REVIEW ARTICLE

Neo-Bondage and Unfree Labour in Rural Gujarat

Paaritosh Nath*

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In March 2020, the world saw images of men and women walking in the heat of the summer sun, often for hundreds of kilometres, with little or no means to sustain their weathered, worn-out bodies, fleeing India's biggest commercial centres in a historical exodus. The nationwide lockdown in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic brought in front of the nation's eyes, perhaps for the very first time, the millions of circular migrants locked away in our economic structure, a reminder of what Binswanger-Mkhize (2013) has called India's "stunted structural transition." Jan Breman, in the preface of *Capitalism, Inequality and Labour in India*,[1] refers to these workers as a "new class of nowhere people" (p. xi), "nowhere" being a fitting term not only with respect to the migratory nature of their existence but also their own indeterminate location in a narrative of development that has gone anywhere but according to plan.

What this narrative of development has become and what it means for the material existence of those located at the very lowest echelons of our society forms the subject matter of Breman's latest book, consisting of nine chapters and bringing together almost six decades of academic work. It provides a comprehensive summation of his previous writings and seeks to cement his own standing in the wider debate surrounding two major and interconnected questions – unfree labour relations in contemporary times and the nature of capitalist transformation in India.

The work traces the historical narrative of the halpati, a caste of agricultural labourers in southern Gujarat who were deeply entrenched in labour bondage at the beginning of the twentieth century.[2] Through painstaking archival research work and his own observations from the field, Breman pieces together the story of the origin of the

* Assistant Professor, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, paaritosh.nath@apu.edu.in

[1] Breman (2019).

[2] Both the terms halpati and hali are used interchangeably. Breman (1974), writes that "halpati" was the name given by M K Gandhi to this caste of agricultural labourers of the Bulsar, Surat, and Broach districts of South Gujarat in place of "Dubla," a term considered pejorative.

bondage system known as *halipratha* and its subsequent transformation with the growth of capitalist relations of production in the rural economy of Gujarat. This sets up the contextual frame that is then used to locate practices of labour bondage in contemporary times.

Through the course of this book, we are not only taken through the broad changes that have occurred in the agrestic economy of Gujarat but also provided with a temporal frame of reference of Breman's own engagement with many of these ideas and their evolution across the decades. It would not be unfair to say that this book sums up Breman's journey from his erstwhile conclusion that labour bondage is no longer a reality of the Indian rural economy to his current thesis on "neo-bondage," which is perfectly compatible with what he designates as capitalism grounded in mercantile-cum-financial interests.

The book is ambitious in design; it is also successful in retaining an engaging tone without compromising on theoretical rigour. It serves as an excellent introductory volume for readers seeking to get acquainted with Breman's extensive study of bondage, migration, and exploitation in India.

The volume is divided into three main sections. In the first section, Breman looks at how labour bondage has been historically codified in the annals of the state. The reader is taken through the reports of various official panels and committees set up to document the existing labour regime. The tendency, by and large, in Breman's own words, has been to soft pedal, ignore, or deny the practice of labour bondage. Reports such as the Agricultural Labour Enquiry report of 1950–51 were plagued with severe methodological issues that failed to properly identify, let alone estimate, the size of the attached labour force in the rural economy. Other documents, such as the Report of the Hali Labour Enquiry Committee of 1949, while recognising the prevalence of bondage, tended to blame the halis and their "vice-filled behaviour" for the persistence of the debt-induced bondage system. The material conditions that led to the continued existence of this system were never fully expanded upon nor studied, quite simply because this did not fit the narrative of the newly independent Indian state. By the mid-1960s, official policy discourse took for granted an impending structural transition from an agrarian–rural to an industrial–modern society, much on the lines of what had taken place in developed nations. Thus, the focus of documents such as the report of the First National Commission on Labour (1969), was predominantly on the new industrial worker emerging in the urban centres. The practice of bonded labour was seen to be a vestige of the past that was rapidly withering away and did not warrant serious discussion.

Subsequent government documents such as the report of the Second National Commission on Labour (2002) uncritically accepted the assertion that the 1976 Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act had been widely and properly implemented, despite ample field evidence suggesting otherwise. The final report of the National

Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, which stated that attachment in debt had become a major feature of the informal economy, remained unacknowledged by the government. This is not to say that the Indian state and its institutional framework has been completely unaware of the existence of such practices. The question Breman asks is whether it "really want[s] to know what remains hidden" (p. 56).

Part II of the book, titled "Destitute in Bondage," undertakes an examination of the history of labour bondage with a focus on southern Gujarat. Given the scant documentary information on the precolonial origins of the *halipratha* system, the author relies on accounts detailing similar practices of institutionalised bondage labour elsewhere in the south Asian subcontinent to construct the evolution of bonded labour relations in Gujarat.

