

Class Formation and the Political Economy of Bonded Labour in the Pakistani Punjab

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In its World Labour Report of 1993 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) reported that the problem of bonded labour in Pakistan was among the worst in the world. In 1994 the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) estimated that the total number of bonded labourers working in agriculture, brick kilns, fisheries, construction and domestic service totalled around twenty million people (HRCP 1995; 120). Reports released by organisations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), the ILO and the HRCP, as well as reports released in the Pakistani print media, point to the widespread use of coercion against indebted labourers. These reports suggest that bonded labour is most widespread in agriculture and takes its most coercive form in the *Seraiki* belt of the Southern Punjab and in interior Sindh where the distribution of economic and political resources is highly inequitable and where landlords are alleged to maintain private jails, and where female labourers are frequently subjected to sexual assault by landlords and by the police.¹ Agricultural bonded labour principally in the form of debt-bondage is also common in the districts of the central Punjab where my research was carried out but where the coercion of labour doesn't take such extreme forms as it is alleged to take in the southern districts of the Punjab, and in Sindh.²

In this paper I present ethnographic evidence collected from a village in the central Punjabi District of Sargodha that confirms reports about the widespread existence of debt-bondage. Furthermore my data largely confirms reports that the practice of debt-bondage is often characterised by the threat and the use of direct forms of coercion. Nevertheless unlike the ILO and different human rights groups, who in addition to economic compulsion tend to emphasise direct forms of compulsion such as beating, imprisonment and rape, I additionally highlight the importance of indirect compulsion inherent in the element of patronage that also characterises debt bondage. I show that patronage is inherent to debt bondage in the Pakistani Punjab, but that this does not necessarily mitigate the exploitative nature of the practice, and that labourers largely perceive the extension of

¹ For a widely publicised case of the use of private jails by a landlord in Sindh see Hassan Mujtaba, "The Living Dead," *Newsline*, December 1992, p. 49. The article reports on one of the twelve private jails reported to exist in the Sanghar District of Sindh by the HRCP in 1993. Labourers were allegedly locked up over night after returning from the fields in large fort like structures guarded by heavily armed men. The most notorious case was that of Haji Gulam Khokhar whose private jail was raided by the army in 1991 resulting in the release of 295 labourers.

² There have for example been no reported cases of private jails in districts like Sargodha or Hafizabad. The reason for this is generally attributed to the fact that landlords in Sindh and in the Southern Punjab own comparatively larger tracts of land to those in districts like Sargodha where landlords with more than 100 acres are the exception rather than the norm.

patronage as a means for employers to obtain cheap and permanent labour. I show that both the elements of patronage and of direct coercion that characterise debt-bondage in the Pakistani Punjab stem from the fact that landlords have a monopoly over economic and political resources and largely have the local monopoly over the means of direct coercion. Thus the politico-economic structures that allow landlords to exert coercion over labourers are the same ones that place the landlords in the position to act as patrons towards their labourers and villagers.

The widespread existence of debt-bondage characterised by economic and extra-economic forms of compulsion together with vertical ties of patronage raises the question of whether it is possible to talk about the emergence of a proletarian class in the Pakistani Punjab despite the widespread commercialisation of agriculture. It is shown that despite the rise in daily wage labour resulting from the decline of sharecropping³ that came about with the introduction of citrus orchards in the 1970's, and from the decline of traditional village occupations, that labourers often can't freely dispose of the use and product of their labour. In order to explain this fact I show how rural employers largely retain their role as patrons by virtue of both their economic and their political dominance meaning that labourers often have to recur to them in order to obtain either credit or mediation with state institutions. Subsequently in exchange for loans, or sometimes in exchange for other forms of patronage, labourers agree to alienate the use and product of their labour to their employers. Despite the fact that such agreements are frequently entered voluntarily labourers are subsequently no longer able to dispose of their labour freely and, as will be shown below, employers have various means at their disposal in order to enforce the repayment of loans through labour.

Before analysing debt-bondage in the rural Pakistani Punjab, however, it is necessary to first take a look at some of the broader academic debates on debt-bondage in South Asia. A broad comparison of the labour situations in rural India and rural Pakistan will enable us to shed light on the broader theoretical issues surrounding un-free labour and proletarian class formation and their relation to broader political and state processes. I take the literature from South Asia, and India in particular, as my main reference point given that the rural social structure of the Pakistani Punjab shares in some of the features that broadly characterise the fertile plains of North India as a whole. These features include high population densities, large inequalities in wealth and landownership, and stark inequalities in status resulting from the presence of caste. I argue that in spite of these broad similarities the present day labour situations in India and Pakistan appear to differ significantly and that the explanation for these differences lies in the nature of the respective political processes that have characterised the two countries.

Debt-bondage in South Asia

As a result of the paucity of social science research in countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, the academic literature on debt-bondage in South Asia largely originates from India where debates have revolved around the issue of whether debt-bondage is compatible with capitalism and whether it can even be said to exist in modern day India. On one side of the debate authors such as Rudra (1994), Prakash (1990) and Breman (1974, 1993) argue that it is not possible to talk about the

³ See Zaidi (1995) for a discussion of the decline in agricultural sharecropping throughout Pakistan following upon the green revolution and the large scale introduction of cash crops and orchards.

modern day continuity of historical forms of bonded labour. For them relations between labourers and their landlord employers in modern day India are, for the most part, of an essentially economic nature and are devoid of coercion and patronage; for them Indian labourers are proletarians in a capitalist system. Located on the opposite side in this debate are authors such as Patnaik (1986) and Brass (1999) who argue that forms of labour attachment involving coercion persist in modern day India. For them these forms of labour deprive labourers of proletarian status and are incompatible with capitalism as formulated in the classical Marxist model.

