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Free and Unfree Agrarian Relations in Colonial India

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Abstract- The Research Paper "Free and Unfree Agrarian relations in Colonial India" explores the existence of various types of free alongside Unfree labourers during the colonial India. According to the nationalist and many other economic historians, the various colonial land settlements, combined with high revenue demands, resulted in making small peasants subservient to moneylenders and bigger landowners. This led to the 'gradual transference of land from the hands of the original cultivators to the moneylenders. As a result, instead of developing free labour forms, as was happening in many advanced capitalist countries in the West, empirical evidences pointed towards the existence of attached labourers (long duration labour) in various forms even in some of the most developed regions of British India.

Index Terms: Agricultural labour, Free Labour, Unfree Labour, Agrestic slavery, Beck and Call Relationship, Bonded Labour.

I. Introduction

The growth of agricultural labour during the colonial period has been one of the most contentious issues among modern economic historians of India. S.J. Patel was one of the pioneers who espoused a nationalist point of view of the growth of agricultural labourers during the colonial period owing to the policies of the colonial government. His views were contested by many other economic historians, Dharma Kumar being one of the prominent among them, who argued that such a clear picture was not evident and the possibility of continuity appears more likely. This debate has been joined by many others on either side. Eric Stokes, Utsa Patnaik, Jan Breman, Jairus Banaji, K.P. Kannan, Gyan Prakash, Neeladri Bhattacharya, and Sugata Bose are some of the important scholars in this area.

According to the nationalist and many other economic historians, the various colonial land settlements, combined with high revenue demands, resulted in making small peasants subservient to moneylenders and bigger landowners. Nationalist economic historians, such as Gadgil, argued that colonial policies were responsible for the 'gradual transference of land from the hands of the original cultivators to – in most cases – the moneylenders' . As a result, instead of developing free labour forms, as was happening in many advanced capitalist countries in the West, empirical evidences pointed towards the existence of attached labourers (long duration labour) in various forms even in some of the most developed regions of British India.

While some early interpretations posited a clear rise of affluent peasant classes and growing land inequality, subsequent scholarship paints a more complex picture. Structural patterns of landholding remained relatively stable, with increasing inequality largely a result of widespread impoverishment rather than concentrated wealth

accumulation. Yet beneath this surface continuity lay significant shifts—through debt burdening, changing caste land ownership, and intensified forms of exploitation—that led to the widespread pauperization of the peasantry. It is with this background this paper discusses agrarian relation and analyse the nature and extent of Free and Unfree labour in British India.

II. Nature of Employment of Agricultural Labourers

Agricultural labourers were employed under different types of contracts ranging from free labour to unfree labour. These contracts had a large variety emanating from different terms and conditions. Broadly two types of relationship existed between the employer and the employee: Unfree or pre-capitalist type, where terms and conditions were decided by the employers and were more or less customary. Employees did not have much bargaining power and were generally forced to adopt the terms dictated by the employers; and Relatively free or capitalist type, where terms and conditions were decided mutually and agreed upon by both employers and employees. Both these types of relationship have been recorded in the official and in the non-official reports during the 19th century and in the early 20th century, although some scholars claim that the process of casualization of labour in the 20th century led to the dominance of free labour. The period between 1850 and 1950 is marked with changes in the nature and form of relationship between landlords and labourers. In the beginning of the 19th century, most labour relationships were the unfree type but by the mid-19th century many changes became visible. The penetration of the British started showing its impact on the society and economy more intensely after the 1850s. Fast transport system, mainly led by the railways, enhanced communication levels which integrated society. At many places customary laws were strengthened or replaced by legal laws. Local elite needed the sanction of British authority to exercise their power over peasantry. New land settlements which started in late 18th century affected agrarian structure and agrarian relations. Early 19th century is characterized by overwhelming type of unfree labour relationships which took variety of forms, discussed below. Unfree labour also had their own characteristics in different regions and sometimes they varied even between villages. These differences were due to differences in the degree of unfree element and the rights and obligations towards their employers. Many scholars have discussed the existence of unfreedom even behind the façade of mutually agreed contractual relationships.

