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Ben Rogaly

EXPLAINING DIVERSE LABOUR ARRANGEMENTS IN RURAL INDIA¹

Abstract

Scholars of agrarian structure in India have encountered severe difficulty explaining the existence and coexistence of diverse hired labour arrangements. The present paper reviews some attempts and argues that rather than seeking to validate one or other general model, future enquiry should use inductive methods to explain locally encountered diversity.

The paper summarises the perfectly competitive model of wage determination and examines the limitations of neo-classical extensions of that model for the analysis of labour exchange in rural India. These are identified as a reluctance to grapple with the coexistence of several arrangement types, the neglect of power relations, the subordination of cultural to economic explanatory factors, the assumption of the homogeneity of labour and the discounting of the importance of labourer solidarity. Orthodox Marxian approaches are then criticised for class reductionism and the implicit assumption of history-as-progress.

Even partial explanations of diversity are shown to require the disaggregation of labour arrangements into component parts. Further, the types of labour arrangements themselves need to be more carefully specified to avoid semantic and ideological divergencies appearing as substantive differences in the characterisation of changes in labour arrangements over time.

1. Introduction

Daniel Thorner defined agrarian structure as "the network of relations among the various groups of persons who draw a livelihood from the soil ... it is the sum total of ways in which each group operates in relation to other groups" (quoted by Harriss, 1982, p. 146, n. 1). Understanding the relation between agrarian structure and the course of agricultural development has long been a concern of scholars of rural South Asia. In this paper, we explore the difficulties inherent in explaining a major component of agrarian structure: the relation between buyers and sellers of agricultural labour, in particular its many contractual forms.

The hiring of labour in agrarian regions of India poses a major challenge to mainstream economic theories. The terms and conditions under which labour power is bought and sold conform neither to neo-classical labour market theory, nor to the

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capitalism of classical Marxism. In the recent past neoclassical economists have been preoccupied by the question of explaining why wages were rigid downwards and more recently with explaining the existence of specific institutions such as the interlocking of credit and labour transactions (Binswanger and Rosenzweig, 1984; Lal, 1989; Bardhan, 1989). Meanwhile Marxian political economists argued at a high level of abstraction about which mode of production, capitalist or feudal, dominated Indian agriculture (eg. Patnaik, 1971, 1972; Chattopadhyay, 1972a, 1972b).

These stages of theoretical inquiry have been overtaken by a need, driven by the persistent diversity discovered in empirical inquiry, to explain institutions of labour exchange as they exist in practice. The diversity of labour transaction systems between regions and villages and even within villages has been noted by several scholars (including D. and A. Thorner, 1962; Ramachandran, 1990; Rudra, 1992). Such research, characterised by methodological idiosyncrasy and compelled by the need to explain diversity, has found explanation difficult. Gyan Prakash has argued with regard to the historical study of agricultural labourers in India that the very complexity ("multiple fissures") of the subject matter "demand[s] fractured accounts" (1992, p. 45).

'Explanation' is defined here as the presentation of a coherent set of causes for a particular event, institution or change (or group of events, institutions or changes). Explanations arrived at through empirical data may be evaluated via an examination of the relationships between the assumptions, the explanations and the data. Typically, this involves analyzing how conclusions were reached from the data presented. Should data not contradict the explanation, the latter is tenable. Explanations may also be derived from first principles. In either case, a complete explanation is one which is not only tenable but rules out others.

The particularistic nature of segmented village labour exchange nexi, together with the disciplinary compartmentalisation of social science inquiry, may signal the practical impossibility of finding complete explanations at the 'macro' level, say, of a given agroclimatic region of a particular Indian state. However, by critically examining some of the categories used and suggesting a more inclusive framework of analysis, I hope to show how the explanatory power of micro- and meso-level studies of labour arrangements can be strengthened.

The purpose of this paper is to review attempts to explain diversity in labour arrangements in rural India. Divergencies in characterisations of change in arrangements also come within this audit. The second and third sections briefly examine two contrasting groups of approaches to explaining arrangements based on the concepts of a labour market and labour relations respectively. In the fourth section, I explore different partial explanations of diversity emerging from recent field studies,² through

2 Findings from my study of two localities in West Bengal carried out between June 1991 and March 1992 are drawn on heavily in that section. The objectives of the study were to explain diversity and change in labour arrangements within and between the two localities in two contrasting seasons. The two research areas are referred to here by the names of their respective districts: Purulia and Bardhaman. Agriculture in the Purulia locality (more than one village as it was composed of two whole *mouza* — smallest administrative unit — and parts of two others) was characterised by a single paddy crop and hardly any assured irrigation. Most land in the Bardhaman locality (two *mouza*) was cultivated two to three times per year and had access to either groundwater irrigation or surface water from the Badamjal river, which acted as a drainage channel for the Damodar canal irrigation system. In both localities most employers of labour belonged to *goala jati*, involved in both dairying and

a disaggregation of arrangements into a number of components. The fifth section considers ideological, semantic and substantive divergencies in attempts to characterise the process of change in arrangements. In the final section I suggest a more inclusive framework of analysis, which is intended to satisfy the criticisms made of others' methodologies in earlier sections.

Labour arrangements are defined here as the totality of formal, informal and implicit terms and conditions which define the relationship between a labourer (or group of labourers) and an employer (or group of employers). Formal (written) and informal (spoken) terms and conditions are those which are explicitly agreed, while implicit ones are those which are understood by both parties, without being stated. They may arise from the nature of other relationships between the same individuals or groups, or from norms associated with a certain arrangement. These definitions do not imply that terms and conditions are necessarily understood in the same way by all who practise them.

Arrangements range from single-stranded daily contracts entered into voluntarily by the worker for a cash return to long term multi-stranded permanent relations under which the worker is obliged to sell labour to a particular employer for an indefinite period (Jagganathan, 1987). The multitude of forms in between vary enormously in duration and degrees of obligation. Labour arrangements also include interlocked contracts, whereby a labour contract is partially defined by relations between the same parties in another market or markets.

2. Labour market approaches

2.1. *The Perfectly Competitive Model*

Neo classical attempts to explain rural labour arrangements maintain at their core the perfectly competitive model for the determination of wages in the *market* for labour. Although the scale of the studies, the questions asked and the issues raised vary, explanations are sought exclusively through this framework or extensions of it.

The core theory explicitly assumes homogeneity of labour, profit maximisation by "producers" and utility maximization by "consumers". It also assumes perfect information (where any relevant information is known to all market actors), no uncertainty and thus no transaction costs. As the market always tends to an equilibrium state, wage on the one hand and supply and demand for labour on the other, are simultaneously determined such that a change in demand or supply would lead to a change in equilibrium wages and thus a change in actual wage, while a movement in actual wage, due to any exogenous factors, would entail similar adjustments in demand and/or supply.

cultivation. In Purulia the landowning structure was characterised by smallholdings; most hirers out of labour also managed their own cultivation. In Bardhaman, the structure was slightly more skewed, the main difference being that most labour days hired in by employers were from seasonally migrant labourers. The two localities were strongly connected by the huge flow of migrant labourers out of the Purulia locality towards Bardhaman and Hooghly districts, though none were directly employed in the sample villages. Daily records of hiring in and out of labour were kept by ninety three sample households, together with detailed information on other transactions.

At equilibrium, the value of the marginal product of labour — the incremental value added to the product by addition of one unit of labour — is equal to the wage — the incremental increase in returns to labour from addition of the same unit — and also to the labourer's marginal rate of substitution between income and leisure. The latter refers to that quantity of leisure a labourer would be willing to forego to gain an extra unit of income.

2.2. Neo-Classical Extensions

Neo-classical economists have extended the perfectly competitive model for analysis of rural labour markets in India. Lal conceded that labour had unique qualities, which distinguished its behaviour from that of other "commodities".³ Partly as a consequence of this, a "multiplicity of contractual arrangements" existed which did not fit the perfectly competitive model, the dynamics of which required sequential spot contracts. Dropping the assumptions of perfect information and no uncertainty, "second best" solutions could be identified as rationales for particular contract types (1989, p. 111). According to Binswanger and Rosenzweig (henceforth B & R) in their critical review of literature on contractual arrangements in agriculture, non competitive behaviour could then be explained by such factors as:

- i) the costs to both labourers and employers associated with frequent job search;
- ii) dislike for wage employment and/or social pressure against it; and
- iii) the costs to the employer of supervising hired labour (Binswanger and Rosenzweig, 1984, p. 14).

