

Labour Partnership, Sharecropping and Tribal Migration

Unravelling the *Bhagiya* System in North Gujarat

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This paper discusses the distinct form of sharecropping arrangement known in Gujarat as *bhagiya mazdoori* involving migrant tribal households. The main purpose is to understand this institution in terms of its specific features as practised in north Gujarat positioned as it is in a changing agrarian system. The livelihood condition of the tribal sharecroppers in the source villages and their work and living conditions in the farms at the destination locations are the core themes of the discussion. The paper delineates relevant policy measures to prevent perpetuation of exploitative arrangements that *bhagiya* system represents.

There are ample references to sharecropping arrangements in the agrarian labour history of the world. The most discussed among these are the Italian *mezzadria* system and the sharecropping system that the southern planters resorted to in postbellum America (Shlomowitz 1979; Luporini and Parigi 1996). In India sharecropping is known to have existed for several centuries, though the precise trajectory of its evolution and the actual extent of its incidence is still unclear. According to Biplab Dasgupta (1984), while family farming was the norm in precolonial India, sharecropping might have been practised by a few, who were smaller peasant-proprietors trying to “augment their land resource” by renting in excess lands available with larger and better off farmers. It is, however, agreed by scholars that the institution has continued through time, interfacing with varying relationships of production, and embedded in distinct modes of production.

The 20th century chroniclers of India’s agrarian history and of land/tenancy reforms have described in detail the institution of sharecropping as it existed in the early decades after independence in West Bengal, Bihar, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan, and its location within the complex and deeply hierarchical social and economic structures of these regions (Bhaduri 1973, 1983; Mencher 1974; Thorner 1976; Bardhan and Rudra 1980a; Cooper 1983; Sharma and Dréze 1996; Iyer 2002). Pranab Bardhan and Ashok Rudra (1980a) in their study of select villages in northern and eastern India (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, and Odisha) found that the phenomenon of sharecropping was more prevalent in “advanced” villages that used tube wells and pumps, chemical fertilisers and high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds.

The dominant representation of sharecropping in the postcolonial literature is that of a labour process and a mode of surplus labour appropriation in backward agriculture. As Amit Bhaduri (1983) explains, sharecropping arrangements, theoretically, involve negotiation between two parties—the landowning farmer and the landless/small peasant sharecropper—both having distinct objectives of maximising land and labour productivity, respectively. Though the typical understanding of crop sharing is that of a system where the inputs, risks and produce are equally shared between landowner and sharecropper, village level studies from across the country have brought to light a variety of ways in which the final produce is shared (Cooper 1983). The terms of sharing could vary depending on the quality of land and other assets, security of tenancy rights, and employment

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opportunities available to tenants who share in the working or fixed capital (Byres 1983; Bhaduri 1973). However, some of the later studies have indicated that sharecropping arrangements have come to be standardised (Sharma and Dréze 1996).

Bhaduri (1983) argues that any bargaining within a sharecropping arrangement is meaningful “only if both parties enjoy more or less symmetrical economic power.” In situations where a landowner deals with a landless or land-poor tenant with meagre and uncertain alternative employment opportunities, the arrangement assumes the nature of a relationship of “dominance and dependence” (Bardhan and Rudra 1980b). This paper discusses the findings from an enquiry into a system practised in many parts of Gujarat that exemplifies “dominance–dependence” relationships between landowners, predominantly engaged in commercial farming, and tribal sharecroppers. The asymmetry in the relationship is exacerbated by the migrant status of the sharecroppers.

The paper begins with a broad review of the available evidence on sharecropping in Gujarat. Then, it describes the research objectives and methodology. This is followed by delineating the context of sharecropping, and then key features of the arrangement are elaborated. Concluding observations and policy implications are presented in the last section.

Incidence of Sharecropping in Gujarat

The National Sample Survey Office (2006, 2015) reports on ownership of landholdings in India indicate that the share of leased-in operational area has increased in Gujarat from 2% in 1981–82 to 6.4% in 2013 (Table 1). As for the terms of lease, no clear trend is visible. This could well be due to the difficulty in accurately identifying the various forms of lease contracts owing to their informal nature. However, from the data, sharecropping has consistently remained an important form of tenancy in Gujarat since the 1980s through the 2000s.

