

Waged Labour Arrangements in a West Bengal Village

In this study of types of labour arrangement in a West Bengal village, several kinds of land tenure and waged labour are seen. Despite the impact of land reforms and a greater assertion by the sharecroppers, a patron-client relationship is still seen to exist between erstwhile landlords and the labourer. The labourers were seen to prefer relations of loan credit with the landlord, who charged interest in terms of labour days than with the mahajans, who charged in cash, and at exorbitant rates of interest.

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This study is an attempt to see the dominant mode of labour arrangement in the village Mohula district of Birbhum, West Bengal. Each labour-selling household is not dependant upon a single source of livelihood. Though agricultural wage labour is the dominant mode, it can be seen that allied agricultural activities occupy a larger portion of their time and contribute more to household economy. The study is based upon a single village study in the district of Birbhum, West Bengal during November 1996 to February 1997 and again revisited in June 1998.

Kinds of Land Tenure in Mohula

Mainly there are four forms of landholding in Mohula. One is owned land, second is sharecropped (barga) land, which does not involve ownership but gives the registered holder a control that cannot be taken away. A third but minor category that exists is *kisani*. The fourth category is the vested land.

a) *Nijaswa Jami (Owned land)*: In our studied village, owned land comprised 146.33 acres of cultivable land. Legally women can inherit land, but mostly the title is passed on patrilineally. Only if the title holder does not have a son then his daughters would be entitled to inherit.

b) *Barga Jami (Sharecropped land)*: After the enactment of land reforms those farmers, who were *kisani* (unregistered sharecroppers) were registered as sharecroppers (bargadars). Most of the sharecroppers in the Mohula were in the *kisani* category. But there are instances where the *kisani*s were terminated just before land reforms so as to deprive them of tenancy rights. In case of women-headed households,

absence or death of the male member in the family in whose name the tenancy was registered resulted in the termination of barga. Legally, there are 17 SC sharecroppers and eight ST sharecroppers. But in reality 16 SC sharecroppers and seven ST sharecroppers operate. It can be called Modified Hidden Tenancy, an informal understanding between the landlord and the sharecropper arrived at whereby the latter is given a portion of land (without documents) by the former in lieu of withdrawal of sharecropping rights [Majumdar 1987:54]. In case of one SC in place of 2.98 acres of barga land he was given 1.66 acres of barga land and 0.33 acre of own land. One Santal gave back 1.65 acres to landlord out of the 2.64 acres of barga land to the landlord, in lieu of which 0.16 acre of land was given to him. During our revisit we came to know that another Santal sharecropper was about to give up his sharecropping right. Those sharecroppers who are unable to take the responsibility to cultivate barga land are in favour of giving up barga land in lieu of small amount of owned land.

Villagers at first made us believe that there existed an essential consensus within the village as suggested by Dumont (1970) when we were surprised to find such a small number of sharecroppers. The term 'Mukh Chenachini' (knowing each other individually over a long time) was used by both landlords and labourers. Because of non-availability of large landholdings, sharecropping is not a big issue here. That large landholding is not the characteristic of West Bengal had been confirmed by others [Lieten 1992:127].

Further investigation revealed that all the *kisani*s were not registered as sharecroppers. They were terminated just before

the land reform. Information was available to landlords because of their access to media and regular communication to urban centres. Consequently, for fear of bloodshed some *kisani*s were afraid to protest against termination and registration. Thus, we see that a comparatively big cultivator (owing 11 to 14 acres of land) did not have a sharecropper whereas a middle farmer have with only 2.64 acres of land rented out it completely. Thus, an essential consensus accompanied by conflicting interests can be seen in Mohula.

c) *Kisani system*: In this village sharecroppers were known as *kisani* (*krishani* or *kisheni*). There has been a considerable degree of disagreement on their status as bargadar proper. Newaj and Rudra (1975), Chattopadhyay (1979) describe *kisani* as mahinder in the sense that he is attached to a single cultivator, possessed only labour power, did not provide any input except for his labour and was bound to do all menial jobs. He was a sharecropper in the sense that he was not paid any fixed amount but a share of output. Bardhan and Rudra (1980) argue that *kisani*s are very similar to fully attached labourers. Sen (1943) in his study of 15 villages showed that *kisani*s not only supplied labour; but also hired labour and supplied inputs. The indebtedness on account of hiring labourers, borrowing inputs and for survival makes *kisani* similar to mahinders. The *kisani* system thus appears to be a downgraded version of bargadari, was usually resorted to by families unlike the regular bargadars in the area, with no other access to land and no resources to withstand a further downgrading of their position by their landowners [Lieten 1992:150]. Among our 50 sampled households we came across two Santal households and one Bagdi household who

are still in kisan arrangement.