B & R also implied that market structure, in particular the oligopolistic and oligopsonistic structure they attributed to rural markets in India, had to be accounted for in extensions of the competitive model (pp. 3 and 34 — 5).

The main concerns of applied neo-classical work have been to test the extent to which supply and demand determine rural wages, to explain downward rigidity and to provide rationales for the existence of particular contractual forms. Here we summarize specific theoretical propositions, drawing on their presentation in Lal (1989).

The uncertainty of demand for labour and the notion of implicit contracts have been used to explain the coexistence of rigid wages and unemployment. The notion of implicit insurance contracts between employer and labourer was shown to be able to explain how, as production and exchange in other markets fluctuated, wages were protected. The labourer paid an implicit insurance premium in good years when the wage was less than the value of the marginal product of labour, and received an implicit insurance benefit in bad years when the opposite was the case. The insurance contract could not have been underwritten by an insurance company because it would have run into moral hazard problems. Rather, employers had to monitor the contract as only they had access to the information required — the value of the marginal product of labour (Dreze, 1979, p. 10, quoted by Lal, p. 118).

Turning to explanations of specific contractual forms, Lal's model of interlinked credit and labour markets [following the work of Braverman and Srinivasan (1981) and Braverman and Stiglitz (1982)] posited landlord-moneylenders as tying credit to

3 See Samuelson (1966, p. 1567) and Hodgson (1982, p. 182) for elaborations of this point.

commitments of labour to reduce the risk of default. Lal showed how this led to monopolistic lending (as labourers could now borrow only from landlords to whom they sold labour), but that as the credit and labour markets were jointly determined (relatively high rates of interest being compensated for by wages at above the marginal product of labour), the solution was both efficient and equitable.

Without defining "attached" labourers, Lal then drew on Bardhan's formulation (1984, p. 80) which showed that the attachment could be explained by assuming that workers were risk averse (and thus wanted to smooth inter-seasonal consumption) and that employers were risk neutral (with regard to climatically induced changes in labour demand) and wanted to ensure adequate labour in the peak season. The greater the *mean* demand relative to supply, the greater was the importance of attached labour (his emphasis).

The phenomenon of caste-homogeneous work groups has been explained as employers' response to "idiosyncratic" tasks, which require ability to cooperate and work in a team (Lal, p. 117). B & R interpreted employers' use of a *mukadam* (middleman) to hire gangs of migrant labourers (Bremen, 1984) as the solution to an informational problem regarding the quality of the work force.

2.3. Testing the Rural Labour Market Theories

Despite the extensions of competitive theory outlined above, alternative theories of wage determination do not yet exist in empirically testable form, *which take into account contractual realities*. Thus the predictive powers of different models cannot be ranked (B & R, pp. 38 — 39, n. 20, emphasis added). However, tests have been carried out to establish the extent to which supply and demand for labour can explain wages.

Lal cited three tests on money wages using National Sample Survey data, which explore inter-village, inter-district and inter-state variations and found 51 — 72 per cent of the variation to be explained by supply or demand factors. He went on to use NSS data himself to explain inter-state variation in real wages between 1956 — 57 and 1970 — 71 (op. cit., pp. 127 — 129 and 135). However, as he admitted, the tests were "crude" and the results "suggestive". The identification of the percentage increase in cereal output as the sole demand variable, is ambiguous as increased output has come about in some areas through labour displacing mechanisation. The sole supply variable — percentage increase in the male agricultural labour force — is also questionable, as it leaves no room for estimating different trends for women, which given their large numbers in the agricultural labour force, may affect the overall trends in labour supply.

In a micro study of Aurepalle, a village in Mahabubnagar District, Maharashtra, a regression was run to try to explain the variation in wages between different "regular farm servants" (defined as those agricultural labourers with contracts of three months or more duration) (Binswanger et al., 1984). The most significant explanatory variable was the one which distinguished between those who worked primarily as cowherds and others. Grazing livestock and ploughing involve contrasting work intensities and have been commonly found (in micro studies from other regions) to be distinguished by different local terms. Defining the contracts in indigenous terms would have avoided this result, which "finds" an "explanation" due simply to misspecification.

2.4. *Some Problems with Labour Market Approaches*

Labour market approaches alone have not succeeded in explaining diversity in labour arrangements (although it has been noted by neo-classical economists [eg. B & R, p. 3]). More generally, attempts to explain the existence of particular contractual systems in terms of market imperfections have proved unable to account for the coexistence of heterogeneous systems of exchange (Bharadwaj, 1989a, p. 17). Bharadwaj argued that the efficient profit maximising choices of a free decision maker should not be assumed (1979). To analyse a contract, according to Bharadwaj, it is important to study exchange over a whole nexus of markets, to make explicit the social heterogeneity of the peasantry and to know which decisions have been foregone as well as those actually taken. Elsewhere she has regretted the attention given to optimality of contracts in the growing literature on interlinked markets, as it neglects the dynamic consequences (1985, p. 13).

Bardhan also criticises models designed to explain the rationale of particular institutional forms for overlooking "how in the historical-evolutionary process the underlying rationale changes and the same institutional forms adapt and mutate in response to changed circumstances" (1988). Srivastava's empirical study showed that "certain aspects of... (interlocked transactions)... change systematically with the penetration of capitalism, even though the outward form of interlocking may appear to be similar" (see section 5.2).

The process of exchange of labour is crucially informed by what Rudra terms "village society" (1984, p. 256; 1992, Ch. 16). This includes manifestations of power relations such as the operation of social sanctions and caste ideology.⁴ However, the neoclassical approaches explored here do not attempt to endogenize social institutions, such as caste or gender, nor the "tastes" or "preferences" of agents. B & R and Lal all routinely subordinated cultural/institutional to economic explanations of diversity and change. B & R concede that "culture and institutions" may be important "since these factors can affect the supply or demand for labour" (p. 30). Lal saw labour market processes as resulting from the mediation of ... "institutions" into the interplay of supply and demand". This privileged economic over social explanatory factors from the outset, reflecting the economistic bias which has characterised historical work on rural labour in India (Prakash, 1992a).

In the analysis of data from the Aurepalle study, Binswanger et al. found it "astonishing" that the lowest caste group should have the majority of "rural farm servant" (agricultural labour contracts of over three months duration) jobs (op. cit.,

4 Rudra's (1984, pp. 252 — 253) conception of ideological forces applying to all sections of village society omits the important distinctions between the ideologies of different castes, classes and genders (see Kapadia, 1990). Aware that in attempting complete explanation, they would have to consider ideological as well as material variables, Binswanger et al. referred to the views of one caste about another as an ideology (1984). However, the views of higher castes about the "weak, lazy, and unthinkable" Madiga group (ibid., p. 159) was the product of a system of ideas, rather than a system in itself. Ideology is defined in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary as "a system of ideas concerning phenomena, especially those of social life; the manner of thinking characteristic of a class or an individual". Explaining how and why a system of ideas came into being would better enable us to understand what Binswanger et al. refer to as the caste segmentation of the labour market than reporting on one of its manifestations.

p. 159). There is no room in their analytical framework for an ideology of domination nor any attempt to *explain* a labour market segmented by caste.

The possible explanations for non competitive behaviour given by B & R, imply an assumption that "prejudices" are exogenous. Thus they need not be explained. Moreover, the statement that "small farmers may 'dislike' [wage] employment" (p. 14) is an absurd proposition. Empirical work has not shown wage employment in agriculture to be "liked" by anybody. It has an association with low status, both as manual labour and because it is subject to authority. (This is not inconsistent with variations in the social and economic status of different operations and the social status of employment by particular employers in specific contexts.)

Another inadequacy of B & R's review arises from the assumption that the heterogeneity of labour is based on inherent inefficiency differences (p. 8), just as Lal based his consideration on skill differences (1989, p. 107). Even in their later consideration of the heterogeneity of labour as one of the "neglected themes" in literature on wages and contractual arrangements, they did not consider personal relations with employers developed on the bases of location of residence and settlement history and mediated by class and caste. Although gender segmentation of the labour market was discussed, no explanations were offered (p. 31).

Lal's ideological agenda, though not explicitly stated, was betrayed by his paraphraseology of Bardhan's findings on labour tying, which he used to support his version of Bardhan's theory. In reporting that Bardhan found land productivity to be positively associated with attached labour, he left out the adverb "weakly". Further, where Bardhan has inferred attached labour contracts to be "frequently" associated with employer credit, Lal preferred "usually" (see Bardhan, 1984, p. 80).