The first set of authors argue that in rural India employers can no longer enforce the repayment of loans given to labourers since they do not have either the *de jure* nor the *de facto* backing of the state law enforcement agencies to retrieve runaway indebted labourers. Due to this fact they argue that it is not possible to talk about the continued existence of historical forms of bonded labour in modern day India and that present day arrangements involving cash advances from landlords to labourers are purely economic and devoid of elements of coercion and patronage. For Jan Breman (1993) the relationship between labourers and Anavil Brahmin landlords in modern day Gujarat has lost the extra-economic elements of political patronage and coercion that characterised it in the past. According to him the relationship is now primarily an economic one whereby labourers obtain a subsistence guarantee by seeking employment and cash advances from the Anavils. Given that employers can no longer guarantee the repayment of loans they are reluctant to extend anything more than small advances of cash to their labourers and are no longer willing to cover large expenses for the weddings of labourers and their family members.

For Breman the assertion of the continuity of historical forms of bonded labour in modern day Gujarat ignores the “materialistic and ideological changes that have occurred between landowners and landless in the countryside in South Gujarat” (Breman 1993; 311). He argues that the onset of commercial agriculture and the expansion of the Indian state have largely eliminated the elements of both patronage and coercion that used to previously characterise the relationship between Anavil Brahmin landlords and their Dubla labourers and servants. Whilst in the past the relationship between Anavil Brahmins and their Dubla labourers incorporated political, religious and economic factors, nowadays the relationship is largely a contractual and an economic one. With the expansion of the state and its monopolisation of the use of force the Anavil Brahmin landlords no longer need large numbers of dependants in order to settle their personal feuds; the political function of large numbers of dependants as well as the prestige deriving from it largely cease to exist. Breman argues that once this has happened the Anavils no longer seek to maximise the number of their dependants and instead dedicate themselves to maximising profits with the consequence that they no longer act as patrons towards their labourers.

Tom Brass (1999) on the other hand insists on the continued existence of debt-bondage in modern day India and strongly emphasises the coercive element present in these relationships. Brass makes his argument on the basis of fieldwork carried out in five villages in Haryana arguing that even though landlords in Haryana do not have the backing of the law enforcement agencies they have other informal means of preventing labourers from running away and of ensuring that they repay the loans made to them. Brass shows how caste *panchayats* and kinship rather than the state are used to enforce bondage. For Brass debt-bondage is a method employers have of ensuring themselves a supply of cheap labour by robbing labourers of their proletarian status. He argues that debt-bondage deprives labourers of their capacity for collective action and of agency in the labour market. This contrasts

starkly with Breman's claim that rural labourers in Gujarat are subject only to economic forms of coercion and that their increasing assertiveness is the sign of an emerging proletarian class.⁴

The ethnographic data presented below for the central Punjabi district of Sargodha in Pakistan more closely resembles Haryana as described by Brass than it does Breman's Gujarat. It will be shown that, as in Haryana, debt-bondage is a means for employers to assure themselves cheap and permanent labourers and servants. As in Haryana the kinship ties of labourers are also used by employers in order to enforce the repayment of loans. Where I part with Brass is on his idea that debt-bondage robs labourers of their proletarian status. On this point I argue that the idea that rural labourers in the Pakistani Punjab have proletarian status in the first place is questionable given that they are often subject to forms of formal and informal political compulsion that restricts their ability to dispose of their labour freely and to thereby qualify as proletarians in the strict sense of the word. I argue that despite the increasing incidence of free wage labour, labourers in the Pakistani Punjab largely remain the political subjects of local landlords meaning that vertical patron-client ties persist at the expense of horizontal ties of class. Thus, although my empirical findings from the Pakistani Punjab differ from Breman's for Gujarat, and although in certain ways they resemble Brass' empirical findings for Haryana, my analysis of the issue of class formation largely concurs with Breman's. Breman basically shows that in order for a proletarian class to emerge not only do labour relations have to increasingly take the form of free wage labour as a result of commercialisation but also that the landlords must be largely deprived of their political power. Breman shows that so long as the Anavil Brahmin landlords of Southern Gujarat possessed both political and economic power they continued to play a significant role as patrons but that this ceased to be the case with the advent of commercial agriculture and with the expansion of the Indian state. In other words vertical patron client ties persisted so long as the power to protect and coerce remained in the hands of individual landlords and only once this power was taken out of their hands by a state that was representative of broader segments of society did horizontal ties of class begin to emerge. This paper will show that in the Pakistani Punjab such a transition has not occurred and that vertical ties characterised by both coercion and patronage therefore persist.

Debt-bondage in Bek Sagraana

As was generally the case throughout the rest of the Pakistani Punjab the principal social distinction amongst people living in the village of Bek Sagraana and its surrounding area was the one between the landowners, or *zamindars*, and the landless menial and artisan castes referred to as *kammis*.

Amongst the *zamindars* in the area of Bek Sagraana the *Gondal* sub-caste of *Jats* was dominant in terms of both political influence and wealth principally in the form of land dedicated to citrus orchards.⁵ *Zamindars* were generally referred to with the honorific term *Chowdri* indicating

⁴ The fact that there are large differences in the regional political economies of India means that both Breman and Brass are likely to be right for their respective regions of study.

⁵ In the village there were fourteen *Gondal* households out of a total number of 120 households. Some *Gondals* had land holdings of up to 400 acres and were prominent politicians, lawyers and bureaucrats whilst

chieftainship. Other than in one or two exceptional cases the *kammis*, who constituted the majority of the population in the area of Bek Sagrama, owned no land.⁶ The principal *kammi* castes included cobblers (*Mochis*), bakers (*Machis*), carpenters (*Tarkhans*), blacksmiths (*Lohars*), potters (*Kumhars*), barbers (*Nais*), drummers (*Pirhains*), bards (*Mirasis*) and sweepers (*Mussallis*). Of these the *Mussallis* and the *Mirasis* had the lowest status and were the ones most closely associated with the *Gondal Chowdris* as domestic and farm servants. However, as will be shown below, opportunities for both rural and urban daily wage labour meant that they could now increasingly find employment independent of the *Chowdris*. Other *kammis*, particularly those who no longer engaged in their traditional occupations, and even poor *zamindars* that didn't belong to the dominant *Gondal* caste, were also engaged in daily wage labour and sometimes also became attached servants with the *Gondal Chowdris* if ever they needed credit or mediation with state institutions.