Many studies on the changing land and agrarian relations in Gujarat carried out during the 1980s through the early 2000s have examined the various types of sharecropping (*bhag batai*) arrangements prevalent in different regions within the state (Patel 2018; Iyer 2002; Prakash 2005). These enquiries have explored the nature and extent of sharecropping, factors that contributed to its emergence or increase in incidence, and social relations embedded in the institution in distinct local contexts. While carrying out field research in the villages of Kheda in the late 1980s among groundnut cultivators and oilseed cooperatives, A S Patel (2018) observed widespread practice of sharecropping by marginal landowners and landless workers called *majuri bhagiyas* (labour partners). The *bhagiyas* provided labour in return for a share in the final produce, and in many cases, the entire crop residue. He also noticed that the introduction of canal irrigation

Table 1: Percentage of Leased-in Area in Gujarat and Terms of Lease

Year	Leased-in Area		Terms of Lease (as % of leased-in area)			
	Fixed Money	Fixed Produce	Share of Produce	No Terms	Other	
1981–82	2.0	5.0	1.0	10.0	68.0	16.0
1991–92	3.3	39.9	1.6	23.7	7.4	27.4
2002–03	5.1	10.7	46.3	37.9	0.0	5.1
2013	6.4	75.0	0.0	21.0	4.0	0.0

The data for 2002–03 and 2013 pertains only to the Kharif season.

Source: National Sample Survey Office (2006, 2015).

and the consequent rise in cash crop cultivation was a major factor responsible for the escalation of crop-sharing arrangements. Similarly, Anjal Prakash (2005) reported a significant rise in the number of sharecroppers in the villages he studied in Mahesana district of north Gujarat during 1990–2003. He attributed this to a decline in the overall availability of irrigation water that forced marginal farmers, already disadvantaged in terms of access to water, to restrict cultivation only to monsoon crops in their own lands. As they “did not have skills other than agriculture ... they started taking up sharecropping from medium and large farmers” (Prakash 2005: 3).

The other aspect highlighted by these studies is the coexistence of different arrangements for sharing inputs and output between the landowner and sharecropper across regions (Table 2). In the case of an irrigated groundnut growing village in Kheda, Patel (2018) found crop-sharing partnership between Patels and Kshatriyas on a one-fourth basis, where the sharecropper received a fourth of the yield. Other than tilling the land, they performed all other labour activities. If improved seed was used in cultivation, they had to bear one-fourth of the cost of seeds and chemical fertiliser. If both parties supply inputs equally, the produce was also shared equally. In a study of a village in Banaskantha district, the sharecropper was entitled to one-third share, while two-third share went to the landlord, who held the right for land and water (Prakash 2005). This specific arrangement worked more as a method to sell water to tenants in return for a crop share. In most cases, the sharecroppers were drawn from upper and middle castes—often the same caste as the landowners—though a smaller proportion of Scheduled Castes (scs) and Other Backward Classes (obcs) also did sharecropping (Iyer 2002).

A careful reading of the available evidence suggests that sharecropping arrangements in many parts of Gujarat started shifting towards a standard system around the late 1980s as

Table 2: Different Modes of Sharing Input and Output Prevalent in Gujarat in the 1980s and 1990s

Bhavnagar	Landowner bears all expenses and receives 80% crop share
	Landowner bears all expenses and receives 75% crop share
Panchmahal	Input costs and produce shared equally (50%) between landowner and sharecropper
Surendranagar	Input costs and produce shared equally (50%) between landowner and sharecropper
	Landowner bears all expenses and receives 70% crop share
	Sharecropper bears all expenses and receives 67% crop share
Bharuch	Input costs and produce shared equally (50%) between landowner and sharecropper
	Sharecropper meets all input costs and receives 67% crop share
Junagarh	Costs of seed, fertiliser and pesticide shared equally between landowner and sharecropper; all rental cost relating to machines, harvester, etc, borne by sharecropper, and receives 50% crop share
	Sharecropper provides labour and half the cost of seed and fertiliser and receives 33% crop share
Kheda	Sharecropper provides labour except for tilling and receives 33% crop share
	Sharecropper provides 25% of the cost of seeds and chemical fertiliser and receives 33% crop share
	Input costs and produce shared equally (50%) between landowner and sharecropper
Banaskantha	Sharecropper provides labour, and receives 33% crop share; land and water rights rest with the landowner who receives 67% crop share