Careful choice of qualifiers also added weight to the conclusions B & R reached regarding the studies they reviewed on employer collusion. The studies they reported did not find "much" indication of collusive behaviour. They did not define "important" when they reported that "there [was] little evidence in the market for daily labour, of important departures from competitive behaviour" (p. 35).

B & R did not present a theory of collusion between labourers either. They described any agricultural "agitation" as "sporadic" in contrast to what they saw as the persistent organised activities of industrial unions. In stating that "efforts to organize rural labour unions have been confined to Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal", they were both grossly inaccurate and understated the absolute significance of these states in terms of rural population (p. 36). Above all, they omitted to analyse the solidarities formed among hirers out of labour resisting wage cuts, observed by a number of studies and termed "mutuality" by Harriss (1991) and Kapadia (1990). This means of resistance can be hypothesized to be provided by the observed "occupational multiplicity" (Comitas, 1973, cited in White, 1976) of rural households. Invoking "mutuality" and "occupational multiplicity" could be introduced into a neoclassical analysis to argue that the observed "unemployment" at equilibrium wages is not necessarily "involuntary". A hirer out of labour may prefer to earn nothing and retain her/his association with other labourers in the locality. Wage labour is only one possible source of livelihood — other productive and reproductive activities may be engaged in for survival, both valorised and unvalorised.

The frequently observed geographical immobility of labourers was attributed in part to asymmetrical information (B & R, pp. 33 — 34). Employers were reluctant to employ strangers because of the possibility of shirking. Thus the familiar unitary explanation appeared again: "Immobility here does not imply absence of choice; instead it may reflect a second-best adjustment to the informational and land market problems." (loc. cit.). Several recent studies from different regions of South Asia have shown the importance of seasonal migration both to migrant labourers and to employers (Bremar, 1985; Datta, 1991; my study). B & R's interpretation of Bremar (in section 2.2 above) does not explain the coexistence of a variety of modes of migrant labour recruitment, such as direct employer hiring of anonymous seasonal migrant labour gangs found to be so common in agriculturally dynamic districts of West Bengal in my field study.

3. Labour Relations Approaches

Scholarship in political economy has focussed on explaining labour relations in terms of conflicts of interest. Thus Adam Smith viewed wage determination as a bargaining process between unequally endowed agents. "It is not difficult to foresee which of the two parties must, upon all ordinary occasions, have the advantage in the dispute." (1976, I. viii. II, cited by Rothschild, 1992, p. 87). Thornton concluded that "the labour of uncombined labourers is ... sold at a disadvantage" (Bharadwaj, 1989b, p. 142) because unlike "tangible commodities", where the price is determined by "the competition of dealers, the price of labour may be determined by the competition of customers" (Thornton, 1886, p. 93, quoted by Bharadwaj, loc. cit.).

In classical Marxist theory, social relations of production are defined by the mode of appropriation of surplus labour with a corresponding structure of ownership of the forces of production. (Harriss, 1982, p. 110) The empirical complexity of production relations in a given space and time is an outcome of the coexistence and interpenetration of modes of production in a process of transition. (Patnaik, 1987, p. 2)

Using this conceptual framework, classical Marxist scholarship of rural India has commonly made the following assumptions:

- i) in analyzing and characterising empirically observable production relations, the most important explanatory parameter is class;⁵
- ii) that history is an *inevitable* process of transition from slavery through feudalism and capitalism to socialism, with struggle between classes as the motor (a form of historical determinism);
- iii) that each of these stages is *progressive* in relation to its predecessor (history as progress).

⁵ Marx himself did not define class. However, the groups that appeared as classes in his writing were unique to each theoretical mode of production (eg. lord, serf, guild-master and journeyman under feudalism; industrial capitalists, financial capitalists, landlords, peasants, petty bourgeoisie and workers under capitalism). It has been defined variously according to ownership of the means of production, net labour hiring practice, and "exploitation status" (Elster, 1986, pp. 142 — 143).

3.1. *Class Reductionism*

As class is usually assumed to be the most important parameter for social differentiation, other sources of conflict (including age, gender, caste, religion, language and region) are interpreted in the light of this single insight.

Brass presented a case study from Haryana to challenge the notion that "attached" labour relations, which he treated as one category, were entered into by labourers voluntarily and for their own "particular reason[s]". Moreover he argued that attached labour could only be understood in terms of "class/decomposition/recomposition (or restructuring) that accompanie[d] class struggle". Thus the persistence/reappearance of these apparently "feudal" production relations were explained as capitalists' "deproletarianisation" strategy to counter growing labour power (1990, pp. 36 — 37).⁶

Repeatedly empirical studies have squeezed complex societal relations into class categories based on land ownership and the extent to which labour power is hired in or out. Ramachandran's richly detailed study of wage labour in the Cumbum Valley, Tamil Nadu, separated out the propertyless as a class, dealing exclusively with *their* material condition, and terms and conditions of employment. For the sake of his study he created a class homogeneity of labour as defined by the ownership of the means of production and net labour hiring practice. Yet there is no *a priori* reason why the first criterion for group loyalty should be class (Elster, 1986, see below). In one contemporary study of rivalry in a West Bengal village, status was "shown" to be the prime cause for competitions (Davis, 1983).

Banaji in another context (1990, p. 297) emphasised the distortions implicit in the division of the peasantry into rich, middle, poor and landless, when wage labourers were often subsumed into the poor peasant category.⁷ He rightly insisted that the peasantry is both "amorphous and profoundly divided" (his emphasis) and such a rigid stratification terminology was not the most appropriate way of trying to make sense of this "shifting and ambiguous reality".

Elster has emphasised the difference between relevance of class and *centrality* of class to analysis of labour relations (op. cit., pp. 160 — 161). In order to do this he posited class as one basis for group solidarity and collective action. While, he argued that in any class society, class is likely to be a source of conflict and that class issues would pervade other sources of conflict, he disagreed with the orthodox Marxian view that class was always the most salient issue. Prakash extended this in his critique of the historiography of agricultural labourers to specify the intertwining of "class, caste, 'tribe', gender and religion" in determining the category "labourers" (1992, p. 45). Such critiques have enabled political economic analysis to go beyond orthodox Marxist categories to explain the reproduction of relations of domination and in the process to start to account for diversity in labour arrangements.

6 Although the reverse was implied by the quotations from Smith and Thornton (above), Brass's reasoning in his argument that proletarianisation (the creation of a propertyless class dependent on selling labour power and "free" to do so) could be seen by capitalists as leading to increased power for labourers, relied on the assumed concurrent loosening of personal relations, credit ties and tenancy relations. With the success or failure of a crop at stake, together with the capital invested in it, the new class of labourers if organised could hold the capitalist farmer to ransom. Moreover, the capitalist could fear losing the social control he was once able to exercise over former clients.

7 See, for example, Bharadwaj (1974, pp. 62 — 5; 1985, p. 11).

Bose's work on agrarian relations in late colonial Bengal (op. cit.) provided a more than convincing case for a *regionally* differentiated analysis. He demonstrated the dangers of generalising agrarian change too broadly with examples of the distinct processes of change in north, west/central and east Bengal.⁸ Mohapatra has argued explicitly that regional differentiation is required to account for distinct processes of change due to "local ecological context [s]" and "the structure of power" (1991).

3. 2. *Freedom versus Unfreedom*

Echoing the assumption of history-as-progress, a number of Marxian studies positioned labour arrangements on a continuum between unfreedom and freedom (Ramachandran made this the central concern of his study (1990)). Freedom was used in the sense that, not bound to a particular employer, labourers could *choose* to whom they would sell their labour power. Ramachandran acknowledged that his definition of free labour did not imply that a worker under capitalism was completely free (p. 1 n. 2). The unfreedom/freedom opposition and the notion of history-as-progress from one to the other have been criticised by Prakash. "Neither rooted in history nor complicit in power, the analysis of bondage, servitude and slavery as different degrees of unfreedom presents itself as self-evident distinctions while privileging free labour as outside the reach of power relations. Although it is true that these statuses represent historically given categories, their arrangement as a spectrum of conditions makes sense only in that it suggests a progressive restoration of a lost essence — freedom" (1990, pp. 6 — 7; see also 1992b).⁹

It is important to distinguish between the economic compulsion to sell labour power and the social compulsion to sell to a particular employer. The latter (pure unfreedom) is now rare in agriculture according to most contemporary field studies. This, however, does not imply the opposite — that freedom of labour is the norm. Despite the low social status involved in hiring out labour power for agricultural fieldwork (which varies for region, gender, caste and religion), hundreds of millions of individuals in India are not free to choose not to be agricultural labourers.

