

Condition of Agricultural Migrant Workers in Punjab



R.S. Gurna
Associate Professor,
Deptt. of History,
A.S. College,
Khanna

Abstract

The system of bondage is not simply a symptom of the pre-capitalist method of labour extraction, it is as rampant in under developed states as in the most developed states like Punjab and Haryana. The only difference between Punjab and many other parts of India is that there is relative paucity of available literature on bondage in Punjab and, consequently, the phenomenon of bondage has never come into the limelight. However, *sepi*, *sanjhi*, and *siri* (different forms of attached labour) are some of the traditional forms of bondage which have survived even today. To highlight the material factors responsible for migration, insights from different perspectives, viz. historical, socio-cultural, ideological, and collective consciousness need to be gleaned through. In this regard, the present paper highlights the results of the field study carried out in 1980-81 in two different districts of Punjab. The present study reveals that it was not the poorest that migrated, rather those a little above the lowest rungs were more inclined to migrate. Caste wise, 14 percent belonged to the Scheduled Castes, 84 percent to the Backward Castes, and only 2 percent were from the upper castes. Though there is a need to make a thorough inquiry into the trade in migrant labourers from Bihar to Punjab, Garhshankar tehsil of Hoshiarpur district, however, is one such centre that has already earned notoriety for its flourishing human trade.

Keywords: Agricultural, Migrant, Workers, Labour, Bonded, Wages, Punjab Farmers.

Introduction

The historical account of bondage in India clearly reveals the link between the character and extent of bondage on one hand, and the level of development of economy and culture on the other. The pastoral society of the *Vedic* period had slaves that were captured during war. The references about the prevalence of slavery in India are also available in the Rig Veda. The ownership of cattle and *dasas/dasis* (bonded labourers) were the two most important components of property. Slowly the pastoral economy was replaced by a settled agricultural economy and this change also influenced the nature of bondage and dependence.

Aim of the Study

The present study is aimed at highlighting and exploring the material factors responsible for migration. The insights from different perspectives, viz. historical, socio-cultural, ideological, and collective consciousness have been taken into consideration. For this purpose a field study has been carried out in 1980-81 in two different districts of Punjab.

The slaves captured during war were reduced to a small number compared to the servile labourers who were tied through debt bondage. The emergence of the Mauryan state as the biggest controller over the sources of production gave fresh impetus to bondage in the existing relations of production. Kautilya while writing the *Arthashastra* - gave protection to debt bonded labourers and not to slaves. The available evidence, therefore, shows that there was extensive use of debt bondage by the Mauryan state itself. The post-Mauryan developments of the period between 200 BC and 300 AD have best been reflected by Manu. It is a period when tension was strongly felt between what the Brahmin ideology of caste propounded and the reality of the working masses. It was Manu who interpreted slavery not as a socially constituted system, but as an eternally sanctioned state of *shudras*. It means the social uneasiness about the state of bondsmen and slaves was put to peace under the domination of the Brahmin ideology of caste and *dharma*. The ideology that *shudras* are born slaves and are meant to serve the Brahmins added a religious dimension to the prevailing egalitarian social system. It is perhaps unique to India where this combination of the secular with the sacred produced a social, political and economic hierarchy that ended up

producing a social structure worse than the societies composed of hierarchical race relations. That is why all the attempts to loosen the chains of caste bindings from the days of Buddha till today have not yielded much result.

The Royal Commission on Labour in India (1931) had already defined bonded labour whereby "the labourer borrows money from the landlord under a contract to work until the debt is repaid. The debt tends to increase rather than diminish and the man, and sometimes his family, is bound for life".¹ In independent India though land reforms were on the immediate agenda, hardly any attention was paid to the agricultural labourers working under conditions of debt bondage for generations. Article 23 (1) of the Constitution prohibits *begar* or forced labour, but the government did not care to materialise the spirit of the Constitutional provision. Debt bondage continued to be the cheapest source of secure labour for the landlords in rural India. It was during the early 1970s that the Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in its Report (1971-72 and 1972-73) redefined the bonded labour system as "the practice under which a man pledges his own person or a member of his family against a loan. The pledger or his nominee is released only on its discharge. Until then the man himself or the member of his family is required to work for his creditor against his daily meals or low wages. Since he gets very little money, he has to depend upon someone in the family to procure the sum required for his release and this, of course, is rarely available. The relationship lasts for months and sometime years, occasionally for an entire life time and not infrequently follows the male heir."

The Government of India reported to the ILO that up to 31st March, 2004, 2,85,379 bonded labourers were identified and released.² Further, after their release 2,65,471 labourers were rehabilitated. Interestingly, the number of those bonded labourers who were identified, released and rehabilitated in Punjab was only 69.

The system of bondage is not simply a symptom of the pre-capitalist method of labour extraction. It is as rampant in underdeveloped states as in the most developed states like Punjab and Haryana. The reason is that bondage not only ensures a regular supply of labour it also ensures high, cost effectiveness in the labour market. This is precisely the reason that the farmers of Punjab love to engage bonded labour despite Punjab being the most advanced state in agricultural production.