The *Gondal Chowdris* of Bek Sagrama, which made up fourteen out of about 120 households in the village, all traced their descent back four generations to an apical ancestor known as *Kala Gondal*. Within this lineage there were large differences in wealth and political position but kinship ties of descent and marriage meant that, on the whole, the *Gondals* looked after each other's interests above those of members of other *zamindar* castes and those of the village *kammis*. Although the *Gondals* of Bek Sagrama already had influence as village headmen during British colonial times, their local influence and wealth increased dramatically after members of the lineage first entered provincial level politics during the time of the populist leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Subsequently members of the Bek Sagrama *Gondal* lineage became members of provincial assemblies on several occasions and were widely known to have used their increased political influence to enrich themselves and to further expand their power base. Increased political influence also allowed several *Gondals* to get involved in lucrative criminal activities in the eighties when cheap weapons and heroin flooded Pakistan as a result of the Afghan *Jihad* supported by the military government of General Zia-ul-Haq. Competition over political and economic resources coincided with the inflow of cheap weapons from the tribal areas of the North West Frontier Province meaning that the struggle for political influence became increasingly associated with armed conflict. As a result of this, influential *Gondal Chowdris* came to require heavily armed retainers often recruited amongst wanted criminals and local village toughs.⁷

Control over access to various state institutions and privatised control over means of coercion, through the use of armed gunmen, meant that the *Gondal Chowdris* not only had economic power, in virtue of their possession of the land, but also political power. Their entry into provincial politics had propelled many of them on an upwardly mobile path and the generation now between twenty and forty was more educated than that of their parents. Members of this generation were frequently brought up in cities such as Sargodha or Lahore and were fluent English speakers. Many of them were

the poorest had holdings of below five acres like other minor *zamindars* in the area such as the *Lurkas*, the *Sagranas* and the *Mohajir Rajputs* who on average owned less than five acres of land.

⁶ The exceptions to this included a family of *Lohars* and a *mussalli* who had been rewarded for his faithful services as a gunman to the head of one of the village factions. In the village itself *kammis* made up 35% of the population but this proportion was much higher in clusters of houses surrounding farmsteads known as *deras*. In the *deras* all houses other than that of the landlord were *kammi* households. On the dera where I lived sixteen out of eighteen households were *kammi* households for example.

⁷ This was held to be practiced by various politicians throughout the Punjab. Protecting thieves and criminals was necessary for fighting and intimidating opponents. In exchange for protection from the police and the courts criminals had to give a share of their profits to their patrons.

becoming lawyers, politicians and civil servants whilst others joined the police and the armed forces. As a result of this the *Gondals* were becoming increasingly established within state structures thereby further enhancing their capacity to act as political patrons for the local population. On the other hand members of the *kammi* castes were excluded from politics and the highest rank that they were likely to achieve within state institutions was as low ranking school or hospital guards (*chowkidars*). Such positions were highly coveted by *kammis* due to the job security and decent pay that they provided, but they could only be obtained through the patronage of the local *Gondal Chowdris*.

Villagers relied almost exclusively on personal contacts with *Gondal* patrons for most of the things they needed to do involving state institutions such as the police, the courts, hospitals and even schools. If, for example, a person needed to file a complaint with the police, in the form of a First Instance Report (FIR), they needed to go through a *Chowdri*. The *Chowdris* could influence the police through their political connections or through kinship and/or friendship connections within the police force itself. Additionally it was widely known that various *Chowdris* had connections with the police in virtue of their varied criminal activities that included buffalo theft, heroin trafficking and the smuggling of stolen cars. Police were widely held to take shares in the proceeds from these activities.⁸ Common villagers were unlikely to have such connections and for them to personally approach the police was at best futile and at worst potentially costly and dangerous. The Punjabi police was, and remain, notorious for torture and extra-judicial killings meaning that villagers greatly feared them. Villagers feared that the police would implicate them in fabricated cases in order to extract whatever money they might have.⁹ Gunmen, who frequently landed in jail on behalf of their employers, told me that the wise ones amongst them always carried opium to eat in case they were caught and subjected to beatings by the police because the opium would numb the pain. Those who did muster the courage to approach the police to file a complaint could end up spending a month's wages in bribes and for the filing of the actual FIR.¹⁰ Additionally it was taken for granted that it was impossible to win a court case without the support of an influential *Chowdri* with contacts in the judiciary. The patronage of *Chowdris* was also necessary for more mundane issues such as obtaining an identity card, a school certificate, or in order to obtain treatment in a public hospital.

The perception, and the reality upon which it fed, of the fact that the *Chowdris* had a monopoly over access to state institutions meant that villagers were largely at the mercy of the *Chowdris* when it came to getting anything done that involved these institutions. This meant that most villagers were aware of the need to retain the favour of the *Chowdris* if ever they were to recur to them for patronage in the future. Thus most villagers and, *kammis* in particular, at least played lip

⁸ The involvement of the police in criminality in Pakistan was a well known fact. I witnessed this on one occasion when an illegal gambling event was held in the village and a low ranking policeman came to collect his dues in exchange for the police not interfering with proceedings.

⁹ Villagers feared lower ranking officers who were in the streets because they claimed that the officers planted drugs into people's pockets when they weren't aware of it and then had them arrested in order to extort money out of them. The victims of such practices were generally the poorest and most vulnerable since police officers knew that they could get away with harassing them whereas harassing people with influence would probably eventually land them into trouble.

¹⁰ In one instance the driver of one of the *Chowdris* decided to personally place an FIR and between all the trips to the police station, bribes to the clerks and the 500 rupee cost of the actually placing an FIR he spent 1500 rupees, the equivalent of a month's pay.

service to the norms of deference and obsequiousness that came into play when dealing with the *Chowdris*.

