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‘Ideal-types’ and the Diversity of Commerce: Landlords and Labourers in Rural Punjab

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Augmenting Small Farmers' Income through Rural Nonfarm Sector: Role of Information and Credit Institutions

Muhammad Ali Jan

Introduction: Historical theory and theoretical history in the study of rural labour

Nationalist and neo-marxist scholars have both assumed that the integration of colonial India into the global economy was an even process that produced either of these two ideal-types; for the Neo-Marxists and world system theorists, the diversity of labour relations can simply be read from the world capitalist system producing the 'development of underdevelopment' (Frank, 1969). On the other hand, for the 'semi-feudal' school all efforts at agrarian dynamism were doomed to fail simply because the colonial state forged a reactionary alliance with feudal and usurious elements that led to the reproduction of these backward forms and precluded any agricultural growth (Bhaduri, 1983).

Against such abstractions, this paper argues that the specific forms of labour relations cannot simply be read off from a priori labels such as 'semi-feudalism' and 'global capitalism'; through a historical reading of the evolution of labour relations in Canal Colonies of present day Pakistani Punjabi as well as insights from field studies, it aims to show how the specific forms of labour relations that came to dominate these areas were a product of the imperatives of commercialization and state policy, but also arose from the specific ways in which cultivators and labourers reacted to their environments. The strategies of accumulation of the cultivators and the strategies of survival of tenants and labour alongside the struggles between them are crucial in understanding the way economic rationality is understood. In fact, the very constitution of the 'labour market' within which choices are made did not simply exist 'out there' as an exogenous variable to borrow from the language of economics: they are socially constituted and mediated through everyday conflicts and negotiations between social groups where identities and access to resources play an important part and through contestations over the very definition of the acceptable and unacceptable (Bhattacharya, 2014: 16).

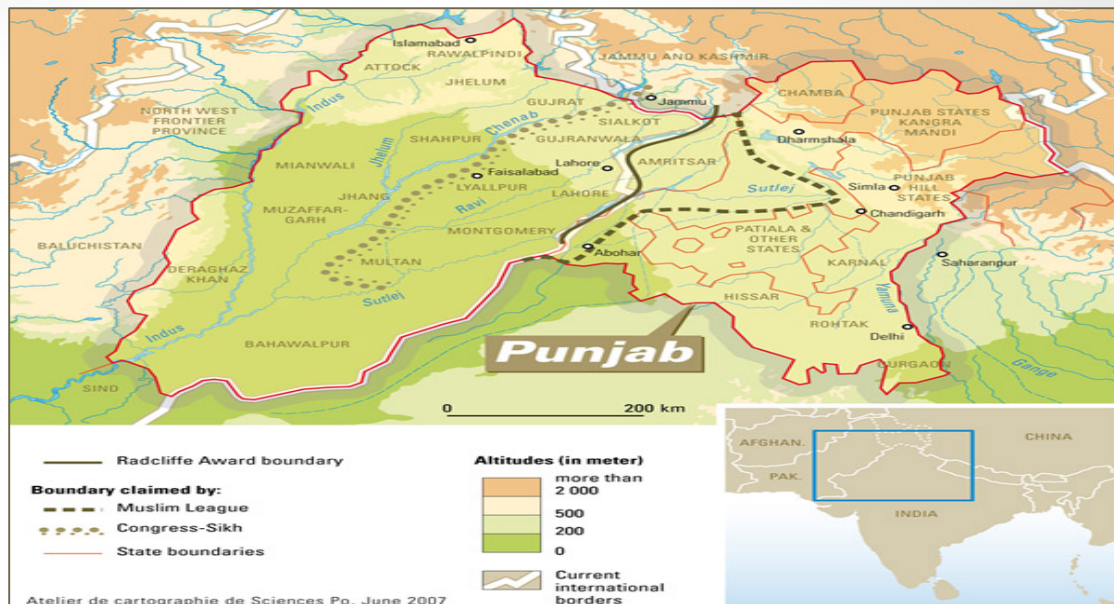
In doing so, we hope to highlight how commercial and even capitalist agriculture is compatible with a range of seemingly backward labour arrangements whose social and institutional forms need to be studied in their specificities and it is these contextualized and historical understandings rather than some abstract 'global' and 'local' processes that better explain the forms of rural labour relations in Pakistani Punjab. Finally, how contrary to certain orthodox Marxist ideas of 'forms' of labour relations as masks behind which 'real' relations are hidden, the

forms of labour relations are constitutive of the content themselves, in other words, it was the very form of share-cropping in our field site which elicited the specific kinds of reactions from landlords once certain institutional and political conditions arose. In other words, while we do understand share-cropping in our field area to be a form of labour control, the differences between this and other forms such as waged and bonded, are significant.

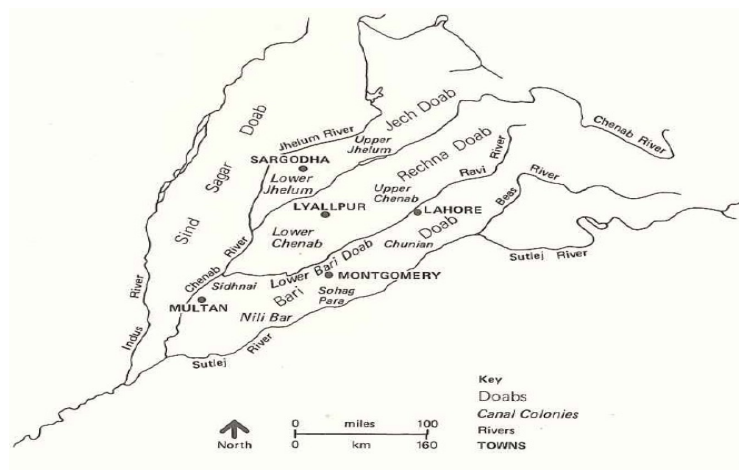
In the first part we argue that in our area of large landownership, share-cropping was a form of labour organization arising out of the pressures of rising labour demand and supervision that canal irrigation unleashed. We also examine the ways in which the system was undermined dramatically where new technology definitely played a part, although the centrality of political struggle between tenants and landlords is highlighted. The paper then briefly examines how important debt and credit are to the workings of the rural labour market in our field area and how these informal relations and not the formal laws of the state, define how livelihoods are created, constrained and contested in contemporary Pakistani Punjab.

