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***Agricultural Labour and Unfreedom: Siri Workers in a Village
in Western Haryana***

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1. Introduction

Haryana is among the States that led India's agricultural development over the last three decades. Growth of agriculture in Haryana over this period was accompanied by major changes in relations of production. In particular, over the decades of 1970s and 1980s, there was a substantial expansion of labour absorption in agriculture in Haryana mainly on account of the increase in cropping intensity (Bhalla 1989). In the 1990s, this trend was reversed and there was a considerable decline in labour use in agriculture in Haryana (Bhalla 1995, 1999). In general, over the decade of 1990s agrarian changes were influenced to a considerable extent and in various ways by the policies of economic reforms. In large parts of Haryana, the decline in labour use in agriculture over the 1990s was also associated with increasing casualisation of employment in agriculture. The practice of hiring long-term workers has been on the decline in most parts of Haryana since the 1980s (Jodhka 1994). This trend continued in the 1990s and in most parts of Haryana very few agricultural workers were hired on long-term contracts by the end of the decade. In addition, there was an increasing informalisation of the process of hiring of casual workers. Casual workers were increasingly hired on piece-rated contracts than on standardised time-rated contracts (ISWSD 2004).

Western parts of Haryana, in particular, Sirsa, Fatehabad and Hisar districts, are an exception in respect of the general trend of decline in incidence of long-term labour.¹ Unlike in rest of the State, use of long-term workers, or *siris*, continues to be a widespread phenomenon in this area. The practice of hiring long-term workers has survived in this area despite significant advance in technological basis of agricultural production that has taken place over the last three decades.

This paper describes and analyses the *siri* system of labour hiring as it is practised in western parts of contemporary Haryana and attempts to record the changes that have taken place in the nature of

¹ . The whole of this area was a part of the undivided Hisar district until the early-1970s.

employer-employee relationships under the *siri* contract in recent times. The paper examines the nature of unfreedom and bondage faced by *siri* workers. It also attempts to identify factors that have contributed to its survival in this part of Haryana while the *siris* have become almost extinct in rest of the State.

The paper is based on material collected from Birdhana, a village in Fatehabad district, as part of a study of women workers conducted by the Indian School of Women's Studies and Development.² The data were collected through a survey of landless manual worker households conducted in June 2003.

2. Basic features of Agrarian Economy of the Study Village

Birdhana was a relatively large village with 1629 households residing in May 2003. The village was divided into three main settlements. In addition, some small and medium landowning households and a large number of *siri* households lived in the fields. Of a total of 1629 households in the village, 1398 lived in the main settlement, 67 lived in Rampura, 23 in Bailbhamiya, and 141 in the fields.

Birdhana was a caste heterogeneous village with about 35 different castes and communities. About 65 per cent of the households belonged to backward castes, 15 per cent were *dalits*, 18.3 per cent were from other Hindu castes, and 0.6 per cent were Muslims.

The land distribution in Birdhana was characterized by extraordinarily high degree of concentration. About 77 per cent of the households in the village did not own any land while top two per cent households owned about 42 per cent of land. The largest landowner owned 100 acres of irrigated land. The largest landowning households were from Mehta caste.³ Another caste that comprised many households having large amounts of land (though usually smaller than the amount of land owned by Mehta households) was Bishnoi. These two castes, Mehta and Bishnoi, were the dominant castes in

² Results of this study are presented in ISWSD (2004).

³ This caste comprised people who (or their ancestors) had migrated at the time of partition and had been resettled in Birdhana. Many of these households were provided large stretches of what was then unirrigated land in compensation for the land they had lost as a result of partition. As resettlement preceded the enactment of land reform legislation, many of these households were in fact provided by the state landholdings as large as hundreds of acres. Most of these landowners managed to evade land reform legislations that were enacted later and continued to own large tracts of land. Provision of electricity and bank credit enabled substantial expansion of groundwater irrigation in Birdhana in the 1970s and 1980s. Consequently, many of the resettled refugee households came to own fortunes in terms of large tracts of irrigated land.

the village: persons from this caste were wealthiest in the village, they dominated the panchayat, they were the local traders, they owned private schools in the village, and the local political leaders came from these castes.