Both the perception and the reality of the fact that *Chowdris* had privileged access to the state also meant that they could largely get away with a wide range of exploitative and coercive practices towards servants and *kammis*. *Kammis* and servants were often subjected to both humiliating verbal and physical abuse. Furthermore the sexual abuse of female servants, most commonly low caste *Mussalli* women, by the more disreputable members of the *Gondal* caste was widely known to take place.¹¹ It was in fact quite common for such *Chowdris* to boast about their sexual affairs with their female servants and other lower caste village women. Although the more God fearing *Gondal Chowdris*¹² were likely to be less abusive they could still arbitrarily refrain from paying their daily wage labourer's (*dihari*) or their attached servants (*naukar*) the wages that were due to them. It was also common for *Chowdris* to make random *kammis* who happened to cross their path, and who were not their paid servants, perform all sorts of odd jobs and errands free of charge. They often sent them on errands regardless of whether they might have any other pressing appointment or task at hand. Refusal by a *kammi* to do what he was required to do was likely to incur the anger of the *Chowdri* so that rather than have to refuse *kammis* tried their best to avoid places where *Chowdris* might be sitting in assembly unless they needed something from them.

Additionally *Chowdris* had the power to forcefully evict people from their houses, to confiscate livestock or to impose fines on the basis of perceived or real offenses by labourers or servants. One elderly *Gondal Chowdri* was known to frequently impose fines of up to five hundred rupees if he saw a *kammi*'s cattle (*mavaishi*) trampling or feeding upon his fields. The same *Chowdri* once imposed a fine of Rs 30,000 (roughly £300) on three young carpenters and beat them with the soles of his shoes¹³ for having stolen large amounts of citrus to sell in the local market town during the night.

From the above it is clear that, unlike in the case of Gujarat where according to Breman the Anavil Brahmins only retained the coercive power inherent in wage relations, in the Punjabi village of Bek SAGRANA the *Gondal Chowdris* retained both significant private coercive power as well as significant political power as patrons through their privileged access to state resources. Their virtual monopoly over access to state institutions meant that they continued to play an indispensable role as local patrons for the inhabitants of the area. Although, as will be shown below, there had been an increase in free wage labour and an expansion in the job opportunities beyond the village labourers still had to approach the *Chowdris* for credit and patronage during times of hardship. In what follows I will examine the reasons that led labourers to seek patronage and employment with the *Gondal Chowdris* as well as the reasons why the *Gondal Chowdris* actually extended patronage and credit to labourers. Finally I will look at the ways in which labourers who had taken loans were coerced into

¹¹ The Hudood ordinances implemented in 1980 by General Zia-ul-Haq meant that evidentiary requirements made it difficult for perpetrators to be convicted of rape. To prove rape four adult Muslim males were required have witnessed the act of penetration. If there was no such evidence a woman who had filed a complaint of rape could actually end up being convicted for admitting to adultery. This coupled with the shame involved with having been raped meant that women were very unlikely to seek redress for it with the authorities.

¹² This is how villagers would refer to them '*jo Chowdri Allah se darta hai*'.

¹³ Being beaten with the soles of shoes was considered to be very humiliating.

repaying them. The role of the police as well as the threat and use of privatized physical coercion by the *Chowdris* and the fear this instilled in villagers will be examined.

Livelihood Strategies and the Demand for Labour

Becoming an attached farm or household servant with one of the *Gondal Chowdris* was not an attractive option to most people although the uncertainty of daily wage labour and the need for credit to cover large wedding or medical expenses meant that it was one that they frequently had to recur to. On several occasions when I asked daily wage labourers why they didn't work as attached servants for a *Chowdri* they responded saying "*tauba, tauba*", which translates as 'repentance, repentance,' meaning that they repented for their sins so that God might have mercy upon them and not punish them by making them work for a *Chowdri*. It was well known that working for a *chowdri* was both physically and mentally exhausting. Servants had to be at the constant beck and call of their masters and were frequently subjected to verbal abuse referring to their low caste status and to the female members of their family.

In what follows I examine the livelihood strategies available to labourers and the reasons why at certain times circumstances could compel them to become attached servants with the *Gondal Chowdris*. I then briefly examine the different tasks and benefits as well as the difficulties that becoming an attached household or farm servant entailed. In the final section I examine the ways in which servants were made to repay their loans and at how they went about doing it.

The demand for daily wage labourers in the village of Bek Sagraana peaked during the citrus harvesting season between the end of December and the end of March and then again during the wheat harvest in March and April. Throughout the rest of the year agricultural employment was intermittent and poorly paid and labourers could find themselves out of work for several days at a time.

This highly seasonal demand for agricultural labour was largely the result of the widespread introduction of tangerine and orange orchards that began in the seventies. The introduction of citrus had also played an important role in reducing the area of land that the *Chowdris* dedicated to sharecropping thereby causing many erstwhile sharecroppers to turn to wage labour.¹⁴ The *Chowdris* had introduced citrus because it was both more profitable and less labour intensive than other forms of cultivation including sugarcane, wheat, cotton, maize, fodder, rice or vegetable cultivation. This

¹⁴ Since the sixties there has been a general decline in sharecropping throughout Pakistan. In the Punjab province land under sharecropping agreements constituted 37.2% of land use in 1960 and only 14.2% in 1990 (Zaidi 1999: 42). The reasons for the decline in sharecropping vary in different areas but largely relates to increasing mechanisation and the increasingly widespread use of tractors instead of bullocks, the introduction of HYV seeds and to the introduction of cash crops.

meant that they could afford to spend less time in the village overlooking agricultural tasks and spend more time in the cities where their children were being educated.¹⁵

The greatest demand for labour in the citrus orchards occurred during the three months between the end of December and the end of March when the fruit was ready for harvesting.¹⁶ A contractor (*wapari*) who purchased the fruit whilst it was still on the trees, based on roughly estimated yields, was in charge of organising the harvest. This included obtaining and organising labourers as well as transporting and selling the fruit. Depending on the size of the orchard in question, and on the speed with which the contractor wanted to complete the harvest, citrus harvesting teams could comprise as many as forty people. This included fruit pickers who climbed up the trees, people to carry away the fruit in large wicker baskets and load the truck(s) and sometimes a group of people to sort the fruit according to grades of quality and box them.¹⁷ At this time of year it was common for various contractors and their teams of labourers to be working simultaneously in the orchards of different *Chowdris*.