By the 20th century much had changed and the process of change continued. There was a significant increase in the number of free casual labourers. There was also a change in the nature and form of existent unfree relationships. The speed of change was different in different areas and in some regions the change was so slow, that, it was almost non-existent. Sometimes the existing relationships were transformed not into free relationships but into newer form of unfree relationships. Various types of unfree and free agrarian relationships are discussed below.

Unfree Relations

Unfree labourers can be broadly put into three categories on the basis of the nature of relationships: debt bondage, which was more common in the whole of north India, east India and west India; beck and call relationship, which was commonly

spread in west and north India; and agrestic serfdom, which was mainly prevalent in southern part of India.

Permanent/ attached / bonded labourers:

The bonded labourers were attached to the landlords through debt. This bondage had many variations and characteristics in different regions but widely existed in the early British period. Labourers were called with different names in different regions. Bondage was institutionalized through caste relationships and even where the land was abundantly available, a group of labourers were forbidden to freely hold it. During the later British period, this system of labour relatively declined, though it did not disappear, and gradually certain forms of free labour emerged as an important type of arrangement. The period of decline of unfree labourers was broadly from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century.

This trend depended on many factors which were sometimes local in nature. For example, by the 1920s, Bihar region still reported a large portion of labourers being Kamiyas and only by the 1940s, it was reported to be dying out. These labourers were attached to the employer for long periods. Period of attachment ranged from about a year to their lifetime and many a time the attachment would pass on to their children. In most regions (particularly in the north) the relationship began with a small loan for marriage or some other purposes and in return labourers accepted bondage till they repay. Uneducated labourers never got to repay this loan and continued to work for the employer for their life-time. R. K. Mukerjee says that even in the 1930s this system was most prevalent in Orissa, Bihar and Chotanagpur, although it was not spreading. These people never received cash and their 'condition vary from absolute to mitigated slavery'. Similar was the situation with the contract of the Halis with their employers Dhaniamo in western India particularly in south Gujarat. Halis came from tribal caste of Dublas, Talavias, Naikas, Dhodias, Ghodras and their bondage also began with the loan. Even as late as the 1930s, the total number of Halis has been estimated at 20% of the agricultural population of the district. In fact, over the years illiterate Halis had internalized the relationship so much that they thought it was a sin to leave their employers. Even if that happened in some rare instance, another Dhaniamo would never employ the Halis who deserted their earlier Dhaniamo. In Oudh these bonded labourers were called Sewaks. People from castes such as Chamar, Koeri, Kurmi, or Lodh caste accepted serfdom for life against a loan from rich landlord and this serfdom was passed on from father to son: 'It is quite common to meet men whose fathers entered into these obligations and who still labour in their discharge'. These Sewaks formed a large proportion of the whole population of the Bahraich district. All these types of relationship have been described as debt bondage.

Many factors were responsible for the change in this system such as the change in cropping pattern from sugarcane and cotton to mango and other fruits in western India, increasing employment opportunities in urban areas and growth of agricultural labour class and thereby abundant supply of labourers which led to free the labourers from bondage. Socio-political reasons were also responsible for the decline in this type of relationships. For example, in Baroda the Hali system was banned in 1923.

Beck and Call Relationship:

Apart from debt bondage there were other forms of attachment, where the employers did not give any loan but gave a small piece of land to the labourers to cultivate and also allowed the labourers to make a roof for himself and his family on allotted land. The labourers were allowed to retain the produce from this piece for his household consumption. In return the labourers had to plough the master's field and do other works if and when required for nominal wage (1-2 annas) or no wage. He may be given meals on the days he ploughs and sometimes even a small sum of money is advanced to the labourers. These labourers were called Halwahas in eastern U.P. They continued to hold and stay on a piece of land of the landlord and were at their mercy. The fear of ejection made them most vulnerable to the exploitation by the landlord. Such system was said to be flourishing even by 1944 in eastern districts of U.P.