Source: Patel (2018), Iyer (2002), Prakash (2005).

landowners or farmers began to engage landless farm labourers or marginal landowners in a peculiar crop-sharing system. As per this system, sharecroppers only provided their labour and received in return a share of the produce, and also the crop residue (in regions where the cooperative dairy movement was thriving). Such sharecroppers are referred to as *majuri bhagiyas* (Patel 2018) or more popularly, *bhagiya mazdoor*. The system seems to have spread to other parts of the state eventually. In the late 1990s, while studying the dairy cooperatives in Banaskantha district of north Gujarat, Rawal et al (2009) came across such an arrangement. By this time, the social composition of sharecroppers too began to change. Along with workers belonging to OBC communities (such as Thakors), they found migrant tribal families from the neighbouring villages working in the farms of Patels for a share in the crop. Bhatt (2008) too alluded to the widespread presence of labour-exclusive sharecropping arrangement in Anand district of central Gujarat in the mid-2000s. In her enquiry into various types of lease contracts she found two variants of this sharecropping: one where the sharecropper contributes all labour mostly through family labour; the other, where the landlord paid for the hired labour, while the sharecropper performed only some tasks, like giving water and applying fertilisers to crops and overall supervision. Currently, farmers across the state engage labour sharing tribal “partners” round the year. They mainly hail from the districts of Panchmahal, Dahod, and Chhota Udepur in Gujarat, and the villages on the border between Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The arrangement has come to be known as *bhagiya* system in the local lexicon.¹

Objectives and Methodology

Apart from a few fragmented descriptions produced mainly by organisations engaged in mobilising and organising migrant agricultural workers in Gujarat, no systematic analysis of the *bhagiya* system has been taken up so far. The main purpose of this paper is to understand the tribal *bhagiya* system being practised in north Gujarat in terms of its specific features and logic. Specifically, the paper aims at exploring the livelihood status of *bhagiya* households in the source villages and their work and living conditions in the farms at the destination locations. Through a detailed exploration of these, the paper would seek ways to evolve a progressive policy framework for advancing sharecroppers’ interests, while recognising the constraints confronting the farming system in the region.

The research study was undertaken in two phases during July 2019–July 2020 in Khedbrahma taluka (Sabarkantha district) and Kotda tehsil (Udaipur district of Rajasthan). Both the regions are covered under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution. Detailed in-depth interviews were conducted with 99 male and 30 female sharecroppers from 20 villages—10 villages each from the selected talukas—chosen purposively with the help of the “Shramik Sahayata evam Sandharbha Kendra” (3SK) at Khedbrahma managed by Aajeevika Bureau, Udaipur and Kotda Adivasi Sansthan (KAS). Exploratory case studies of nine sharecroppers were prepared as a pilot exercise towards designing tools of enquiry. Information about farm operations and experience relating to engagement of tribal *bhagiyas* was gathered during this phase from 10 farmers, purposively selected from five

villages in Khedbrahma. Group meetings were conducted with farmer leaders and office bearers of a farmers’ cooperative, as also *bhagiya* workers (separately with men and women and in mixed groups). Extensive discussions with key informants among farmers and *bhagiyas*, and the functionaries of the 3SK were also carried out. Apart from these, 24 case files of disputes between *bhagiyas* and farmers reported to 3SK between 2013 and 2019 were studied carefully. The cases were randomly selected from among the more than 1,000 files maintained at the Kendra.

Context: Source and Destination

The region of north Gujarat is agroecologically characterised as arid to semi-arid. Scarcity of groundwater has been a long-standing problem in the region. Since 2000, area under irrigation steadily expanded thanks to an increase in canal irrigation coverage operated by the Sardar Sarovar Project and aggressive promotion of micro-irrigation technology by the state government. From around 2005–06 onwards, the number of farmers adopting micro-irrigation increased in north Gujarat. The region accounted for 34% of all farmers who took to the technology in 2013–14 (Bahinipati and Vishwanathan 2017). As a result, north Gujarat has witnessed diversification of cultivation away from food crops towards cash crops like cotton, groundnut, castor, potato, and vegetables. Most of these crops also involve labour-intensive cultivation and, hence, relatively higher share of human labour cost (about a third of total cost in the case of cotton). Increased migration of agricultural labourers to the region is a direct outcome of these developments.