d) *Vested land*: In post 1980s, 14.52 acres of vested land was distributed between 12 SC and 32 ST families, each family received 0.33 acres of land. The surplus land was recovered by clearing a Jhurijungle (thin bush). The surplus land was recovered from three landlords (two from Mohula, one from neighbouring village of Sarpolebona). The NGO (Tagore Society for Rural Development) headed by Pannalal Dasgupta was instrumental in patta distribution. 32 ST households collectively farmed the land that continued for five to six years. Later, it was stopped due to inter-group conflict within the STs. Now, each family till the land on its own. The patta lands are composed of unirrigated upland.

Types of Waged Labour

Almost all the SC and ST households are engaged in daily waged labour (Table 1). Following are the different types of waged labour practices.

a) *'Chhuto' (Daily Wage labourers)*: Most of the Santals and Bagdis earn their livelihood from agricultural wage labour. Bagdis work for the Mohula landlords, while Santals work either in Biseghata and Mohula. The village Biseghata belongs to separate Mouza. The Santals, though residing within the Mouza Mohula consider themselves as having a separate habitation in the middle of Mohula and Biseghata. They never consider themselves as inhabitants of either Mohula or Biseghata. Tribal's self-location of separate habitation was found in Bihar village as well [Chattopadhyay and Jackson 1995]. Half of Santal para (hamlet) works for Biseghata while another half for Mohula. 'Exclusionary labour arrangements' [Hart 1986] whereby old and incompetent are excluded from the labour force has already started in Mohula. The old and incompetent are commuting daily to neighbouring villages namely Sangri and Bagdore for daily wage. Landlords said that there are surplus labourers in Santals which Santal labourers also echoed. Even if Santals possessed some amount of land, they lack necessary input to cultivate whereas most of the Bagdis possessed cultivable land. So, Bagdis do not need to move out of this village.

The phenomenon of excluding old and incompetent would be further reinforced by the introduction of thika (contract) arrangement. Labour rates for both the villages were the same at Rs 37 per day

in 1996. In 1998 it rose up to Rs 45 per day. No gender discrimination in this regard is noticed. Ploughing and land preparation are done only by males. This is one of the reasons that males got more labour days as than females (Table 2 to 6).

b) *'Mahinder' (Attached labourer)*: Mahinder means permanent household labourer. His job includes both farm, off-farm and household jobs. Two types of mahinders are there – boro mahinder (aged greater than 16-17) and chhoto mahinder (aged between 8-15). Landlords possessing more than 10 acres of land and are engaged in non-agricultural occupations, e.g., teaching, service are more likely to employ mahinders. There are seven chhoto mahinders from Bagdipara and six chhoto and seven boro mahinders from ST para.

c) *'Thika' (Contract labourer)*: We came across only two ST households who did the job of plucking seedlings from seedbed on contract basis in 1996-97. One 'Pon' was comprised of 80 seedlings, Rs 50 was paid per pon. In 1998 during harvesting of boro paddy thika was introduced. Labourers from neighbouring Gangarampur participated in thika labour. For harvesting and binding of boro paddy Rs 250 per bigha is paid.

d) *'Bandha' (Regular labourer)*: Only one ST woman headed household has reported herself involved in Bandha arrangement. During the lean period she does the job of maid servant in the landlord's house. She describes it as most convenient as one does not have to search for labour days in peak season. For farm work she gets Rs 37, but for non-farm work no cash is paid, only 3 meals are served.

e) *'Jhi' (Maid servant)*: During lean periods Bagdi women mostly work as maid-servants.

f) *Off-farm labourer*: Besides farm work both SC and ST male and female are involved in off-farm labour.²

Characteristics of the Employer Households

Amount of landholding seemed to be the criterion for hiring labourer and labouring for others. Two General Castes (GCs) (one Pal, another Mondol) who own less than one acre of land do not hire labourer. Male members of the family do the job of farming. In one case even a female member (Pal by caste) participates in the farmwork. One Bagdi who has 5.30 acres of sharecropped land and owns 3.30 acres of land does not allow their women to work in the field.