In Punjab, the studies suggest the existence of permanent farm servants who were called Siris. In the 19th century, Siris were secured by giving advance but by 20th century, the contracts were more legal and written out and signed by both the parties and the witnesses. The Siris of the Punjab were free labourers and the contract was mutual in the 20th century. The change was much faster in Punjab than in other parts of the country.

Agrestic slavery:

On the other extreme, there were panneyals or padiyals in Madras Presidency, who were agrestic slaves. They were referred by their caste names Palli, Pallam, and Pariah. They were sold along with the land and were attached to the land. The modes of dependence in the Tamil districts during the early 19th century spanned a wide range, from near freedom to near slavery. In south Canara Dr. R.G Kakade observed in 1949 on the basis of personal survey that Mulada Holeyas (their caste name) were still hereditary serfs attached to the Muli Wargs (estates) and were owned (not legally) by the Wargadars or landholders. They received no wages and were given only three meals a day. In Malabar, these labourers were called cheruman and were treated like private property of the masters who could be bought, sold or leased out, independent of land as the master thought fit. The 'serfs of janmi' were leased to certain farmers who wanted cheap labour to cultivate their farms in return of money or paddy to janmi. In fact, it was reported that 'there are certain areas, especially in chirakkal taluq, where some of the rajas and landlords have got a number of serfs under them... As lands are leased on Kanam, these people are also sometimes leased.' Early 20th century records show that the right of the landlord over the Panneyals of Mayavaram were also transferred in the document which transfers the ownership of the land. Market for slaves was quite developed. Even among agricultural labourers, caste was important. Castes of slaves determined their price.

Unpaid labour / Begaar:

Particularly in north India, there was a system of begaar or unpaid labour. Economically and politically powerful landlords belonging to upper caste could force certain days of labour on the poor lower caste tenants, agricultural labourers or on any other residing in the area. It is being described by A.M. Lorenzo as the 'customary right of the landlord to exact for a certain number of days, free labour from their raiyats'. The payment in such cases may be nil to very low, much lower than the market price.

In the Palamau district of Bihar, tenants were forced to perform begaar on the landlord's fields and there was little difference between Kamia and these tenants who had to perform begaar. N. Bhattacharya also talks about small tenants being indebted so largely to landlords, that their independence was completely lost, and to retain their plots they would perform begaar on landlords' fields. In fact, it is reported that in the second half of 19th century landlords in Punjab secured labour through loans and advances, but by 20th century these landlords signed the contracts with Siris, Sanjjihis or Sajjhis. Sagri system of Rajasthan also shows that debtor labourers performed labour only for food and a share in crop without any wages on the creditors' field. In the Gothi system of Orissa, the debtor performed free labour only for food on landlord's land. In the Chittagong hill tracts in earlier eastern India, there existed a type of intra-tribal bondage where some hill tribes had to perform four days of unpaid service for the tribal chief. In Oudh, there was a system of begaar (unpaid labour), hari (forced service) and rasad (supplies). Tenants were forced to perform begaar for 40 days in a year for taluqdars. Wages were nil or very low. In Pratapgarh district, market wage was 8 annas and taluqdars paid 6 paise to 3 annas or, if they were kind enough, provided chabena (roasted grain). Anybody was picked up for the purpose. In Hari, the tenant had to provide his plough and oxen 12 times a year without any payment, most of the time at the cost of his own fields. Rasad meant providing bhusa, ghee, milk and other commodities to the British agents whenever they visited their village. Nothing was paid to the tenantry for these commodities. In fact, a government report in 1887 said that phenomena of forced labour for landlords prevailed all over the country and was a recognized form of tenancy.