Our enquiry revealed that the *bhagiya* system involving tribal sharecroppers is integral to the farming system in north Gujarat, currently. Most of the farmers with large landholdings consider it critical to engage *bhagiyas* given the pattern of cropping (dominated by cotton, groundnut, wheat, and potato) and the shortage of labour supply in the region. Apart from the villages in Khedbrahma and Kotda, sharecroppers also come from other tribal-dominated villages in Poshina (north Gujarat) and Chhota Udepur (south Gujarat). It was pointed out that tribal sharecroppers have been present in the villages for about two decades. In a majority of the cases, *bhagiyas* were working in the farms as daily wage labourers prior to their engagement as sharecroppers. They were thus familiar with the farming system. A strategic instrument that seems to have facilitated the transition from daily wage system to sharecropping is the promise of getting a lump sum advance (an issue discussed in detail later). After the *bhagiya* system got entrenched in the region, an elaborate network of contacts has emerged that includes fellow *bhagiyas*, farmers within and outside these villages, and transport operators who link the interior villages with distant farms.

Farmers prefer the *bhagiya* system for various reasons, particularly because of the flexibility of work and timeliness of labour input. *Bhagiyas* perform many tasks in the field. 3SK has listed about 13 activities directly related to farming that men and women are engaged in during a given season. These include land preparation, sowing, watering, applying fertiliser, spraying pesticide, tending to crop, harvesting, threshing, cleaning the harvest and collecting straw. They also perform

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tasks like cutting fodder for cattle and clearing cow dung. The continuous availability of bhagiya on the farms ensures that they and their family can be called on to perform various tasks round the clock. It must be noted that electricity supply to farms is available on rotation in Gujarat—one week at night and the next week during daytime. Also, a crop like cotton needs frequent watering once the plant blooms. Taking care of cattle and providing protection to field and wells are the other valuable services sharecroppers are expected to provide.² Women must do the routine domestic work of cooking, washing, cleaning, and caring for children at home in addition to farm-related tasks. Their labour is critical in the upkeep of animals, too.

In the source villages, the population is almost exclusively tribal (99 per %). They are characterised by low levels of literacy (30% overall and 18% female literacy) and predominantly farm-based livelihoods. Most of them own land, but landholdings are small (average 0.53 acre). Farming is mainly subsistence-oriented. Most of the families in the sample have said that they are unable to produce enough to be food-secure, let alone have any marketable surplus to provide for other basic necessities.

Non-farm employment opportunities within the village are very limited. Daily wage work outside the village and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) are the only options available to most. While availability of work under MGNREGS is highly sporadic, finding daily wage work is physically and financially arduous as they must travel 35–40 kilometres (km) one way to reach the work sites. Though private vehicles arranged by petty job contractors operate services, cost of travel is exorbitant compared to the wages earned.

Under these circumstances, sharecropping has emerged as a major livelihood strategy for the tribal households over the past couple of decades. First, sharecropping arrangements usually start with lump sum advance from the farmer. This is a significant temptation especially for households that are perennially cash starved. Second, as noted before, most of the tribal households face serious food insecurity as their landholdings are small and yields are relatively poor due to the terrain being hilly and irrigation facilities, scarce. Sharecropping ensures some degree of food security. Third, sharecropping provides these households with a guarantee of fuller employment over a long term, even if the earnings per unit of labour time is lower compared to daily wage workers.

Bhagiya System: Key Features and Relationships

Our study reveals that close to 56% of the respondents have been engaged in sharecropping for four years or less, and 17% for over 10 years. Of the latter group, 23% continue to work in the farms they started at, indicating the existence of a patron-client relationship between them and the landowners. Overall, 40% of the workers have been working in their current farm for less than two years. The average length of a migration cycle is seven months (ranging from 45 days to two years). Analysis of 24 dispute records randomly picked up from the 35k archives shows that a bhagiya unit typically manages landholdings of average size varying from 0.4 acres (vegetables) to two acres (cotton) to four acres (wheat). They usually move to the farm along with their family. A typical sharecropper unit in the sample

consists of a family of two or three adults, and one or two children. But there are also cases where groups of workers either on their own or attached to family units work for a share of the crop. Such groups usually are larger than that of a family unit.

