determine the standard only in areas where the peak is above it, but the off-peak wages lie below it. Unemployment would then be measured as follows :

$U = A - E'$, where U is the number of time-units unemployed, A is the number of time-units a person reports as employed plus the time for which he is available for work, and E' is as in equation (ii).

CONCLUSION

Our analysis brings out adjustability of wages of agricultural labourers (who form the most vulnerable class) to levels of agricultural productivity. In the backward areas wages at the peak appear too low to leave any surplus for the off-peak. Workers are, therefore, compelled to seek work in the off-season at any level of remuneration. Excess labour supply in this situation finds its expres-

5. Standards for Surveys on Labour Force, Employment and Unemployment, Central Statistical Organisation, Government of India, 1961.

sion in the prevalence of what we may call 'distress' wage rates and overcrowding in 'self-employed trades,' not in open unemployment. In the relatively prosperous areas, however, workers can afford to wait so long as the wages offered to them remain below their reservation price. This serves to explain the anomaly of direct association between wages and unemployment rates. In view of the divergent adjustment mechanisms, any measure of employment in time-units would be irrelevant until it is deflated by a suitably determined standard wage rate.

TABLE I—WAGES AND PRICES OF FOODGRAINS—1938-39 AND 1950-51

States	Weighted wage (Naye Paise)		Weighted price per lb. of foodgrains (Naye Paise)		Wages in terms of foodgrains (lbs.)	
	1938-39	1950-51	1938-39	1950-51	1938-39	1950-51
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Uttar Pradesh	24	121	3	18	6.36	6.54
Assam	49	182	6	25	7.71	7.34
Bihar	25	126	4	26	5.25	4.94
West Bengal	43	172	5	25	7.76	6.93
Orissa	17	74	3	18	4.75	4.11
Madras	33	95	5	23	5.99	4.16
Mysore	35	91	4	11	8.54	8.29
Travancore-Cochin	37	133	5	30	7.82	4.38
Bombay	34	100	4	15	7.82	6.79
Saurashtra	39	139	—	—	—	—
Madhya Pradesh	27	84	3	9	7.63	8.74
Madhya Bharat	21	89	3	16	6.73	5.62
Hyderabad	35	89	5	20	6.34	4.34
Rajasthan	25	127	3	18	8.15	7.28
Punjab	69	199	4	16	18.56	12.34
Pepsu	42	277	15	18	8.43	16.31

Source : Agricultural Labour Enquiry—Report on Intensive Survey of Agricultural Labour, Vol. I—All-India, 1950-51, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, 1955.

Notes : 1. Weighted wage rate relates to ploughing, transplanting, weeding and harvesting operations. The rates of wages are weighted according to man-days worked on these operations as revealed by the Intensive Family Survey.

2. Weighted retail price relates to rice, wheat, gram and other cereals. The prices are weighted according to the intake of ounces of these foodgrains per consumption unit as revealed by the family budget data of the Intensive Family Survey.

TABLE IIA—WAGE RATES, VALUE OF OUTPUT AND SUPPLY OF LABOUR PER HOLDING : 1950-51

States	Average daily wage† rates (Naye Paise)	Minimum† wage rates (Naye Paise)	Coefficient of variation Max.—Min. Min.	Value of agricultural output per holding (Rs.)	Agricultural labour per holding
	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Assam	203	185	0.24	1,872	0.18
Bihar	113	93	0.75	691	1.19
Bombay*	112	88	0.23	1,129	0.66
Madhya Pradesh*	86	64	0.50	782	1.30
Orissa	77	76	0.03	913	1.23
Punjab	215	167	0.74	1,572	0.31
Rajasthan	118	107	0.31	934	0.28
South Indian* States (com- bined)	113	88	0.39	1,102	1.77
Uttar Pradesh	115	100	0.55	995	0.33
West Bengal	184	168	0.15	1,769	0.55

Sources : 1. Columns 2 to 4 and 6 from Agricultural Labour Enquiry—Report on Intensive Survey of Agricultural Labour, Vol. I—All-India, 1950-51, *op. cit.*

2. Value of agricultural output in 1951 was estimated by deflating 1961 output by the index numbers of production for the period 1951-61 given in Growth Rates in Indian Agriculture, Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Government of India, 1965. For sources of data for 1961 output, see footnote to Table IIB.

† Since output data are given at 1961 prices, wages have also been raised by cost of living index in 1961 with 1951 as the base.

* Each asterisk marked State includes two or more States (as of 1951 boundaries) pooled together to make it comparable to a State or groups of States as formed after organization of boundaries.

TABLE IIB—WAGE RATES, VALUE OF OUTPUT AND SUPPLY OF LABOUR PER HOLDING: 1961

States	Average daily wage rates (Naye Paise)	Minimum wage rates (Naye Paise)	Coefficient of variation Max.—Min. Min.	Value of agricultural output per holding (Rs.)	Agricultural labour per holding
	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Andhra Pradesh	134	117	0.25	1,074	1.37
Assam	218	213	0.07	1,702	0.12
Bihar	140	127	0.19	700	0.76
Bombay	181	172	0.12	1,273	1.02
Kerala	184	167	0.22	2,434	0.97
Madhya Pradesh	134	128	0.14	972	0.66
Madras	132	122	0.25	1,378	0.87
Mysore	154	140	0.21	1,094	0.70
Orissa	126	118	0.20	743	0.54
Punjab	245	221	0.21	1,898	0.33
Uttar Pradesh	127	102	0.50	870	0.34
West Bengal	186	170	0.18	1,436	0.58

Sources : 1. Average daily wage rates have been computed from Agricultural Wages in India, 1960-61 and 1961-62, Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Government of India, 1962 and 1965. Since the wage rates for Rajasthan are not given in the source around 1961, it has been dropped.

2. Data on agricultural output of 41 crops obtained from Estimation of Area, Production and Yield per Acre of Principal Crops in India, 1961-62, Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Government of India, and farm harvest prices obtained from *Agricultural Situation in India*, Vol. XX, No. 10, January, 1966 were used to estimate the total value of agricultural output in different States. Some gaps in data were filled by figures obtained from the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Government of India.

3. Numbers of agricultural labourers were obtained from Census of India, Paper No. I of 1962, 1961 Census—Final Population Totals, Government of India, 1962.

TABLE III—EXTENT OF UNEMPLOYMENT

States	Man-days unemployed per agricultural labourer, Agricultural Labour Enquiry 1951	Unemployed per 1000 of male labour force in rural areas Census 1961
Assam	70	7.94
Bihar	85	3.28
Bombay*	128	3.88
Madhya Pradesh*	76	0.69
Orissa	53	2.61
Punjab*	162	7.10
Rajasthan	100	0.94
South Indian States* (combined) ..	113	
Andhra Pradesh		1.97
Kerala		28.08
Madras		4.80
Mysore		1.78
Uttar Pradesh	48	1.77
West Bengal.. .. .	94	18.12
All-India	90	4.78

Source : Agricultural Labour Enquiry—Report on Intensive Survey of Agricultural Labour, Vol. I—All-India, 1950-51, *op. cit.* Census of India, 1961, Volume I, Part II-B (i) and Part II-B (ii)—General Economic Tables, Government of India, 1965 and 1966.

* Asterisk marked States are formed by combining groups of States according to 1951 boundaries. Figures for each group are weighted in proportion to the respective number of agricultural labourers in constituent units.