Punjab does not fall out of the historical sketch on bondage drawn here at the all India level. The only difference between Punjab and many other parts of India is that there is relative paucity of literature on bondage in Punjab and, consequently, the phenomenon of bondage has never come into the limelight. Even British civil servants focused more on Punjab peasantry rather than on agricultural labourers.³ It is quite likely that the severity of bondage might not have been as intense as in the South or other *zamindari* settlement states due to the Sikh reform movement's anti-caste role. However, *sepi*, *sanjhi*, and *siri* (different forms of attached labour) are some of the traditional forms of bondage, which received legitimacy from the dominant social

structure, and which has survived even today. Lack of alternative employment opportunities outside agriculture and the absence of the ideology of enlightenment were two factors that assured the submission of the labourers belonging to the untouchable castes to the demand of the farmers for servile labour. Traditionally, the attached labourers were paid their wages in kind either in the form of a share of the crop or a fixed amount of the produce. In order to camouflage the servile condition of the attached labourer the employer offered him a helping hand at the time of special social or religious occasions, such as, festivals, weddings or at the time of any other crisis. The rise of modern agriculture has extended the role of the labour market on the one hand, and, proportionately, has intensified the severity of bondage on the other.

From 1860s onwards rich farmers in Punjab with very large holdings ensured a stable supply of labour through loan and cash advances, and by the early twentieth century they began to issue written contracts to these labourers known as *siris*, *sajjis* or *sanjhis*. There are hardly any statistics on the employment of bonded labourers in agriculture at the time of Independence.⁴ The earliest figures available on the existence of bonded labourers in Punjab were collected by the NSS after the promulgation of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976. As many as 4,300 bonded labourers were detected by the NSS in 1979, but the government of Punjab did not accept the fact. The neighbouring state of Haryana, which was part of Punjab till 1966 and has a similar social and economic structure, was found to be carrying the burden of a number as high as 1,29,000 debt bonded labourers. The figure of bonded labourers from Haryana suggests that the number of bonded labourers in Punjab also must be much higher than what had been reported in the NSS survey. It is important to mention here that the NSS data is generally respected in the academic and government circles. The responsibility for the enforcement of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 rests entirely with the state governments. The Government of Punjab submitted an affidavit before the Supreme Court in 1996 mentioning 'no bonded labour' in the state. The myth of 'no-bondage' in Punjab was exploded when in 1997 a team of labour officials from the Union Ministry of Labour, raided a village of Bibipur in the district of Fatehgarh Sahib on a complaint lodged by a Member of Parliament from Bihar. The team succeeded in detecting bonded labourers who were later produced before the D.M. and immediately released. Once again, in response to an inquiry from the Union Ministry, the Government of Punjab submitted on 7th August, 2000 that there was almost no incidence of bonded labour in Punjab. It is contrary to the press statement given recently by the Labour Commissioner, Punjab whereby he claimed that 107 bonded labourers have been released and the Department of Labour has received an amount of Rs10/- lakh from the Union Government for conducting a further survey on bonded labour in the state.

The study over the last quarter of past century has shown that there are two types of bonded labourers in Punjab⁵: one, those who are migrant in

origin and second, those who are local and are part of the village society and economy. Further, among the bonded migrant labourers there is a section of labourers who hail from the tribal belt of Jharkhand and are brought to rural Punjab after their recruitment by intermediaries at their respective place of origin. The second set of migrant labourers flow into the labour market of Punjab under the pulls and pressures of the labour market and are generally non-tribal in origin. The latter type of migrant bonded labourers is primarily engaged at the brick kilns and some of them also work within the primary sector. All the three types of bonded labourers have their own specific conditions of recruitment, wages and working conditions depending upon the social, economic and power relations they are subjected to, both at the place of origin and destination. Before bringing in the topic of bondage it is important to throw some light on the 'push' and 'pull' factors that bind the two ends of the chain of migration between pre-divided Bihar and Punjab.⁶ To highlight the material factors responsible for migration, insights from different perspectives, viz. historical, socio-cultural, ideological, and collective consciousness for both the states need to be gleaned through.

In this regard, the present paper highlights the results of the field study carried out in 1980-81 in two different districts of Punjab. It was found that there were two different streams of migrant labour flowing from Bihar to Punjab. From the districts of Saharsa, Monghyr, Darbhanga, Muzzafarpur, and Samastipur in North Bihar seasonal migrant labourers were attracted to Punjab during the period of peak demand for agricultural labour. Their total number was between four to five lakhs.⁷ The labourers socio-economic background showed that it was not the poorest that migrated; rather those a little above the lowest rungs were more inclined to migrate. Caste wise, 14 percent belonged to the Scheduled Castes, 84 percent to the Backward Castes, and only two per cent were from the upper castes. They worked mainly for three agricultural seasons, that is, wheat harvesting, paddy transplantation, and paddy harvesting. If both the peak period and lean period of employment is taken into consideration, the average daily earnings of a seasonal migrant labourer ranged between Rs.4/- to Rs.5/-. On an average migrant labour was paid 35 per cent less than the minimum wages fixed by the state labour department, and that too during the peak period of demand for labour.⁸ Except for the scramble at the different railway stations to capture these free flowing migrant labourers and whisk them away in tractor-trolleys waiting outside, the farmers generally did not use any coercion to extract work from this category of migrant labour.