The main crops grown in Birdhana were wheat, paddy and cotton. Wheat was sown in winters (December-January) and harvested in April. Paddy and cotton were monsoon crops, sown in June and harvested between September and December. In addition, okra, sugarcane and fodder crops like berseem were grown to some extent.

The system of labour hiring in the village was based on widespread use of long-term labour. There were three kinds of agricultural workers in Birdhana. First, the casual workers who, like everywhere else in India, did all kinds of agricultural work on short-term (time-rated or piece-rated) contracts. Second, the *siris*, who long-term workers and were paid a share in produce as wage. Although *siris* were all men, the *siri* contract typically covered the use of labour power of all family members of the *siri*. Farm servants (*naukar*) were the third type of agricultural workers. Farm servants worked under a long-term (typically annual) contract that specified a fixed wage paid mainly in cash. Farm servants were always men. Between the two types of long-term workers, *siris* and *naukars*, hiring *siris* was a more widely prevalent practice. Of a total of 367 working age male workers that were covered in our sample of 282 households, only five worked as *naukars*. In contrast, in our sample, 44 households living in the settlements and 43 households living in the fields worked as *siris*.

Casual workers in the village faced acute levels of unemployment. On average, a male casual worker aged between 16 and 60 years found employment for about 102 days in a year; of this, he worked for about 45 days in agriculture. On the other hand, an average female casual worker in this age group found employment for about 46 days in a year, of which 43 days was in agriculture. Women found very little employment in non-agricultural labour.

Acute levels of underemployment and low wages meant that the annual earnings of casual workers were meagre. Total annual earning of an average male casual worker in agricultural and non-agricultural employment was about Rs. 6626. An average female worker earned about Rs. 1584 in a year (ISWSD 2004).

Agriculture in Birdhana was highly mechanised. Tractors had completely displaced bullock ploughs. Harvesting and threshing of wheat was mainly done using harvester combines. Even when wheat

was harvested manually, threshing was done on mechanised threshers. One of the three varieties of paddy grown in the village was also harvested using harvester combine. Main tasks that were done manually were transplanting of paddy, picking of cotton and okra, hoeing, and harvesting and threshing of some paddy varieties.

3. The *Siri* System in Birdhana

3.1 The *Siri* Contract

The contract of a *siri* resembled a sharecropping contract in terms of the mode of payment. The *siri* and the landowner shared the material costs of production and the agricultural produce in a pre-decided proportion. The *siri*, in addition, provided all the labour that was required for the production. This included any labour that needed to be hired for the work.

The contract, however, differed from a sharecropping contract in two very important ways. First, unlike typical sharecropping contracts, the share of *siri* in the material costs and output was very low. Most commonly, the *siri* provided one fifth of the material costs and provided all the labour. In return, the *siri* got only one fifth of the produce. Secondly, all decision making powers in respect of the choice of crops to be sown, the amount and types of inputs to be used and farming practices were vested solely in the landlord. The landowner closely supervised work on the field on a daily basis. Most landowners visited the field at least once every day and gave instructions to the *siris*. Although the landlord typically entered into the contract with a male worker, typically, the whole household had to work on the farm as part of the contract. The contract also often required the *siris* to live on the field with their families.

The *siri* contracts were oral and we did not come across even a single instance where there was a written agreement between the landowner and the *siri*. In a study of labour relations in the late-19th and early 20th centuries in south-west Punjab (broadly covering modern Haryana), Bhattacharya (1985) reported that by early twentieth century a system of written *siri* contracts emerged. In the early green revolution period, Shiela Bhalla had reported a rising incidence of written contracts in long-term labour contracts in rural Haryana. The evidence from Birdhana about two decades later does not suggest that this trend was sustained and there has perhaps been a retrogression in this respect.

There is another respect in which the terms of contract seem to have turned against the *siri*. Bhattacharya (1985) records that an essential feature of the *siri* contracts, as they existed in the late 19th

and early 20th century, was that landlords did not charge an interest on the advance given to the *siris*. This practice of providing interest-free credit to the *siri* had been completely abandoned by the landlords. Typically, the *siri* took an advance from the landowner at the starting of the contract. Our respondents in Birdhana reported that this advance was treated as a loan and the landowner charged an interest at the rate of about 3 per cent per month on this loan. Moreover, the landowner purchased all inputs, made all the payments in respect of rent of machinery and paid wages to all hired workers. The share of the *siri* in these expenses was treated as a credit and the landowner charged an interest on this credit from the day each expense was made to the day the accounts were settled after the harvest.