Caste, Custom and Canals: Land ownership and agricultural labour in the Canal Colonies

When the British conquered Punjab in 1849, it was the last province to be annexed by the Company before the 1857 revolt brought it under the direct rule of the Raj. The province that was conquered included present day Indian Punjab as well as parts of the North West Frontier Province (now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) (map 1). In the western part of the Punjab, the *bars* (pastoral highlands) beyond the Sutlej were a vast scrubland stretching all the way to Multan in the South West (map 2). They had an arid climate and apart from a few places of settled agriculture near river banks, were largely inhabited by nomadic pastoralists who traversed the landscape with their camels and herds, a scenario that was an anathema to the colonial state's idea of 'order' and 'progress'. By the 1880's, these vast scrublands were taken over, reclassified as *rakh* (wasteland), mapped, surveyed and bounded (Bhattacharya, 2012: 1)



Map 2 –Canal Colonies



The high-minded ideologies of order and progress co-existed with more mundane needs such as that of finding new raw material and food grain markets for their industries, enlarging the revenue base and decreasing the demographic pressure on land in the districts of Eastern Punjab. These considerations combined in the construction of 9 canal colonies between 1886 and 1930 in the largely pastoral areas opening 10 million acres of irrigated land for cultivation and comprising the largest canal system in the world at the time (Fox, 1985: 53). Over these huge new tracts, thousands of families were settled from the Eastern wing of the province, accompanied by their artisanal servants, pejoratively called ‘menials’ by the British and *kamins* by the *zamindars* (landowners). By the early 1930s the population of the canal colonies had begun to overtake that of the older settled districts and today comprise the most densely populated parts of Pakistani Punjab (Heitzman, 2008).

As scholars have shown, the colonists aimed to delicately balance the logic of commercialization and revenue generation with that of maintaining hierarchy and

social order (Akhtar, 2006: 483). The latter could best be guaranteed in their view, if the rationalized bureaucratic authority of the colonial state rested on cultural foundations that were 'indigenous' to local society, especially in the wake of the 1857 revolt. The legitimate basis for bureaucratic authority was to be found in the affective bonds of *biraderi* (kinship/tribe) solidarity which colonial officials believed was the defining feature of Punjabi society. The term literally means 'brotherhood' denoting the principle of common descent among a group of people and while this may be possible to trace for a small group living in a locality, it is impossible to track for a larger entity such as for example, the *jats* and their various *goths* (sub-*biraderis*) (Ahmad, 1972). Therefore, in practice *biraderi* relations often manifested in an expectation of reciprocal obligations (often unequal) between members who notionally consider themselves to be hailing from a common descendent.

What mattered for the British was less the complexity and fluidity of actual *biraderi* relations but their conversion into rational legal categories as a means of stabilizing rural society (Gilmartin, 1988: 20-21). Punjab was considered different from Bengal, where 'Hindu Law' set out in upper-caste texts was to be the defining feature of the legal order. Instead, it was argued that the various *biraderis* of rural Punjab were governed by 'customary law', the central tenet of which was the preservation of the agnatic brotherhood through inheritance of land within the 'patrilineal' family (Nelson, 2011; 34). It was only through the codification and enforcement of 'tribal' customary law aimed at preserving the coparcenary body of village proprietors that the British could best guarantee their alien rule, as C.L Tupper, one of the chief architects behind the codification, explained in the following words:

"It is through the tribe and clan that Government can gain its firmest hold on the inclinations and motives of the people. The people can be led by their own leaders.

It is much easier for a foreign Government to deal with organized bodies of men, through

those who can be trusted on both sides, than with miscellaneous hordes of individuals" (1881; 17)

These 'leaders' were to be identified among the various agricultural 'clans' and quite often created where they previously did not exist. The latter was especially the case in the canal colonies that were previously inhabited mostly by pastoralists with social relations different from the agriculturalists of central Punjab. A duality was thereby created within the legal regime where on the one hand the state recognized individual property rights based on payment of revenue through the law of contracts, while on the other hand, in crucial matters such as land inheritance, law was to follow the 'custom' of preserving the property of the patrilineal family (Gilmartin, 2003; 5061).

Colonial ethnography and the tenets of British political economy had identified two distinct 'groups' of cultivators with different origins, castes and approaches to farming; one were the self-cultivating (*Khudkasht*) peasantry whom the British considered the 'finest cultivators in Punjab' (Ibbeston, 1916: 102). These were 'family farmers' from the Eastern part of the province belonging to the 'agricultural castes' primarily the *Jats, Arains, Kumbahs, Sainis* and *Gujjars* (Chaudhuri, 2008: 362). On the other hand, the British also recognized the existence of a stratum separate from the self-cultivating peasantry who were the rentier, absentee landlords belonging to the upper-caste aristocratic gentry (Major, 1996).

