

Unfreedom and Bondage in Rural India

Project: Modern Forms of Debt Bondage in Indian Agriculture

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Debt Bondage

- Debt bondage is defined as:

as being forced to work to repay a debt and not being able to leave, or being forced to work and not being able to leave because of a debt.

- **12.5 million** people in debt bondage in the world! (ILO, 2016)
- Asia- largest hub of debt bonded labour
- The Indian Parliament legislated the law dealing with bonded and forced labour in 1976 called **The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976**

Lack of Official Data on Bondage in India

- No Official Survey
- **2.6 million** people in debt bondage in agriculture (Survey by Gandhi Peace Foundation in 1978)
- Between 1997 and 2004, about **0.28 million** bonded labourers were identified and released, and all states reported the prevalence of bonded labour.

Modern Forms of Debt Bondage in Rural India

- The survey of 1978 estimated the average duration of bondage for a bonded worker in agriculture at **6.4** years.

- No national survey for latest estimates, but primary studies show a considerable **fall** in the average duration of bondage.

Features of short-term bondage

- The labourer is bonded for a fixed period of time, ranging from, as little as three months to one year.
- He/She is generally advanced a loan before the work begins.
- The **right to change the employer** during the period of employment is forfeited.
- The worker works to pay off the debt and is rendered free once the debt is cleared.
- The worker voluntarily enters into this contract.

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- The duration is **designed to be short** by the employer. Why?
 - **Seasonal** nature of work in industry and agriculture. Save costs of hiring worker full time.
 - Long-term bonded labour contracts are more susceptible to be **checked and caught**
 - Short-term contracts can be **concealed** in a better manner.
 - The **social factors** that prevented the workers from breaking away from the system of bonded labour have weakened over time.
 - The workers have access to precarious work in the informal sector which allows them or members of their family to pay back the debt and break free from bondage.

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- These contracts can be seen in brick kilns, garment factories, carpet weaving industry, stone quarries, and domestic work.
- These forms of bondage are thriving in capitalist economies and are a form of **precarity** that workers endure because of
 - Lack of decent employment
 - Failure of the state to provide basic minimum employment and social protection to workers.
 - Deregulation of labour markets under neo-liberalism.

Unfreedom: Conceptual Framework

- V.K. Ramachandran (1990) explains that the labourer in bondage and the free wage labourer stand at two ends of **a continuum of degrees of unfreedom**.
- Unfreedom refers to work done under some form of coercion and without payment at the regular wage rate.
- An unfree worker provides **labour services** to the landlords.
- Labour services are tasks performed by the worker for the employer at rates (if at all there are payments) that are far below the market wage rate.
- Examples: Looking after the field, helping in domestic work, tending to livestock, guarding the crop, women used for cleaning the stables etc.

Location of Primary Study: Haryana



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- A primary study of agrarian relations in rural Haryana was conducted by the Society for Social and Economic Research, New Delhi in 2018–19
- Results based on data of 293 households across four villages of Haryana.

Siri/ Mazhaaras in Haryana

10 % of the 293 sample households

Unfree Workers and Debt Bondage in Haryana

- There were **no standard terms of contract** for these workers.
- Typically worked on the farm for one or two seasons in the year and did all labour work required for cultivation in exchange for a share of the crop produce.
- In most cases, they were **advanced a loan** by the landlords.
- Expected to work for the landlord until they have repaid the loan.

Nature of Unfreedom in Haryana

- The share of a *siri* in the total crop produce varied from as low as **one-twelfth to one-fourth**.
- The siri had to bear the cost of material inputs often in the same proportion.
- What determines the contract?
 - Bargaining power of the siri worker
 - Household size (family labour supply)
 - Requirement of loan
- Typically responsible for providing all labour including hired casual labour.

Siri Vs a Sharecropper/tenant

- Similarity: Both **shared the agricultural risks**: climate, diseases, price shocks etc.
- Distinction: Siri takes **no managerial decisions** what crops to grow, from where to buy the inputs or where to sell the produce. He remains a farm worker.

Nature of Unfreedom in Haryana

- Households had to engage in providing different **unpaid labour services** to the landlord.
- These households typically rely on exploiting their family labour to the maximum to minimise their costs of labour. They were most exploited category of farm workers.
- In extreme cases, they were subject to atrocities by their landlords.

Economic Viability of Siri Workers

- Siri households earned on average Rs. 20,000 more than the hired manual worker households in the Study villages. Why?
 - Low levels of work in agriculture. Siri is more commonly used.
 - High mechanization and therefore less use of casual labour.
 - Non-farm work is limited and mainly of precarious nature.
- Antagonistic class relations between siri worker and casual hired workers.

Change in the Nature of Unfreedom (1930-50 vs 2018)

- Siri workers belong to the **Dalit (Schedule Caste)** households. Today and in the 1930-50's too.
- Siri rely heavily on the **unpaid labour of women** in their family.
- Siri workers **hire in** labour today (in sharp contrast to 1930s).
- The incidence of unfree labour has **fallen** sharply since the 1930s.
- Contracts were usually standard (one-fourth share during 1930s). Now more varied.
- The forms of coercion faced by workers have changed significantly.
- Earlier work on siri system showed a large prevalence of siris in the Fatehabad and Sirsa districts of Haryana, this study also found the prevalence of such labourers in Sonapat and Bhiwani district of rural Haryana.

Changes in Nature of Unfreedom in Birdhana Village (surveyed in 2003-04 and again in 2018-19)

- There was about **9 months** of work in agriculture during 2003-04. It meant all members of the family were engaged in agriculture to provide unpaid labour.
- It has fallen to **less than 6 months** now. This has led to other members of the family diversifying into different occupations.
- The shift from cotton to paddy is one of the reasons for decline in use of siri in Birdhana now. As paddy now does not require a steady supply of labour (mechanization).
- Landlords extracting a major share of surplus as rent is a reality that persists in today's Birdhana too.
- Siri workers are relatively more mobile now than earlier.

Other Forms of Unfreedom

- Forced inclusion is a common form of bondage practiced in rural India.
 - Households from a specific **caste** are forcefully obliged to provide caste-based services to the village.
 - These include, for instance, *Chamars* (a Dalit caste) obliged to remove dead cattle, *Dhobis* (washers) required to wash clothes of the dead or of women after delivery, and *Naaïs* (barbers) who are obliged to perform hair cutting and shaving services in the village.
 - These are collective forms of oppression that are rampant in India.

Conclusions

- Why unfreedom prevails today?
 - Lack of decent employment opportunities
 - Lack of access to formal credit at cheaper rates
 - Continuous dispossession of tribal lands
 - Caste-based labour mobilisation
 - Inadequate provision of land redistribution for the agricultural labourers.

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