It is noteworthy that the terms of *siri* contracts in Birdhana were not standardised. The main terms of the contract regarding the share of the *siri* in material costs and output varied a great deal. The share of *siris* in material costs and output was one-fifth for about 58 per cent of the *siris* and one-sixth for about 22 per cent of the *siris*. In a few cases, the share of the *siri* was as low as one twelfth. The *siri* contracts also varied in respect of what costs were covered under the specified proportion. Typically, there was an understanding between the landlord and the *siri* on provisioning of a number of specific inputs. Usually, the tractor and water were provided by the landowners. The cost of water, however, was shared if the landowner did not own a tubewell. Depending on the bargaining capacity of the *siri* and the landowner, the share contract covered costs of wheat and paddy harvesting, cotton picking and various other inputs. Usually, the *siri* paid for harvesting of wheat, irrespective of whether it was done manually or by combined harvesters. On the other hand, the cost of paddy harvesting was often shared. The cost of cotton picking was generally shared by the landowner and the *siri*. In such cases, the landowner paid his share of cost even when some family labour was used in cotton picking. The extent of sharing the cost of these tasks – harvesting of wheat and paddy, picking of cotton – however varied a great deal from *siri* to *siri*.

Many *siris* complained that over the years the landowners had reduced the share of *siris* in output. According to some of the old workers we spoke to, the *siris* and the landowners shared the costs equally (one share for land and one share for labour) before the tractors and tubewells were introduced. With introduction of tractors and tubewell irrigation as part of Green Revolution, the landowners insisted that the produce be divided into four parts of which the landowners took three (on account of land, tractor and tubewell) while the *siri* got only one (on account of his labour). In the recent years, however, the landowners had further reduced the share of the *siris*.

Our respondents told us that this had been done by the landlords purely through bargaining with the workers aspiring to be employed as *siris* and had not been linked to any additional expenses being borne by the landowners.

The landowners kept detailed accounts of the expenses, credit and interest to be charged from each *siri*. These accounts, particularly in respect of calculation of interest, were quite complex. Barring a few exceptions, *siris* did not keep parallel accounts.⁴ Only in a few cases, the landlord gave a detailed written account of the expenses to the *siri* at the end of the season. Most of the *siris* we interviewed could not give detailed accounts for the previous season. Usually, the *siris* were aware of the amounts of the material inputs used, the rates of rent for the machinery and the usual rates of interest charged. Most *siris* also knew their actual net income – in terms of grain for wheat and in terms of cash for paddy and cotton – that they received at the end of the season. If they made a loss, they usually knew their outstanding debt at the end of the season. In many cases the *siris* felt that they had been cheated by the landlord but were unable to add the figures to point out how the net income was calculated. In some cases, the ignorance of the *siri* was so extreme that all that they could report was the amount of grain that they got, not knowing how much of it was their income and how much a credit.

It is noteworthy that although the *siris* had to bear all the cost of labour, they seldom had enough money to foot the wage bill. As a result, while the workers were called by the *siri*, the wage payments were usually made by the landowners and credited to the accounts of the *siris*. The *siris* informed the landowners when any workers were hired and the wages to be paid to various workers. The casual workers collected the wages from the landlord.

3.2 Pattern of Labour Use under the Siri System

The fact that a *siri* had to provide all labour used in cultivation had important implications for the pattern of labour use in agriculture in the village.

First, the *siri* system created a class of workers that were employed by the landowners and who, in turn, were the main employers of casual workers in the village.

Secondly, as the *siris* had to bear all the cost of labour to get a small share in the output, their only hope to make a small net income

⁴ It is noteworthy that only about 14 per cent *siris* in the settlements and 19 per cent *siris* living in the fields were literate. About 39 per cent *siri* households in the settlements and about 51 per cent *siri* households in the fields had no adult literate member in the family

lay in maximising the use of family labour. In general, all workers from *siri* households except old persons, children and a few workers who were also involved in other occupations worked every day from the time land preparation work started until the crop was harvested, threshed and stored. On double cropped land, this meant about nine months of work. During these months most workers from the *siri* households were on the field every day. Table 1 presents proportion of workers in different age-groups in *siri* and non-*siri* households. The table brings out a number of interesting findings. First, the table shows that the work participation rates among men and women in the *siri* households were very high. Secondly, the table shows that work participation rates among children, particularly girls, were very high. Thirdly, the table shows that among the households living in the fields, work participation rates for women were higher than for men in all the three age groups.