We are introduced to the halis, formerly a group of tribal peasants in the central plains who were dispossessed of their lands by bands of colonisers. The colonists, who are likely to have had peasant-cultivator caste origins, brought with them advanced agricultural technology and introduced the practice of sedentary agriculture. These settlers firmly established themselves as landlords in the new terrain, staying away themselves from actually tilling the soil. Their ascendancy in the caste hierarchy was made possible by the subjugation of dispossessed local tribals. Deprived of their main source of livelihood, a large section of the newly dispossessed tribal population engaged themselves as bondage labour to work in the fields and the homes of their new *dhaniamo* (landlords). The halis, tied to their master's household, would be provided a food ration not only during days of work but also in the slack season. This "free" sustenance further entrenched the halis in bondage and servitude towards the master – a system of exploitation that was, in the words of the author, driven by patronage (p. 66). Any income that the halis were able to generate from this arrangement was far below the amount necessary to cover the basic cost of their subsistence. However, the author makes it clear that this mode of employment was not driven by tendencies of profit maximisation. The *halipratha* system was rather a definitive feature of a pre-capitalist mode of production, wherein production for the market had not assumed major importance and money played a minor role in the local exchange of goods and services.

This was the system of labour bondage that the British administration encountered when they set up their administrative control over Gujarat in the nineteenth century. The accounts written by the company's officials provide a rich archival resource for the author, who uses them to describe how the colonial administration approached the practice of *halipratha*. Initial reports submitted to the company described the system as akin to a form of slavery. However, as the author notes, there was little interference made by the colonial administration to overturn the existing system. The colonial administration argued that the hali sysyem was not based on any form of coercion, rather it was a contractual arrangement that the

halis were more than happy to enter into, given their inability to fend for themselves. Behind this glaringly racist assessment of the hali's attitude towards servitude, Breman shows us, is a deeper motivation, one that lay in protecting the rights of the creditor–employer. The colonial administration had started expanding its own commercial activities in other parts of the world, and these activities required indentured labour deployed from India. Slavery, however, had formally been abolished in 1843 with the passage of the Indian Slavery Act. It was necessary, therefore, in the eyes of the law, that exploitative practices such as the hali system be repackaged and validated as an employer–employee arrangement based on debt servicing. The halis of yesteryear were codified as workers who were technically free but had consented to entering a contractual arrangement in which they had forfeited control over their labour power in lieu of a loan.

This was around the time when the rural economy itself was undergoing major changes, characterised by a rise in commercialisation and monetisation. There was an expansion in total cultivated area with cash crops such as cotton beginning to replace food crops and a rise in conspicuous consumption among the rural elite. Breman notes that the advent of the new mode of production had important implications for the hali system, with greater impersonalisation and distancing emerging between the master and servant. Discretionary favours in the form of small loans, for example, were less willingly granted. The patronage system started to erode and profit maximisation began to emerge as the driving force behind the use of labour in agriculture.

The final chapters of this section deal with the political intervention of the Congress party in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Though there was an acknowledgement of the state of penury and deprivation in which halis lived, the party leadership, writes Breman, was less than keen to challenge the local landed elite on the issue of bonded labour. The support of the landed elite was necessary to push through a successful anti-colonial struggle in southern Gujarat, and though there were murmurs (from ground-level party workers) about the emancipation of the halis, these were, more often than not, ignored. Though the struggle against the colonial powers promised land to the tiller, the landless halis remained as dispossessed as ever. The party was willing to conduct reformist activities among land-poor and landless halis only as long as they did not run inimical to the wishes of the landed elite. An important reason for the Congress to maintain a strong presence on the ground was to check the growth of communist influence amongst the most oppressed sections of Gujarat's rural economy.

In a frank admission, Breman acknowledges that his earlier writings on the hali system and external political intervention failed to capture the presence of the Kisan Sabha and its attempts to radicalise the landless and the land-poor in the 1930s. The recognition of this role in Breman's later work places the seemingly half-hearted attempts made by the Congress leadership to organise the halis, particularly in the

form and manner in which they did, in an altogether different light. The repudiation of assertive action against the landowners, the stress on maintaining cordiality with the landlords, and the constant admonishment of the moral and social "pitfalls" of the halis' lifestyle, as the author makes clear, had as much to do with staving off communist influence, and thus protecting the class interests of the rural elite, as it did with any Gandhian notion of non-violence and moral asceticism.

The section concludes with a rather scathing assessment of various attempts made by different agents to mobilise the halpatis from above, including the efforts of organisations such as the Halpati Sewa Sangh, whose leaders are seen as lackeys of the rural elite. What about the potentialities of assertion by the halis themselves? Though the author submits that there have been instances of resistance and attempts at organised agitation, these have been few and far between. The penury that the workers are confronted with on a daily basis continues to manifest itself, in the opinion of the author, in the form of political inertia (p. 129).

