Agrarian Change and Class Conflict in Gujarat, India

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Only a few decades ago rural India was described in terms of poverty and stagnation, a society imprisoned in tradition. Gunnar Myrdal’s well-known study published in 1968 provides a prominent illustration of this school of thought, which dominated Western debates on development around the middle of the twentieth century. While his Asian Drama had a wider setting, the author based his argument mainly on the southern part of this populous continent, more precisely on the incapacity for self-transformation that seemed to characterize former British India. Myrdal noted with concern that development efforts were largely nullified by the enormous population growth caused by a fall in the death rate and a continuing high birth rate. Major institutional reforms were urgently needed, in his opinion, to overcome the underutilization of labor, which hindered any increase of agrarian production. What he had in mind was a radical redistribution of agrarian resources, which would place land in the hands of the tillers. The objectives of such a basic reform were twofold: a political one, namely, reduction of the rigid inequalities in the social structure; and an economic one, namely, the optimal use that a much greater mass of owners would make of the means of production allotted to them. A closer and more realistic assessment of policies and politics, however, convinced Myrdal that government lacked the will and the capability needed for transforming the rural system in this way. In his opinion, the failure to introduce any fundamental change into traditional property relations and the ingrained attitudes of agrarian people who were perceived not to be “development-oriented,” was due to the “soft” character of the Asiatic state.

That social dynamics were nevertheless not entirely lacking was shown by the concentration of landholdings among a comparatively small village elite, mostly members of upwardly mobile peasant castes who had in recent times gained political power. Myrdal was well aware of the growing weight of this class and the concomitant deterioration in the position of sharecroppers and agri-
cultural laborers. His skepticism regarding the chances that the social balance would be tilted in favor of the great mass of small producers led Myrdal to advocate an agrarian strategy that would enable the small landowning elite to provide leadership to, and form the social basis of, the process of economic growth.

Although not elaborately or even well argued, this policy recommendation became a major turning point in Myrdal’s analysis. The veiled bias in favor of capital owners already shown by bureaucratic agencies had to be changed into purposeful and systematic promotion of the interests of dominant peasants in order that their potential to develop into genuine rural entrepreneurs of modernization might be realized. The increasing social differentiation, an inevitable result of this scenario, would have to be compensated by providing protection and security to the labor force working on the land. Using the catch slogan of “welfare capitalism,” Myrdal suggested that the authorities should “give a small plot of land—and with it a dignity and a fresh outlook on life as well as a minor independent source of income—to members of the landless lower strata” (Vol. II, 1968: 1382). The Swedish economist thus implied that, since a more radical path to Indian development was unattainable, social inequality could in any event be reduced or at least curbed by capitalist methods. By holding out the prospect that a better life was within reach of all those who owned even a little land, he seems indirectly to argue that these lowest classes, which form the majority of the rural population, would see the need for self-restraint in their demographic behavior and consequently would practice birth control out of their own interest.

The course of events has corroborated Myrdal’s opinion. The route he favored, much more actively promoted by Indian policymakers in the 1970s and 1980s than he had foreseen (Chakravarty, 1987: 24), has indeed facilitated a shift toward a capitalist mode of production in agriculture. “Betting on the strong” was the phrase used by Willem Wertheim at a very early stage to describe the strategy of entrusting the rich peasants with implementing the Green Revolution (Wertheim, 1964: 259–278). These true “sons of the soil” have come out from under the shadow of large landlords, moneylenders, and traders to whom they were tied by pre- or early-capitalist dependency relations during the colonial era. As major beneficiaries of a series of land and tenancy reforms that were introduced shortly before and after Independence, they acquitted themselves of the task assigned to them as “progressive farmers,” namely, to modernize agriculture and to increase the agrarian surplus. Moreover, and this is an important addition, these peasant entrepreneurs started to invest part of their savings away from agriculture, a development that has stimulated the diversification of the rural economy as well as strengthened rural–urban linkages.

The emerging capitalism is a major trend but still does not everywhere dominate the structure of agrarian production. The transformation process has occurred at varying rates in different parts of the country. Regional disparities have increased in a way that makes one suspect that more is at stake than a mere
difference in stages of the same growth pattern. Uneven development is very much a feature of the general trend toward capitalism (Patnaik, 1986: 18–20). Second, it is questionable whether the aggressive, expansion-oriented behavior of the peasant-capitalists lends itself to imitation by the great mass of petty producers who have far fewer resources at their disposal. If we are properly to understand the outcome of the economic restructuring that is going on, it is essential to keep track of mobility trends—frequently more downward than upward—as well as mechanisms of consolidation in the broad middle range of society. Nevertheless, I agree with Myrdal that the force and the speed with which capitalism is gaining ground can best be shown by emphasizing the situation at the polar ends of the agrarian hierarchy.

Surat District in the south of Gujarat is one of the bulwarks of peasant capitalism. I have been able to document the advance of this mode of production over the last 25 years in a number of micro-studies based on recurrent fieldwork. The landowning elite and the landless proletariat, although disproportionate in size, together represent roughly two-thirds of the region’s agrarian population. In combination, the capital and labor provided by these two classes produce the greater part of the agricultural yield.

The rich peasants with holdings of 8 acres or more mostly belong to the local dominant caste. For the last two generations they have exercised power at the district level. By setting up their own economic and political associations, they have lately been able to extend their influence far beyond the local domain. These entrepreneurs have been militant in expressing their displeasure at what they consider to be willful neglect by the state of the countryside and agriculture. They propagate a rural populism that is strongly opposed to the idea that urban-industrial interests should be given priority in the guise of a growth-pole strategy. Their leaders, like those of other movements of peasant producers that are coming to the fore in other parts of India, have little faith in politicians and exert pressure on them by occasionally mobilizing their rank-and-file. Their demands, expressed in a typical kulak idiom, stress the peasant owner as the focal element. The interests of other rural classes, insofar as these are considered at all, are secondary to those of the sons of the soil. Charan Singh was a leading proponent at the national level of this brand of agrarian populism (Singh, 1986; Byres, 1988). He mapped out a path to development based on close integration between agriculture and rural industry, in a way that would keep the autonomy of the peasant-cultivator intact. From among them a new type of manager would emerge, leading what would primarily be small-scale industry. The employment resulting from this growth model is supposed to contribute to the welfare of all.