Conversely, the *siri* contract ensured that hiring of casual labour was minimised. The use of hired labour was limited by maximising the use of family labour and the widespread use of labour displacing technology. Given the design of the *siri* contract and the fact that it was cheaper to use machines like combined harvesters than get the work done using hired labour, the interests of the *siris* and the landowners converged on the use of labour displacing technology. Casual workers were hired only for those operations which could not be done by machines and which required a large number of workers to work at the same time. Even in this, the *siri* system minimised the cost by placing the *siri* between the casual workers and the landlord. The *siris* typically hired workers through their social and caste relations. This helped them hire workers who worked for lower wages and worked longer hours.

Table 1 *Work participation rates of men and women in siri and non-siri households, Birdhana*

Age-group	<i>Siri</i> households				Non- <i>siri</i>	
	Living in the		Living in		Living in	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Persons between 6 and 15 years of age	70.3	59.0	37.9	28.6	28.6	13.3
Persons between 16 and 60 years of age	98.4	95.7	94.1	98.7	83.3	88.8
Persons aged 61 years and above*	100.0	80.0	57.1	70.0	44.7	64.0
All persons	76.1	71.5	66.4	70.8	60.8	63.2

Notes: * There were only a few persons in this age group particularly in the households living in the fields because generally such

households comprised young couples living in the fields with their children.

Some of the most important tasks done by women from the *siri* households were weeding, harvesting of wheat, harvesting and threshing of paddy, winnowing, loading of grain and straw, cotton picking, picking and harvesting of vegetables, and harvesting of fodder crops.

It is noteworthy that in case of family workers in the *siri* households, unlike say the casual workers in the village, the distinction between tasks done by men and women was not clear-cut. Women from these households did a number of tasks that were otherwise considered men's work in the village and only men were hired for such tasks. These tasks included application of fertilisers, spraying pesticides, clearing of field channels, making bunds, irrigation and threshing. Similarly a lot of male workers from the *siri* households did cotton picking, an operation for which only women workers were hired. Typically, the cost of cotton picking was shared equally between the landlords and the *siris*. In such cases, workers from *siri* households did a lot of cotton picking themselves and the landlord paid his share of the wage for such work.

It is noteworthy that only a few of various tasks done by women required full day long participation. Such tasks typically were done on a single day and required every member of the household to work together. These tasks included, most importantly, threshing and loading. There were still other tasks that could be done for part of the day but where the quantum of work was definite and the period in which the work had to be finished was short. These included tasks like harvesting, transplanting, and picking of cotton and okra. In addition, there were a number of other tasks, many of them done by women, which were done on a regular basis over a long duration. These included, most importantly, weeding and hoeing. Women typically spent a few hours on most days weeding in the fields. Similarly, women did a lot of work over a long period hoeing the cotton fields. Women typically removed grass from the field bunds and channels everyday, collecting them for use as fodder.

It is important to note that the burden of work on women from the *siri* households was really enormous. A normal day started very early and got over very late. Over such a day, a woman cooked for everybody in the family, milked cattle, cleaned the cattle-shed and made dung cakes (for use as fuel), bathed and fed cattle, attended to other household chores, took care of her children, and served tea to the landlord when he came for supervision. With all this, she spent every minute she could spare doing agricultural labour on the land. In

the evening, after having done backbreaking work for the whole day, she collected grass and firewood, and harvested fodder. In case of households that did not live in the fields, women had to do a number of domestic and animal husbandry related activities in the morning, carry food for rest of the members to the fields, participate in the agricultural work, collect grass and firewood, harvest fodder, and carry them home. After that, she again got back to household chores, cooking, taking care of children, milking cattle and moving them into the shed.