That Bagdi jati households use the idea of inappropriateness of women doing paid work for other households to increase their status had been found by Rogaly (1997) in Purulia. On the contrary, they hire-in labourers. Only one GC (Mondol) who owns a power-tiller and whose land of 3.33 acres is totally sharecropped participate in agricultural labouring. In case of Santals withdrawal of women from labouring had not started.

Interestingly, those employers who are engaged in services, like teaching never participate in farm work. Those who possess more than 10 acres of land employ mahinders and also are engaged in non-agricultural occupations. Women from these households are not supposed to do any heavy job. Even if boro mahinders are not employed, chhoto mahinders are recruited. Maidservants are recruited by those landed households who are not

Table 1: Types of Waged Labour Arrangements by Caste

Types	Male	Female
Chhuto	Bagdi, Kaiborio, Santal	Bagdi, Santal
Mahinder	Bagdi, Santal	—
Thika	Santal, neighbouring Muslims	—
Bandha	—	Santal
Jhi	—	Bagdi, Santal
Off-farm	Bagdi, Santal	Santal

Table 2: Average Number of Labour Days in Kharif, Rabi and Boro for SC and ST, Males and Females

	Kharif	Rabi	Boro	Total
SC Male	65.0	39.4	45.4	149.8
SC Female	53.1	24.4	45.5	123.0
ST Male	82.5	22.0	38.5	143.0
ST Female	73.5	17.1	31.0	121.6

Table 3: No of Labour Days in Kharif Shared by SC and ST Households

	Male	Female
SC	650	585
ST	908	1030

Note: Out of 17 (sampled) SC households, seven SC households are sharecroppers; one is woman headed household; one Kaiborio does not sell the labour of women members and only one sharecropper's son and son's wife participate in wage labour; 10 SC males and nine SC female members participate; Average labour days for males and females are 65 and 53.1 days respectively. Total number of sampled ST households are 19. 3 are sharecroppers; one woman headed household; does not participate; three are women headed households, that is why number of days is higher than males; One household never participates in farm work. The average days for males and females are 82.5 and 73.5 days respectively.

employing mahinders. But for large households both mahinders and maidservants are recruited.

Sharecropping is specifically confined to kharif season. Like agricultural labourers they have to perform all the agricultural jobs from ploughing to harvesting. In case of winnowing, boiling of paddy and threshing sharecroppers unlike most of the landlords have to do it on their own. Landlords, very often hire female agricultural labourers for these. Boro mahinders share all types of agricultural jobs. In addition to farm work, boro mahinders have to perform all types of household chores like cleaning the house, marketing, feeding the livestock, etc. Chhoto mahinders, in addition to grazing do all the household jobs. Two households, who are on contract, do the job of plucking seedlings from seedbeds. Bandha labourers are firstly agricultural wage labourers, then maidservants. They have to get up at dawn and clean the house, then proceed for farm work. After coming back from field, they have to clean the utensils of the landlord's house. In the lean season they have to perform the job of a maidservants.

A number of bagdi women do the job of maidservant in lean season. The job includes cleaning of utensils, floor cleaning and washing of clothes. Besides these, they do the job of boiling and drying of paddy. Only two ST women do the job of maidservant who are too old to work as soil cutter.

Besides these, fishing by fish basket (traditional occupation), preparation of puffed rice, goatery, selling of cow-milk are done by Bagdi women. Bagdi males are involved in road preparation, soil cutting. Bagdis—both male and female are also involved in making and selling of country liquor (traditional occupation). One SC household (Kaiborto) is involved in fishing by fishnets and selling of date-palm juice (traditional occupation of Kaibortos). In lean season ST men and women earn their livelihood from soil cutting, road preparation, and by working in brick kiln. Additionally, ST women do the job of making basket, broomstick, and piggery.

The relationship between the landlord and the labourer is stable in the sense that Bagdi women do the job of maidservant at their respective landlords' house. An implicit 'Bandha' arrangement, is in practice, though not mentioned by the labourers. A number of households are locked in the fixed labour arrangements

over the years.

In this perspective, it would not be out of context to say that apart from unwaged work done by female labourers, contribution from waged work to the household is much more by women labourers than their male counterpart.