Furthermore, the prism of 'community' coloured the settlement as these grantees were to be selected from the rich 'agricultural' castes and not the non-landed *biraderis*. British agrarian policy further solidified this structure through the passing of a landmark paternalistic legislation, the Land Alienation Act of 1900 that prevented cultivators from alienating their land or mortgaging it for extended periods, except to other cultivators. The Act solidified the interests of the diverse kinds of landowners existing within the vast expanses of the Punjab (primarily the gentry and the peasant grantees) into a reasonably coherent 'agricultural' interest organized around the legally sanctioned identity of 'agricultural castes' against which the 'non-agricultural castes' were pitted including both the upper-caste urban mercantile groups as well as the lower caste laborers (Ali, 2002)

Thus, the practice of tying agricultural property with certain 'castes'/'tribes' through customary law and its culmination in the Land Alienation Act was of immense significance for the structure of rural labour markets for it turned land into a hereditary property that could only be transferred to the next of kin within the patrilineal family of kinship groups that the law identified as 'agrarian castes', thereby completely denying ownership rights to at least 3 sets of groups; i) women who had no customary shares in land according to colonial understandings; ii) a majority (though not all) pastoralists inhabiting Western Punjab before the construction of the canal colonies; iii) 'non-landed' labouring (*Kamin*) service castes, many of whom made contributions to production as labourers, service providers and tenants (Ali, 1988: 44) Thus, even with the differences among the landowners, the British practice of reifying landownership through *biraderi* identity and making this the primary criteria for obtaining land grants excluded the entire non-landed poor and solidified further their status as labourers earning their living through a variety of arrangements that we shall explore in the next section.

Global Markets and Local Imperatives: Share-cropping in the land of the peasant?

Despite the bureaucratic stereo-type of the Punjab as the land of the 'peasant-proprietors' the situation in the canal colonies seemed to be moving in exactly the opposite direction. By the early 1920s, the proportion of total land cultivated under tenancy agreements of various kinds had exceeded more than 50% in Lyallpur, reaching up to 80% in the case of Montgomery (**Table 1**). It seemed that

the land of the peasant was transforming into what the British feared the most, an area of rack-renting landlords. The dominance of tenancy in Western Punjab, mostly under share-cropping (*batai*) arrangements has prompted nationalist historians notably Mridula Mukherjee to declare that the Punjab remained 'semi-feudal' during the British time period, experiencing agricultural stagnation in line with the rest of India (Mukherjee, 2005: 177). How credible is this claim? Did the canal colonies experience agricultural commercialization and if so, of what kind? What form did share-tenancy take in the canal colonies and was this connected intrinsically to commercial agriculture? Finally, what role did caste hierarchies play in structuring the labour relations in this part of Punjab?

Table 1 – Total area under tenancy in different districts of Punjab (1922-32)

District	Area as % of total as cultivated under tenants
Jullunder	31
Hoshiarpur	26
Hissar	36
Sialkot	35
Lyallpur	55
Montgomery	83

(Source: Punjab land revenue Administration report quoted in Agnihotri, 1987: 346)

Mukherjee's argument rests on 4 claims that characterize the agriculture of Punjab as semi-feudal and lacking in any dynamism; i) a large amount of land was cultivated on share-cropping basis and although she agrees that this by itself does not mean pre-capitalist social relations, there was no waged labour on an appreciable scale; ii) most of the rent was appropriated as rent in kind and not as cash rent, the assumption being that only the latter indicates greater commercialization; iii) very high rents could be charged almost at will by the landlords and the tenants had to comply due to a lack of alternative sources of livelihood and finally; iv) as a result of the high rents there was no investment in improved productivity (Mukherjee, 2005: 177-179). Therefore, much like the rest of India, agriculture showed no appreciable growth in Punjab contrary to the claims of the colonial state.

It is important to note that her thesis is heavily informed by the 'semi-feudal' view of Indian agriculture first formulated by nationalist and communist historians and most eloquently articulated in Amit Bhaduri's work (Bhaduri, 1973). However, as a number of scholars have demonstrated, Mukherjee's generalizations do not stand when agricultural data is disaggregated from an all-Punjab level to one between canal irrigated areas and unirrigated ones. Table 2 for example, shows the weightage of output of groups of crops between canal irrigated and unirrigated areas highlighting a far greater amount of land devoted to cash crops on irrigated rather than unirrigated lands, even as the weightage for other crops is similar. Table 3 shows the trend rates in acreage and yields of the main cash crops between irrigated and unirrigated areas which again point to a substantial increase not only in the acreage of cash crops (made possible by the new perennial canals) but also improved yields (especially with the introduction by the Punjab government of new wheat and 'American' cotton varieties). Finally, the Punjab emerged as one of the most export oriented regions in all of India and this was reflected in the very strong correlation of prices with global trends, both in terms of a steep rise due to demand as well as a fall in prices during the great depression (Table 4) prompting one colonial observer to remark 'the price of crops in Punjab depends not on local conditions but on the price in Liverpool' (Calvert, 1936: 12). Therefore, there was substantial dynamism and a turn towards commercial agriculture in the Punjab, even if the benefits of agricultural growth were unevenly distributed.

Table 2 –Weightage of the Output of Groups of Crops

Year	Cash Crops		Minor Crops		Food Grains	
	a	B	A	B	A	B
1907-16	17	8	20	28	83	92
1917-26	21	8	18	28	79	92
1927-36	21	7	17	26	79	93
1937-46	23	8	17	26	77	92

a = irrigated; b = unirrigated (source: Islam, 1997: 68)

Table 3 –Trend Rates in Acreage and Yields in Colonial Punjab

Crops	Acreage				Yield	
	1887-1900		1906-46		1906-46	
	a	B	a	B	a	B
Total	2.4	-3.05	1.39	-0.19	0.8	-.05

Cereals	1.8	-3.66	1.00	-0.21	-	-
					0.01	0.02
Wheat	2.00	-2.23	0.92	-0.09	0.26	0.04
Cotton	4.35	-.2.81	2.88	-.2.57	1.78	0.48
Cash Crops	3.46	-4.64	2.29	-1.62	0.86	0.23

(source: Islam 1997; Pray, 1984)

Year	Wheat	Cotton
1913-14	100	100
1914-17	109	81
1917-23	163	167
1923-30	138	161
1930-35	67.4	72.6
1935-41	82.3	80.5
1941-44	213	134

Table 4 - Harvest Prices of Selected Crops: Punjab (1913–14 to 1943–44)
(Agnihotri;)

The high prices of major agricultural crops and the extensive cultivation made possible by the canal system led to a substantial increase in the demand for labour (Fox, 1985: 65) coinciding with and accelerating the loosening of traditional *seypidari* (a form of *jajmani*) relations in the Eastern part of the province leading to the migration of several *kamin* labouring households to the canal colonies in search of work (Chaudhuri, 2008: 363). Moreover, not only did canal irrigation make double-cropping possible but the colony districts typically had a much greater proportion of cash crops (primarily cotton, which occupied about 25% in the canal colonies as against the provincial average of 10%) that were more labour-intensive, thereby increasing the number of farm hands required, particularly at harvest time (Bhattacharya, 1985).