The survey also revealed that sharecropping has become an intergenerational survival strategy for many of the households. Two-thirds of the migrant sharecroppers in the sample said that someone from their families (fathers or brothers) did sharecropping before them. In the case of 56% of the respondents, some other family member is currently working as sharecroppers, too.

Sharing of Produce: Nature of Contracts

Under the bhagiya system, all expenditure related to seed, fertiliser, electricity, land and water are borne by the farmer, while the sharecropper bears all labour costs, including the cost of additional casual workers employed. The farmer provides for daily subsistence of the sharecroppers in the form of periodic advances. The bhagiya also takes a cash advance from the farmer to pay additional workers. All these advances are adjusted against the share due to the sharecropper. There is an understanding that a bhagiya is granted leave to attend social functions back in the village, and cash support in times of an emergency.

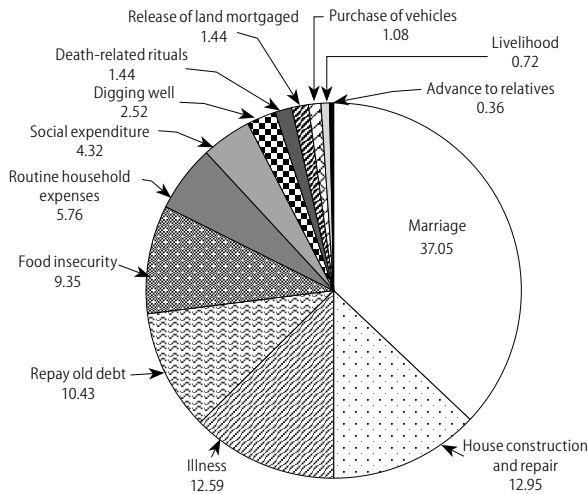
The share contracts are informal, unwritten, and legally non-enforceable.³ The contract terms were found largely uniform across crops and villages. Irrespective of the crop, 86% of the bhagiyas receive one-fifth of the produce as their share. In nine cases, the share was reported as one-sixth. The share is usually paid as cash in the kharif season and as foodgrains (mainly wheat) in the rabi season.

It is clear that the bhagiya arrangement helps farmers externalise labour costs, which forms bulk of the operational cost of farming. For instance, in the case of cotton, a highly labour-intensive crop, labour accounts for about 37% of the total costs and 50% of operational costs as per the available estimates for 2016 (Table 3). Casual labour alone constitutes 22% of total cost of

Table 3: Cost of Cultivation of Cotton in Gujarat (2016)

Cost Items	Amount (₹)	Percentage (%)
Fixed costs	17,775.46	24.95
Depreciation on implements and farm building	250.01	0.35
Interest on fixed capital	4,093.77	5.75
Land revenue, taxes, and cesses	15.52	0.02
Rent paid for leased-in land	1,343.35	1.89
Rental value of owned land	12,072.81	16.94
Operational costs	53,472.88	75.05
Animal labour (own)	572.84	0.80
Animal labour (hired)	1,154.14	1.62
Fertiliser	5,137.41	7.21
Manure	2,681.63	3.76
Human labour (attached)	142.35	0.20
Human labour (casual)	15,488.84	21.74
Human Labour (family)	11,059.91	15.52
Insecticides	3,428.2	4.81
Interest on working capital	1,285.24	1.80
Irrigation charges	3,367.76	4.73
Machine labour (hired)	4,135.07	5.80
Machine labour (casual)	1,626.29	2.28
Seed	3,365.75	4.72
Total costs (fixed + operational)	71,248.34	100

Source: CEIC Data, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/india/cost-of-cultivation-non-foodgrains-fibres-cotton-gujarat/cost-of-cultivation-fibres-cotton-gujarat-operating-cost-irrigation-charges>.