Within sharecropping arrangements there does exist a variety of mode of payments. Legally, the landlord and bargadar will share 50 per cent of the crop. The landlord will provide plough, bullock and fertiliser whereas the bargadar will provide water and labour. But no one is abiding by this rule in Mohula. Mostly, the bargadar supplies labour and 50 per cent of the water, the landlord supplies plough, bullock, fertiliser and 50 per cent of the water, 60 per cent of the crop is shared by the landlord and 40 per cent by the bargadar. In case of absentee landlords four fifths of the yield is shared by bargadar and one-fifth by the landlord because the bargadar has to hire labourer for farming.

Barga is practised only in kharif season. In rabi and boro not only registered bargadars but some agricultural labourers also get land for kisan. The arrangement in rabi is as follows:

Land + Seed + Plough and Bullock – Provided by the landlord
Labour + Water – Provided by the labourer (Water cost per hour in rabi is Rs 33 or Rs 12 if one and half litre of petrol is provided by the labourer).

In boro season the arrangement is almost the same, but for the cost of water. In boro the labourer has to pay Rs 500 per bigha. Both in rabi and boro (two-thirds of the yield goes to the landlord and one-third to the labourer. But there may be deviation from this pattern also, as seen in the example of Dharam Murmu. Murmu supplies plough + labour. Seed, land and water is provided by the landlord. Dharam Murmu shares one-third of the yield and 50 per cent of the mustard cake as fuel. Then he gives back exact amount of seed.

In kisan system, the labourer supplies only labour, the landlord provides plough, bullock and seed. After harvest the two-thirds of the crop is shared by the landlord and one-third by the labourer. But the labourer had to give back the seed to the landlord.

Agricultural wage labourers have to do field preparation, leveling of field, ploughing, manuring, sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, threshing, winnowing. All agricultural tasks except ploughing are shared both by males and females.

No gender discrimination exists regarding remuneration. Both are paid cash at the rate Rs 37 per day. Regular cash is not paid, instead they are paid twice a week. Most of the labourers resent cash payment because purchase of food items after a day's work becomes difficult for them. Only two to three labourers appreciate this because earlier labourers instead of moving for their families consumed all the foodstuff provided by the landlord on their own. At the end of our fieldwork we came to know that sometimes instead of cash,

Table 4: No of Labour Days in Rabi Shared by SC and ST Households in Kisan

	Male	Female	Male	Female
SC	355	220	—	—
ST	111	76	198	130

Note: Out of 17 SC households seven sharecroppers and one Kaiborto does not participate in rabi; SCs are not involved in kisan. Average labour days for SC male and female is 39.4 and 24.4 days respectively.

Out of 19 ST households; three women headed households do not get labour days in rabi; one woman headed household does not participate in rabi; one household participates only in Kharif. Combining both wage labour and Kisan the average days for males and females are 22 and 17 days respectively.

Table 5: No of Labour Days in Boro Shared by SC and ST Households in Kisan

	Male	Female	Male	Female
SC	455	410	—	—
ST	338	311	202	187

Note: Out of 17 sampled SC households, seven are sharecroppers; one Kaiborto does not participate in boro; Only one sharecropper's son and son's wife participate in boro as agricultural labourer. SCs do not participate in kisan. Average labour days for males and females are 45.4 and 45.5 days respectively. Out of 19 sampled ST households; one woman headed household does not participate; one sharecropper is not in kisan; Only one household works both as agricultural labourer and kisan. So the average for males and females is 38.5 and 31 days respectively.

From Table 6 also it is seen that women get less labour days.

Table 6: Hiring in by GC Households of Agricultural Labourers

	Male	Female
Kharif	1285	1010
Rabi	299	125
Boro	750	520
Total	2334	1655

Note: Out of 15 GC households; one household is running a business (owns no land); three households do not employ female labourer (female family members do the job); two households hire in labourer; on the other hand hire out themselves as agricultural labourer.

payment is often, also in kind. Frequently, labourers ask for paddy and husk from the landlords. A ledger book is maintained by the landlord listing the amount and items of loan against the name of the labourer. Labourers were supposed to pay back by labour days. But, mostly the labourers were unable to convert the exact amount into labour days. One teacher who is also a landlord confessed that due to the poor memory of labourers, landowners can easily exploit them.

Payment in kind is always kept secret. Labourers do not report this because this is not officially permitted. On the other hand, landowners too did not report this because it perpetuated the exploitation of labourers.