Free labourers

Free labourers performed variety of labour and generally were not specialized in one particular work. Their work depended on the job availability and since they did not have much choice, they did whatever was available. An enquiry conducted by Chaturvedi noted that very frequently 'all agricultural occupations such as ploughing, sowing, weeding, transplanting, irrigation, hoeing, reaping, thrashing are done by the same group of workers'. Not only agricultural operations, but all kinds of odd jobs were also performed by this labour. For example, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, Lohars performed smithy, carpentry, preparation of mud walls etc. Similarly, Shilpkars in hill districts performed carpentry, smithy, mason work and ploughing. These labourers were employed for different time periods, which may vary from a year to a single day, though most of these labourers were employed for a day. They were paid according to piece or a daily basis. The casual jobs were also performed by the sharecroppers, and marginal or small peasants during the peak season to supplement their income from cultivation. It basically resulted from the increased number of dwarf holdings where the former whole-time peasants supplemented their reduced income by working for others. Most of these labourers belonged to lower caste or tribes. In some parts of eastern India, these labourers were called Majur or Krishans.

The category of these free labourers in modern India were quite mobile. They migrated from place to place in search of work. The significance of these labourers was a 20th-century phenomenon. Expansion of railways, new employment opportunities in urban industries attracted the labourers from rural areas and thereby increased their mobility. The number and proportion of such labour was the highest in south India. The

Krishans of Birbhum area were employed either for a day or for a crop season. These labourers were the floating reserves, migrating from place to place in search of work, be it on the farms during crop seasons, or on the plantations, or in industries or in any kind of odd job. Bhattacharya also talks about these characteristics of labour in the case of Punjab. People in Punjab moved with their families particularly during the harvest season. In Sirsa, a settlement officer noted 'wondering bands of labourers, such as Thoris, Ods, or Mens, go about from village to village while the harvest lasts.' In Punjab, these labourers moved from the south region where harvest was early to the north where it was late, from barani tracts where labour demand was marginal to the tracts where demand for labour was high due to higher intensity of cultivation because of irrigation. Geographically the movement was from the south east to the central Punjab and from there to the canal colonies. The supply of these labourers depended on the nature of the harvest. In the bad year, mainly caused by monsoon failure, their number increased. Even the nature of harvest in the nearby regions such as U.P, Rajasthan affected the labourers who were looking for work. After the harvest, these labourers went back to their homes and it was in the slack season that public works were started by the State to provide employment to these under employed labourers. In winter months these labourers moved to towns to work in industries, particularly cotton ginning. It is been estimated that 42% of all industrial workers were employed in seasonal factories. Thus, the slack period of agriculture was the busy period of industrial employment.

Casual migratory labour was seen around mid-19th century, when the British law clearly defined proprietary rights and most of the common land was declared as private property. Forests were reserved and the tribals using these forests land were displaced and were forced to move to the villages for work. These displaced tribals joined the ranks of casual migratory labour. In Narmada valley these migrant labourers were from the nearby districts of Betul, Chindwara, Soeni, and Mandla and from the reserved forest of Jarkahu Gokakhal and Lokhartalai in Hoshanagabad. They are called Chaitharas and accounted for up to a 1/5th of work force in the Narmada valley at the harvest time even in 1920s. The same labour was employed for the construction of railway during 1850s and 1860s. In the central provinces, tribal displacement was very large and labourer from these areas even migrated to Khandesh and Gujarat cotton tracts. Cotton growing areas and canal zones of Bombay Deccan created a new demand for labour. Sumit Guha has estimated that the seasonal demand for labour was about a million people (out of total population of 11.5 million). The new mining industry of Bihar also attracted labour from Bhaghat and Bhandara (Chhattisgarh). Coal, Iron and Manganese industry employed the labour who came sometimes from as far as 40 to 50 miles. A good proportion of Halis of South Gujarat became casual labourers, when the new employment opportunities in railway and modern industries in Bombay arose particularly during and after Second World War. In the dry season from November to May, they worked in salt pans and brickyards. During the harvest time or the peak season, they came back to their villages to work as agricultural labourers.

Summing up

there is a lot of evidence that the nature of labour in the 19th century was distinctly different from the nature and form which replaced it in 20th century. The change in the nature and form of labour itself represent the transformation which took

place in the Indian agriculture during this period. One view which exists on the casualization of agricultural labourers is the disintegration of the village community system due to commercialization and growth of capitalist tendencies which gradually changed the relationship between the landlords and labourers.