Does reality in South Gujarat agree with this scenario? The anticipated rise of agrarian production has indeed taken place and, thus self-propelled, the rural economy has undergone a true metamorphosis. The expansion in employment opportunities, however, has not kept pace with the growth of the landless population. The further broadening of the bottom of the agrarian hierarchy is due
not so much to high fertility as to immigration. One consequence of the transition to capitalism is that labor becomes mobile over long distances. Myrdal made no allowance for this in his study and even explicitly excluded the possibility, as becomes clear if one reads his notes on migration. In his opinion, the life of the village population is determined by immobility and isolation, the only exception being departure for urban destinations. Poverty, more than any other factor, prevents people from escaping from their birthplace:

[T]he poorer the people, the stronger the barriers to migration; poverty squeezes the margin for risk-taking, blunts the incentive to try new things, and rigidifies all restraints upon initiative. (Vol. III, 1968: 2140)

My own findings in South Gujarat are quite contrary to those of Myrdal. The massive circulation of labor, mostly for one season but sometimes for longer periods, shows that the hinterland of the capitalist enclaves has become very strongly tied to this mode of production. Intra-rural circulation, a neglected theme in literature on labor migration, shows how the new economic dynamics have radiated throughout large parts of India. Both the mobility of labor and the value attached to this factor of production under a capitalist regime explain why poverty, instead of disappearing, now governs the life of more people in the countryside than ever before. The findings of my fieldwork-based research in South Gujarat are, in my opinion, also indicative of the transformation process that is taking place in other regions of India (Chakravarty, 1987: 27). The misery that I encountered refutes the rationality that Myrdal, perhaps against his own better judgment, attributed to the logic of capitalism.

A new landscape

Ten years ago I was in the midst of investigation into the effects on labor relations of the changes in the agricultural economy that had occurred in the plain of South Gujarat, on India’s west coast. The emergence of a new landscape was due to the completion of an irrigation system that secured for an extensive part of this fertile region a sufficient year-round supply of water. A network of canals now cleaved the district, originating in a reservoir that had been constructed by building a dam upstream in the River Tapti. This intervention in the natural ecology brought the forces of production to a higher level of development. The area of perennially irrigated land was also expanded through the increased availability of oil and later electric pumps, which made it possible to dig new and much deeper wells.

The transition to wet-land agriculture brought with it sweeping changes in the cropping pattern. The cultivation of millet, cotton, and, to a lesser extent, groundnuts, which had prescribed the agrarian cycle for almost a century, made way for the production of paddy, bananas, and, increasingly, sugarcane. In many villages this last crop now takes up half or more of all arable land.
That agriculture became more intensive is only partly attributable to the expansion of irrigated land, although the significance of this factor can hardly be overestimated. Production has also been increased as a result of the Green Revolution, for which the central plain of South Gujarat was one of the earliest concentration areas. The promotion of the new package of inputs, starting with the Intensive Area District Programme in 1962–63, meant that farmers in the area had high-quality seed varieties at their disposal, more fertilizer, agricultural extension services, and generous credit facilities with which to modernize their equipment, methods of cultivation, and farm management.

Another important factor was the expansion of the road network as part of the improved infrastructure, which stimulated the changeover to mechanized means of transport. In touring the region one cannot overlook the many indications of modernity. There is dense traffic on the roads: heavily laden lorries and tractors with trailers bringing agricultural produce to depots for processing or further transport; the crowded but frequent buses that have made the country-side more accessible and, conversely, easier to leave; and the horde of bicycles, mopeds, scooters, motorbikes, and cars, all of which emphasize the mobility made possible by the new pattern of communication. The background to this lively picture is the intensely cultivated fields, on which water, machines, and workers are present almost year-round. The supply of nonagricultural commodities and services has increased considerably. The growing number of village shops now sell more and better consumption goods, thus showing the rise in purchasing power of at least part of the rural population. The landscape that I had come to know during fieldwork in the early 1960s (Breman, 1974: 231–233) has changed almost unrecognizably in the subsequent quarter-century.

Demographic growth has placed increasing pressure on agrarian resources. In the central part of the plain, population density now exceeds 350 persons per square kilometer. On the one hand, agricultural dynamism has created new employment opportunities, but on the other hand agricultural mechanization has reduced the demand for unskilled labor. Due to economic diversification, however, and notwithstanding an annual rate of natural increase of 2.6 percent that has caused the population almost to double during the last 25 years, the total scope for rural subsistence has actually increased.

The development of the forces of production gave a powerful impetus to the building trades. Raw materials largely originate within the region and are processed in small-scale industries into stones, bricks, roof and floor tiles, cement pipes, timber, and so on. The demand for such products, used in the construction of roads and irrigation canals as well as for utility buildings and houses, has increased enormously. The motorization of transport and mechanization of agriculture, requiring greater technical skill, have caused maintenance and repair workshops to be opened up at busy traffic junctions. Extension of the electricity network to rural areas has made it possible to disperse the diamond industry, which until a few decades ago was located in the cities of Surat and Navsari. In the 1970s in particular, workplaces where the raw diamonds were cut and
polished opened up in increasing numbers of villages. The net result of all these activities was that at the beginning of the 1980s approximately one-third of the nonurban population of Surat District worked outside agriculture, considerably more than the average for the rural sector in the state of Gujarat as a whole.

Even more significant for the trend toward diversification was the rise of new agro-industries. By far the most important of these are the sugar factories that process all cane produced in the region. One of these factories also produces the chemical solvent acetone. In addition, the sugarcane waste, rice husks, and grass serve as raw materials for the six paper factories that have been set up in the district. Their productive capacity is modest, and they specialize in manufacturing strawboard and packing paper. The new agro-industrial complex also has a stimulating effect on other branches of industry. In Bardoli, the central town of the plain, for example, a local smithy has grown into a large engineering works specializing in the manufacture of machines for the paper factories. After successfully installing a number of complete machine halls in the region, this family-operated business has received orders for similar equipment elsewhere in India and even abroad. Finally, cattle-keeping has become more businesslike in character, modeled after the famous AMUL milk cooperative in Central Gujarat. Milk is delivered to, and processed by, a dairy cooperative in Surat city, which has set up its own cattle-feed factory. And eggs collected from large poultry farms are sold in distant urban markets.