Boro mahinders perform agricultural labour as well as sundry jobs in the household. Farm work includes field preparation, carrying sacks of paddy to husking mill and includes labouring in the harvest seasons. Non-farm work includes cleaning the house, marketing etc. The remuneration is Rs 1700 per year + 3 meals each day + 5 tins of paddy (50 kg) + soaps, clothes and towels. The job of chhoto mahinder is grazing of livestock and doing household jobs like cleaning, helping in farm works. The remuneration is Rs 700 per year + 3 meals each day + 5 tin paddy (50 kg) + soaps, clothes and towels. The working hour of mahinders is 6 am to 8 pm. It is a contractual job, renewed in each January. Contract remains valid from mid-January to next January. Then the payment per annum is slightly increased.

The life of a mahinder is like a prisoner. No freedom is allowed. Rs 10 is deducted if he is absent for one day, if absenteeism occurs in the peak season Rs 20 is deducted, sometimes Rs 37 is deducted if the landlord is not generous enough. Throughout the year, a single day's leave is not permitted. If something gets lost at the landlord's house, the mahinder is beaten. That's why those who were chhoto mahinder in their childhoods do not want to continue as boro mahinder.

The remuneration of maidservants is Rs 30 per month. Besides these Bagdi women do the job of boiling of paddy. The remuneration is 1 ser rice for boiling 10 tins of paddy. The remuneration for soil cutting is Rs 40 per sq ft which is done only by SC men and Santal male and females. If road construction is undertaken by the panchayat then the remuneration is Rs 45. In the brick kiln Rs 45 per 1,000 bricks are paid. One person does normally 500 bricks. Per day income is Rs 22.50,

once a week it is paid. Daily work in brick kiln is available for nearly four months. One ST man who does farm work only for 10-12 days in a year works in the brick kiln round the year. The coals are broken into pieces by him. Remuneration is Rs 30 per day and Rs 20 during peak farm work. SC women are not involved in soil cutting or in brick kiln because "they are not hardy like Santals" as reported by ST women.

There seems to be a strong correlation between class and caste. Here we are operationalising class primarily in terms of land owned. Within our sampled 17 SC households, four are landless and four do possess 0.33 acre of vested land. The remaining nine households own 2 to 2.67 acres of barga land and 0.33 to 3.0 acres of own land.

Within 18 ST households, four are completely landless, 11 households received vested land after 1981, three are bargadars possessing 1.33 to 3.33 acres. Only one household owns land amounting to two

acres. Out of 15 GC households only five households possess 0.33 to 1.66 acres of land. Within these five (a) one runs a grocery shop and goatery, (b) three households are pursuing their traditional occupation of pottery, and (c) one household's migrant son is engaged in service where from remittance is received.

Two households possess 2.65 to 3.33 acres of land. While the former household head is in service, the latter owns a tractor, only one in the village to be hired for the purpose of transportation of crops.

Another two households possess 6.00 to 7.41 acres of cultivable land. One of them is engaged in the business of medicine whereas another runs multiple businesses, i.e., business of cane crusher, electrical repairing and paddals.

The remaining six households own 8.00 to 15 acres of cultivable land; four of them are also in service. Two are owning submersible pumps that are hired out for irrigation purposes.

Table 7: Amount of Nijaswa Jami (In Acres) by Caste of Family Name

Caste	Family Name	Owned (Including Barga Land)	Land	Barga Land	Vested Land
Brahmin	Bhattacharyya	17.19			
Sadgop	Mondol	18.82			
Tefi	Chowdhury	2.33			
Kumbhakar	Pal	113.34			
Kolu	Gorai	14.85			
Kayastha	Sarkar	0.33			
SC	Kalborto	1.00			
SC	Bagdi	13.15		41.15	3.63
ST	Santal	7.12		14.31	10.23

Table 8: Type of Waged Labour Arrangements by Type of Work

Type of Waged Labour	Male	Female
Chhoto	Ploughing, land preparation, sowing, harvesting, threshing	Transplanting, harvesting, winnowing, threshing, boiling and drying of paddy
Mahinder (Chhoto)	Grazing, cleaning of utensils and house, other sundry jobs	-
Mahinder (Bodo)	Ploughing, land-preparation, sowing, harvesting, threshing, carrying for dehusking, house cleaning, looking after largestocks	-
Thika	Plucking seedlings from seedbed, harvesting	-
Bandha	-	Transplanting, harvesting, winnowing, Threshing, boiling and drying of paddy, cleaning of utensils, clothes and house,
Jhi	-	House-cleaning, cleaning of utensils and clothes
Off-farm	Soil cutting, arrangements of bricks in brick kiln	Soil cutting, arrangements of bricks in brick kiln