Despite the existence of these diversities it is nonetheless true that the canal colonies had a very high incidence of share-cropping with a large mass of tenants divided into 2 main types; 1) Occupancy tenants with security of tenure through inheritance (*Maurusi Muzara*) and; 2) tenants-at-will lacking tenurial security (*ghair-maurusi muzara*). By the 1930s their numbers in the Montgomery colony had reached close to 80%, with an overwhelming majority being tenants-at-will and a majority of these paying rent in kind rather than cash. *Why did the increased demand for labour not result in a greater incidence of wage-labour instead of share-cropping? How did the intersection of a globalized, export-oriented and*

labour intensive commercial agriculture lead to the dominance of a form of cultivation often considered backward from the point of view of scholars? Clearly, integration into the global capitalist system cannot by itself explain the incidence of share-cropping which has to be located in the interstices of the local environment and the decisions made by landowners and labourers in these contexts.

Here the government's grant policy and the technological constraints were 2 major factors inducing share-cropping; surveys conducted by Calvert under the auspices of the Punjab Board of economic inquiry found that in the colony districts area covered by owners holding 25 acres and above accounted for close to 70% of the total as against the provincial average of 40% (1925: 35). Furthermore, in districts like Montgomery (of which Depalpur was a part) 'gentry' grants of up to 500 acres covered a major part of the settlements. A large concentration of these landholdings in the colonies made self-cultivation (*khudkasht*) based on family labour (or without hired labour on a substantial scale) impossible even as it was widespread on peasant holdings in the Eastern part (Bhattacharya, 1983: 122). Indeed, many holdings were so large that in order to assume operational responsibility it would have been necessary to use labour-reducing implements like tractors which were not widely available at the time. Thus, the size of the grants and the technological constraints precluded both the growth of 'family farming' on a substantial scale as well as of full-scale capitalist farming using hired labour.

At the same time, the increase in the demand for labour as a result of the irrigation coincided with a loosening of *seypidari* ties between *zamindars* and *kamins* in the East and their large scale migration to the West, as discussed above. Reports on Montgomery from at the turn of the century indicate that land was in excess of the amount of labour as a result of which the bargaining position of tenants was much higher than in Lyallpur (Agnihotri, 1987). However, even as their traditional occupations were becoming less remunerative under market pressure, industrial growth was tardy and not enough to pull landless labourers off-farm. In a situation of increasing cultivation, they were bound to participate actively in the lease market for excess land available for share-tenancy agreements. Given these constraints, a more direct form of bonded labour was difficult to enforce since land was abundant and the tenants could migrate to other parts of the colonies. Share-cropping therefore became an ideal arrangement as it reduced the problem of labour demand by tying labour to the land for longer time periods even if some concessions had to be made in terms of produce sharing.

Moreover, the high supervision costs of monitoring waged-labour in the conditions of larger tracts of land also made it difficult to deploy it on a mass scale and by giving him a stake in the cultivation process through a share in the produce, the *bataidari* system overcame the problem of the supervision constraint by inducing the *muzara* to work harder for a larger share (Majid, 1998: 72). Furthermore, the lack of a developed market in indivisible implements,

especialmente los bueyes, también meant que los señores podían alquilar la tierra a los campesinos que podían organizar para tales implementos por su propia cuenta. Finalmente, el arrendamiento era beneficioso para el señor ya que le permitió no solo aprovechar el trabajo del individuo campesino, sino también los recursos y el trabajo de toda su familia. Esto podía también ser utilizado, donde el equilibrio de poder entre señores y campesinos lo permitía, para llevar a cabo servicios personales tales como el drenaje de cursos de agua y el excavado de pozos.

En lugares como Montgomery, una abrumadora mayoría de los campesinos eran campesinos-at-will y la masa de estos pertenecía a *Dalit* y *kamin* grupos. Según Juergensmeyer, su impresionante presencia es destacada en el censo de 1931 que identificó antiguas castas intocables tales como *chamars* y *churas* junto a otras meniales artesanales (*kamin*) castas que comprendían cerca del 70% de la fuerza de trabajo agrícola en las colonias de canales, una mayoría de los cuales trabajaban como arrendatarios (1974: 87).

Así, la difusión del cultivo compartido no solo debe verse como una imposición unilateral de los señores, ya que había algunos beneficios que podrían acumularse a los campesinos de casta baja de este arreglo así. Primero, la perspectiva de seguridad alimentaria que el cultivo compartido bajo un suministro asegurado de agua tenía era claramente una razón importante para grupos que habían trabajado en condiciones precarias. También era la perspectiva de ganar ingresos extra a través de una agricultura más intensiva acompañada por un aumento de precios. Pero había razones extra-económicas así; la más importante siendo que la idea de convertirse en cultivadores compartidos meant una asociación directa con la tierra que confería un cierto grado de honor (*izzat*) que sus ocupaciones anteriores no les otorgaban (Islam, 1997: 143). En este sentido muchos campesinos no simplemente se veían como trabajadores agrícolas sino como propietarios de la tierra. El diseño de los pueblos era tal que permitió una mayor interacción entre diferentes castas en escuelas y lugares de culto y aun si *harijans*, *musallis* y *mazhabis* continuaban viviendo en los alrededores de la ciudad las rigideces de casta probablemente se aflojaron más aquí que en otras partes de Punjab (Bhatia, 1987).