The *siri* system of labour hiring has a long history in Haryana. In some parts of the State a *siri* was historically known as a *sajhi*. Bhattacharya (1985) has described the nature of *siri* contracts between the late 19th century and early 20th century. In most part of the State, the *siri* system has been on the decline over the last three decades. Widespread prevalence of the *siri* system of labour hiring in Birdhana, *albeit* in a form that was very different from the one described by Bhattacharya, was based on two very important features of the village economy: concentration of landholdings and a very substantial technological advance in agriculture. Expansion of groundwater irrigation extended agricultural calendar to the whole year and made cultivation of two to three crops in a year possible. Modern technology, particularly mechanisation and weedicides, considerably smoothed the demand for labour over the crop cycle. As a result, while a few workers were always required on large farms on a regular basis, there were only a few occasions when the landowner needed to hire many workers. Given the cropping pattern and the level of technology available in Birdhana, workers in a *siri* household were sufficient to do most of the tasks on a plot of about 15 to 20 acres. The concentration of landholdings was so high in Birdhana that about 1955 acres of agricultural land (58 per cent of total) in Birdhana was owned by 62 households that had more than 15 acres of land each. A number of such households met their labour demand through the *siri* system of labour hiring. Landowners who had very large holdings (say more than 30 acres) typically divided the land into plots of 15 to 20 acres and employed a different *siri* household on each plot. We came across land owners who had simultaneously employed more than 10 *siri* households.

4. Unfreedom and Bondage under the Siri System

The *siri* system imposed severe restrictions on the freedom of the *siri* and his family to use their labour power and many *siris* worked under conditions of bondage. They were indebted to the landlords and were usually not allowed to quit working for the landlord until their debts were cleared. In cases of eviction or when a *siri* quit working for a landlord, the *siri* was required to repay the debt. It was common for

the landlords to prevent the *siri* from taking away his possessions from the field unless the debt was repaid. As a result, *siris* who lived on the fields faced the threat of dispossession of their cattle and other assets unless they repaid the debt.

The *siri* contract typically involved restrictions on the freedom of *siri*, and sometimes even on other workers from his family, to work for any other employer. The *siris* were usually not allowed to leave the land unattended and at least one person from the *siri* household was required to be present on land at all times. In many cases, the landlords even restricted the main *siri* worker (the male with whom the landlord entered into the *siri* contract) from leaving the fields except for specific purposes (going to landlord's house, going to the market once in a while and death in the family). In a few cases, similar restrictions also applied to other members of the *siri* family. It was common that the *siris* would be required to take permission for leaving if they had to go away for some important personal work (and the permission was often denied) and provide a replacement for the day that the *siri* was going to be away. A number of *siris* reported that they had not gone out of the village for a long time and had spent most of their time restricted on the farm.

The *siris* were typically required to perform various kinds of labour services for the landlord. About 55 per cent of the *siris* in the two settlements and about 67 per cent of the *siris* living in the fields performed labour services for the landlords. These services included all kinds of agricultural, non-agricultural and domestic work. A *siri* could be required to deliver fodder to the landlord's house every day. Persons from the *siri's* family could be asked to do agricultural work on other lands owned by the landlord. They were given various responsibilities when there was a wedding in the landlord's house. Or on a regular basis, a *siri* could be required to spend some time in landlord's house tending their cattle or serving his guests. Women from *siri's* family could be asked to do domestic services in the landlord's house or remove dung from the landlord's cattle-shed.

Given the harshness of the terms of *siri* contracts and extra-economic coercion faced by the *siris*, a natural question that we asked the *siris* was as to why they became *siris* in the first place. The two most commonly cited reasons for becoming *siris* were: need for credit and high unemployment among casual workers.

The *siri* system provided *siri* households with access to credit from the landlords. In Birdhana, credit from landlords was available only to *siris* and farm servants. Table 2 shows that *siri* households borrowed a higher amount of credit and that a very substantial share of their credit had been taken from the landlords. It may be pointed

out that the debt that non-*siri* households owed towards landlords had been taken by non-*siri* households when they worked as *siris* for these landlords.