Figure 1: Reasons for Taking Advance by Sharecroppers

Source: Field Survey.

cultivation (29% of operational costs). Under the bhagiya system, this cost is entirely borne by the sharecropper, who in the best case receives 20% of the produce as his share.⁴

It needs to be noted that crop-sharing contracts can exist at multiple levels. The bhagiya could well be working for a farmer, who in turn is a tenant/sharecropper for another large farmer. In one such case that we documented, the bhagiya was given one-sixth of the produce, while the crop-sharing farmer's share in the produce was one-fifth.

Dearth and Debt

As mentioned earlier, farmers usually offer lump sum amounts as advance to the bhagiyas before the contract commences. About two-thirds of the respondents cited the system of cash advance (*upaad*) as the reason for why they decided to take up sharecropping. Interestingly, more than 90% of the respondents said that given a choice they preferred to work for daily wages. Women especially consider daily wage work as more dignified and remunerative. However, the transaction cost associated with wage work (resulting mainly from high cost of transportation) is very high. About 15% of the respondents took to sharecropping to avoid such high transaction costs.

The peculiar cultural practices and rituals of tribal population contribute significantly to the need for extra financial resources for all households. Among Adivasis in western India, marriages are considered complete only when the groom's family pays a bride price to the bride's family. Every marriage spawns at least one loan. If the girl decides to break the marriage and return to her natal family, the bride price must be returned. The analysis of 278 advances taken over four cycles of sharecropping reveals that 72% of the bhagiyas have taken an advance ranging from ₹3,000 to ₹1,00,000 at least once. In 37% of the cases marriage either of oneself or someone in the close/extended family was the reason to take an advance (Figure 1). Lump sum cash is also required at regular intervals to meet routine (food, for instance) and emergency (like illness) needs. The advance amount usually depends on the number of working hands the sharecropper promises to bring along.

About two-thirds of the respondents said that conflicts do arise in their relationship with farmers. Such conflicts could erupt on occasions when the bhagiya asks for a maintenance advance or weekly grocery, demands leave, or when the accounts are finally being settled. Arbitrariness in calculating workdays of bhagiyas, refusal to account for extra labour (in the case of crops still standing or work done to care for animals) put in by them, and non-settlement of expenditure incurred by bhagiyas on fodder and fertiliser were also reported as reasons for conflicts between farmers and sharecroppers.

After accounting for the advance taken, cost of subsistence and the cost of extra labour hired, the sharecroppers often end up returning home with very little cash income. The records of disputes between the bhagiyas and farmers maintained by 3SK demonstrate this. In one of the 24 cases we examined, a farmer refused to extend maintenance advance to a bhagiya household consisting of a husband and wife, who were sharecroppers on his farm from November 2016 to August 2017. During the term, the bhagiyas had availed an advance of ₹89,000. The farmer refused to give any subsistence support beyond August and wanted to terminate the contract, presumably estimating that he had already extracted labour worth the advances extended till then. With 3SK's intermediation, the farmer was made to calculate the total wages due, which came to ₹90,600. After accounting for all advances, the sharecropping family ended the contract with a mere ₹1,600 as wage arrears. Under such circumstances, the tribal households have no other option but to enter another cycle of sharecropping to sustain their livelihoods. Eventually, they get trapped in a cycle of "dearth and debt," to borrow the expression used by David Hardiman (1996) which described the perpetual indebtedness of peasants in colonial western India.

The bhagiyas kept referring to "trust" (*vishwas*) as the foundation of their relationship with farmers. Apparently, close to 80% of the bhagiyas do not keep any accounts because of this trust. The accounts are maintained by the farmers. Two-thirds of the sharecroppers do not even get to see the accounts during the contract season. Only 2% said that they check the accounts themselves, but just about once. In fact, 44% of the bhagiyas from our sample had a *hisab* (accounting) diary provided by the 3SK. However, only about 16% of them have used it. The majority do not have any clue as to the market prices of what they produce. On being asked how one ensures that the accounts are kept properly, and that the farmers do not cheat them on sales and market proceeds, most just reiterated their "trust" in the farmers. They are generally satisfied with seeing the bills of transactions. That such perceived trust is in fact an expression of the powerlessness of the sharecroppers is evident from the response of one of the bhagiyas: "There is no use keeping any accounts. The farmer doesn't honour it." As van der Toorn et al (2015: 2) argue, "the subjective experience of powerlessness, which often accompanies the objective state of disadvantage, fosters system justification in that it motivates individuals to perceive the system and its representatives as relatively legitimate."