Moreover, seasonal fluctuations in volume of employment and access to earnings make many people dependent for advances, loans or employment in the lean seasons on the group patronage of local employers who have claims on their labour in return in the peak season. Thus individuals, households, descent lines, *para* (neighbourhood) may be dependent for their livelihood on a single employer or group of employers as descent line, *para*, subcaste. Conversely, an individual employer/group of employers may rely on local labourers for peak season labour power.

The process of production and the requirements of reproduction create a mutual dependency. However, the unequal distribution of economic power, reinforced by

⁸ Van Schendel (1991) closely followed Bose's regions in his attempt to identify changes in employer-labourer relations in the same period. Beteille (1974) illustrated the problems of trying to generalise insights on agrarian relations over the whole of West Bengal in his discussion of the contrary meanings of "jotedar".

⁹ For an opposite view to that of Prakash, see Brass's attack on post-modernism, for its denial of "the possibility of a universal process of socio-economic development", and for signalling "the abolition" of "emancipation as the object and attainable end of historical transformation, and along with it socialism and communism" (1991, p. 177).

cultural and religious domination (Prakash, 1992a, p. 36) is manifest in labour arrangements that themselves contribute to the reproduction of existing power relations and to changes in those relations.

4. Explaining Inter- and Intra-Contractual Diversity: The Need For Disaggregation

Whether labour arrangements are theorized as the outcome of a bargaining process between unequally endowed agents or as the expressions of an employer's maximisation strategy in given technological and economic conditions, in order to specify them correctly, some disaggregation is required. Wage rates alone neither distinguish who has the balance of advantage in an arrangement, nor indicate the "price" of labour. Dividing labour contracts into "casual" and "attached" disguises both the other components of the arrangement and the overall power configuration.

Here I review a small number of selected empirical studies of labour arrangements, all of which to some extent break arrangements down into component parts. Even partial *explanation* of the coexistence of diverse labour arrangements requires a consideration of whole packages of terms and conditions. Nevertheless the relations between labourers and employers in particular circumstances cannot be expressed simply as the sum of these parts.

Evidence is considered below from several studies (including mine, see p. 2, n. 2, above) on variation in the following attributes of labour arrangements:

- earnings, wages, and hours
- form of payment
- time of payment
- type of work
- payment regime
- work organisation.¹⁰

The duration and the degree of obligation to a specific employer are also often used to define arrangements. Indigenous terms used in the localities where I carried out my field study, generally carried a one-to-one correspondence with each of these two aspects of arrangements. They are discussed further in section 5.

As each study defines or groups contracts differently, I use the means by which arrangements were distinguished in the study concerned to illustrate diversity. Thus where indigenous terms are used, the differences between and variation within arrangements as perceived locally are highlighted. If arrangements are classified by duration, examples of inter and intra contractual variation are indicated according to that yardstick. When findings of different studies are aggregated, contracts are distinguished according to common features.

¹⁰ Others have called for and/or used similar criteria for disaggregation (eg. Rudra and Bardhan, 1983, p. 1; Ramachandran, 1990, p. 189).

4.1. *Wages and Daily Earnings*

Daily earnings are defined as the material reward due to a worker following the hiring out of his or her labour power in a particular twenty-four hour period. The wage is the amount due per unit of work. In the case of time rate work, the wage is usually calculated per day, which often connotes a standard number of hours. For piece rate, the wage is paid per unit land area or other physical unit.

Inter-contractual variation (wages and earnings)

Several studies have found earnings per day to be lower on average for annual than for daily contracts. Others have commented on premium payments to those in long duration contracts.

Annual arrangements may be actually paid annually, seasonally, monthly, daily or in a combination of these. Calculating the equivalent material payment per day has shown *lower earnings* than for daily rate contracts. Lower earnings have been explained variously by the compulsion to work for the same employer who sets the wages, by revealed preference by certain labourers for surety of subsistence (Kapadia, 1992, p. 7) and by unvalorisable patronage benefits over a perhaps higher daily rate without such benefits (Davis, 1983, pp. 202 — 203).

On the other hand, Bardhan's recruitment cost theory explained the incidence of higher earnings per day for long duration contracts by employers paying a premium to ensure supply of workers when time was very short in the peak seasons. As more land was brought into irrigated cultivation in West Bengal and cropping intensity increased, Bardhan argued that the cost of labour hoarding diminished, negatively related to the flattening out of seasonal labour peaks (1984, p. 77).

Hart explained observed higher wages for long duration contracts in Java in terms of labour management and control. The creation of a tier of privilege among the labour force was used as a mechanism of social control. Labourers were then divided, with those in apparently advantaged positions having more to lose from acting against the interests of the employer. She also showed how groups of labourers with "long-standing social ties with the village elite", based on settlement history, had access to arrangements with higher pay (1986a, pp. 175 — 177).

Intra-Contractual Variation (wages and earnings)

Variation has been observed within the same contractual form between the wages as well as earnings of men and women, young and old. The amount earned has also been shown to be related to type of work done, which may be organised, *inter alia*, by caste and gender. Furthermore, variation in wages has been found to occur when payment is imperfectly related to hours worked, when some workers have to travel further than others; and in one study according to the supply and timing of seasonal migration.

Most studies concur that when there is gender differentiation in daily time-rated arrangements, men do better than women. However, in one of the localities in my study, women earned more for transplanting than most men earned at any time.¹¹

The narrowing of wage differentials between the sexes in seasonally tight labour markets has been shown to vary by agricultural region in West Bengal (Kynch, undated).

In certain circumstances agricultural daily-rated wages also varied according to the type of work performed (see also section 4.4 below, which briefly considers type of work itself as a yardstick of diversity). In one locality of my study, this often reflected seasonal variation in the demand for labour and labourers' requirement for earnings. Access to particular types of work are commonly proscribed in a number of areas by gender and caste (Beteille, 1974, p. 122), though to differing degrees. This has been stated in many studies but rarely explained (see Prakash, 1992, p. 31 — 34 and 45 for an attempt).

Sarap found wage differentials according to age, strength and skill among men and boys in *guti* and *khutia* arrangements in Orissa (1991, p. A170).¹² He identified three types of *guti* arrangement, attributing the differences in terms and conditions of contract to employer household characteristics. Others have sought to identify those contracts where daily earnings vary, dividing arrangements overall into negotiable and non negotiable categories (Dreze and Mukherjee, 1987; Kapadia, 1992). Kapadia identified piece rates for gang labour as negotiable, in contrast to daily time rates, which were fixed. My data showed daily equivalent earnings for *bagal* and *bhatua*¹³ arrangements in the Purulia locality to be negotiable; however, in Bardhaman, daily rates for seasonally migrant harvest labourers varied in one segment only, reflecting the party political orientation of the employers concerned.¹⁴

Ramachandran found that labourers apparently employed on a 'casual' daily basis would perform extra unpaid duties for an employer before returning home. This had the effect of extending the working day beyond eight hours, signifying a reduction in wages though not in earnings. Although for other analyses, Ramachandran standardised the eight hour day, he did not explicitly consider earnings per hour. Thus his statement that a "general practice" of time-rated work was that a single wage rate existed for each type of work (p. 191). The "continuation of labour services" was explained by the presence of a "despotic dominant landlord" on the one hand and the desperation of labourers arising from "poverty, unemployment and land hunger" on the other. Ramachandran also noted variation in wages in Gudalur (not his main study village), where in the 1976 — 1977 peak seasons, workers often received premium payments for travelling longer distances to the fields.

Sarap observed harvest piece rates to vary for the same work according to the supply and timing of seasonal migration (p. A172). Farmers' interests in completing the work as early as possible were reflected in the higher piece rates available for groups, who could complete in good time, and generally in times of scarce supply of migrant labour.

11 Transplanting was usually rewarded at piece rate; however, those employers paying a time rate equivalent paid much more than to any other agricultural worker at any time of year, except ploughmen who brought their own plough and animal power.

12 *Guti* and *khutia* are two categories of "farm servant" in Sarap's study. A *guti* arrangement involves daily work on the employer's fields, while *khutia* labourers work as herdsmen.