La mayoría de los señores no simplemente buscaban renta sino que tenían un interés mucho más activo en la agricultura, decidiendo la mezcla de cultivos al momento de sembrar y financiando parte de los costos de producción. Esto es notado en encuestas llevadas a cabo por el gobierno de Punjab pero también fue expresado por muchos señores y campesinos durante nuestras entrevistas quienes explicaron cómo el gran señor era a menudo una fuente importante de crédito de producción para los campesinos-at-will, la mayoría de los cuales eran demasiado pobres para asumir todos los costos de producción (GOP, 1948: 84). Finalmente, la preferencia por pagos en especie en lugar de efectivo también era paradójicamente, debido al aumento de precios que la mayor demanda de exportación había inducido en tal situación, que el señor prefería el control sobre una mayor parte de la producción que podía ser vendida a un mayor precio, que una suma fija de efectivo o involucrarse en el tedioso proceso de ajustar la renta en efectivo con los precios de los cultivos.

Sin embargo, en contraste con el análisis funcionalista de la tesis 'semi-feudal' que tiende a asociar el cultivo compartido con subdesarrollo y falta de dinamismo agrario, nuestro análisis ha mostrado cómo la gran expansión del arrendamiento en

the canal colonies was intrinsically connected to a greater commercialization of agriculture but one in which a range of constraints and opportunities made the institution, with all its tensions and contradictions, the most viable labour arrangement.

Whether this arrangement can be called 'capitalist' is a major source of controversy and it is certainly true that a full blown agrarian capitalism based on hired labour and mechanization never developed in colonial Punjab on an appreciable scale. However, as the preceding analysis hopes to have shown, neither can it be considered an expression of 'semi-feudal' backwardness since share-cropping based on rent in kind was an expression of expanded, not reduced commercialization and with demonstrable agricultural growth. It was moreover, in our field area, overwhelmingly a form of labour control of lower caste workers rather than one based on a self-cultivating peasantry using a combination of family and hired labour.

The indigenous roots of labour market liberalization: class and technology in Rural Punjab

Depalpur, the field site for the paper is the name of a *tehsil* (sub-district) in district Okara as well as the town headquarters for the *tehsil* (see map 3).¹ The town is located approximately 150 km South-West of the provincial capital Lahore within the canal colony districts. Depalpur was part of the Montgomery district till 1982 when it became a *tehsil* of the newly created Okara district. When the British took over the province Depalpur had already been a well-developed town and military outpost both in the Mughal and Sikh kingdom with a substantial presence of upper-caste Muslim landlords in the surrounding countryside (Vandal. 1996: 85). As argued earlier, the British policy of stabilization gained the upper hand here as the landed gentry was strengthened further through land grants by the colonial state. Furthermore, the area became a central horse-breeding ground with large grants given to members of the 'martial castes' for this purpose (Ali, 1988: chapter 4). As a result of state policy land became concentrated in the hands of Muslim upper-caste aristocracy belonging mostly to the *Syed* and *Rajput* clans. By the 1930s the overwhelming majority of their lands (around 90%) were cultivated by *Musalli* (Muslim Dalit) tenants on a share-cropping basis and this remained more or less constant till beginning of the 1960s (Calvert, 1936: 37).

Yet, by the time of the 1980 census the area cultivated on share-tenancy on these estate farms (100 acres and more) had declined to less than 10%, with the tenants being replaced by a combination of permanent and casual seasonal labour (Zaidi, 2008: 45). Today, the proportion of land cultivated on *batai* has become negligible and cultivation on large farms is done primarily by casual labour organized through sub-contractors called *thekedars* many of whom hail from former *musalli* tenant households. How did a system that dominated agriculture for close to half a century end so dramatically? The answer once again lies in a combination of state policy towards agriculture that created an incentive towards self-cultivation,

¹ For a basic understanding of the administrative divisions in Pakistan see (Hasan & Raza, 2013: Chapter 1)

accompanied by technological change that made it feasible. However, this is only part of the story as the political struggle between tenants and landlords that these forces unleashed explains why the trend towards tenant eviction became more pronounced than the imperatives of profit alone would have pushed it. Indeed, in some ways share-cropping could have been more profitable for capitalist landlords but was nonetheless not pursued.

Most scholars agree that agriculture underwent a long period of stagnation from the mid-1940s onwards and despite a brief period of commodity price boom in the wake of the Korean War crisis in the early 1950s, agricultural growth remained below the rate of population growth till the end of the decade (Mccartney, 2011: 87). This was not only because the land frontier in the canal colonies had closed down and with it the scope for extensive cultivation, but because state policy was geared towards deliberately worsening the terms of trade for agriculture in order to direct it towards industrial growth (Zaidi, 2008: Chapter 2). From the late 1950s the government actively subsidized the proliferation of private tube-well technology as a precursor to the Green Revolution package, thereby easing considerably the by now burdened canal system by shifting the most dynamic cultivation towards ground water technology (Nazir, 1991: 54).

The 'Green Revolution' package of fertilizers and high-yield variety (HYV) seeds may be considered a key moment in the reconfiguration of rural labour relations in the Punjab in general and in Depalpur in particular. First, being an area with a considerable supply of ground water, the new tube well technology was ideally suited to the district and was thus taken up enthusiastically by the landed elite, especially since the fertilizer and HYV package worked best with an assured supply of water. Second, the new technology was heavily subsidized by the state which made it even more attractive; third, the government provided a support price mechanism for crops in which HYV seeds were introduced, mainly cotton, wheat and rice. This policy package greatly increased the profitability of agriculture in the early 1960s creating an incentive for landlords to assert greater control over the cultivation process which could best be achieved through resumption of land from former sharecroppers (Hussain, 1982: 172).