Bhagiya system is particularly burdensome for women. They perform many tasks like taking care of animals (cutting fodder, clearing of cow dung), and helping with farm work and domestic work at the farmer's house, apart from carrying out their

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own regular domestic chores. These are considered residual tasks and not remunerated properly. Also, in the farms they live in constant fear of *maar peet* (physical abuse) and *chhed chaad* (harassment) from the men at home and outside. Without any health support, pregnancy and childbirth often turn into harrowing events for them financially and emotionally.

Women were candid in acknowledging that extravagant expenditure on social ceremonies and alcoholism are the major reasons for the financial stress of tribal households. They said that these habits have ruined the fabric of families, community, and work relationships. Not only has the habit drained the already meagre resources of a lot of households, but it has also resulted in violence, especially violence against women, and sometimes, litigation and expensive social sanctions.

Conclusions and Policy Direction

Bardhan and Rudra (1980a) have noted the tendency in institutions like sharecropping to adapt to the needs of increasing production and profit by both landowning farmers and tenants, as well as the introduction of new inputs, new crops, and new irrigation devices. The bhagiya system seems to have evolved as an institutional arrangement to sustain the labour-intensive farming economy of north Gujarat faced with shortage of local labour. The limited livelihood choices of tribal households depress the reservation wage level of family labour and reduce them into a flexible and compliant workforce facing unfair employment practices.⁵ Following Sen (1981) it may even be argued that the bhagiya arrangement has evolved as an institutional innovation to seize economic gains from the cheap family labour of poor tribal peasants and landless workers.

As described in the paper, the core characteristics of the bhagiya arrangement do not conform fully to typical crop-sharing leasehold that is discussed in the literature or recognised in the official data systems like the National Sample Surveys. Sharecropping is defined in these surveys as an arrangement wherein the owner of land receives a stipulated share of the produce without participating, directly managing, or organising agricultural operations. However, under the bhagiya system, the landowner or farmer actively participates in making all decisions regarding farm operations, apart from bearing all input costs other than labour. The tribal migrant sharecropper is responsible only for the labour component, including hired labour. Bhagiya system is also different from other known arrangements like permanent labour contract (Otsuka et al 1992) where a worker is employed typically for a year or a cropping season for various farm tasks (often including household chores) and is remunerated by share of output. It does not fit the NSSO category of “permanent attached farm worker” defined as someone employed continuously in a landholding under a contract that binds the person to undertake various agricultural operations (from preparation of soil to storing of grains) during a given season (National Sample Survey Office 2006, 2015). That the bhagiya puts in own labour valued at less than the minimum wage rate and pays a substantial rent in the form of labour cost makes the arrangement an intermediate form between sharecropping and agricultural labour and exacerbates the underlying exploitation.

What are the key policy lessons from this study? To begin with, it is evident that the crop-sharing arrangement is grossly unfair to the bhagiyas. The shares of each season and crop may be negotiated based on a detailed estimation of cost of non-labour inputs per unit of land, who bears the cost of each input, and cost of family/hired/attached labour per unit of land. While a bhagiya can be made responsible for a mutually agreed quantum of labour input of theirs and their family, the cost of extra workers hired during harvest must be shared equally between the farmer and the sharecropper. Such measures would work more effectively than promoting formal and written contracts. The impact of formalisation at best is moderate and at worst, it is prone to manipulation by the powerful. The bhagiyas also seem to prefer a fluid contract system as it gives them some freedom to switch loyalties in the case of a dispute or when promise of a larger cash advance comes up.