13 *Bagal* is defined for the present purposes as an annual arrangement concerned almost exclusively with grazing livestock. *Bhatua* refers to an annual fieldwork oriented arrangement.

14 The locality was split by a river with dwellings on either bank. On the south side, a CPI (M) stronghold, wages were kept rigidly at the norm brokered by that party. Employers from the north side of the river, where Congress dominated, were observed to negotiate with groups of seasonal migrants, using the CPI(M) brokered wage as a floor.

4.2. The Form of Payment

The form of payment refers to the substance in which the work is rewarded: i.e. cash, kind, food, clothes or a combination of these. Other forms include the use of a small plot of land and/or provision of homestead.

If one form of payment is seen as advantageous to employers and neutral or disadvantageous to labourers or vice versa then the actual form may reflect the balance of bargaining power. Form of payment is part of the arrangement "package", whether contested or not.

Ramachandran asserted that workers "in Gokilapuram, as elsewhere" preferred payment in kind, particularly in the main harvesting, threshing and transplanting seasons. This he argued was due to the workers' perception that kind wages protected them against the decline in real cash wages. However, Ramachandran showed that for piece rate gang work, where the number in the group had increased but the payment per unit land has stayed the same, this was an illusion.

In my study, daily-waged, time-rated labour was materially rewarded in cash, kind, cash and kind or cash and food. Supplements included tobacco and bath oil. Form of payment differed considerably between the two localities and in Purulia between seasons, types of work, arrangement types and employers. There was no consistent preference by labourers for payment in kind. Some employers differentiated in payment form between different categories of labourers (usually by the location of the labourers' residences). The reality was diverse and it would be wrong to extrapolate from this that labourers consistently prefer payment in kind. For example, in the main seasonal migration to Bardhaman from Purulia for the (*aman*) paddy harvest, the cash payment was valued as a means of recovering from debt and celebrating the forthcoming *mela*,¹⁵ while the kind portion was consumed in the camp. On the other hand, seasonal fluctuations in paddy prices caused labourers to prefer payment in kind in the lean season when prices were particularly high.¹⁶ Petty purchases were made using paddy as currency from village shops.

Sarap described variation in the pay form of *guti* labourers in combinations of cash, kind, food and homestead. He distinguished three common combinations and associated the differences with employer characteristics based on place of employer's origin and level of education. Employers who recently immigrated from a neighbouring state retained some of their old contractual arrangements, while of indigenous employers, the more educated feared the new legislation under the Bonded Labour Abolition Law (1976) and converted the form of payment to cash as well as routinizing payment time.

4.3. The Time of Payment

Payment may be made to the worker in full on the day of work. It can take place partly the same day and partly in advance or in arrears. Sometimes payment is made

¹⁵ Country fair.

¹⁶ Preference for particular forms of payment were found to vary annually for similar reasons in the study of the village in Mahbubnagar District, Maharashtra reported by Binswanger et al. (1984, p. 161).

fully in advance or arrears. Arrangements as institutions lead workers to expect patterns such as receipt of a kind portion immediately and a cash portion later.

In my study both labourers and employers were asked each day when they would receive payment for that day's work. In this way it was learned that the timing of payment for daily time rate contracts varied according to season and locality.

In the Bardhaman locality, the kind portion was consistently paid on the day of work and the cash portion adjusted against advances at the end of the month or season. In Purulia later cash payment was expected at harvest when employers tried to wait as long as possible to receive the best price for their crop. In the Bardhaman locality, where seasonal migrant workers were employed in the peak seasons, arrears payment of the cash portion of cash and kind wages was standard practice. Although workers who migrated from the other locality expressed preference for this as it acted as a saving mechanism, some employers refused to pay the arrears until the seasonal duration agreed had terminated. During unseasonal rains some such employers did not pay migrant labour any wage, nor provide subsistence; yet they were not free to leave as they were refused the balance due for work already completed.

In the Purulia locality, most long duration contracts (seasonal or annual) were paid at the end. Deductions were made for any "advances".¹⁷ At harvest, daily arrangements were often not rewarded on the day of work. Employers waited as long as possible, as payment was mostly in cash and this depended on crop sales. The later the sale, the higher the price gained for the crop. As Marx has pointed out this amounted to an interest free advance from labourers to employers¹⁸ (Bharadwaj, 1989b, p. 16). The practice of *berhun* loans continued, whereby loans were made to particularly vulnerable labourers in the wet¹⁹ lean season, which had to be repaid by labour at harvest. The debt was reduced by much less than the minimum received by other workers for the same tasks. Thus intra-contractual diversity in timing of payment may be partly explained as an exercise in employer power and partly as the outcome of labourer livelihood strategies (see section 6).

Sarap found advances common for "farm servants" (both *guti* and *khutia*). The worker would be expected to work off the advance within the agreed duration of the contract. This was explained by employers' desire to cement the relationship between the parties. The advances were paid in only 75% of cases (p. A170). He found that the practice was more common among indigenous employers in contrast to those who had migrated recently from Andhra Pradesh. One explanation offered was the slightly higher value of overall payments offered to *guti* by the latter group of employers. Other possible explanations were not explored, such as the need to build alliances and increase influence in local affairs by these employers (see section 6).

17 I distinguish between loans and wage advances, the latter referring to prior payment against work to be done in the future where there is to be no implicit or other interest charged.

18 James Mill, on the other hand, referring to payment at regular intervals, saw the capitalist as paying the labourer in advance of the final sale of the product (cited by Bharadwaj, 1989b, p. 51).

19 The wet lean season refers to the period during the monsoonal rains (in the months of Bhadra and Aswin — mid August to mid October) in between transplanting and harvesting of the main *aus* and *aman* paddy crops. The dry lean season occurs in the period immediately preceding transplanting (i.e. in the months of Chaitra and Baisakh — mid March to mid May). In contrast to the loans made in the wet lean season against "cheap" harvest labour, dry lean season advances against transplanting and land preparation carried no implicit interest.

Ramachandran found that daily time-rated work was not always paid on the same day or on completion of the task. Timely payment was related to the wealth of the employer, with richer employers tending to pay wages on time (p. 200).

4.4. Type of work

Types of work carried out can be crudely divided into three categories: agricultural, livestock and non-agricultural. Agricultural work here refers to all activities connected with the production of crops from preparation of land to storage and transport. Livestock-associated work refers to livestock rearing and milk production activities, including grazing, cleaning out dung, preparing food, feeding and milking. Other tasks are classified by the umbrella term non-agricultural arrangements.

Type of work may be associated with a particular arrangement form. Thus, for example, separate arrangements were found by Sarap and in my study for grazing livestock (see section 2.3). Moreover, certain crop-associated tasks are institutionally tied to a particular payment regime and/or work organisation (see 4.5 and 4.6). Sarap explained the predominance of piece-rate contracts for the transplanting, weeding, harvesting and threshing of paddy by the employers' need to complete the task quickly. The same argument (that some paddy activities were time-bound) was used by Bardhan to explain the increased popularity of long duration daily or seasonally rated arrangements (1984, p. 77).

4.5. Payment Regime

The payment regime refers to the unit by which payment is calculated. In short duration contracts payment may be calculated either by time rate or by piece rate. Workers paid per day, per hour or other unit of time are being paid at a time rate, while those paid according to a physical quantity of work done are being paid at piece rate. In the Purulia locality of my study transplanting involved both a piece rate (for uprooting paddy seedlings) and a time rate (for transplanting them).

Payment regime, like duration and degree of obligation was usually indicated in both the study localities by the indigenous term for an arrangement. Thus inter-contractual diversity existed by definition.

In separate discussions of paddy cultivation in southern Tamil Nadu, Ramachandran and Kapadia reached separate conclusions on whether piece rates were in the interests of the worker. The implication of Ramachandran's argument was that piece rates were forced on reluctant employers by supervision requirements (p. 187). Workers benefited from the higher earnings available per day (p. 193). Kapadia found that the Pallar caste landless women labourers with whom she lived preferred time rates over piece rates (1992, p. 5). Piece rates represented an "internalisation of discipline" (p. 28) and a "powerful extension of employers' control of the workforce". In a situation of excess supply of labourers employers benefited whenever contracts were negotiable, as in the case of piece rate contracts (*loc. cit.*). The increased incidence of piece rate contracts signalled increasing employer power.