Although we demonstrated in the previous section how far large landowners controlled the production process in the case of share-cropping arrangements through the crop-mix as well as cost-sharing, it is nonetheless true that the *batai* system still involved, by its very definition, a division of the produce between the consenting parties. This was useful for landlords in the previous situation of stagnant yields where they could still gain through a fixed rent, but once the profitability of agriculture soared in the early 1960s, the incentive for sharing part of this gain with their tenants declined concomitantly. Thus, once profitability increased the large landowners began to resume a greater amount of land from their sharecroppers for self-cultivation using waged labour.

But there was no linear path from the introduction of tractors and the widespread displacement of tenants that occurred across the Punjabi landscape. In fact, our interviews with many large landlords revealed that the tenancy arrangement was

highly profitable since supervision costs were lower and with a 50-50 or 60-40 share settlement, they gained access to the unremunerated labour of the entire household (including women and children) whereas all hired labour had to be paid. Indeed, the profitability of share-tenancy in Sindh has meant that owner-cultivation has only gradually replaced the former and in some cases of very profitable agriculture, it has even increased (Majid, 1998: 72). Indeed, even almost a decade after the introduction of the new technology, only farmers in the 50-100 acres category had replaced most of their tenants with tractors and hired waged labourers, while the larger landlords in Depalpur retained a majority of their tenants as an assured supply of labour to cope with the seasonal peaks induced by the new technology (Alavi, 1976: 341). Yet, by the time of the 1980 census almost 80% of them had been evicted. Why did Punjab not take the more cautious path towards the replacement of share-cropping? What happened in the decade between the late 60s and early 80s that made the displacement of tenants so very dramatic in the canal colonies?

The answer lies not in the realm of economics but of politics for this period coincided with the increase in demands by poorer sections of society culminating in the populist government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Even more dramatic was the announcement by the government of a set of major Tenancy Reform Acts accompanied by the plans for a thorough-going land reform which threatened to effectively end large landownership, at least according to the rhetoric of the government (Herring, 1983: 82). While the actual amount of land reform did little to change the agrarian structure, the threat of tenant militancy (incidents of *qabzas* (takeovers) and squatting were widespread) and the 'shock' of the 1970 election results sprung the rural elite into action and prompted their counter-offensive (Gotsch, 1976: 368). Between 1971 and 1977 'aided by the bureaucracy and the police, this counter-offensive produced a spate of tenant ejections' with a number of violent conflicts between contending parties, even if one was overwhelmingly stronger. What helped the cause of the landlords was the huge subsidy given to the import of tractors by the government, which made them one of the cheapest capital imports in a country where capital was scarce. As Jones notes, the PPP's (Bhutto's party) rural organization was unable to stem what he calls the 'quiet counter-revolution in the countryside' (Jones, 2003: 429).

Thus, even as a purely economic rationality of costs and profits would have elicited a response of retaining a significant chunk of share-croppers on the land and introducing new technology and perhaps shifting to a cash rent system for maximizing overall surplus, landlords chose to push their lower caste tenants off the land in order to subvert their claims on the property ownership even as it meant a great disruption and even outright loss of production and profits in the short-run. In other words, the logic of short-term profit was trumped by the imperatives of long-term preservation of their economic and political power.

Therefore, the contest over the form of labour turned out not to be a trivial matter but constitutive of the content itself. In other words, it is because of the ambiguities of the ownership status of the share-cropper vis-à-vis the land that

they were able to make claims for better rates of adjustment of rent as well as of tenure security and even landownership and it was this ambiguity that led to the counter-offensive by the landlords to evict them which may simply not have happened with different labour arrangements such as hired-labour for example.

Our case is similar Juan Martinez-Alier study of the large rural estates (or *Latifundias*) of Andalusia in Southern Spain where forms of labour use showed great flexibility between share-cropping to hired labour and back, with no linear pattern (Martinez-Alier, 1971: Chapter 7). In Southern Spain, despite a surplus of labour in which all landlords agreed they could give land out on share-cropping for extra profits, they refused to do so. This was because tenancy was associated with demands for redistribution of estates and attacks against rentiers and absentee landowners especially in the wake of civil war and since that time landowners had been wary of giving land out on share-cropping. So in making their economic decisions they were willing to forgo the potential benefits of profits because earlier struggles had attached to share-cropping a sense of threat to their symbolic and social power which were constitutive of the forms that the labour market took.

Thus, it was the contradictions around surplus appropriation and property relations unleashed by the new technology which generated sufficient social tensions in the Punjabi countryside and led to a largely successful counter-offensive by the landed elite to substitute erstwhile tenants with waged-labour. The eviction of tenants greatly enhanced the pool of casual labour that could be employed both on and off-farm; it was these indigenous mechanisms and not simply the pressures of 'neoliberal globalization' that ushered in the liberalization of rural labour markets through a glut of evicted tenants from lower caste backgrounds becoming waged-labourers when we began our research.

Labour Control in a 'liberalized market'

At the time of our field research, large rural estates (the largest we encountered was up to 700 acres per household) in the area now had a 3 crop cycles including potato and maize both of which are highly lucrative cash crops for export and require a large amount of labour at harvest. Even as technology largely replaced labour from the sowing part of the cultivation process, which had become highly mechanized, it is still required at harvest. At the time of our research we broadly observed three different types of labour in our field sites, which broke down into various levels of duration, tasks and forms of payment; i) family labour; ii) permanent (*mustaqil mazdoor*) labour; iii) casual labour (*aarzi mazdoor*).

Why was permanent labour, a category antithetical to the ideas of a casual and liberalized labour market, continuing to exist? It arose out of the needs of greater labour demand of a particular kind. Landlords complained that it was much more difficult to monitor and maintain labour in the immediate aftermath of the end of tenancy, since the problem there was resolved through providing a stake in the produce to the tenant. Daily wage often led to a loss of motivation since the labourers were not paid for any extra effort. Moreover, most large landowners

have also had to employ managers to supervise their lands, thereby adding to the costs of supervision. Although these tasks varied with each crop and size of farm, in general larger farmers required labour for ploughing, levelling, sowing, weeding as well as looking after the livestock. Since care is needed during the maturation process (for example seeing that the fields are watered on time, the right amount of fertilizer, pesticide is applied etc.) farmers prefer not to leave these to casual labourers. Hiring *mustaqil* labour also gives access to the entire family of the labourer which can assist with domestic work alongside farm work.