The tribal livelihood system of the 18th and 19th centuries was dominated by usury, though usurers were largely seen as the benefactors of tribal societies by the colonial masters. David Hardiman (1996) who studied the interactions among peasants, moneylenders and colonial administrators in western India described debt as the cruellest feature of peasant lives. It is no coincidence that the Constitution in its Fifth Schedule (Part V, Article 244 [1]) provided for regulation of moneylending business in scheduled tribal areas. Despite the affirmative policy announcements made through successive five-year plans, the tribal regions remain largely excluded from the financial services landscape. Mainstream policy analysis attributes this to the peculiar structural bottlenecks of these regions, like, for instance, their location closer to hilly and forest areas, their lower population density and low land productivity (RBI 2006). All these factors, they argue, increases transaction costs of service delivery. It is high time that institutional credit facilities in such regions are reimagined to suit their typical priorities and constraints.

No institutional mechanism exists as of now to address the problems faced by bhagiyas, while farmers are well organised and enjoy considerable political and economic clout. The ability of bhagiyas to bargain is severely constrained by their very low social and economic capital, as also by their status as migrants. Hence, they need an intermediary to speak on their behalf. The 3SK at Khedbrahma is a good model in this respect. It registers complaints of migrant workers and negotiates solutions with farmers. Its other activities include legal education to agricultural labourers, including bhagiyas, formation of farmers' committees or *khedut mandalis*, awareness campaigns on labour rights (*Shramik Jagrookta Abhiyan*), labour sourcing and placement services, and training and placement of young migrant workers (Tiwarly 2013). These efforts have compelled farmers to properly account for the labour of sharecroppers and compensate them fairly at minimum wage rates. Such centres may be established in other parts of the state.

Bhagiya workers need to be provided with adequate social security at the place of their work, which can reduce their dependence on routine cash advances from farmers. Women and children bear a disproportionate burden of the vulnerability because of their subordinate status and powerlessness within the patriarchal

social order. Apart from access to food, basic health support, and educational support, they must be assured freedom from violence.

It is a matter of great concern that even the youth have taken recourse to sharecropping as a means of livelihood. In the study sample, one fifth of the respondents were in the age group of 20–25 years. In all likelihood, they will remain trapped in the system as the needs of their families increase with time. They need to be trained for alternative employment opportunities.

Tribal development efforts in India have a long history. The notification of certain communities as Scheduled Tribes (and Scheduled Castes) by the Constitution was an acknowledgement of their suffering from extreme social, educational, and economic backwardness due to social practices and constraints like lack of infrastructure facilities and geographical isolation. That they

require extraordinary support for transformation in line with the rest of the economy was evident. Though many policies and programmes have been introduced for tribal development, some of the critical livelihood issues (relating to land and natural resources, for instance) have not been pursued well enough. As a result, tribal regions in western India have witnessed an increase in their dependence on migration for income security (Aravali 2004; Nair and Shankar 2014). There is an urgent need to augment investment towards development and regeneration of tribal economies to protect households from entering exploitative labour arrangements like the bhagiya system. At the same time, efforts must continue to mobilise and collectivise them and build their capacities to resist exploitation and stake their claims in the national resources for securing decent lives and livelihoods.

NOTES

- 1 Interestingly, Iyer (2002) describes an informal tenancy system prevalent in Junagadh in the late 1990s known locally as *sathi* system. *Sathi* previously were sub-tenants of Patel tenants who used to receive payments in cash annually. The farmer looked after their subsistence needs. Land was actually cultivated by the *sathi*, who was available for work round the clock in non-monsoon months. The tenant bore all costs relating to production such as seed, fertiliser, pesticides, and water. They usually belonged to the same caste as the tenant.
- 2 Kumar et al (2017) point out that farmers who are involved in non-agricultural professions and who are old find it easy to manage farms with sharecropping workers.
- 3 However, the farmers in the region have been using a written contract called *Naukar-nama*, the terms of which are heavily tilted against the interests of agricultural workers. It considers the worker as liable for losses resulting from delay in any farm operations as also losses due to accidents met on the farm. It also says that in case the worker takes leave, he would have to arrange for a substitute and pay his wages (Aajeevika Bureau, nd).
- 4 The likely positive relationship between the incidence of share tenancy and degree of labour intensity was noted by Bhaduri (1983).
- 5 Temporary migrant worker programmes have been used by high income countries with thriving capitalist agriculture to aid accumulation. For instance, Preibisch (2010: 406) points out that in Canada such “programmes have undergone changes that allow employers to exert significantly greater control over the social composition of their workforce in ways that they perceive as beneficial to production.”

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