In the countryside of South Gujarat, agriculture and industry have thus become more closely interwoven in terms of capital and management. This interconnection can best be illustrated by the cultivation and processing of sugarcane, which, during the last few years, has become almost a mono-crop in many villages. At the beginning of the 1960s the area planted with sugarcane amounted to barely 1,000 acres (1 acre = 0.40 ha), but two decades later it had multiplied to 142,000 acres. The first factory to make a modest start in 1957 has grown into the largest cooperative enterprise for this commodity in all Asia, with a daily production capacity of 7,500 tons. At present there are nine such factories in the region, and more are under construction. Without exaggeration one may conclude that in South Gujarat, as in various other parts of India, agriculture has taken the shape of industry over the past few decades. Before examining the consequences for labor of such changes, I shall first discuss the landowning class, which spearheaded the transition to the new capitalist mode of production that has become predominant in the plain of South Gujarat.

**Peasant entrepreneurs**

In 1960 rather more than 50 percent of all farms in the district had less than 25 percent of the cultivable area at their disposal. At the top of the agrarian ladder, about 10 to 15 percent of rich peasants commanded roughly half of the available land. Most of them belong to the dominant Patidar caste. Although the members
of this community represent only some 7 percent of the total population, they dominate the social hierarchy.

Their elevation to their present status as a rural elite goes back no more than two to three generations. At the beginning of the present century the Patidars had a reputation of being simple and devoted cultivators of comparatively low origin, whose ancestors arrived in the region within living memory after famine had driven them from their more northerly native habitat. The introduction and rapid expansion of cotton cultivation, dating from the 1860s, marked the commercialization of agriculture in Western India under colonial domination. Linkages with the world market were channeled through traders established in the cities or even abroad, to whom the peasants became tied through the credit that they offered.

The economic and social advance of the Patidars began in the first decades of the twentieth century when they set up their own cooperatives, first for the purchasing and later for the processing of cotton. The growing control that the producers thus exercised over marketing was an important step in the penetration of a more capitalist mode of production in South Gujarat’s countryside, further accelerated by tenancy reforms shortly before and after Independence.

With the adoption of irrigation agriculture, the cooperatives, whose advantages had been proven, continued to be the economic model in which the Patidars coordinated their farm management. It helped them to enlarge their scale of activities. A cooperative in Bardoli, whose members specialized in growing bananas, was not content to sell only to the local market; at the end of the 1960s, it leased a freighter with which to export the members’ produce to the Gulf States of the Middle East. Patidar landowners, who meanwhile had gained social recognition as a vanguard of progressive farmers, controlled the cooperatives and provided most of their managerial staff.

Cooptation along caste lines has ensured that the new agro-industry with its cooperative basis has grown into a Patidar stronghold. This applies particularly to the factories that process the ever-increasing amounts of sugarcane. The rich peasants have themselves raised the necessary capital for these industries, liberally supplemented with government subsidies and credit. The purchase of a share in the cooperative gave the sugarcane grower the right to deliver his cane to the factory. Cash advances and inputs supplied by the factory, such as seed, fertilizer, and tools, together with agricultural extension services, indicate managerial intervention in farm production, but without eliminating the landowner as private entrepreneur. All decisions regarding cultivation are made by the peasants, but in doing so they can count on the generous facilities that the cooperative makes available to its members. Each factory has an agricultural staff whose aim is to increase production and productivity. This is done by singling out model farmers who are prepared to experiment with new seed varieties and planting techniques; by organizing meetings at which new methods are discussed; by arranging excursions to more advanced production areas in neighboring Maharashtra State; and so on. The result is that the yield has increased.
considerably, amounting at present to over 40 tons per acre. My research shows that costs of production have increased far less than the prices received by the members of the cooperatives, which, in 1989, amounted to Rs 430 per ton of cane delivered. A share in the region’s oldest sugar factory, with a nominal value of Rs 500, was traded early in 1989 for about 50,000 rupees or more. There is no better way to highlight the enormous profits that the peasant capitalists reap from growing sugarcane.

The prosperity of the dominant landowning caste-class has visibly increased. A growing number of wealthy families have replaced the simple houses in which they formerly lived by large bungalows of two or three storeys. Tiled floors, modern sanitation, urban-made furniture, refrigerators, kitchen utensils of stainless steel, television, video-cassette recorders, and, last but not least, a motorbike or scooter at the doorstep, all emphasize the comfortable life of the rural elite. In addition to the quantity and quality of consumer durables, the great variety of food and other daily consumption goods illustrates the achievement of a prosperous lifestyle that was formerly found only among the urban elite. Equally noteworthy is the reduced participation of household members in agricultural work. The gradual withdrawal from the economic process of women and children, the former particularly in regard to work outside the house, has been carried to such an extent that even the male members of the main landowning caste now avoid working on the land and restrict themselves to supervising their hired nonfamily labor.

It would be incorrect to conclude from this that the Patidars are about to give up agriculture as a profession. Such a conclusion would also be contrary to the investment behavior of this entrepreneurial class. The yield of their agrarian resources has largely been used to improve the value of their land and to modernize and augment their capital stock. In addition, they seek nonagrarian outlets for their profits. The need to diversify arises from their anxiety to find sources of wealth to enable the next generation to maintain and preferably to improve their present level of prosperity. In preparation for this they send their sons to college. Equipped with a Bachelor’s degree in science or commerce, the male offspring are then sent to learn a trade or enter a profession, usually with the notion that they should become self-employed or, better still, owners of small industrial enterprises or trading establishments. Women belonging to the dominant caste restrict their childbearing—now frequently by sterilization. They do so after having borne two sons, one of whom will continue the farm, and as few daughters as possible in the hope of avoiding the high dowry and marriage expenses that may be demanded by a partner from the same social class. This conservative demographic strategy explains why the Patidars’ share in population growth is a modest one.

The increasing rural surplus wealth is partly drained away and converted into urban capital, but this does not necessarily mean that the peasant-entrepreneurs have lost control over these investments. The surplus that reaches
the cities is increasingly accompanied by Patidars of the younger generation looking for an opportunity to open a workshop or to find some other way to get a footing in the urban milieu as small-scale entrepreneurs and businessmen. While the drain of rural capital toward the urban economy at first sight seems to corroborate Michael Lipton’s thesis of a pattern of uneven development between countryside and city (Lipton, 1977), I would argue that the direction in which money flows is only one dimension of a more complex shift in the balance of social forces, eventually leading to a new class alliance between segments of the rural and urban bourgeoisie.