Table 9: Type of Waged Labour Arrangements by Caste

Caste	Male	Female
Bagdi	chhoto, mahinder, soil cutting	chhoto, jhi, fishing
Santal	chhoto, mahinder, soil cutting, thika, working in brick kiln	chhoto, bandha, piggery
Kalborto	chhoto, fishing, selling of date-palm juice	working in brick kiln
Das	-	preparation of puffed rice

The correlation between caste and land-holding has further implications. Why have landed GC households found alternate non-agricultural incomes and why have not landless and receiver of vested lands not done so too? Though the numbers of landless labourers seem small, those who have received vested lands are not in a position to garner capital so as to start a business. Additionally, these agricultural labourers also lack social connections that would encourage others to lend them capital and to be their customers.

Sexual Division of Labour

The central sexual divide in agricultural labour lies only in ploughing and land preparation, which were defined as 'male' activity. Though there is no bar in case of women manuring and levelling of field, these are done by males. These are considered heavy work for females. This was one of the reasons for women not to be employed as boro mahinder. Landlords are also averse to employ chhoto mahinders. Even if they are not supposed to do any heavy work, lack of security in the employer's household is the prime reason.

Thika was also not extended to women. Thika was introduced by landlords with the intent of completing harvesting with minimum expenditure in a lesser number of days than is required in chhoto arrangement. The speed that is required in thika was considered unsuitable for the female physique. 20-25 young males were recruited in thika. But in Purulia few women hired themselves out in thika arrangement [Rogaly 1996:156]. This might be due to the fact that thika is in practice in the studied village in Purulia. Also, it might be that the number of male labourers is not sufficient to provide labour.

Sharecropping and kisan system are also not extended to women. Three ST sharecropper's households have been reduced to agriculture labour selling households due to the death and absence of adult male member as women are excluded from the inheritance right to sharecrop [Chattopadhyay and Seddon 1997]. On the death of the sharecropper, according to official rules, the landlord should inform block land and rural development officer who in turn would appoint closest relative of the deceased sharecropper as present incumbent. But none of the landlords did it. If deceased is survived by his adult son then the son is appointed by the landlord as sharecropper without any official status.

Off-farm jobs like goatery, selling of cow-milk, fishing by using fish basket, preparing basket and broomstick, preparing puffed rice, working as maidservant are not done by males. These are considered feminine jobs which a male should not do.

In addition to sexual division of labour there is division of labour within gender also. ST women neither do the job of maidservant nor prepare puffed rice. On the other hand, SC women never work in brick kiln, or engage in soil cutting. There are clear divisions of labour between caste and gender hierarchy. Within the same SC group, kaiborto women never do the job of maidservant nor did they prepare puffed rice because they consider themselves as superior to other SCs, namely Bagdis, in the village.

Taking a cue from Kapadia's work we can say that in this village, the parallel between what is 'biologically female' and appropriate farm and off-farm job is quite thin, excepting ploughing which is entirely taboo for women. More than gender boundaries, caste and class boundary play an important role in gender division of labour [Kapadia 1996:212]. Among the SCs who are sharecroppers and have other sources of non-farm income, their women are not allowed to participate in agricultural labouring.

The division of agricultural tasks by age did not formally exist in Mohula because all jobs are defined as adult jobs and paid an adult wage. Those who are too young or too old are automatically excluded from it. It is mainly the job of 'chhoto mahinder' and maidservant where boys and girls below 16 do participate. Those who are too old to do wage labour look after grandchildren or collect fuel and fodder accompanied by their minor granddaughter.

Bargaining for increased wage labour starts each year during the onset of monsoon. A procession jointly by SC and ST men and women of both the villages namely Biseghata and Mohula marches around two villages demanding higher wages. Afterwards meeting with landlords takes place. In these meetings women do not participate. When asked about the reasons for the non-participation of women one Bagdi man told that as their husbands were participating there is no need for the women to join. Further questioning by us reveals that traditionally landlords were against the participation of women. This non-participation of women helped them reduce daily wage by Rs 2 for women labourers. Equal remuneration for both males and

females is a quite recent event not more than 10-12 years.