Another view relates casualization to population growth. Earlier landlords, in order to have a secure labour at crucial point of time, kept labour in their bondage and that is why when the population increased, this system of bonded labour declined and was replaced by casual labour. Labour on the other hand, in order to secure employment competed with each other to get a job and the system of bondage flourished. Only when the employment opportunities increased in late 19th century and early 20th century, labour moved to other jobs and the system of bondage declined. Socio-political reasons are also responsible for the casualization of labour during the late British period. For example, bondage was made illegal in Baroda in 1923.

III Mode and Medium of Payment to Agricultural Labourers- Cash, Kind, Combined or Share.

The transition from kind to cash was intricately related to the casualization of labour and the nature of contract. Where the casualization was faster, cash component of wages increased faster as compared to other regions. There were a variety of systems of payment to agricultural labourers in different regions. These systems varied according to the nature of contract, or according to the agricultural operation. In the early British period, payment to agricultural labourers was according to the customary rules. In north India, mostly jajmani system was prevalent, where in the village each caste had its own pre-decided share in the crop. Cash transactions were generally less. Peasants were mostly self-sufficient and a very small number entered the market to sell their produce. During this period, payment in kind widely prevailed in India and this was so till 1920s, vast tracts of eastern India showed payment in kind which were nearly constant for a very long time. Various districts Gazetteer in the 1920s tried to provide reason for the payment in kind. Generally non-availability of cash and the difficulty in marketing of the crop were the main reasons for the payment in kind.

Wherever commercial crops were grown, payment to labourers was mainly in cash. In eastern and northern Bengal districts wages were widely received in cash, as these were the areas where jute was cultivated on large tracts. The Imperial Gazetteer of India for the period 1873-5 to 1901-3, observed that “as regards agriculture labourers, the system of payment in kind is still widely prevalent, but speaking generally, cash wages are still commonly paid only in the vicinity of towns or industrial villages and by large employers of industrial labour. The only cash system was almost non-existent. Mostly payments were made in various combination of kind, cash and perquisites. While at work, food, drinks (sherbet etc.), tobacco (bidis), light meals to full meals etc. were more common along with some cash or a share of produce.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, there was a gradual increase in the payment in cash in almost all regions due to growth of agricultural labourers, change in their nature and form, dis-entanglement of their ties with landlords, rigidity about the payment of revenue in cash, increasing commercialization and the emergence of

capitalists tendencies. In the short run, however, form of payment varied according to the prices in the market. The pace of transition differed in different regions. In Punjab, for example, early-20th century reports suggest a fast movement towards cash wages replacing wages in kind, although the onset of depression slowed down this pace of transition from kind to cash. In the post-depression period, we again find a fast change towards cash payment. Punjab Wage Survey in 1943 reported that 60% of the villages showed pure cash wages whereas 30% showed cash with supplements.

But even within a village, system of payment differed operation-wise. For sowing, manuring, transplanting, irrigation or thatching etc., payment was usually in cash, whereas in reaping, thrashing, and winnowing, the payment of wages was in kind. Even where such cash was given, it was combined with kind payment. In western Punjab, a day labourer was paid Rs. 5 per month plus a blanket and a pair of shoes at the end of the year in 1943. In the canal colonies wages were higher (almost twice) but still they were combined with food and clothing.

Attached labourer or bonded labourer usually received the payment in kind and an advance of some cash. Halis in south Gujarat received 'Bhata' i.e. a ration of food grain which varied from place to place. Payment was not made by weight but by a certain local measure. These measures varied from 2 to 2.5 seers of jowar and 4 seers of paddy or 4 annas if paid in cash. Before the World War II the Dhaniamo preferred to pay in kind, but after the War when the prices of agricultural produce increased, there was more and more of a tendency towards payment in cash. Cash wages increased from 4 annas to 8 annas but the increase in prices was even sharper and wages often lagged behind.