Apart from duration, what distinguishes permanent labour is the process of recruitment which was more personalized; either as individuals or as a family, workers went to particular landlords asking for work. They were provided a place to live often makeshift tents or were allowed to build a mud house on the landlords land without rent. Single men were often provided a room to sleep in the shed next to the farm implements and domestic labour was provided with quarters inside the house if it was for a woman with a child. The range of payments combined cash and grain. Although traditionally landowners provided their farm servants with consumption loans, in both areas this practice had been drastically reduced. This was one of the main complaints heard during our few interviews with permanent labourers in the absence of the landowner.

The overwhelming majority of permanent labourers were *Musallis* (Dalit converts to Islam) or *Muslim Sheikhs* (to be differentiated from the mercantile *Sheikhs*) who were also the *biraderi* most frequently found doing farm labour in general in our field area. Although conversion from Hinduism to Islam meant that ideas about ritual pollution hold less sway for *Musallis*, they were nonetheless considered to be at the bottom rung of Punjabi rural society (below the other *Kammi* or service castes such as barbers, blacksmiths, carpenters etc. some of whom have made a transition into RCC as we have seen). Since abandoning their traditional occupations *Musallis* are mainly found as rural labourers throughout Punjab (Gazdar, 2007).

That such labour not only survived but in the case of intensive cultivation *increases* under a 'liberalized' labour market shows the futility of thinking of commercialization and 'attached' labour as binary opposites. The relations between labour and landowners have become less personalized and short-term attests to the influence of greater mobility. However, several labouring households prefer to enter into longer term arrangements to shield themselves from some of the uncertainties of a casual labour market, even if it means reducing their mobility and alternative options for substantial periods of time. Thus, not only do casual and permanent form a continuum that is entirely compatible with the logic of commercialization and capital accumulation but also compatible with one another. In order to understand their reproduction we need to place them in strategies of accumulation and survival of employers and employees (Guerin, 2013: 419).

The *Thekedar*: Debt and mediation in the labour market

A similar kind of diversity was to be found within the category of ‘casual’ labour – in our field areas it included both those labourers who were hired on a daily basis, or for particular tasks for up to a month. Many of these seasonal labourers were locals and not migrants coming from outside the district. The farthest labour reported to us was in Depalpur where the largest landlord hired labour from a village 15 km away. These ‘casual’/temporary labourers were known locally as ‘*aarzi mazdoor*’ (meaning temporary worker).

In contrast to permanent labour where demand was determined by the level of activity and investment with a longer time span, demand for casual labour was correlated with needs that were both expected and unexpected. The overwhelming majority was employed for harvest and immediate post-harvest operations. Depalpur has high rural labour demand year round as well as greater labour demand at peak times; the calendar year begins with the very labour-intensive potato harvest followed immediately by the equally labour-absorbing maize sowing process. For those that sow rice a great amount of labour is required at sowing as well as for wheat harvesting. The higher intensity of cropping is compounded by the size of bigger landholdings which are the main utilizers of casual labour and require it in large quantities at particular points in time as highlighted earlier. But labour is also immediately required for loading/unloading goods in the *mandi* (market) as well as for small-scale industry. In other words, the high demand for labour works on an urban-rural continuum largely due to the seasonal nature of both the markets as well as small scale processing.

Moreover, as we discovered during our survey, landlords were preoccupied with decisions on securing credit, crop procurement and timing of sales and storage and needed to minimise time spent recruiting labour and the higher search costs for recruiting labour on such a scale was extremely difficult, particularly after the demise of share-cropping. As a result, what had crystallized in Depalpur overtime was a system whereby the task of recruiting, organizing and deploying the bulk of both rural and urban casual labour was outsourced to a separate group of individuals known locally as *thekedars* who acted as labour recruiters/jobbers. These were individuals whose profession was to organize and deploy labour-gangs in order to work on farms for specific pre-harvest, harvest and post-harvest operations but also for off-farm work in the *mandi* particularly as *Palledar* (‘coolie’ labour for loading/unloading produce).

The institution of the *Thekedar* is particularly suited to a place like Depalpur where access to large pools of labour needs to be organized in a timely manner. Nonetheless, it is also important to note that the mere existence of *thekedars* does not guarantee that labour will be recruited in the required quantities at the required time. This is primarily because competition for labour is high particularly

for the main hirers of labour-power as even small farmers require labor at harvest time. How did landed capitalists ensure a timely and adequate supply of labour in a context of high competition and how did this impact both the choices of labourers themselves as well as shape access to labour for small farming households?

The main method of tying labour was the payment of an amount of money in advance to *thekedars*, called both 'advance' and *khata* locally. The advance paid acted as a pledge by a particular *thekedar* to guarantee a timely and adequate labour supply for a particular task so that the farmer's search costs are reduced substantially. By interlinking the labour market with the credit market, rural-commercial capitalists ensured that in exchange for an additional amount of money, they spent a minimum amount of time searching, organizing and supervising labour on such a large scale. The number of *thekedars* varied depending on the size of cultivated land but it was not greater than three for the largest farmers and most rural-commercial capitalists contacted only one. The amount paid in advance varied from the lowest of Rs.20,000 to the highest of Rs.50,000 and was tied (albeit tenuously) to the number of labourers that needed to be recruited for a particular task.