The *Chowdris* had nothing to do with the process other than finding the contractor that offered them the best price. During this time, therefore, labourers dealt directly with the contractors rather than with the *Chowdris*. Fruit pickers earned between Rs. 100 and Rs. 120 per day (roughly £1-£1.20) meaning that if they worked for 25 days in a month they could earn Rs. 2500 per month for the three months over which the citrus harvest extended itself. This, as will be shown below, was significantly more than what attached farm or domestic servants earned in monthly wages as well as more than what daily wage labourers could expect to earn throughout the rest of the year with the exception of the wheat harvesting season.

During the rest of the year the demand for labour from the citrus orchard was relatively weak and the *Chowdris*, or their overseers (*munshis*) if they were wealthy enough to have one, were directly involved in organising and recruiting labour for the tasks at hand. The orchards had to be irrigated throughout the year, particularly during and before the flowering of the trees in the spring in order to ensure an abundance of fruit. This task was usually carried out by a single labourer; usually an attached farm servant. The orchards also had to be fertilised once a year and sprayed with pesticides about six times a year. These tasks were also frequently carried out by a farm servant and a couple of hired wage labourers who were paid a standard wage of Rs. 80 per day. In addition, during the summer months, some labourers were hired to trim the trees and get rid of the dead branches not already removed by people using them for firewood.

The second greatest demand for agricultural labour occurred shortly after the end of the citrus harvesting season for the wheat harvest starting around the middle of April. Although citrus provided the bulk of the *Gondal Chowdris*' agricultural income they all dedicated some of their land to wheat and fodder cultivation. It was possible to cultivate both of these crops in the citrus orchards when the trees were still relatively short and didn't stop the sunlight from reaching the crops. For the most part, however, the *Chowdris* saved some land solely for the cultivation of these crops. Wheat in the form

¹⁵ Whilst the *Chowdris* from the generation of people aged above forty had received at least primary school education in the village, the younger generation largely received an urban education.

¹⁶ Depending on the prices that could be obtained for the fruit and upon how hard-pressed the *Chowdris* were for cash they had a span of three months to sell of the fruit in their orchards.

¹⁷ The boxes were frequently made on the spot.

of unleavened bread (*roti*) was the basic staple of everyday life and all households stored wheat to last them for the entire year if they could afford to do so. The wheat was stored in large padlocked aluminium trunks and taken to one of the several mills in the village in order to be turned into flour. Additionally the *Chowdris* kept an important amount of wheat in order to pay their servants and the *kammis* that occasionally provided services to them and who were paid fixed amounts of wheat on a yearly basis. Fodder on the other hand was used to feed the cattle¹⁸ as well as for sale to whoever needed some.

During the wheat harvest plots of land were allotted by the *Chowdris* to teams of labourers of up to five people who were frequently, but not necessarily, close kin belonging to a single household. The labourers were frequently the *kammis* or the house tenants of the *Chowdris* that hired them. The wheat was cut by squatting men with sickles and then tied-up into bundles that were piled up in order to be eventually put through a threshing machine. The work was considered to be physically exhausting, and only the able bodied took part in it, but it was also considered to be the most important and profitable work of the year. Teams of labourers were given three *maunds* (a maund = 40 kg.) per acre harvested meaning that at Rs. 400 per *maund* of wheat a team of five labourers could make Rs. 250 per head if they harvested an acre in a day. Although wheat could be sold and directly converted into cash most people stored it for consumption throughout the year and only occasionally sold some whenever they needed cash.

Outside the wheat and citrus harvest there was no time of the year when almost everyone was working out in the fields. People took up wage labour both in and out of agriculture and frequently found employment in construction either building new structures for local *Chowdris*, who had ready cash after the citrus harvest, or building roads and other forms of public infrastructure further afield.¹⁹ Finding work often depended upon word of mouth and upon personal ties with specific employers.

Daily Wage Labour versus Permanent Attached Labour

Labourers told me that the main advantage with free wage labour was that it allowed them to take advantage of the peaks in the agricultural cycle during the wheat and citrus harvests when daily wages were at their highest. Another advantage was that the economic compulsions of wage labour gave them a relatively greater degree of freedom than the extra-economic forms of compulsion that they were subject to if and when they became attached servants. Labourers could now find work with employers as far afield as Islamabad and their livelihoods no longer solely depended upon the *Gondal Chowdris* of Bek Sagraana who in any case spent each time more of their time living in cities. Both *Chowdris* and *Kammis* told me that villagers were relatively freer from the influence of the *Gondal Chowdris* than they had been in the past.

The disadvantages that labourers saw in free wage labour was that outside the peaks in labour demand between December and May it could be difficult to find work on a daily basis. Free wage

¹⁸ All households who could afford it owned cattle for milk that was used to drink and to make yoghurt and *lassi*.

¹⁹ Five out of the nine brothers comprising the sibling set of the village *Lohars* went to build roads in Lahore for over four months with a contractor that they knew was working there.

labourers also faced a significant degree of uncertainty as to whether employers with whom they didn't necessarily have longstanding relationships would actually ever pay them.²⁰ In addition to this free wage labourers faced greater difficulties obtaining patronage and loans, both small consumption loans as well as larger loans to cover wedding and medical expenses, than attached farm and domestic servants. Both the uncertainty of free wage labour and the need for patronage meant that many free wage labourers opted to become attached servants with the *Chowdris*, sometimes out of necessity and at other times simply for the sake of security, despite lower wages and work conditions that were known to be exploitative and abusive.

Labourers frequently took up employment with the *Gondal Chowdris* because it allowed them to take both small consumption loans and larger loans and because it was supposed to entitle them to other forms of patronage including support in case of a dispute, mediation with state institutions and even help in retrieving an eloped wife or daughter.²¹ Part of the reason why the *Chowdris* extended such forms of patronage and gave labourers large loans was that they thereby ensured themselves a cheap and permanent supply of labour. Having servants was also part of a display of status and power that demonstrated a *Chowdri's* wealth and influence.²² Unlike in modern day Gujarat, as described by Breman, having dependants in the Pakistani Punjab continued to play an important political function for the *Chowdris* because certain types of servant, namely gunmen, were frequently used to settle disputes with enemies (*dushman*) and because dependants more generally were mobilised for their votes during election times. However the *Chowdris* frequently complained that village *kammis* no longer wanted to work and had become lazy and that the only way to obtain permanent servants was by extending loans. Many *Chowdris* blamed this on the fact that the *kammis* had inflated job expectations as a result of a combination of education, television and easier access to urban centres. Extending loans meant that *Chowdris* guaranteed themselves cheap labour that was at their constant beck and call until the time when the debt was fully serviced. Debts could be serviced within weeks or after an entire generation depending upon both the size of the loan and upon whether the labourer had able bodied siblings that could help him service the debt.