A study conducted in 1944 reports that in U. P.'s 6981 surveyed villages, 70% and more of the villages reported payment in cash for many operations. Only for reaping around 70% of the villages reported kind payment. N. Bhattacharya observed a similar pattern in Punjab. Further, in U.P also there was a wide variation in different regions. Cash wages were reported by a much larger proportion of villages in hill tract and north-west region for almost all the operations and the least in eastern region. Hill and north-west region showed a fast transition towards casualization of labour whereas eastern and central regions reported a large proportion of attached labour till very late.

During the Second World War, as the prices increased, the transition towards cash payment became faster because the employers tried to reduce their cost of payment. This was highlighted by the 1944 report on quinquennial enquiry conducted in U.P., which concludes that compared to earlier quinquennial surveys of 1934 and 1939, cash payment was fast replacing payment in kind and this process has been faster in the last quinquennial of 1939-44. In the hill tracts, this transition towards cash wages has been the fastest. In 1934 the ratio of cash to kind was 100:80, in 1939 it became 100:74 and in 1944 it was 100:12.

The All-India Labour Enquiry, conducted in 1950-51, noted that out of the total wage employment in agriculture, around 58%-man days were paid in cash with or without perquisites and 32% in kind (with or without perquisites) and the balance 10.1%-man days were remunerated partly in cash and partly in kind (table 1). Although

cash payment predominated in almost all the regions, its proportion was much higher in north-west and west, and south India. In central, east and north India payment in kind was quite common which lay between 35-40%. Payment in cash + kind was paid for around 6% to 12% of labour households in all the regions.

Table 1. Percentage Man-Days of Men, Women and Child Workers Paid under Different Modes, 1950-51

Zones	Cash	Kind	Both Cash+Kind K Kind	Total	With perquisites Perquisites	Without perquisites	Total
North	56.1	35.5	8.4	100	62.2	37.8	100
East	50.1	42.5	7.4	100	50.9	49.1	100
South	65.9	21.4	12.7	100	30.5	69.5	100
West	75.8	18.2	6.0	100	21.1	78.9	100
Central	46.2	42.6	11.2	100	1.7	98.3	100
Northwest	78.8	13.1	8.1	100	21.6	78.4	100
All India	57.7	32.2	10.1	100	33.4	66.6	100

Source: Report on intensive survey of agricultural labour, vol.-I, ALE, 1950-51, p. 48.

Summing up, Payment in cash or kind was related to many factors, such as the cropping pattern, traditional practice etc. or the nature of contract. The region where cash / commercial crops were grown, payment was made mostly in cash. Secondly, the casualization of labour is also responsible for the mode of payment. Areas where casual labour was prevalent, were also the areas where cash payment dominated. Thirdly, the overall development of the region and the availability of cash also affected the mode of payment. Fourthly, the prices of various commodities in the market also determined mode of payment. Higher prices of superior grains tempted employers to pay in cash or switch over to inferior grains if possible. And finally, the nature of operation for which the labourers were employed also affected the mode of payment. For most pre- harvest crop operations like ploughing, irrigation, sowing, weeding etc., large proportion was paid in cash whereas for most post- harvest crop operations like harvesting, thrashing, etc., large proportion of payment was made in kind.

IV. Conclusion

The colonial India witnessed a transformation in the agrarian relations including mode and medium of payment to agricultural labour. During the 19th century, labour relations were deeply rooted in unfree forms—debt bondage, “beak-and-call” attachments, serfdom, and unpaid obligations like begaar—where workers had little autonomy and were typically compensated through advances or in-kind payments. However, by the 20th century, a gradual shift emerged. Free casual labor became increasingly prevalent, especially in regions undergoing commercialization and payment of land revenue in cash. With this transition, cash payments gained strength

in some regions but the still, entrenched traditional forms persisted—many laborers continued to receive wages partially or wholly in kind specifically for operations like harvesting or threshing. Also, Cash component of wages was relatively less to unfree labourers. Kind and perquisites as part payment were much more common. Monetization gradually increased during the British period, with the increase in casual or free labourers, payment of revenue in cash and commercialization of crops. All evidence suggests that even though cash component was growing, it had not entirely replaced customary in-kind practices and dual (Cash + kind) component which continued to be significant especially in regions less integrated into cash markets..

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