It is noteworthy that the nature of unfreedom under the *siri* system took a whole new form under the general conditions of severe under-employment among casual workers. The evidence from Birdhana suggests that while advancement of credit was an integral part of the contract and an important reason why workers became *siris*, it was not necessarily used as an instrument of bondage to a specific landlord. The debt of the *siri* seldom exceeded by a substantial extent the amount that was generally available as *siri* advance if the *siri* were to seek employment from another landlord. The landlords, on the one hand, regularly deducted repayments of loans from the share of the *siris* in net income after every harvest, and on the other, rationed the amount of credit that would be given to the *siris*. If a *siri* was unable to produce enough to meet his debt obligations, he could face eviction.

Table 2. *Share of different sources of credit in debt of siri and non-siri households, Birdhana*

Source of credit	<i>Siri</i> households		Non- <i>siri</i> households
	Living in settlements	Living in the fields	
Formal	28.4	7.8	21.1
Landlord	48.5	60.6	28.6
Moneylenders	10.6	1.2	7.4
Friends, relatives and caste relatives	8.0	9.5	30.6
Shopkeepers	3.2	12.6	5.5
Medical practitioners	0.1	0.9	0.3
Others and unspecified	1.1	7.4	6.6
All sources	100	100	100
Average household debt (Rupees)	22657	18964	13801
Average household debt asset ratio	59.8	53.8	53.8

It is noteworthy that the *siri* contracts were typically one-year contracts and could be renewed every year. Data show that the *siris* frequently “changed masters” or were evicted. Most of the *siris* we interviewed -- 69 per cent of the *siris* living in the settlements and 47 per cent of the *siris* living in the fields -- had been working for not more than two years for their employer (Table 3). Just as a majority of *siri* households had been working for the same employer for less than two years, there were a number of non-*siri* households in our sample who had worked as *siris* in recent years but were casual workers at

the time of the survey.

There were of course some *siris* in our sample who had had a longer association with the same employer. There were 6 *siris* in our sample (3 living in the settlements and 3 in the fields) who had been working for the same landlord for past 10 years. We came across three *siris* in our sample who had been working for the same landlord as their parents.

A number of *siris* who were evicted or who quit working for a landlord in the last year repaid the debt by becoming *siri* for another landlord and taking an advance from him. Loans taken by current *siris* for repayment of old debt accounted for about 8 per cent of total debt of both *siris* living in the settlements and *siris* living in the fields. Ved Prakash, a *siri* in the main village settlement, aptly described the situation as follows: "We can leave the landlord only after repaying all the loans taken from him. That can be done only by taking a loan from another landlord and accepting to become his *siri*. So you can free yourself of one only by becoming bonded to another."

While advancement of credit was not used as an instrument of bondage to individual landlords, the threat of facing massive under-employment as casual workers ensured an adequate supply of *willing siris* to the landlord class as a whole. This meant that the landlords did not need to invest too much of their funds for holding *siris* and advancement of credit was used merely as an additional means (over and above rent) for extracting surplus from the *siri*.

Table 3. *Number of siris by the number of years for which they had been working for their employer*

Number of years since working for the present employer	<i>Siris</i> living in the settlements		<i>Siris</i> living in the fields	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Less than one year	16	44.4	5	13.9
Between 1-2 years	9	25.0	12	33.3
Between 2-5 years	6	16.7	13	36.1
Between 6-10 years	2	5.6	3	8.3
More than 10 years	3	8.3	3	8.3
All	36	100.0	36	100.0
Average number of years	3.83		4.08	

Unfreedom in labour relations in Haryana has been an issue of considerable debate in academic literature. Jodhka (1994, 1995a, 1995b) has argued that incidence of attached labour has been on the decline and that there is a complete absence of patron client relationship in hiring of attached workers in contemporary Haryana.

He argues that although there are continuing elements of unfreedom like dependence of permanent agricultural workers on big farmers for credit, by and large, long-term contracts are a result of a choice on part of the workers to enter into such contracts. On the other hand, Brass (1990, 1995) has argued that the attachment in labour relations and indebtedness of workers are symptomatic of bondage in labour relations, and that this tendency has been on the rise in rural Haryana.