The *Chowdris* generally extended loans and other forms of patronage to people whom they expected to become farm servants, domestic servants or even drivers and gunmen. It was not uncommon for attached servants to end up having to do a combination of these depending upon their employer. Most commonly they ended up having to do a combination of domestic and farm work, despite generally being hired for either one or the other task. Only in instances where they were hired by village factional leaders involved in politics was it usual for them to become gunmen and only the wealthiest *Chowdris* were likely to hire drivers.²³ Farm work usually involved feeding and milking

²⁰ It was not uncommon for employers to defer payments indefinitely or for them to pay less than what they had initially agreed upon.

²¹ Mustafa Khar who was Chief Minister of Punjab under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and who was otherwise known as the Lion of the Punjab (Sher-e-Punjab) and made internationally famous by Tehmina Durrani's book *My Feudal Lord*, was particularly popular in his constituency for the fact that he both stopped buffalo theft and that he was very effective at retrieving eloped women.

²² The greatest display of influence and power was through armed gunmen. Having gunmen showed that a *Chowdri* was powerful and to be feared. These were qualities deemed to be necessary in a ruthless political environment where men considered to be weak could end up having their land and wealth taken away from them by more aggressive opponents.

²³ There was a total of six *Gondal Chowdris* who had drivers in the village and its surroundings.

the livestock,²⁴ irrigating the orchards and the crops, as well as sowing crops and driving the tractor. The domestic tasks that farm servants ended up having to attend to often included serving food and tea to the *Chowdris* and their guests, cleaning, and being constantly sent on errands to fetch and buy things, frequently well into the night. Even though they might have their own house in the village, servants were frequently asked to stay the night in order to guard the livestock from roaming cattle thieves and in order for them to be at hand if the need for their services arose. Additionally attached servants had to work throughout the year and if ever they wanted to take a day off it was generally the case that they had to personally provide a replacement that would carry out their work. Finally the servants were frequently told to carry out the tasks given to them in an imperious and abusive manner by the *Chowdris*. The *Chowdris* that drank alcohol often grew more abusive towards servants with drink and frequently entertained themselves by humiliating them.

For all their labour farm and domestic servants rarely earned more than Rs. 1500 plus eight *maunds* of wheat per year, plus two meals a day, a cup of tea and at least one *shalwar kameez* suit per year on Eid. In addition to this the *Chowdris* often provided small sums of credit that they recorded in notebooks. The meals provided were frugal and frequently consisted in leftovers and the clothes provided were often used and worn. If we include wheat and five hundred rupees worth of old clothes in the yearly total of what an attached servant earned it amounted to roughly Rs 18,100 (Roughly £181) which divided by the 365 equals Rs. 49.6 per day.²⁵ Assuming that an employer was relatively generous with food we can add Rs. 20 per day to this total thereby leaving an attached servant with a daily wage of about Rs. 69.6 per day. This was less than the lowest wages earned by free wage labourers outside the peak of the agricultural cycle, usually around Rs. 80 per day, and significantly less than daily wages earned during the citrus and wheat harvest. Therefore it appears that in addition to considerations of status part of the reason for hiring permanent attached was that the *Chowdris* thereby not only assured themselves a ready supply of labour but also one that was cheaper than hiring labourers on a daily wage basis. Hiring a labourer that had taken a large loan reduced the cost of labour even further and there were instances when labourers with debts of around Rs. 30,000 were only paid Rs. 10,000 per year which amounted to Rs. 27.4 per day. This happened because the *Chowdris* had no incentive to make large loans unless in so doing they could significantly reduce the cost of labour. As will be shown below such low wages meant that it could be extremely difficult for servants to service their debt meaning that the *Chowdris* were guaranteed with a long term supply of cheap labour.

As a result of being overworked, poorly paid and abused servants were often resentful towards their employers and frequently vented their feelings towards their masters by badmouthing them, stealing from them, and by pilfering and dragging their feet. Servants frequently told me that their masters were miserly (*kanjoos*) and greedy (*lalchi*) and that they were insensitive and hard hearted and that they evaded their obligations as *Chowdris*. They frequently complained that their masters lied about not having any money to advance to them and constantly made up excuses not to have to extend their patronage. On one occasion I saw a servant throw angry punches and spit at the photograph of his master. Additionally servants often stole whatever they could get away with from their masters. Most frequently they stole food and fruit from their master's orchards. They often ate and pilfered their master's food supplies as soon as the latter were away from the village. Whilst

²⁴ Most of the *Chowdris* owned some livestock in the form of cows and buffaloes for the production of milk for domestic consumption.

²⁵ This is calculated with the price of wheat at Rs. 400 per *maund*.

doing this one servant told me that it would teach his master a lesson for being so stingy. I also directly witnessed occasions when servants made purposely long calls on their master's landline in order to run up a large phone bills.

These 'weapons of the weak' were however ultimately ineffective and even counterproductive in that they resulted in greater suspicion and therefore harsher treatment by the Chowdris. The fact that they didn't just walk out of these jobs and leave the *Chowdris* behind but resorted instead to such acts was more of a sign of weakness, by virtue of their politico-economic situation, than a sign of any real bargaining power that might help them to improve their living and working conditions. This therefore raises the question of what it was exactly that prevented them from running away and made them have to endure such unfavourable working conditions in order to service their debts.