My study found piece rates to be favoured by workers in the Purulia locality due to the higher potential earnings. Therefore employers had less difficulty recruiting on piece rates than time rates in the peak season. In the Bardhaman locality, workers for employers resident in the CPI (M) stronghold area (see section 4.1, n. 14) demanded fixed hours as compensation for being denied the possibility of working on piece rates. Workers resident in the Congress dominated area, where employers did not adhere so strictly to the CPI (M) brokered floor, had access to much higher earnings through lucrative piece rate arrangements.

4.6. Work Organisation

Work organisation is also usually defined in the indigenous term for an arrangement. It refers to whether labourers are to be employed as a group (with a single payment made by the employer to a gang leader, or contractor) individually. Thus inter-contractual variation again occurs by definition.

Here the contrast between the description and analyses of Kapadia and Ramachandran is highly informative. They both provided aspects of a regional picture, not simply based on spatial differences in work organisation, but in the different parts of an explanation that emerged from distinctive field methodologies. Ramachandran described the composition of, and recruitment to, several work groups, only one of which was limited to a single caste. Supervision was observed to be required by the contractor at harvest, when coordination of cutting, binding and loading onto trailers was essential. At transplanting, on the other hand, supervision was not required even by the contractor. Thus technical differences between operations informed the extent of supervision necessary.

Kapadia specifically considered the recruitment of Pallar caste women into workgroups. While Ramachandran explained the one single caste (Pallar) work group in terms of the work ability of this caste as perceived by employers, Kapadia examined the internal composition of Pallar groups and explained them in terms of the power and patronage of the group leaders. Thus the inclusion of elderly women was not fully explained by Ramachandran, though one reads between the lines that he viewed it as an intra-caste social security mechanism (p. 214). One contractor reported that he punished workers from his own community if they complained that the less productive elderly were paid equal shares (op. cit.). Kapadia explained the inclusion of the elderly as patronage favouring of their own kin by contractors (pp. 19 — 21).

Sarap attributed the increase in gang labour in his area to the decrease in control through personal relations *which accompanied the inflow of migrant labour*. 'Homogeneity' of labour groups due to common "place of origin" decreased the employer's supervision costs (p. A172). Unlike Lal (see section 2.2), he did not spell out the mechanism whereby commonality of origin decreased the need for supervision.

5. Distinguishing Ideological, Semantic and Substantive Divergencies in the Characterization of Contractual Change

Ambiguity over the meaning of the terms 'attached' and 'casual' labour, together with different uses of 'exploitation' and 'coercion' based on unstated ideological divergencies increase the lack of clarity in the literature. This is marked in analyses of change in labour arrangements. A contract is experienced along more than one axis, including duration, interlinkage and degree of obligation/freedom (as defined by Ramachandran, see section 3.1), and these are not necessarily correlated. While some authors specify the yardstick by which attached and casual arrangements should be distinguished (eg. D. and A. Thorner (1962, pp. 21 — 23) and Ramachandran (1990, pp. 169 — 70), who use freedom; and Binswanger et al. (1984, p. 143, n. 1), who use duration), some of the authors discussed in this section allow the blurred distinction of the categories to remain in place.

There is no necessary empirical correspondence between contracts of a particular duration and the existence or extent of interlinkage with other markets, nor between either of these and the degree of unfreedom (see van Schendel and Faraizi, 1984, p. 96 for an example of short duration interlinked contracts; and Rudra, 1987, p. 759; Breman also argues that the distinction between attached and casual labourers is not as clear in practice as it might seem, 1985, p. 262). Indeed, long duration, interlinkage and coercion do not necessarily correlate negatively with the commercialisation of agriculture or the development of capitalism (Hart, 1986b, p. 189; Brass, 1990, p. 37; Rudra, *op. cit.*, p. 757 — 760; Bhalla, 1976, p. A29). Nevertheless, 'attached' or 'tied' labour arrangements are generally distinguished from 'casual' arrangements by their duration and/or by their degree of unfreedom and/or by the extent of interlinkage with other markets. This presents problems for comparison of the findings of different authors on change in their relative incidence over time. As a consequence, we examine in turn the evidence for the increase of short duration relative to long duration, free relative to unfree and multi-stranded relative to single-stranded attached labour contracts.

5.1. Duration

There is considerable evidence that the incidence of long duration arrangements as a proportion of total labour contracts has increased since the onset of the Green Revolution both in northern and eastern India. In the early 1970s a survey of three contrasting regions in Haryana (northwest India) was carried out to investigate changes in relations of production following the recent and continuing rapid changes in technology (Bhalla, 1976). The regions were selected according to degree of adoption of the new technology, the most "advanced" of the three being the region in which the forces of production had changed the most. Bhalla found that in this region more than half of male agricultural labourers were employed under some form of long term (one year or more) contract. In the intermediate region, the proportion was 30 per cent and in the backward region, 9 per cent (*ibid.*, p. A25).

A survey conducted in West Bengal by Bardhan and Rudra in 1979 found that the proportion of tied labour households to the total number of labour households was

twice as high in agriculturally more advanced villages (Bardhan, 1984, p. 78). Moreover, a later smaller survey in the same State compared a group of four villages in a relatively backward District (Bankura) with two large villages in a relatively advanced one (Bardhaman). Longer association was found to be more common in the advanced villages (35 per cent as opposed to 20 per cent) (Rudra, 1987, p. 760).

In contrast to these results, an historical study of rural labourers in Bengal between 1880 and 1980 found that short term employment was "the only type of labour contract which (had) increased decisively" (van Schendel and Faraizi, 1984, p. 96). Life long contracts²⁰ had disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century though annual and seasonal contracts had continued with no clear evidence of a significant increase or decrease.²¹ Ramachandran judged the literature to indicate a clear trend away from long term towards "daily paid" and "piece rate" work (1990, pp. 14 — 15). He attributed shifts in incidence of long duration contracts to the "nature of the crop grown and the way the market for labour has evolved in a region" (p. 237). He thus explained trends in predominantly technological and economic terms, illustrating how green revolution technology could be consistent with the sharpening of seasonal peaks in labour demand, while expansion in the size of the rural labour force could maintain a surplus of labour throughout the agricultural year.

5.2. Freedom

A second yardstick by which the incidence of tied labour is measured concerns the relative *freedom* of labour over time. Section 3.2 above, notwithstanding, this reveals further contradictions in the literature. At the heart of the disagreement lie ideological differences over the meaning of "exploitation" and "coercion". "In the economics of orthodox Marxism, the existence of exploitation under capitalism is assumed. In neo-classical economics it is assumed away" (Hodgson, 1982, p. 202).²² *Exploitation* for a conventional Marxist is the appropriation of the surplus value of labour in the production process. This is equal to the value of the total product minus the labourers' needs for his/her reproduction.²³ For conventional neo-classical analysis exploitation occurs when a labourer is paid less than his/her marginal product.

Similarly, economic as opposed to extra-economic coercion does not exist for some neo-classical authors because coercion is taken to imply the use of physical force. A contract may be regarded as "voluntary" even when the employer has used superior bargaining power to offer a labourer an "all or nothing" choice. At the limit, where the employer is a perfect monopsonist and there is no labour mobility this may be akin to the "freedom to starve" (Bardhan, 1984, p. 82). For Ramachandran,

20 Also termed "bonded labour" by the authors. I have avoided using this concept in the text where possible because of its association with other yardsticks used to discuss tied contracts (degree of freedom/unfreedom and extent of interlinkage with other markets).

21 Elsewhere, however, van Schendel explicitly considers daily paid contracts of seasonal duration as casual (1991, pp. 190 — 191).

22 Roemer clarifies the distinction in game theoretical terms (1986a, pp. 104 — 109).

23 A labourer's needs and those of those dependent on his/her (necessary product) are analogous to the concept of "natural price of labour" discussed by Ricardo (1971, p. 118). He argued that this price varies according to societal norms and individual expectations — it was not simply biological.

workers are unfree when they are forced by a social or economic obligation to hire out labour to a specific employer or group of employers (op. cit., p. 1; see also previous section). This may be termed "economic coercion".

In a study of five villages in Haryana in 1987, Brass found that labourers were unfree whenever they took a loan from an employer, whether the repayment of the debt through labour was due intermittently on different days or in a continuous block (Brass, 1990). Attachment was "coercive" by its very nature as "only through a debt would a free labourer become attached" (ibid, p. 53). Brass identified the increase of indebtedness among casual as well as longer term labourers as a strategy used by employers to counter the bargaining power of labour (see section 3.1).