The intended effect is to bind labourers to a particular landlord for a specific period of time so that they may not take advantage of any other employment opportunity, even if it is better paying. This is because the non-agrarian economy has still not unhitched itself from agriculture and the bulk of employment for lower caste, unskilled labour is on farm or within the marketing system, i.e. the markets and agro-processing, all of which provide seasonal, short-term jobs. As a result, most lower caste, unskilled labourers seek employers that can engage them for longer periods of time rather than one with the highest wage rate. In this way, by the provision of a money-advance and the dearth of alternative employment outside of the agro-commercial system, employers are enabled access to labour at a lower price precisely at times when the demand for labour and potentially, their bargaining power, is at its peak. Moreover, since the or in the market as coolies, in which women don't participate while farm labour is dominated by women and children.

Furthermore, the blurred lines between wage and debt which the existence of the 'money advance-labour tying' arrangement suggests is *also* due to the continuous need for borrowing that households labouring in informalized labour markets with precarious employment conditions have (see Guerin, 2013 for an excellent discussion on this point from South India). Owing to the increasing consumption requirements of households this often means that indebtedness becomes a permanent fact of life for most labourers. It also reiterates the earlier point about there not being one form of 'permanent' labour tying but that indebtedness

actually being compatible with a host of different labour relations and arrangements of varying durations; the money-advanced to highly mobile rural workers for the short-term seasonal cultivation of one particular crop being different for example, from the long-term bonded labour on brick-kilns even if debt is a way of organizing both. Neither is entering into tied arrangements a pure coercion as many may actively seek such relations and in some cases the aspiration of increased consumption may be the driving force. Thus, debt can exist with a host of labour arrangements and instead of the dichotomy between 'free' and 'unfree' labour posited by some scholars (e.g. Brass, 2002) we have instead a continuum of relations of bondage with various durations, modes of recruitment and rationales behind it.

A vast majority of thekedars were from the *Muslim Sheikh* castes and a great number of them were also women, particularly in agriculture. A typical pattern we found was that many of them were former share-croppers or belonged to former share-cropping families. Many of them were also themselves older labourers who could no longer carry out the drudgery of farm or the back-breaking *paledar* (coolie) work in the market due to health reasons. Therefore, the highly commercialized, capitalist agriculture of Depalpur greatly depended on kinship and caste networks to organize and deploy labour.

Interestingly, by tying labour with money advances the landed RCC reduce the availability of labour for less powerful players; as we've argued above, PCP and petty-capitalist households also hire labour at harvest time for certain operations. Since they are unable to pay an advance to *thekedars* and the bulk of labourers are already engaged on the farms of large landlords and capitalist farmers, the bargaining power of subcontractors and labourers over PCP households is higher. In exchange for diverting a small number of labourers already engaged on a large farm to carry out particular tasks on their farms, PCP households have to pay *thekedars* a wage higher than that being paid on the larger farm. During our interviews, we found PCP households paying between 700 to 1,000 Rupees more in wages for every acre cultivated than rural-commercial capitalists that had tied labour with money advances.

Thus, a segmentation exists within the labour market whereby labour seeks greater work days with employers with a lower wage and can bargain over wages with PCP farmers. One of the key strategies that PCP households use in such a situation to survive and reproduce without accumulating is to rely as much as possible on their own and their families labour, take on additional debt or diversify the livelihood portfolio of the household through off-farm work in order to hold on to their land. The diversification of livelihoods off-farm and the ploughing back of earnings into retaining land is one of the reasons why there is no clear movement as yet in Punjab agriculture towards polarization, i.e. the

existence of highly capitalist farmers alongside a mass of landless workers which was predicted by earlier literature (e.g. Hussain, 1982). Even in Depalpur where several villages are highly polarized (such as the 2 landlord villages we surveyed) there are a range of cultivators of different sizes and they continue to exist.

In short, the institution of the *thekedar* owes its existence to the increasingly capitalist potato AMS. After the end of share-cropping the pressure to secure access to a large pool of labour for farm and off-farm operations at peak periods has intensified. By interlinking credit and labour markets the landed RCC are able to secure access to labour in a context of high competition over labour-power without spending extra time searching for it like farmers in TTS. Moreover, *thekedars* link the labour market for the entire agro-commercial system (farming, marketing and processing) with great overlap between the different parts. This mirrors the greatly integrated character of agriculture in Depalpur and allows for labour to move within different parts of AMS with relative ease, reproducing the low-wage, casual work within informal labour markets.

The heterogeneity we witness within the agro-commercial marketing systems was much more complex than either neo-classical or new institutional analysis would suggest. Contracts and arrangements were embedded within local power structures and institutions as were the accumulation strategies of employers and survival strategies of employees in the informal labour markets. That simplistic analysis of supply and demand was unhelpful or that institutions would always work to reduce transaction costs for everyone as the New Institutionalists assume is not borne out by actually existing labour markets.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated the importance of a historically informed political economy of labour relations. Against the trend of analyzing labour relations through overarching theoretical frameworks from which the conclusions are simply read off (Tomich, 2004: 18) we try and maintain a productive tension between what Geertz calls 'thick descriptions' of the processes and relations involved and categories used to describe these processes and relations (Clough, 2015: 82). Against the unproblematic move from above of exogenous factors 'global capitalism', 'semi-feudalism' etc we show how an export-oriented capitalism was constitutive of share-cropping in the canal colonies even as the actual form it took place was a product of the sometimes contentious but also cooperative relations between large landlords and their lower caste tenants at the micro level.

We hoped to have shown how several institutional mediations and rationalities coexist (often conflicting) at this level within the seemingly simple relation of a rural labour market between labour and landowner. From state policy to

environmental technology as well as the considerations of politics, a range of variables enter into the logic of decision-making by different types of social groups over the act of production and distribution. By understanding these different logics, we can dispense with the teleology of capitalist development and the ideal constructions of historic missions of 'the' bourgeoisie and the proletariat which burden them with an a priori a set of institutional and cultural traits and ultimately obfuscate more than they illuminate. Only by breaking with these teleological studies of marginality, can proper understandings of the multiple ways of fighting it can be conceived.

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