The Enforcement of Debt Servicing

Several factors combined to make running away both difficult and futile. To run away it was in the first place necessary to have a place to run away to. Servants had few places outside their home village where they could run to and be beyond the reach of the *Chowdris*. This was because for the most part they had few contacts in faraway cities that they could rely on to help them find employment and accommodation. If they ran away to nearby villages or even to the nearby town of Sargodha the *Chowdris* were likely to find them through their political and friendship ties with other *Chowdris* in the region and in town. If they did have friends or relatives in faraway cities like Rawalpindi, Faislabad, Jhang or Lahore, relatives that stayed behind in the village were likely to know where these friends or relatives lived and were likely to tell the *Chowdri* who could then easily retrieve the escaped servant. It was also widely believed that the *Chowdris* could enlist the support of the police in order to retrieve and even jail escaped bonded labourers although this hadn't happened to any bonded labourers that I interviewed or interacted with. However findings by Human Rights Watch (1995; 70) confirm that the Pakistani police frequently arrest bonded labourers who resist their employers or who try to file charges against them. The police arrest them on the basis of fabricated charges of theft and routinely fail to file complaints against employers whom they have business with (*ibid*).

In most cases, however, the *Chowdris* could rely on the kin of attached servants to ensure that they repaid their loans and didn't run away. When a *Chowdri* made a loan to a labourer he generally obtained a guarantor (*zaman*) from amongst the labourer's household kinsmen who was responsible for repaying the loan, in labour or in kind, if ever the labourer failed to meet his obligations because he either ran away, became ill or died. In cases where the house of an attached servant was located on the land of the employer it was generally taken for granted that other able bodied household members would be made responsible in case the attached servant defaulted on his debt servicing obligations. It was therefore in the interest of kinsmen to prevent their attached relatives from running away. It was, in fact, in the interest of kinsmen even to help their attached relatives to service their debts as this could prevent the latter from growing weary of their work and running away thereby leaving the kinsmen with the burden of servicing the debt. The way they helped their attached kinsmen was by sustaining them economically so that they didn't need to take their monthly wages from the *Chowdri*. Thus an indebted attached servant who was paid Rs. 10,000 per year could eliminate that amount

from his debt if he refrained from claiming his wages and relied on his kinsmen to cover for his basic needs.

The amount of time that an indebted servant took to repay a loan with his labour largely depended upon whether he had the financial support of close kinsmen, most commonly from siblings. One *Mussalli* who worked for a *Chowdri* in order to repay a loan of Rs.60, 000, taken to cover the medical treatment of his father suffering from heart disease as well as his elder brother's wedding expenses, managed to fully service the debt within a two year period thanks to the help of his two siblings and thanks to the proceeds of the sale of some livestock. He managed to reduce his debt by Rs. 10,000 in the first year by taking none of his wages, which added up to Rs. 10,000 per year, and by subsisting with Rs. 300 per month from his siblings to cover for basic necessities other than food which was provided by the *Chowdri*. In the second year he shifted to another *Chowdri* who offered to pay him Rs. 15,000 per year and who purchased his remaining debt of Rs. 50,000 from the previous employer.²⁶ In that year he further reduced his debt by Rs. 15,000 by not taking any of his wages. The remaining Rs. 45,000 was paid through the sale of some goats and a buffalo.

On the other hand when indebted servants had no able bodied siblings or parents to help them out, repaying a loan could take an entire lifetime and rather than see their debts diminish they were likely to see them grow. The repayment of a loan was made even more difficult if in addition illness and/or drug addiction came to afflict a household.²⁷ In one instance a *Mussalli* who was a heroin addict had given his seven year old son over to a *Gondal Chowdri* in exchange for Rs. 500 per month and various small cash advances.²⁸ The *Mussalli* household in question had come to depend on the young boy, known as Fazi, because the father, as a result of his heroin addiction, was unable to do regular physical work and because there was no other able bodied male in the household. By the time Fazi had turned seventeen the debt had reached Rs. 20,000 as a result of the household continually having to take loans. In addition to taking loans for the household the father had sold much of the furniture in the house in order to finance his heroin addiction. The debt further increased by Rs. 30,000 when Fazi, now a young man of seventeen, and his sister got married. At the time of fieldwork their debt had reached Rs. 50,000 and the *Gondal Chowdri* had decided to cut off any further flow of credit because it was becoming unlikely that they would ever be able to repay the loan.

The situation for Fazi had, however, become more hopeful as he now had a younger sibling of working age who was working in a vermicelli (*sevia*) factory in Sargodha and who was contributing to family finances. The father had also ceased to be a burden since he was far away in Islamabad where he had managed to find work in a market carrying people's shopping bags and could therefore

²⁶ It was possible for indebted labourers to leave their current employer so long as another employer was willing to purchase their debt. It was an unwritten rule amongst the *Chowdris* that they didn't snatch each other's bonded labourers, even when they were hardened enemies. Snatching a bonded labourer was seen as a lowly act by the *Chowdris* as it was tantamount to stealing money.

²⁷ There were around fifteen heroin addicts in the village and surrounding areas. They purchased the heroin from one of the local *Gondal Chowdris* and from a nearby Pathan settler village (*Chak*). To finance their addiction many of them were involved in theft. I personally had a jumper, an old camera, shoes and a bicycle stolen from me and on each occasion people blamed the heroin addicts. There was clearly some truth to this as I found out when we caught the person who stole my bicycle and who was in fact a heroin addict. One addict that I often spoke to admitted to the fact that desperation to get his daily dose often compelled him to steal.

²⁸ Child servants were very common. It was the parents and not the children who were paid wages for the labour of their child and these wages were significantly lower than wages paid to adults.

personally finance his heroin addiction. Additionally a charitable *kammi* who had purchased some land in the village had given Fazi a baby buffalo to rear. He was in charge of rearing the animal and when it was fully grown they would share the proceeds on a 50/50 basis. An adult buffalo could sell at about Rs. 80,000 meaning that he would be able to reduce his debt by up to Rs. 40,000. The only setback was now that his sister had contracted tuberculosis and her in-laws had sent her back home because she had become a financial burden. Medical treatment was expensive and Fazi, who was desperate to repay his debt, complained that it was his sister in-law's duty to take care of her and he was threatening not to make any monetary contributions towards her treatment.