The economic advancement of the Patidars has also increased their self-esteem. Known as bhumiputra (sons of the soil), they make no excuses for their rural roots. With their larger scale of activity and expanded power base, however, villages for them are now no more than platforms for action in a wider sphere. Patidars control the institutional infrastructure right up to the district level and even beyond. One encounters them in all major places of economic, political, and social transactions. This minority is accustomed to making its presence felt. Their dominance over public life in the region is highly visible: industries and agricultural cooperatives bear the name of their caste; they manage the local sections of the various political parties; they serve on the managing boards of schools and institutions. In all respects, the heart of the plain is Patidar-land.

The caste solidarity on which the advance of the cooperative movement in Western India is based also forms the foundation for political action. In the 1920s the Patidars successfully resisted attempts by British colonial authorities to raise land taxes. After Independence, the continuing social progress of this landowning caste made them no less critical of the state and its bureaucracy. Their displeasure is expressed through the Khedut Samaj, a nonparty political union of peasant producers, which recruits its rank-and-file in Surat District largely among the Patidars. According to the populist thinking prevalent in this milieu, state power has been too long in the hands of party politicians and bureaucratic policymakers who are biased in favor of industrial-urban interests. The leadership, which owes its allegiance to the rich peasantry, stresses the basic unity of landowners and landless, but this conceals acute contradictions within rural society. Although the current tilt in the balance of power toward the countryside has thus led to a shift in the sectoral division of interests, the social disparity has remained much the same.

The landless existence, past and present

The rural proletariat is greater in number than the various classes to which the landowners of Surat District belong, either separately or in combination. According to the 1981 census, the landless represented 54.5 percent of the agricultural population, and their majority is even greater in the densely populated central
part of the plain. Although South Gujarat is distinguished by a particularly high concentration of agricultural workers, the proportion of landowners is also gradually declining in other parts of the state. For Gujarat as a whole in 1961 there were 1.24 landowners to each landless worker, but by 1981 the ratio had dropped to 0.84.

Which mechanisms are responsible for the growing proletarianization of the agrarian population? It is only natural to associate the trend with the advance of the capitalist mode of production. One familiar interpretation is that this restructuring along class lines is the result of the accumulation of agrarian property at the top of the hierarchy, while an increasing number of small peasants lose their holdings and slip downward into a landless existence. Such a dual segmentation I believe does not exist in reality, however, not even in the region where production relations are permeated with capitalist features. In the region of my fieldwork, for example, medium and small holdings (of 4–8 acres and of less than 4 acres respectively) continue to exist. The strategy adopted by the households belonging to the small peasantry to prevent their regression on the social ladder is characterized on the one hand by intensifying production and, on the other hand, by supplementing the family income with off-farm employment, for which the diversification of the rural economy has created many new opportunities. In the case of petty landowners in particular, the effort to preserve their holdings for the next generation involves heavy self-exploitation—long working hours at low pay, and maximum participation of household members in the labor process. But this strategy also entails pushing some members of the younger generation into a landless existence, preferably away from the home village so as to veil their downward mobility. In other words, the process of proletarianization is fuelled by the expulsion of “superfluous” members from resource-poor peasant households, but without this expulsion leading to any drastic shift in landownership patterns.

A large proportion of the landless population in the South Gujarat plain belongs to the tribal caste of Halpatis, whose ancestors were denied access to agrarian property many centuries ago. They played an important part in the opening up of new land, a gradual process that was completed early in the twentieth century, but their role was mostly as laborers in the employ of landlords. Was the doubling of the landless population of Surat District between 1951 and 1981 perhaps due to a disproportionate demographic increase of those castes to which the bulk of agricultural workers traditionally belong? This second explanation of the growing pressure at the base of the agrarian system certainly is in line with prevailing opinion in higher social echelons. It is a familiar cliché that the landless have no inhibitions about the size of their families and that severe, even draconian, sanctions are necessary to force them to keep their demographic behavior in check. However, there is nothing to indicate that the Halpatis, who, more than any other caste in South Gujarat, are identified with landlessness, distinguish themselves from the rest of the rural population by a conspicuously
high birth rate. In 1971, in the core of the central plain around Bardoli, the Halpatis made up one-third of the population, somewhat less than had been the case 20 years earlier. The 1971 census also showed that within the agricultural population in the region three out of every four belonged to the landless class. Neither local proletarianization nor a high birth rate among the lowest social categories can explain the speed with which the ratio of landowners to agricultural workers has declined. Rather, the explanation seems to lie in the qualitative changes in labor relations that have attended the erosion of patron-client ties and in the inflow of long-distance seasonal migrant workers toward this rural growth pole of capitalist production.

The changing shape of the agrarian workplace cannot merely be explained in quantitative terms. During the last half-century production relations in the central plain have undergone important qualitative changes that have strongly increased pressure on the agrarian base of existence. In the past, the Halpatis of South Gujarat lived in a state of bondage. Hali was the name given to a farm servant who had become tied to a landowner through indebtedness. From an early age he was bound to work for his master for an indefinite period in exchange for a subsistence allowance. The relationship was usually formed when a rich peasant enabled a worker to marry by meeting all the expenses involved. The loan would be made primarily in kind. The master usually also had a right to the services of the hali’s wife, who was employed as a maid in the household, and of their adolescent children. Girls helped their mother without pay; sons were taken on to look after the cattle on reaching the age of eight or ten. Together, and with considerable interchangeability, the bonded family did all the work on the land, in the house, and in the master’s compound. All day, and if need be also in the evening or at night, they were at the beck and call of their master. In return, the master was obliged to provide his bondsmen with a livelihood. In addition to a daily ration of grain, this included various emoluments such as morning or noon meals, tobacco, tea, now and then cash to be spent on drink, firewood, a set of clothing each year, medicines if a member of the family should fall ill, a hut on the master’s land, waste material for thatching the roof, and a tiny plot for the servant to cultivate for his household’s own use.