The second stream hailed from the tribal belt of Chottanagpur. Though the number of labourers were far less than the seasonal migrants from North Bihar. Independence does not make any difference to the tribal world. The *modus operandi* of recruitment was that some of the rural Punjabis who had some knowledge of the Chottanagpur area would go all the way from Punjab to Jharkhand and lure the tribals with the assurance of highly lucrative jobs in Punjab.⁹ Their rail fare and other expenses on the way were

borne by the recruiting agent. After alighting at Punjab the whole group, generally 20 to 50 labourers, was taken to some secluded farmhouse where they were handed over to different farmers individually in an open bid against an advance payment. Once the labourers were disposed of in a competitive bid, the responsibility of the recruiting agent was over. The farmers, fearing that the labourers might flee at night, kept a close vigil on them. Some of them, true to their traits of slave driving, would lock them at night along with their cattle in the cattle shed. Some employers would physically assault them to make them submit to the inhuman conditions.

The tribal labourers revealed that most of them were promised wages between Rs. 60-80 per month, which was almost half the amount of the then prevailing statutory minimum wage. There were labourers visiting Punjab for the second or third time, despite the slave like treatment meted out to them during their previous visits. The answer to this puzzle was with one of the respondents working with one employer for the last 10 years without wages.¹⁰ He was satisfied with the two square meals and some pocket money for *bidis*. He said that back home at Ranchi he could not even get enough food to live on. For the tribals the question was not of wages and working conditions, but of the choice between survival and death.

Though there is a need to make a thorough inquiry into the trade in migrant labourers from Bihar to Punjab, Garhshankar tehsil of Hoshiarpur district, however, is one such centre that has already earned notoriety for its flourishing human trade. Agents poured in regularly along with their groups of migrant labourers. This only showed that the trade in migrant labourers had never come to an end. In the beginning the trader in labour was largely limited to males but subsequently tribal women were also lured by the agents.¹¹ The facts gathered during the investigation were shocking. Anybody from the township of Garhshankar could reveal stories about the 'Sunday Bazaar' of migrant labour, particularly the tribals. On every Sunday all types of employers (farmers, shopkeepers, bureaucrats, police officials, and even some school management) thronged in, not only from within the district, but also from the whole of north-west Punjab. They could procure a labourer after the payment of a fixed amount of Rs 1,500/- per labourer. Interestingly there was no change in the *modus operandi* of the trade except that the recruiting agents, who used to be Punjabis in the past, were now of Bihari origin, particularly belonging to the Teli (oil extactors) caste. Though the trade in migrant labour was common knowledge nobody dared to challenge. People feared to talk about them partly due to their notorious past and partly due the clout they wielded with the support from high-ups, including some of the politicians. This was the reason that in the villages, there was not a single person ready to speak against him.

Conclusion

The present study reveals that it was not the poorest that migrated, rather those a little above the lowest rungs were more inclined to migrate. Caste wise, 14 percent belonged to the Scheduled Castes, 84 percent to the Backward Castes, and only 2 percent were from the upper castes. Though there is

a need to make a thorough inquiry into the trade in migrant labourers from Bihar to Punjab, Garhshankar tehsil of Hoshiarpur district, however, is one such centre that has already earned notoriety for its flourishing human trade.

References

1. Safa, H. I. and Dutoit, B. M. (1975), *Migration and Development*, Mouton Publishers, The Hague, p.959.
2. Saxena, R. C. (1987), *Labour Problems and Social Welfare*, Prakashan Kendra, Lucknow, pp.83-84.
3. Bharti, Indu (1990), "Mobilisation of Agricultural Labour: Jehanabad Experience", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 25, No. 22, pp.1181-84.
4. Dasgupta, Biplab (1975), "A Typology of Village Socio-Economic Systems", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Number, August, pp.1395-1414.
5. GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS, Government of Punjab, (2009), A study on the problems of migrant labour in Punjab, Faith Healthcare Private Ltd., New Delhi, p.114.
6. Ghaffari, Hadi and Singh, S. P. (2000), "Pull-Push Determinants of Inter-Provincial Migration : Iran's Case Study", *Indian Journal of Economics*, Vol. 81, No. 321, pp.269-275.
7. The Tribune, 21 Dec. 2014: *The Migrants Dilemma*.
8. Gupta, S. P. and Prajapati, B. L. (1998), "Migration of Agricultural Labourers in Chattisgarh Region of Madhya Pradesh : A Micro Level Study", *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp.707-15.
9. Iyer, G and Singh, M. (1980), "Impact of Migration Labour on the Rural Economy of Punjab State", *Man and Development*, September, pp.169-174.
10. GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS, Government of India, (1978), Draft Five Year Plan 1978-83, Planning Commission, New Delhi, Controller of Publications, p.82.
11. GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS, Government of India, (1991), Report of the Study Group on Migrant Labour, Vol. II, Part II, National Commission on Rural Labour, Government of India, Ministry of Labour, New Delhi