Conclusions

This paper has shown that changes in the regional economy resulting from the mechanisation of agriculture and from the introduction of citrus orchards together with broader economic expansion in non-agricultural sectors resulted in the decreased economic dependence of rural labourers on the *Chowdris*. However these changes in the regional economy were not matched by changes in the highly unequal political structure and, unlike in the situation described by Jan Breman for Indian Gujarat, the livelihood strategies of labourers continued to be circumscribed by the political influence of the *Chowdris*. Not only did the *Chowdris* have the means to physically coerce labourers, in certain cases through their gunmen, but they also had the virtual monopoly over access to the state meaning that they continued to play a crucial role as patrons. Labourers continued to largely depend on the *Chowdris* for patronage in the form of mediation with state institutions, dispute resolution and for the extension of credit. The result of this was that despite their dislike of the *Chowdris* labourers going through periods of economic and political hardship were compelled to seek attached employment with them. In certain circumstances it was even possible for *Chowdris* to demand that labourers take up permanent employment with them. This was particularly the case where labourers also happened to be house-tenants of the *Chowdris* and thereby faced the possible threat of eviction for non-compliance.

Thus unlike in rural Indian Gujarat, where labourers were increasingly independent from as well as increasingly assertive towards their employers, labourers in the Pakistani Punjab continued to depend on the *Chowdris* in various ways and their behaviour towards them remained solicitous and often obsequious. Additionally it was seen that for the *Chowdris* having servants and dependants continued to play a significant political function because it allowed them to mobilise votes during elections and to also mobilise the use of force in order to settle feuds. The relationship between labourers and *Chowdris* in the Pakistan Punjab therefore retained a strong political element to it meaning that unlike in Breman's Gujarat the transition from vertical patron-client ties to horizontal ties of class had not fully taken place.

I conclude that the principal reason for these differences can be said to lie in broad differences between the Indian and the Pakistani states. Whilst in Pakistan political representation is largely restricted to an elite class that often collapses the distinction between the state and civil society, political representation in India is comparatively more inclusive and the distinction between the state

and civil society is, on the whole, somewhat more secure.²⁹ The high concentration, and personal appropriation, of political power within the hands of the landed elite and the fact that in Pakistan labour and lower ranking castes have virtually no political representation means that rural employers can often behave with impunity towards both servants and labourers. There are of course wide regional variations in the politico-economic conditions of labour in both Pakistan and in India meaning that there are areas where labourers are better off and others where they are worse off. It was, for example, noted that the most extreme forms of bonded labour in Pakistan are reported to occur in interior Sindh and in the Southern Punjab where the distribution of political and economic resources is most highly skewed. Where the distribution of political and economic resources is somewhat less skewed, as in Northern Punjab and in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), the condition of labourers is significantly better than in central and Southern Punjab.³⁰ Likewise the debate between Jan Breman and Tom Brass shows that, rather unsurprisingly, there are wide regional differences within India as well. It was seen that Brass' Haryana resembled the Pakistani Punjab more closely than Breman's Gujarat in that employers were able to enforce debt obligations through kinship ties and caste *panchayats*. However the main difference between Brass' material on Haryana and the material presented here for the Pakistani Punjab still remains the difference in the role of the state in the reproduction of bonded labour. Brass' landlords do not seem to have captured the state to the same degree as the *Gondal Chowdris* nor, as far as Brass' description shows, do they go around with groups of armed retainers. Arguably therefore the capacity of landlords in rural Haryana to enforce debt bondage is somewhat more restricted than it is in the central Pakistani Punjab.

Finally another broad difference related to the nature of the Pakistani and Indian states and that accounts for differing labour conditions between the two countries is their historical and present day relationship with labour movements and interests. Whilst Pakistani governments have been consistent in their opposition to labour movements and interests Indian development strategies have at least recognised the importance of workers and the Indian constitution even recognised the importance of workers and workers organisations to development and democracy. In Pakistan, on the other hand, the adoption of top-down neoliberal economic ideologies meant that labour was largely seen as a factor of production and cheap migrant labour from rural areas was seen as a prerequisite for rapid industrialisation. Under the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) of 1952, agricultural workers and workers in other sectors deemed to be essential to the welfare of the nation were even prohibited from unionizing in order to keep labour cheap. Furthermore throughout the cold war labour movements and organisations were attacked as potentially subversive and communist. Thus although the working and living conditions of labourers in India are very far from being ideal, political representation³¹ and the possibility for collective action gives them a bargaining power that

²⁹ For a discussion of this issue in the Indian context see J. Parry 2000 'The crisis of corruption' and 'the idea of India': a worm's eye view in I. Pardo, ed. *The Morals of Legitimacy*. New York. Berghahn Books.

³⁰ Furthermore in the area where fieldwork was carried out there were also differences in the incidence and nature of bonded labour between different villages. *Chowdris* in other villages did not necessarily have the same reputation for their high handed behaviour and for their involvement in criminalized politics as the *Gondals*. The villagers of both *Bek Sagrana* as well as of neighbouring villages generally held that the *Gondal Chowdris* were particularly harsh in their treatment of servants and *kammis*.

³¹ By political representation I refer to labour unions as well as to the fact that different segments of Indian society have been guaranteed political representation through a system of caste based reservations.

they lack in Pakistan and which is likely to account for the increasingly open assertiveness that Breman documents for labourers in rural Gujarat.

The fact that in the rural Punjab, and elsewhere in Pakistan, labourers had no means of collectively addressing their situation meant that they continued to rely upon the goodwill and the patronage of the *Chowdris* for their basic welfare. This did not mean, however, that servants bought into the ideologies of patronage and protection upheld by the *Chowdris*. On the whole servants thought that the dispensation of patronage was a tool used to obtain their labour on terms that were favourable to the *Chowdris* and highly unfavourable to them. Additionally the fact that they stole, and pilfered from the *Chowdris* and continually badmouthed them showed that they were under no illusions as to the benevolence of their patrons. Therefore the fact that labourers generally hoped to find benevolent patrons to advance and protect their interests did not demonstrate that they somehow bought into a hegemonic ideology that was against their interests. Instead it demonstrated that for most labourers finding a benevolent patron, rather than direct political action, was the most pragmatic and realistic, if not the only, course of action available in order for them to address their political and economic problems.

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