The character of such employment was so comprehensive that neither the wage, the nature of the work, nor the working hours were laid down in any detail. Work was not always available, and the grain ration that the hali received during the off-season was charged as an advance on future wages. In this way, his indebtedness gradually increased over the years, partly because the master charged interest on the amount outstanding. Concepts such as debt, interest, loan, and advance were in any case only of nominal significance. Neither party wanted the relationship of dependency to be terminated by repayment of the debt. Bondage was attractive to the landowners because they were assured of a permanent and cheap labor force. In turn, the Halpati preferred this mode of attachment because it provided them with security, however minimal. Colonial
reports show that casual wage laborers, who formed a small minority, were far worse off from the economic point of view and were less respected socially. Elements of patronage were inherent in this form of voluntary servitude (Breman, 1974). The master not only committed himself to looking after his servant and servant’s family, but also accepted the moral obligation to protect them against third parties. In turn, he could count on the unconditional loyalty and total subordination of his clients.

By stressing the personal character of this vertical relationship and the intimacy and warmth of affection among members of the households of successive generations of master and servant, it is easy to draw a picture of this hali system that is far too idyllic. The norm of reciprocity, which balanced the lopsided division of rights and duties, existed merely as an ideal. In practice, the highhandedness and compulsion the master showed toward his landless clients emphasized the sharp inequality between the two parties. The surplus value appropriated by the master from his attached laborer was not only economic in the restricted sense of the word. The docility and deference the hali was obliged to show to his master increased the latter’s superiority. In this sense, patronage has to be seen as the sociopolitical dimension of a precapitalist relationship that was essentially exploitative.

This type of servitude has been linked too easily with a subsistence economy and a feudal lifestyle of dominant landowners, which came to an end when the transition was made to production for the market. In fact, there are indications that peasants in South Gujarat used the profit from growing cotton for the world market to replace their own labor power by that of halis, thus showing off their increasing prosperity to the outside world. As the consequences of capitalist penetration of the agricultural economy began to make themselves felt in terms of farm management, that is, in the increasing monetization of wages and contractualization of all economic relations, the former patron–client ties between substantial landowners and landless workers became less significant. From then on, the rich peasants acted as employers and no longer as patrons indulging in acquiring inferiors who, from the viewpoint of economic rationality, were increasingly found to be redundant.

The transition to what was formally “free” labor came when landowners would no longer provide their workers with security because, according to the principles of the new mode of production, the benefits did not offset the costs. Most certainly, the disintegration of the system of attached labor was also, and at least equally, due to rebellion by the landless laborers against the state of complete dependency in which they had been imprisoned. To free themselves of the stigma of social inferiority that, according to the new system of values, was linked to their earlier bondage, the younger generation of agricultural workers showed a distinct preference for a life as daily wage earners, which frequently made it necessary for them to change their employment and employer.

The dark side of this emancipatory trend has been that the worker’s value is now determined solely by his labor performance, and the price paid for labor is
fixed at an extremely low level as a result of the ample supply. The patron’s provision of daily necessities to the halis, even in the off-season, does not apply to casual laborers, who have to use their own resources to survive on days on which no work is available. The change in relations between demand and supply is thus due not only to structural but also to cultural factors, amounting to a reassessment by both parties of the utility or desirability of vertical ties. Emancipated in its noneconomic dimensions, labor is now recognized only as a commodity, but its supply far exceeds the need.

This conclusion seems to contradict my earlier assertion that total employment in the rural economy of South Gujarat has increased. Only a small minority of the local proletariat, however, seems to be eligible for new income opportunities outside agriculture. Those jobs are largely filled by people coming from other parts of Gujarat or even from outside the state. Halpatis are denied access to the new forms of employment, ostensibly because they lack the required skills or industrial mentality. The massive influx of migrants also threatens the Halpatis’ traditional position as agricultural workers. This is particularly well-illustrated by sugarcane, which is cut by an army of more than 100,000 workers who come to the plain each year for a period of six to seven months. This annual migration results from the refusal of cooperative factories to rely on local labor in the harvesting campaign. The reasons for this replacement of local by migrant workers will be discussed later on. Its effect is that Halpatis are undergoing a process of economic marginalization—one that victimizes the women even more than the men.

As a result of de-patronization, Halpati agricultural workers also find that they are socially isolated. Without the mediation of their former masters, they find no one to listen to their claims to a fair deal. In the past the Halpatis were paid a wage at a bare subsistence level, but were indentured to landowners who were willing to ensure the livelihood of their inferiors, even if no work was available. Such generosity was of course due to self-interest, which was well-understood in terms of the precapitalist mode of production. It is in that respect in particular that the stage has been set for a new drama. The landless have always lived in a state of poverty, but for many the daily misery has become even greater because they no longer have the basic security on which they could formerly depend. Their newly gained freedom has meant little more than the freedom to starve.

State intervention has brought no change for the better. The government both at the national and regional levels recognizes that the landless have the right to a livelihood, but the protection this should entail is nonexistent in practice. Legal measures have fixed the minimum wage at a level that permits little more than survival and that makes no allowance for nonworking members of the household. Moreover, as I have explained elsewhere, there is no effective control over compliance with this ordinance, with the result that the actual wage paid is generally much lower (Breman, 1985). Neither does government support the Halpatis’ claim to preferential employment in their own territory. The official point of view is that the free movement of labor should in no way be hindered
and that entry into the production process should depend completely on the spontaneous effects of the demand-and-supply mechanism. The passive stand taken by the state apparatus turns to active opposition, however, whenever efforts are undertaken to improve the situation of the landless proletariat. Organizations that seek to mobilize labor are essential to any emancipatory trend at the bottom of the rural hierarchy. However, the authorities are prone to judge such movements primarily as a threat to law and order, taking forceful counter-action at an early stage.

It would be incorrect to suggest that the landless in the central plain of South Gujarat are a docile mass whose fighting spirit has been broken. Portraying them as living in a state of passivity, amoral individualism, and fatalism (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987: 387) is both inadequate and unfair. Time and again, the Halpatis have shown that they do not submit meekly to their social marginalization, but they have little chance of translating their rebelliousness into permanent and collective action. Sporadic, spontaneous, and strongly localized are the main characteristics of the persistent strikes and other forms of labor protest. The “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985) also include a series of actions and attitudes with which the landless show their dissatisfaction and militancy in more individual fashion. Their increasing willingness to enter into open confrontation with the rural elite, however, shows that the economic, political, and social hegemony of the entrepreneurial class of peasant capitalists does not go unchallenged (Breman, 1985a).