It is interesting to note that while depicting the practice of the hali system as being exploitative and highly unequal, the author does acknowledge that it provided the halis with some form of security and informal property rights. What replaced this feudal arrangement, in the absence of any protection from the state, however, was a system far more exploitative and denigrating. Often, there is a tendency to associate the withering away of the old production relations with an almost immediate transformation in the material lives of the labouring poor.

The third section of the book, titled "The Political Economy of Boundless Dispossession," is based on the author's own fieldwork and looks at the changing nature of Gujarat's rural economy a couple of decades into Independence. The author notes that, by that time, the traditional hali system had eroded. Two rounds of land reform and gains from the green revolution bypassed the class of landless workers, who, in the face of increased mechanisation and casualisation of work, experienced a further deterioration in the number of days of employment and the earnings they received. Daily wage workers, mostly from outside the village, had replaced the erstwhile farm servants. The halis were no longer allowed to set up their huts on the lands of the landowning classes and were mostly displaced and relocated to the outskirts of the village.

The phenomena described above resulted in a marked increase in the spatial movement of rural labour, what Breman refers to as "circular patterns of mobility." This is different from migration, which the author characterises as a long-term or permanent relocation of workers. Devoid of a regular source of employment, banished from cultivating for sustenance, and replaced by casual labour ready to work for lower wages, workers belonging to the castes and classes at the "lower" end of the rural economy have no option but to sell their labour power in advance to jobbers who, acting as agents of rural and urban entrepreneurs, are on the

lookout for pliant workers ready to work for less than market wages. These monetary advances, generally taken during the slack season, contractually bind the workers to leave their homes and, under the aegis of the jobbers, work off their debt at the employer's worksite. The payment for labour performed is often made in bulk at the end of the contract period, effectively preventing workers from seeking employment elsewhere. What Breman refers to as neo-bondage is thus a mixture of advanced and postponed wage payments. While the prior system of agrestic, unfree labour might have diminished, the pattern of labour relations emanating from this system of "immobility in mobility" signals the emergence of new forms of labour bondage that are altogether compatible with capitalism.

Continuity and change, as one can note from the description above, are the twin axes of enquiry running through the course of the narrative. Thus, though forms of debt-induced labour bondage are present across different modes of production, these are marked by differences significant enough to be treated as separate analytical categories. Demonstration of power and social prestige, as Breman notes, is what encouraged the owners of land to place halis under their patronage in the pre-capitalist system. Neo-bondage, on the other hand, is driven purely for the extraction of surplus value. Unlike the erstwhile system, it is characterised by a commodified relationship, with labour power being the only commodity transacted. The engagement of labour, moreover, is for a shorter duration of time, given that the work is generally seasonal. There is no longer a need for the worker to be present at the household all year round. The employer is not responsible for providing for the worker in the off season. Another major change, highlighting the increased impersonalisation of the worker–employer relationship, is the presence of middlemen–jobbers who hire workers for the employer and are responsible for payment of wages. The practice of neo-bondage, moreover, is not restricted to a specific region or occupation. The author provides accounts of other studies (De Neve 2005; Kompier 2015; Mezzadri 2017) that report the existence of practices such as paying loans in advance and postponing wage payments among different types of workers, including diamond cutters, textile workers, and home-based workers. Neo-bondage is present, with different degrees of severity, across a host of activities in the informal sector. The author estimates that around 15 per cent of the workforce in India is unable to choose when, where, to whom, and at what price they sell their labour power (p. 233).

This brings us to Breman's central concern in the book: Are the workers he has encountered in the field doubly free in the traditional Marxist sense? And, if not, does the absence of the "double freedom" automatically imply that the rural economy is characterised by the predominance of pre-capitalist production relations? The picture that Breman paints for us is one of workers forced by extreme poverty into indebtedness. One of the ramifications of such indebtedness is that these workers have no control over the wage rates of the contracts into which they enter. The actual sums of money that bonded labourers are to receive for their work

are divulged to them at the end of their work engagement, before their dismissal. The low reservation wage coupled with a system of advances and deferred payments signal the presence of unfree labour relations. However, Breman notes, this does not imply that these unfree relations are operating in a pre-capitalist setting. Capitalism and unfree relations co-exist in this space.

The point being emphasised by the author here is that one cannot dismiss the view that capitalism is the dominant mode of production in India simply because of the presence of these unfree relations. Capitalist relations have been superimposed on the countryside without the destruction of that which existed earlier. The presence of unfree labour relations, therefore, does not signal the continued predominance of pre-capitalist relations. Varied forms of unfree relations, including neo-bondage, operate alongside the large-scale development of capitalism in India.

Breman's academic contribution to these questions is invaluable and driven by a deep concern for the millions in the country who are subject to blatant exploitation and servitude. His closing lines do not, however, encourage much optimism, as he expresses much anxiety at the future prospects of the "nowhere" workers under the current Hindutva regime. If the opening observations of this article are anything to go by, his anxiety is well grounded and justified.

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