Both these arguments are problematic. While it is true that the incidence of attached labour has been on the decline in most parts of Haryana, the recent evidence suggests that even in such parts the relationship of casual workers with their employers impose substantial restrictions on the workers (ISWSD 2004). The evidence presented in this paper suggests that the decline of long-term labour has not been uniform in all parts of Haryana. In Birdhana, hiring long-term workers continued to be a widespread practice in 2003. The *siris* in Birdhana faced severe forms of restrictions on their freedom to work for employers of their choice. The question of whether the *siris* entered into long-term labour contracts out of choice or out of compulsion is quite meaningless in the context of agrarian conditions that prevailed in Birdhana. There can be no *free* choice in a condition where the alternatives on offer are bondage on the one hand and acute unemployment and insufficient access to food on the other. Birdhana had both kinds of workers: those who felt that accepting bondage was better than having to go hungry day after day and those who felt bondage had to be avoided even if it meant being unemployed for most of the year and not having adequate amount of food.

On the other hand, it is analytically inaccurate to confuse all indebtedness with bondage. It is true that indebtedness often imposes restrictions on the freedom of workers to sell their labour power. However, this might not be universally true and there are cases where employers are not the main source of credit for rural labour households.⁵ Secondly, a rigorous conceptualisation must differentiate between varying degrees of unfreedom faced by a worker and identify bondage as the extreme condition in which a worker can make no free choice about his or her conditions of employment (Ramachandran 1991). Conditions of employment of *siris* in Birdhana were a case of bondage and a rigorous theory must differentiate this condition from conditions of restricted freedom that casual workers in large parts of Haryana and in many other parts of the country face.

⁵ Recent studies present evidence from places where major lenders to even the landless workers are not their employers and that, although informal loans carry extremely high rates interest, old forms of labour services have been on the decline.

5. Conclusions

This paper describes and analyses the *siri* system of labour hiring as it is practiced in western parts of Haryana. The paper uses data collected from Birdhana, a village in Fatehabad district. This village falls in an area where the practice of hiring long-term workers has survived despite very substantial growth of production potential in agriculture since the mid-1960s.

The case study of Birdhana suggests that two features of agrarian economy of Birdhana - large size of landholdings and availability of labour displacing technology - made it beneficial for the landowners to hire workers through the *siri* system despite major transformation in the productive potential of agriculture over the last three decades. On the other hand, conditions of severe unemployment for casual workers ensured that a number of workers were willing to work as *siris* on extremely oppressive and exploitative terms.

The design of the *siri* contract ensured that the *siri* household provided as much family labour as possible and mobilised cheap hired labour through their social relations. The *siris*, typically engaged on a plot of 15-25 acres size, worked under a contract that provided them a small share (1/5th to 1/12th) in the output. In return they were required to give an equivalent share in the material costs and provide all labour. If any casual workers were required, the *siri* had to hire them and pay their wages. The share of the *siri* in output was so small that they seldom made any profit. The *siris* were given an advance by the landlords. They charged an interest at the rate of 24-36 per cent per annum on the advance and on the share of the *siri* in expenses incurred by them for purchase on inputs. If the landlord paid the wages for hired casual workers, they were credited to the account of the *siri* and an interest was charged on it. The *siri* contract was designed in such a way that the landlords extracted almost all the surplus either in the form of rent or in the form of interest. *Siris* often made losses, incurred debt and were evicted. In such cases, they faced the threat of dispossession of their assets and had to usually find another landlord who will hire them as a *siri* and give them an advance.

The *siris* faced severe conditions of bondage. Landlords imposed restrictions on their physical mobility and treated them as servile labour. *Siris* and their family members were routinely made to perform various kinds of labour services for the landlords. Even the physical and verbal abuse of *siris* and their family members by the landlords was not uncommon.

The only hope for a *siri* household to make even a miniscule net income lay in their using as much family labour as possible and minimise hiring of workers. In the process, the *siri* system created a class of workers that were employed by the landlords and who, in turn, were the main employers of casual workers in the village. The class of *siri* workers did not own any means of production and comprised people who were among the poorest in the village. They were bonded to the landlords and faced severe forms of restrictions. Nevertheless, their interests converged with those of the landlords when it came to minimise hiring of casual workers and displacing labour with cheaper mechanical options. Involuntarily, they colluded with the landlords in depressing wages of casual workers in a bid to get some remuneration for their own labour.

This division in the class of agricultural workers, casual workers on the one hand and *siri* workers on the other, was one of the most problematic outcomes of the *siri* system and one that will have to be addressed by the peasant and agricultural workers' movement in the area.

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