Labor nomads

I now turn to the migrant workers. The pull induced by the economic growth poles that have emerged in various parts of India is not the only reason for large-scale labor circulation to which I have referred. Expulsion as a result of greater pressure on resources in the home regions is a major reason for migration, particularly of those at the bottom of the agrarian hierarchy. This has been due partly to population growth but also to other factors. The migrant workers who come to the plain of South Gujarat every year in large numbers do so because rural ecological conditions make it impossible to find work in their home areas. There are recurrent water shortages in the hinterland, caused not only by monsoon failure but also by deterioration of the environment in consequence of large-scale tree-felling during past decades. The almost barren wasteland that has resulted from deforestation is exposed to uncertain rainfall; as a consequence, the productivity of the land, which was never very fertile, has now declined even further.

It is paradoxical that the new canal irrigation system, which provides so much benefit to the rich peasants on the plain, has led to a veritable flight of labor from the region where the water is derived. The artificial lake created by building a dam in the Tapti River robbed a great many tribal cultivators of their land. They
have been resettled in squalid housing colonies. Deprived of their livelihood, these former peasants have no choice but to follow the water to the plain, where they sell their labor power. Their semi-proletarianization results directly from the type of development policy adopted by the state. Local government has attempted to alleviate the lack of employment in the hinterland with the construction of public works, but the number, duration, and scale of such projects is insufficient for the purpose.

Labor mobility is usually associated with rural-to-urban migration, to such a degree that many authors consider migration almost synonymous with urbanization. This is incorrect, because many of those who are pushed out of their village economy continue to live in rural areas. A minority of the land-poor peasants who flowed into Surat District seem to have settled there permanently. Far greater numbers of migrants, however, go to the plain as seasonal workers, sometimes year after year. The background to this pattern of intrarural circulation is formed by growing regional inequality in the level of development; in turn, these “labor nomads” further accentuate the inequality. Again, this is vividly illustrated by the massive use of migrant labor in the harvesting of sugarcane in South Gujarat.

The presence of these migrants is a surprising phenomenon in view of the underutilization of the indigenous proletariat to which the majority of the agrarian population in the central plain belongs. Why do landowners and other rural employers prefer to rely on outsiders? The peasant-entrepreneurs say that the local landless are incompetent, lazy, indifferent, physically weak, impertinent, and untrustworthy. Such terms illustrate the animosity that is felt toward the Halpatis, a social class whose members are penalized with economic sanctions for their refusal to continue to behave as inferiors. Their replacement by imported labor, however, is also and even primarily due to more rational economic considerations. The migrants provide a workforce that is fully and unconditionally available at the lowest possible price for the duration of the annual harvest campaign.

Factory agents in the hinterland enter into agreements with labor brokers stipulating that, at the end of the rainy season, the latter will journey to the plain accompanied by a specified number of cane-cutters whom they have contracted during the preceding months. These labor brokers then also act as gang bosses, accountable for their recruited workers, and take charge of the open-air camps in which the cane-cutters bivouac during their stay. Finally, they commit themselves to leaving the plain again together with their work gangs at the end of the season, in early May. Once cane-cutting has begun, the factories operate continuously day and night. The cane is cut only during daylight hours, but its transport continues during the night. The workers frequently have to return to the fields at night in order to load the fleet of bullock carts, tractors, and lorries that keep production going. A workday averages ten to fifteen hours throughout a seven-month period. Even the day of rest that workers are allowed once a
fortnight is not a concession to the gruelling work regime, but is caused by the need to clean the factories.

Living in an alien environment, under continual supervision in the fields and in the camp by a gang boss who has promised meticulous observance of the factory’s directives, the labor nomads have no space into which they can withdraw at the end of the working day. In comparison, it would be far more difficult to control the local landless, who could not be denied a social life of their own. To begin with, the agricultural laborers who belong to the plain have household obligations that make demands on their time. Some years ago and with obvious reluctance, one of the sugar cooperatives conceded to the repeated request made by leaders of a local Gandhian movement that a number of local agricultural workers be employed in cane-cutting. This experiment was soon brought to an end when the Halpatis resolutely refused to work into the night hours.

For each ton of cane cut, the members of a team consisting of two adolescent or adult members, usually a man and a woman, are paid a fixed amount. For his mediation, the broker receives 10 percent of the total earnings of his gang from the factory. When converted into a daily wage, this cane-cutting tariff is still less than the minimum wage that can legally be claimed by agricultural workers in the plain.

On arrival the workers in a gang are handed two mats and a few bamboo sticks with which to construct their shelter. “Hut” is too grand a term for these tent-like structures, which are too small to accommodate man, wife, and children together. The adults usually sleep in the open air around the embers of the fire on which they have cooked their evening meal. A group of such shelters gives the field or wayside allocated for their bivouac the appearance of a camp, but there is no drinking water, washplace, or other sanitary facilities. When the canefields in the neighborhood of the camp have been harvested, the migrants move on to another spot and set up a new “camp.” Gangs of workers who have shared the same encampment for some time now go in different directions, most probably not to meet again during the campaign. This continual rotation is characteristic of the nomadic life of the cane-cutters.

The women in particular lead an extremely hard life. Although the man normally uses the cutting knife, the partner with whom he forms a team, usually his wife, will sometimes relieve him in order that he may rest. It is also her task to strip the cane of its leaves, to break it into pieces, to bundle the pieces, and to lay them out on the field ready for transport. During the short break, when the men lie on their backs exhausted and silent or smoking a bidi, the women have to care for the infants who have come to the field with them and to suckle the very youngest. When the workers return to camp at the end of the day, the women carry the headloads of wood needed for the cooking fires. Finally, when they reach camp, the women remain busy at such tasks as preparing the evening meal and doing the washing.
The privations suffered by the dependent family members of migrant workers who have to remain in the hinterland perhaps exceed those of the cane-cutters who go to South Gujarat partly in the hope of saving enough money to get them through the monsoon months. Those who are forced to remain behind are among the most vulnerable—the young children and the aged, not yet or no longer able to take part in cane-cutting. Their labor power is useless and as consumers they are not allowed to go to the plain. Anyone who pities the army of cane-cutters should realize that those who have to stay at home, the aged and the very young, are probably even worse off.

