

mobility patterns, all of them reflecting the institutionalisation of gender-based violence, which is becoming normalised, actualised, and internalised.

The consequences of the policies that eschew economic rationality, ethics and equity cannot be more graphically explained than in the words of Ayesha:

The sarkar does not want the working class anymore. Withdraw whatever little welfare is available today, digitalise it so that we cannot comprehend the technicalities, and by next year the roads will be full of the dead bodies of emaciated workers. And for women there will be no need to even wait for those 12 months—single women are half-destitute already. All we face is devastation, destruction, despair and destitution. We are the real NRI—Not Required Indians.

Ritu Dewan

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Neo-bondage, Not Sharecropping

The article “Labour Partnership, Sharecropping, and Tribal Migration: Unravelling the *Bhagiya* System in North Gujarat” by Tara Nair (*EPW*, 26 June 2021) fills a key gap in the studies of agrarian labour in India. There are very few existing studies of this mode of labour engagement that has expanded rapidly not only all over Gujarat but is also showing signs of expansion in other states.

The *bhagiya* system has evolved as a highly innovative form of labour extraction by the enterprising peasant classes of Gujarat. The innovation lies as much in changing the mode of payment for agricultural labour from daily wages to a share in the crop as much in calling it sharecropping. This serves the key purpose of avoiding the labour laws, most important being minimum wages. The author, in spite of her rigorous description of the system, seems to have fallen into this trap and refers to the system as a distinct form of sharecropping in her conclusions.

The *bhagiya* system of Gujarat is an alternative mode of labour deployment where the daily wages have been substituted by a share in the harvested crops to the detriment of the worker class. Table 3 in the article that gives cost calculations for the cotton crop clearly illustrates this. Whereas labour costs account for 37% of the total costs and 50% of the

operational costs, the share of the *bhagiya* stands at 20%. In fact, contrary to the assertion made in the report that the share remains constant, it does vary by crop. Cash crops like potato have a one-eighth or one-ninth share. And irrespective of the share promised, farmers make sure that the share received by the *bhagiya* corresponds to the labour input. This is corroborated by the conflicts that emerge. Two-thirds of the respondents have reported conflicts, frequently at the time of the settlement. *Bhagiyas* realise this fully well. The article reports that given a choice, 90% of the respondents would prefer to work for daily wages.

The system of advances is a key component of the *bhagiya* system that serves as a great attraction for the tribal households to work as *bhagiyas*. However, in locating the reason for taking advance to the peculiar cultural practices and rituals of the tribal population, the author seems to be falling into the familiar trope of blaming the victim. Bride price and extravagant expenditure on marriage are not peculiar tribal practices. These are practised by wide sections of non-tribal society as well. The system of advances has to be looked upon from the perspective of the employer too. It serves as the critical means of tying the *bhagiya* worker to the land for the duration of the season.

A key issue to decide when analysing the *bhagiya* system is whether the *bhagiya* is a sharecropper or agricultural worker. This is critical from the point of view of legal jurisprudence as well as considering the large number of disputes that arise. The author provides comprehensive definitions of both sharecropping and attached farm hand as given by the National Sample Survey Office in the concluding sections. A perusal of the

two definitions and the description of wage sharecropping arrangement provided in the previous sections of the article makes it clear that the *bhagiya* worker is more akin to the permanent farmhand rather than the sharecropper.

The *bhagiya* system needs to be looked upon as an evolution of the traditional system of farm bondage and not of sharecropping arrangements. The author has taken note of the traditional bondage system in Gujarat, the *saathi* system, but this gets confined to the endnotes. It needs to be analysed in the context of the shift by the local agricultural labour class from farm work and the availability of a large mass of footloose tribal labour in Gujarat. The emergence of the system has to be looked upon as an example of “neo-bondage” as described by Jan Breman. It is described as “neo” because the relationship between the bosses and workers is less personalised, of shorter duration, more contractual, and monetised. Classifying the system as a distinct form of sharecropping causes immense harm to the working class and serves the interests of the farm owners, even if inadvertently.

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Corrigendum

In the paper titled “Women’s Participation in Protests against the Three Farm Laws in India: Perspectives from the Ground” (*EPW*, 22 October 2022), the acknowledgement should have read as “The authors are thankful to Inderjit Singh for sharing his views on the issue and providing critical feedback.” Endnote 26 should have read as “Jodhka (2021) has similar observations on this aspect.” References should have listed the following: “Jodhka, Surinder (2021): “Why Are the Farmers of Punjab Protesting?” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol 48, No 7, pp 1356–70.”

The error has been corrected on the *EPW* website.

EPW Engage

The following series and articles were published in the past week in the *EPW* Engage section (www.epw.in/engage).

Indian Freedom Struggle and Beyond: The Decade of the 1940s

- (1) Non-Brahmin Labour Movement in Bombay and Indian National Movement — Babasaheb Kambale
- (2) Sudras and the Nation: Periyarist Explorations — Karthick Ram Manoharan
- (3) Gandhi and the Development of Public Health Infrastructure in Interwar Bombay — Mrunmayee Satam
- (4) Unwrapping an Uprising That Hastened Indian Independence — Johnson Odakkal
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- (6) Flights to Freedom: Independence and the Indian Air Force — Ashique Iqbal