Government rate for agricultural labourer was Rs 40 but in Mohula it was Rs 37. One reason cited by the villagers is that an increase by Rs 2 per year was demanded. In 1995 it was Rs 35, that is why it rose to Rs 37 in 1996. Another reason is that some SC sharecroppers who possess own land also hire agricultural labourer, who are also members of village committee. They are hand-in-glove with landlords to keep the daily wage to the minimum level. In 1998, the daily wage increased to Rs 45. There was strike for one week in July 1997 for an increase in the wage, which rose from Rs 37 to Rs 40. In 1998 they again resorted to a strike. Then labour inspector intervened and it was made at par with government rate. Our studied village deviated from Rudra's model that when accepting a certain wage rate, workers "have no consultations over the matter with labourers of other villages, even neighbouring ones" [Rudra 1984: 262-263]. On the other hand, like Kapadia's studied village Arulloor, in Mohula also wage raise is demanded in peak season, when there is high demand for labour [Kapadia 1996: 241].

The womenfolk deeply resent the ways in which the landlords exploit them during the lean seasons. Landlords are supposed to pay more if the labourers work more than eight hours, a day. In case of female agricultural labourers however, landlords always make them work for more than eight hours, but deny that it is more than the prescribed time.

Segmentation of Labour Market

In this village we find Rudra's model of reciprocity between landlords and agricultural labourers [Rudra 1984: 259]. Labourers do not go out to other villages for work. Employers also do not hire labourers from other villages. At times of wage negotiation also labourers from other villages do not participate. Athreya, Djurfeldt and Lindberg (1990) argue that respect for each others' work domain means that conflict is avoided but also it has the effect of restricted supply of labour, thus maintaining wage levels. Rudra's assumption that "better labourers cannot earn more than their inferior colleagues in the same village as a function of their high productivity" seemed true during our first field trip in 1996-97 [Rudra 1984: 257]. However, the emergence of contract labour

arrangements found during our revisit in 1998 seemed to be in disagreement with this assumption. The hiring of contract labourer from a neighbouring village of Gangarampur was not resisted by the labourers because most of the labourers who got kisanis in boro were in a hurry to finish their own harvesting. But if this practice is repeated during kharif season, they will resist. The resistance would be against the migrant labourers, not against the contract system.

Landowners and also some labourers were very much in favour of introducing contract in kharif. From the conversation with the village teacher it became clear that contract system in another form is also existent here. During the harvest, whether kharif or boro, cash was not paid to a major proportion of Santal and Bagdi labourers, but drinks were served. Harvesting is done at night and not only chhutos but boro mahinders also participated in it. Drinks were served after completing one bigha and it was gang-based. More than cash, drinks were the major incentive.

Reasons Behind Different Contracts

As explained earlier that no landlord and sharecropper were abiding by the 50:50 share of crops as demanded legally. It might be due to the fact as stated by Dasgupta that agricultural production does not resemble the division of a cake of fixed size [Dasgupta 1995: 232]. The contract that stipulates not what mix of inputs to be used in production but rather how costs are to be shared, leaves allocative decision to the sharecropper [Dasgupta 1995:233]. Cost sharing allows the sharecropper a flexibility in production technique. This might be the reason to set aside a 50:50 crop share. Those landlords who had available manpower within their household and did not have time constraints to look after one's farm are against the system of sharecropping.

Kisanis were resorted by those households who did not possess enough labour power to work as agricultural wage labourer, neither did they have access to land. Kisanis system provides them a minimum security of crop sharing.

But another kisanis system which was provided in boro and rabi cultivation was different from the above-mentioned category. Bagdis were not provided with kisanis in boro and rabi, because there is apprehension among the landlords that after one

year of farming Bagdis would demand for barga rights which the Santals would never do. Bagdis are politically more aware of their own rights than the Santals in spite of their close proximity in rehabilitation settlements. Another explanation was that almost all the Bagdis possessed some land whereas Santals, even if some of them possessed land, this land usually comprised non-irrigated upland. Apart from sharecropping, among different types of waged labour arrangements, chhuto was most preferred because it gives ample freedom to workers, for example, taking leave for a particular day if one wished to visit relatives or to take rest. Mahinders are least preferred because of the nature of servitude to the owner. It was expected that Mahinders would be recruited from landless households. But surprisingly, we found that a Santal sharecropper's son was also employed as mahinder. The reason behind

such a peculiar phenomenon was the access to interest-free wage advance. Pal observed that there are some non-wage factors especially those related to time and credit constraints of rural workers which determine their market participation [Pal 1996: 113]. Though it was stated that earning from chhuto was higher than from the job of mahinder, there were other non-wages factors like interest free loan at times of wedding, illnesses³ and also meals cooked in upper caste households, which were of a much better quality.