The pressure to leave the hinterland is primarily economic, although existing dependency relationships expressed in indebtedness can be an important incentive to seasonal migration. Free choice is curtailed, however, the moment the cane-cutter signs a work contract with his broker. On doing so he is given earnest money, and thus commits himself to work for the length of the campaign. The amount of money labor brokers need to recruit the members of their gang is greater than the sum advanced to them by the factory. They complement it with a loan from a moneylender, and naturally charge the workers for the high interest rate that has to be paid. The result is that, for each rupee that a cane-cutter receives at the start of the campaign, he has to repay two at its end. During the season the debt often increases because the migrants borrow small sums from their gang boss. Wage payment is deferred until the end of the campaign when the migrants are returning home. The members of a gang are paid only a living allowance once a fortnight, a grain ration supplemented by some money (not more than one or two rupees a day per capita) for cash expenses. This is almost always inadequate, and the gang boss then provides a loan. As a result, he usually has a great deal of money on loan to the cane-cutters. He does this with the express purpose of disciplining his gang, with the tacit approval of the factory.

Although the binding of labor through indebtedness is legally prohibited, the cooperative enterprises of South Gujarat employ their workforces on this basis. The stakes for the labor broker-cum-gang boss-cum-camp boss make it understandable that he occasionally uses extra-economic force. In the last resort, physical violence is used to force the contracted cane-cutters to journey to the plain and, once there, to prevent them from returning home prematurely. Labor brokers who are excessively harsh, however, are likely to engender violent reaction, lending support for the often-expressed view among factory fieldstaff that cane-cutters are impulsive and irrational. Supposedly, although cutters will not take umbrage at the coarsest abuse, they are likely to explode in fury for some futile reason and injure or even kill their antagonist with the cutting knife.

I do not consider the sort of dependency relations that have been discussed above to be a continuation of the former feudal-type relations between master and servant. The new bondage that has emerged is not necessarily in conflict with the development of a capitalist mode of production. In other words, it is
possible for labor to become mobile without being able to exercise free choice over terms and conditions of work. Cooperative managements naturally enough deny any charge that agro-industry is guilty of coercion and illegal binding of labor. They argue that cane-cutters are employed by their gang bosses and that interpersonal relations among the workforce are beyond the control of the factory. Management contracts only with the intermediaries, and maintains that whatever arrangement these gang bosses may make with the cane-cutters is not its concern.

The government has offered no protection to the local proletariat against the massive influx of outside workers. Neither has any official action been taken toward ending the exploitation and oppression to which migrants are subjected. Existing legislation provides the basis for such action, but implementation so far has been haphazard at best. This applies both to the act that places restrictions on the movement of labor between states, and to the regulation intended to keep the operations of labor brokers in check. At their own request, the cooperative sugar factories have been given official exemption from compliance with these laws. No reason for this leniency has been given. The influence exercised by the sugar barons is illustrated by a secret memorandum found in 1987 by a commission of enquiry set up by the Gujarat High Court, which explicitly forbids the rural labor inspectorate in Surat District from prosecuting management of the sugar enterprises for failure to pay the minimum wage.

In contrast to local agricultural laborers, who have at least some political influence, since they are rooted in the same social milieu as the employers, the huge army of seasonal migrants is politically powerless. As a prominent politician of Gujarat told me: cane-cutters do not vote, either in the villages where they come from, or where they work. Nevertheless, the agro-industries are apparently not entirely insensitive to the growing criticism about migrant labor conditions. They fear that the negative publicity might cause the government to tighten its control over abusive labor practices. That there has so far been no sign of any such corrective measures is undoubtedly due to the strong pressure exerted by the lobby of peasant capitalists at both state and central levels.

The cane-cutters, who stay only temporarily in the plain, who are segregated from the local landless in the fields and in their camps, and who, finally, are penned-up in their gangs and disciplined by gang bosses whose principal loyalty is to the factory, have no opportunity to build collective resistance. They do not even share a common background. Unlike the situation ten years ago, many harvesters now come from within Gujarat itself—in my estimation about 30 percent. Nearly all seasonal migrants belong to tribal and other low castes who own little if any land. By tapping different labor reservoirs, the factories are beginning to reduce their dependence on Maharashtra, the hinterland that has traditionally been the main source of recruits.

The age composition of the workforce also militates against emergent solidarity. Understandably enough, the factories prefer to use workers who are at the peak of their physical strength—young adults between 16 and 30 years of
age. I have noticed that each year many migrants are taking part in cane-cutting for the first time, and even the older people have less than ten years’ experience. Only very few keep up this vagrant lifestyle, with its heavy workload, for a long period. Circulation, in other words, not only is a reflection of the seasonal nature of the industry but is also a major feature of the workforce composition. The obvious explanation is that only the very strongest are prepared repeatedly to subject themselves to the harsh labor regime of the campaign.

But such a conclusion assumes a greater freedom of choice than is available to the cane-cutters. The lack of any alternative means of livelihood forces them, year after year, to make the journey to South Gujarat. The physical exhaustion that they suffer is the reason the sugar factories bring in new blood after a few seasons. Constant rotation of the workforce is also encouraged because cutters with longer experience may show a spirit of resistance that newcomers, not yet accustomed to the work, lack. Just as segregation into camps prevents the gangs of harvesters from coming into contact with the local landless, so the regular replacement of old by young migrants tends to prevent worker mobilization.

The key to capitalist dynamics in rural Gujarat lies in the continual effort by the cooperatives to increase not only production but also productivity. During the last 20 years, the area of arable land in the plain that is planted with sugarcane has expanded enormously and per acre yields have increased by 25 to 30 percent over the same period. The peasant-entrepreneurs are naturally interested in potential productivity gains in the harvesting operation. Under the existing technology it seems inconceivable that labor-intensity can be raised any further. With the best will in the world, two adults cannot cut much more than half to two-thirds of a ton of cane by hand each day and prepare it for transport, over a period of six to seven months. Any further increase of the workload would cause their physical collapse. Mechanization is not yet under serious consideration, but I anticipate that the incentive to adopt it will gradually increase. Initial experiments have already been made. Although mechanical harvesting will certainly not be cheaper—over the years harvest labor has amounted to only 15 to 20 percent of the total cost of production—management could decide on mechanization to avoid having to provide cane-cutters with better treatment and better pay. For the time being, employers in agro-industry merely use the mechanization option as a threat against troublemakers such as those who urge compliance with existing labor legislation. Mechanization of harvesting would undoubtedly make the majority of migrant workers superfluous. Lacking any alternative means of livelihood, they would face a grim future.