In contrast, Bardhan considered those tied contracts which benefited employers without involving extra-economic coercion, as voluntary on the part of labourers and not necessarily to the latter's disadvantage. Whether a contract is voluntarily entered and whether it is to one or other party's objective material advantage are of course separate issues. Clearly, part of the contradiction here is due first to the very different production and exchange relations in the two regions and secondly to the authors' different ideological frameworks.

Substantive differences remain, however, regarding the extent to which labour is obliged to work for a particular employer under disadvantageous conditions. While Bardhan argued that increased attachment was a response to higher recruitment costs in the peak season as demand for labour increased and the labour market tightened,²⁴ Brass viewed the higher incidence of tying as an employers' strategy to exercise more effective control over the labour force.

Earlier evidence from north India was also divergent. Bhalla (op. cit.) identified changes in the form of tied labour contracts as reflecting a "counter-attack" by employers on the increased bargaining power of labour following a sharp rise in labour demand. Taking the form of indebtedness, the involvement of a panel of powerful village individuals in the increasingly formalised written contracts and the individual, personalised basis on which precise terms and conditions were designed, the strategy had been "entirely successful" (ibid, p. A29). Bhalla termed the outcome of these strategies the "redesigned fabric of conservative rural power" (p. A27). Although labourers were materially better off in the villages where the green revolution had penetrated furthest, at the time of the fieldwork they had not organised any kind of collective action.

In contrast, Singh, in a study of two Districts in Punjab, attributed the predominance of the *siri* (crop-sharing) contractual form directly to the increased bargaining power of labour (Singh, 1976, p. 97). In conditions of increasing yields and agricultural

24 Bardhan's (1979) "recruitment cost" explanation held that employers placed a "high premium on quick and ready availability of labour". Bardhan argued that higher recruitment costs were incurred hiring landed labourers who were reluctant to commit labour time during peak agricultural activity. Thus landless workers received higher wages. While Bardhan's prediction did not hold for her village, Hart accepted that the concept of recruitment cost could provide a partial explanation of why *small landowners* were preferred at times of peak labour demand. In her study of a Javanese village, the *landless* presented higher recruitment costs because of their preference for long duration contracts. However, according to Hart, Bardhan's theory still did not explain a) why landed labourers had access to slack season jobs of relatively long duration and high wages, and b) why at the intermediate stage following peak labour demand, small landholders should have been preferred by employers over the landless (Hart, 1986a, pp. 170 — 173).

commodity prices, it was advantageous to labour to continue to receive payment a) as a share of the harvest and b) in kind (p. 96).

Srivastava compared production relations in three villages in Uttar Pradesh (Srivastava, 1989). The relatively advanced village was situated in western Uttar Pradesh, which more closely resembles developed agriculture of archetypal north Indian conditions. The others, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, may have had more resemblance to the backward agriculture of eastern India than to the western part of the same state. Srivastava found that new forms of interlinked contract developing out of "more recent strategies of surplus producers"²⁵ did not in themselves constitute a decline in freedom for the labour force (ibid, p. 518). The relative constraint which they imposed on the mobility of labour was more to do with "direct economic processes" (labourers could and did opt to leave interlocked contracts) than the effects of labour relations in the agriculturally more backward village, where "several types of interlocked relationships (were) derived from traditional relationships" (p. 517). Thus tied contracts could have the same form but reflect different accumulation strategies. Interlinking the credit and labour markets did not necessarily indicate "additional" surplus appropriation (loc. cit.). Although Srivastava concluded that the persistence of certain such forms could lead to "the more adverse forms of interlocked relationships", he provided no evidence from the study to support this assertion, basing it rather on other authors' work. A more reasonable conclusion from his work might have been that labour in the advanced village, despite the extent to which it was tied, was relatively free in relation to labour in the backward villages. However, contrary to the implications of Srivastava's final sentence, the study does not actually contradict Bardhan's findings on the issue of freedom (see above and Srivastava, p. 519).

Other findings for West Bengal, however, have brought Bardhan's optimism into question. Rudra (op. cit.) found that tied labourers in the advanced villages were less free than those in the backward ones. This was evinced by the terms of the contract, which in the advanced village involved being at the "beck and call" of the employer for any task when required. However, payment was only received for days when the labourer worked for the employer. The predominant form of tied labour in the backward villages, on the other hand, stipulated a continuous period of employment for a specific task. Moreover the higher incidence of longer duration contracts in the advanced villages (cited above) often implied a "more servile relation" (1987, pp. 759 — 760). The problem here is that Rudra's concept of freedom differs from Ramchandran's (1990). In the latter's conceptualisation, a continuous tie in the backward village would be considered less free than the advanced village's "beck and call", because of the absolute constraint on working for another employer.

Although van Schendel and Faraizi reported that "extra economic coercion" gave way to "economic coercion" at the end of the nineteenth century, "the particularistic

25 The segmentation of the labour market which followed was classified into four groups:

- i) those who work for the employer on priority because of debt considerations;
- ii) those who work for the employer because of credit considerations and because of kinship ties to a group i) labourer;
- iii) those who opt for the employer because such employment facilitates certain transactions; and
- iv) those who do not work for a particular employer(s); are not indebted or for whom settlement of debt takes place outside employment or tenancy markets (ibid, p. 518).

basis of rural employment and labour control is... retained to the extent that the interests of smaller employers are served" (op. cit., pp. 97 — 98). Here it is the dependence on employers for credit, though no longer as personalised in that more than one source may be available, which restricts the freedom of labourers. Economic coercion here refers to the practice of tying employment contracts to consumption loans, obliging the worker to supply labour as repayment.

The use of the free/unfree axis, particularly by Srivastava (1989) and Ramachandran (1990) distinguishes a worldview which holds that as agricultural labourers come to approximate a rural proletariat, they can be said to be emancipated (following assumption iii) of classical Marxist approaches (section 3.1)). This "emancipatory" perspective is contrasted with the "moral economism" of anthropologists Kapadia (1990) and Davis (1983). These scholars interpreted long term contracts in villages in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal respectively as in the interests of labourers. The world is seen as moving away from mutual obligation (good) towards commoditization of labour (bad). Kapadia attributes the declining incidence of long duration labour arrangements to the exercise of employer power.

5.3. Interlinkage

The changing incidence of tied contracts when defined by interlinkage has already been discussed in the previous section in as much as it relates to the "freedom" of labour. It is important to reemphasize here, however, that changes or lack of them in the *form* of interlinkage do not necessarily signify the domination of one party's agenda. Although Adnan argued that interlocked markets were "contractually imposed by one agent upon another" (1984, Section 3.1.2), there is no *a priori* reason why this should be so. The interlocking of product and labour markets documented by Singh as being in some labourers' interests under a particular set of economic conditions, were lobbied for by workers (op. cit.; see also Bhalla, op. cit., p. A25 for evidence of similar lobbying in Haryana). Moreover, in the advanced village in western Uttar Pradesh, Srivastava argued that certain forms of interlocking could facilitate "subsistence (of the direct producers) and production" (op. cit., p. 517). Interlocked transactions were shown by Srivastava to arise out of both new (i.e. more commercialised) and "traditional" relations (see above). Labourers may perceive interlocking to be to their advantage and seek it out. Thus the use of interlocked contracts as a category may be fairly redundant as they cannot be ranked as a group against single stranded contracts. The advantage of microstudies is that they enable the economic and power relations behind different arrangements and different manifestations of the same arrangements to be specified.

6. Labour Arrangements as Strategic Interactions

Labour market and labour relations approaches have been assessed here in terms of their capacity to explain the coexistence of diverse arrangements. The limitations of neo-classical approaches were identified as:

- i) the focus on constructing rationales for specific contractual arrangements, rather than seeking to explain the concurrent existence of a variety of arrangements;
- ii) the neglect or externalisation of power relations — both economic and social (mediated, for example, through caste and gender);
- iii) the subordination of cultural to economic explanatory factors by implication;
- iv) not taking sufficient account of the heterogeneity of labour; and
- v) discounting of the importance and possibility of labourer solidarity, expressed through resistance to wage cuts.

Classical Marxian approaches were criticised for:

- i) their class reductionism, through which class was assumed to be not just relevant but central as a parameter of social differentiation, subordinating and neglecting other parameters such as age, gender, caste and religion;
- ii) the implicit assumption of history-as-progress, which was flawed in its veiling of the power relations inherent in "free wage labour", including the economic compulsion to sell labour power in low status work and the social compulsion to sell to particular groups of employers.