Thika is increasingly becoming popular among a group of labourers as well as landlords. It was profitable to both landlord and comparatively young labourers. Landlords explained that to harvest one bigha, four labour days are required, i.e., it amounts to Rs 180 (4 multiplied by Rs 45) whereas in thika system he had to pay Rs 150. It is going to be popular among

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young men also because he will earn more if works hard.

Bagdi women do the job of maidservants at their respective landlords' house at the rate of Rs 30 per month so that the labour days are assured. One ST woman praised the bandha system because then one does not feel insecure in peak seasons (she is provided with three meals, no cash during the lean season when she works as maidservant). Only two ST women work as maidservants (one is too old to do farm work, another is physically handicapped).

From the discussion with wage labourers it seemed that no attachment to any particular landlord existed. Almost all the labourers described themselves as 'chhuto'. But we noticed that over the years the relationship between the landlord and labourer is stable in the sense that a sort of patron-client relationship had developed. In the beginning, the landlord would call those labourers who worked last year, provided he was efficient. It is not mandatory for the labourers to work for the same landlords he had worked with last year. But the consumption loans taken by labourers from their landlords round the year bound them in a fixed relationship which were described as mutual love and respect. The reason for attachment to a particular landlord is the facility of loans and credit extended by the former to the wage labourers in lieu of secured labour supply. At times of necessity, wage workers turn to their respective landlords for consumption loan. No interest is charged for this. Loan is repaid by labour days. When we asked whether they do know how to convert the amount to labour days, they replied in chorus that between themselves they convert the amount into labour days. Rest is paid in cash. For example if Rs 150 is to be paid by labour days then it will be 4 days labour + Rs 2 (Rs 37 × 4 = Rs 148).

The other option for credit is to approach the mahajans. Mahajans charge interest at the rate of 10 per cent per month. Brass utensils, jewellery has to be mortgaged for that purpose. There are four mahajans in the village and one at the outskirts of the village. But the exploitative system of repaying loan has stopped during the last 20 years. Earlier, if one lends one tin of paddy one had to repay with two tins. It was called 'Dadan'. But the landlords charge no interest for a small loan amount.

The patron-client sort of relationship still exists in the village. The modern form of credit is that when the creditor asked

for a certain amount of loan from the landlord, the landlord in turn took him to a stockist. The stockist will charge 10 per cent interest per month and the landlord too gets a commission.

The patron-client relationship regularly extends preferential treatment to each other as is seen from our findings. For consumption loan labourers are not to pay interest to their landlords if they can pay it within the stipulated time period. But there are undercurrents also. In some cases the debtor has to mortgage brass utensils for a meagre amount of Rs 60. A SC boy sarcastically commented that for providing loan to poorer persons interest is charged, but if a rich person asks for a loan, interest is not charged.

The credit-labour linkage is not declining in this village or in many others [Kapadia 1996; Dreze and Mukherjee 1989; Athreya, Djurefeld and Lindberg 1990]. Cultivators go ask loans from cooperatives, banks to purchase farm inputs particularly implements and seeds in Boro season. The panchayats also took an active role in supply of mini-kits, livestock to poorer households but consumption loan is one area where such loans are not available. ■■■

Notes

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- [This paper is the offshoot of the collaborative project between Indian Statistical Institute and School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK on 'Long-term Changes in Livelihood Trajectory'. A village in Birbhum was selected for the purpose. Selection was made on the basis of availability of a report (1976) of the same village, though studied for a different purpose, by the Agro-Economic Research Centre, Visvabharati University.]
- We have used the local definition in identifying different labour arrangements excepting off-farm labour. The term labour is not English word to them. By off-farm labour they mean 'labour khali' (means providing labour for working in brick-kiln or soil cutting).
- B Hunsda, a Santal sharecropper's son is employed as mahinder at B N Pal's household. B N Pal gave them loan amounting to Rs 3000, free of interest, when wife of B N Hunsda's elder brother was suffering from protracted childbirth.

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