**Prosperity and pauperization**

Introduction of the sugarcane crop has so far benefited mainly, if not only, the class of noncultivating proprietors. A decade ago the cane-cutters were paid a wage that amounted to approximately two-thirds of the rate that agricultural
employers were then legally obliged to pay. During the spring of 1988, according to my latest fieldwork, two-thirds of the present minimum wage is what they are still paid. It would be inaccurate to deduce from this, however, that the degree of exploitation has not changed during the intervening years. The price received by the peasant capitalists for their sugarcane has risen more rapidly than the costs of growing and processing. While the producers thus have a greater profit margin, the underpayment of labor has persisted. As members of the dominant caste-class, the producers demand what they consider to be their due: more capital, even if the surplus value derived from labor is at the expense of the workers’ livelihood.

“The crushing of cane and of labour” was the title under which I published the results of my first investigation into the employment of seasonal migrants by the cooperative sugar factories of South Gujarat (Breman, 1978). My new findings show that this conjunction is still linked to the success of the agro-industry in the region. The continuing and even increasing social polarity counteracts the idea so cherished by development experts and policymakers that economic growth, although in the first instance primarily benefiting those who own or have access to capital, will gradually trickle down to the have-nots. In the situation that I have described above, which is by no means unique to South Gujarat, I have seen no signs of any trickle-down effect among those who own no commodity other than their labor power (see also Bardhan, 1984: 188–199).

Behind the facade of the social harmony model, with which government legitimizes its development schemes, is hidden an essential unwillingness to introduce any change into the extreme inequalities between rich and poor, powerful and powerless. As a result, those who speak on behalf of the subjugated classes are soon branded as guilty of subversive activities. Even when their intention is no more than to represent the interests of the poverty-stricken people who cannot make their own voices heard, and although they try to do so within the boundaries of legality, the authorities are often inclined to regard such intervention as inadmissible agitation, an unjust invasion of proper law and order. The employers are averse to any reference to class contradictions and claim, paradoxically enough, that efforts to achieve harmony must regulate labor relations. In their perception there is no place for opposing interests; conflicts, should they unexpectedly arise, must be brought to an end in consultation between employers and workers.

In any effort to reach a compromise, however, such outsiders as trade unionists, politicians, and other “activists” can never be permitted to play a role. Those who proclaim themselves to be the sons of the soil and who form the hard core of the New Agrarianism (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987: 354–364) will tolerate no interference in their domain of hegemony. They fiercely resist any attempt by government agencies, however guarded and reluctant, to move into the social arena as impartial arbitrator.

Indifference to the fate of the landless is too mild a description for the unreserved hostility that the Patidars show toward the subaltern classes. They
expect their leaders to follow a collision course leading to further polarization, and all agreed when the main farmers’ union in Gujarat demanded some years ago that the minimum wage should be abolished, even though it was already inadequate for anything more than survival. The ideas expressed by members of the dominant caste in rural areas smack of Social Darwinism. They amount to saying that it is not poverty that is the problem but the presence of a large underclass, which exists in conditions of misery only due to its own shortcomings. In their opinion, society would benefit if it were relieved of that millstone. The rapidly forgotten slogan from the early 1970s, to abolish poverty, seems to have been replaced by the sentiment, often expressed by those who have property, to be rid of those who have not.

An ideology that denies the poor the right to an adequate wage easily lends itself to suggesting that the granting of suffrage to such people was a mistake. This type of thinking has evident implications for population policy. The exercise of free choice that Myrdal had in mind when he pleaded for a government-supported program of drastic birth control cannot be the guiding principle on which to build a population policy, according to the prevailing ideology. There is definitely a need to restrain the demographic behavior of the masses that live in poverty, but this underclass is considered to lack the mentality of responsibility which is a precondition for voluntary action. A restraint on their disproportionate growth would comply with the wish voiced by the more prosperous that this supposedly counter-productive and criminally minded surplus should be removed from sight or even from society as a whole. Such attitudes of Social Darwinism, which I often encountered while doing fieldwork, make it understandable why the rural elite profoundly sympathized with the forced sterilization program that was practiced during the Emergency of the mid-1970s. Not the landowners, but agricultural laborers and other vulnerable categories, were the groups on whom local authorities concentrated their efforts to meet the quotas laid down at higher levels within the bureaucracy.

The new mode of production in the South Gujarat countryside has given rise to a hardening of social relations. The rich peasants have no hesitation in using physical force to neutralize the claims for emancipation that are being voiced ever more loudly by those at the bottom of society. Such a reaction provides new fuel for the bitterness that has long been felt among the landless Halpatis. The resultant heightening of tension increasingly gains the character of class conflict, a process that is also noticeable in other parts of rural India. The newly established order lacks social legitimacy, and in consequence may well also lack political stability.

It would be much too simplified to posit that the state is an instrument in the hands of the ruling class, but it cannot be denied that development policies place a premium on the ownership of capital (Bardhan, 1984a: 32–39). To present the state as “a third actor” (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987: 397–401) is tantamount to overlooking its anti-poor bias. The so-called target group approach—expressed in terms such as growth with equity, basic human needs,
employment guarantee schemes, positive discrimination—can also be seen in a more ominous light. The barriers thrown up by government agencies to prevent any mobilization of the landless into their own organizations have prevented the rise of a countervailing force that would be a precondition to reducing the strong inequalities between the classes. Seen from below, the state is not soft but extremely harsh.

The social stagnation of which Myrdal spoke, if it ever existed, is definitely a past state of affairs. Nevertheless, more people now live in poverty in rural India than ever before. This part of the population, declared to be superfluous, could be called a new class of Untouchables: people who are ephemeral in economic transactions, who have become marginalized in rural society or even pushed out of the village economy, and who have no access to the welfare services and government facilities that can be claimed by those considered to be full-fledged citizens. Far from being afforded protection against intimidation and terrorizing, they have to make themselves invisible if they are not to be prosecuted by those who uphold law and order. The quantitative surplus that they represent is a social rather than a demographic problem.

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References