Arguing that labour arrangements needed to be broken down into their constituent parts if we were to begin to understand their total worth to labourers and employers, I presented findings from a small number of studies illustrating diversity in arrangements. Explanations of particular aspects of contracts were noted. They are summarised in Table 1.

The number of possible explanations is evidence enough that more micro and meso level inductive studies of labour arrangements are required, if the understanding of agrarian structure and its relation with agricultural development in any one region is to be improved. As well as answering the criticisms I have made of neo-classical and orthodox Marxian approaches, the framework of analysis should place the objective of explaining empirically encountered diversity first. This would be incompatible with an agenda which sought simply to validate one particular general theory. Any theory constructed would thus need to be more scrupulously contextualised.

Moreover the discussion of the characterisation of agricultural change demonstrated the need to spell out ideologies and methods more clearly. In this way, ideological and substantive divergencies could be more immediately distinguished.

Gillian Hart outlined a framework for data collection and analysis developed during the course of her study of a single village in central Java. She sought out diversity, carefully distinguishing labour hiring activities which carried differential rewards and status rankings. Household labour deployment strategies were assumed to be related to household class, size, structure and the gender and age of its members. These strategies (whether developed according to necessity or selected from combinations of possibilities) were conceived of as interacting with the accumulation strategies of employers. Moreover, Hart built macro political and economic variables into the explanation of change in employers' strategies (1986a); she argued specifically against a unilinear conception of history (1986a).

Hart found that much of the diversity in contracts could be explained in terms of employers' strategies for labour management and social control. She discussed how

the interaction between the rural power structure on the one hand, and local bureaucrats and higher level political processes on the other could influence labour arrangements in different ways in different national political systems. Whereas in Bangladesh, for example, the competitiveness of local politics meant that gaining access to state resources was contingent on client support, in Java such access depended more on forces external to the village (1984). The military and bureaucracy maintained law and order and granted concessions to the rural elite in the form of non-agricultural investment opportunities. Major employers used the provision of job security as an indirect means of organising and disciplining labour, partly to allow themselves more time to cultivate relations with bureaucrats (1986a, p. 178).

In tackling change, Hart acknowledged the importance of technological and demographic explanations, but set herself the task of explaining the residual. Why did labour arrangements not move unilinearly with the advance of technology or changes in the size and structure of the population? She showed that one explanation could be found in the nature of the political regime and its effects on employers' strategies.

Thus Hart did not focus on finding rationales for particular contract types; nor did she externalize the practice of power relationships. Gender relations were endogenised in later work on Muda region, Malaysia, when she began to focus on the household as a site of struggle rather than a decision making unit (1991, 1992). Her framework is not class reductionist and explicitly opposes a historically determinist approach. For these reasons, I drew heavily on her work in designing the field study, some of the first findings of which have been included in this paper.

Following Hart, labour arrangements were conceived of in my study as the outcomes of interaction between parties with conflicting interests who nonetheless depended to some degree on each others' cooperation. Equally important in the framework was the acknowledgement of imbalances of power and a greater degree of involuntariness in action for one party than the other.²⁶

Hart's field method centred on a thirty day recall period, which enabled her to compare the average terms and conditions of different arrangements. This was extended in my study through the use of daily records kept by sample employers and labourers, to give insights into *intra*- as well as *inter*-contractual diversity. Explanation can be induced through the exercise of associating arrangements *and their components* with household and individual characteristics, such as class, caste, gender, religion, age, settlement location and history.

Thus a framework for analyzing arrangements *at the village level* is produced which:

- i) accounts for social heterogeneity within the two categories employers and labourers;²⁷
- ii) sees arrangements as the outcome of interaction of both parties' agendas,²⁸ the degree to which one party's agenda is dominant being related to the endowment set, status position (Elster's cultural capital, 1986, p. 147) and gender of each;²⁹ and

26 Contrary to Lieten and Nieuwenhuys's identification of a dichotomy between 'interactionist' and 'dialectical materialist' views of survival strategies (1989, p. 3).

27 Rudra (1992), van Schendel (1991) and Datta (1991) concur that this basic distinction between employers and labourers is the key analytical one. Government categories (marginal, small, medium farmers) are unsatisfactory. They are used by Sarap (1991), although he does state that labour markets are segmented on caste, tribal, kinship, gender, local/migrant lines.

28 While, unlike Hart, not implying all action necessarily to be strategic or even deliberated (see

- iii) disaggregates arrangements and examines intra-contractual diversity again with reference to the individual and household characteristics of the agents.

Table 1: A Summary of the Explanations of Diversity in Labour Arrangements Presented in this Paper:

Type of Diversity	Author	Explanation
Wage		Higher wage in long duration contracts explained by:
	Bardhan	<i>Recruitment cost — high in peak season</i>
	Hart	<i>Labour management/social control</i>
		Lower wage in long duration contracts explained by:
	Kapadia	<i>Security of subsistence preference</i>
	Davis	<i>Unvalorisable patronage benefits</i>
		Intra-contractual inter-seasonal swings (manifest in differences between types of work) explained by:
	this study	<i>Shifts in demand for labour and relation to supply</i>
		Intra-contractual (harvest wages) variation in part of one locality vs rigidity in the other part explained by:
	this study	<i>Party political orientation of employers</i>
Form of Payment		Variation in wage (not earnings) due to labour service explained by:
	Ramachandran	<i>Despotic landlord & poor, unemployed, land hungry labourers</i>
		Intra-seasonal variation in harvest piece rates explained by:
	Sarap	<i>Coordination of number & timing of arrival of seasonal migrants (supply) with demand.</i>
		Labourers' preference for kind payments explained by:
	Ramachandran	<i>Perceived protection against inflation</i> No evidence for constant labourers' preference for any one form explained by:

Hodgson, 1988, pp. 98 — 101).

- ²⁹ Although employers' and labourers' agendas tend to differ, there is no *a priori* reason why their preferred contractual forms should necessarily do so. They may have different perceptions of the relative advantages of a particular arrangement. However, Bardhan's interpretation that all labourers and employers preferred the contracts they were currently in over others available takes this line much too far (1984, p. 84).

	this study, Binswanger & al.	Lump sum cash from seasonal migration valued for repaying debt, celebrating mela versus kind preferred in lean season when cost of paddy high Employer preference for cash payments explained by:
Time of Payment	Sarap	<i>Fear of legal action — Bonded Labour Abolition Law</i> Employer preference for late payments explained by:
	this study	<i>Cash payments required sale of crop. Post-harvest prices lowest</i> Employer use of arrears payment with migrant labour explained by:
	this study	<i>Tying mechanism. Prevents departure</i> Loan tied to work at lower than going rate (implicit interest) explained by:
	this study	<i>Employer power and labourer livelihood strategies</i> Variation in whether advances paid (inter-contractual) explained by:
	Sarap	<i>Employers' desire to cement relationship</i> Variation in whether advances paid (which employers of farm servants were among 75% who paid advances) explained by:
Type of Work	Sarap	<i>Compensates for lower value of annual payment</i> Variation in timeliness of payment for daily-rated work explained by:
	Ramachandran	<i>Variation in wealth of employer</i> Specific payment regimes for certain work type
	Sarap	<i>Piece rate explained by need to complete task quickly — transplanting, weeding, harvesting, threshing</i>
	Bardhan	<i>Long duration arrangements explained by need to ensure timely labour supply so that work could be done on time and at appropriate time</i>
Payment Regime		Piece rates vs time rates explained by:
	Ramachandran	<i>Piece rates forced on reluctant employer by supervision requirements. Otherwise work too slow (see section 4.4 above)</i>

	Kapadia	<i>Piece rates reflect internalization of discipline within workgroup — powerful extension of employers control of workforce.</i>
	this study	<i>Piece rates favoured by workers — because of higher earnings — employer again reluctant</i>
	this study	<i>Piece rates available (& otherwise higher earnings) according to orientation of dominant political party</i>
Work Organi- sation		Internal composition of Pallar work group — inclusion of elderly explained by:
	Kapadia	<i>Patronage of own kin by Pallar female contractors</i>
	Ramachandran	<i>Social security: intra-caste mechanism</i>
	Lal	<i>Caste — homogenous group to enable necessary team work/cooperation for "idiosyncratic" tasks where supervision costs otherwise high</i>

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Ben Rogaly, St. Antony's College, Oxford OX2 6JF, UK.