

# **The Labour Process in Rural Haryana (India): A Field-Report from Two Villages**

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*Forms of labour hiring and the extent of unemployment are analysed using primary data collected from two villages in Haryana (India) during 2002–3. Data from these villages show that wage labourers, particularly women, faced extremely high levels of unemployment. Employment in agriculture was limited and new forms of labour hiring contracts had emerged under conditions of high unemployment. Earnings of manual workers were very low and gender disparities in wages very high. In one of the villages, a high concentration of landholdings and a decline in labour use facilitated the use of long-term workers. Labour relations were characterized by significant degrees of unfreedom, although the extent and nature of unfreedom varied considerably between casual and long-term workers, and between the two villages. In particular, long-term siri workers worked under conditions that were akin to bondage. It is argued that a very high degree of unemployment, combined with unequal caste and land relations and dependence on employers for credit, contributed to sustenance of unfree labour relations in rural Haryana.*

**Keywords:** Haryana, India, labour, employment, agriculture, unfreedom

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Green Revolution began in north-west India in the late 1960s, in the Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh. It was there that one might locate the vanguard of agrarian capitalism in India, a form of capitalism from below, or 'peasant capitalism'. Now, more than three decades on, we may investigate the outcome of that Green Revolution and the trajectory and forms of that capitalism, and, in particular, its implications for subordinate classes. This paper seeks to cast light on that. It shows the complexity and diversity of agrarian transition through an analysis of various forms of labour relations that exist in rural Haryana.

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This paper is based on fieldwork done as part of a research project of the Indian School of Women's Studies and Development on women workers in rural Haryana. I am thankful to ISWSD for permission to use the material for this paper. B. Srujana, Keya Mukherjee and Shamsheer Singh were involved in entry and processing of data. Discussions with Brinda Karat, V. K. Ramachandran, Jagmati Sangwan and Inderjit Singh have been of much help. Terry Byres read the paper with care and gave detailed comments. His comments and suggestions were extremely helpful in revising the paper. I am thankful to all of them.



Agricultural growth in Haryana, unlike that in other early-Green Revolution areas like the Punjab, was sustained through the 1970s and 1980s. Agricultural output in Haryana grew at about 3.02 per cent per annum in the 1970s and at about 4.74 per cent per annum in the 1980s. In contrast, in the Punjab, the growth of agricultural output declined from the 1970s (when it was 4.7 per cent per annum) to the 1980s (when it was 3.9 per cent per annum). In India as a whole, agricultural output grew at about 2.38 per cent per annum in the 1970s and 3.4 per cent per annum in the 1980s (Bhalla and Singh 2001). Agriculture in Haryana, a State that covers just about 44,000 square kilometres or 1.3 per



cent of the total national geographical area, is characterized by wide variations in cropping pattern across different districts. Macro-level evidence shows that there were different phases in the process of rural transformation in Haryana in the post-Green Revolution period. Sheila Bhalla divided that period in Haryana into an expansionary phase (from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s) when labour absorption increased significantly, and a contractionary phase, from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s, when substitution of labour with machines and chemicals-based technology led to a decline in per hectare labour absorption.

Total labour absorption in agriculture, however, did not fall even in the contractionary phase because of an increase in the area sown with labour intensive crops like paddy and because of expansion of gross cropped area. A significant feature of rural transformation in Haryana was also that non-agricultural employment grew at a very substantial rate through the 1970s and 1980s. Growth of non-agricultural employment was particularly important in view of the falling rates of labour absorption in agriculture. Growth of non-agricultural employment was also associated with the emergence of close rural–urban inter-linkages (Bhalla 1981, 1989, 1995, 1999).

Finally, it was from around the late-1980s that the growth of overall rates of employment started declining in rural Haryana (Bhalla 1999). This trend continued through the 1990s. According to the NSS data, the annual growth of usual status employment was 0.91 per cent between 1987–88 and 1999–2000; the corresponding figure for the period 1977–78 to 1987–88 was 1.96 per cent. This decline in growth of overall employment was driven by the decline in growth of employment in agriculture, which turned negative (–0.24 per cent per annum) between 1987–88 and 1999–2000 (Sen 2002).

While there has been some work on macro-level trends in rural employment and agricultural change in rural Haryana, scholarly work on the nature of unemployment and changes in labour relations, particularly in recent years, is scanty. Micro-level studies on rural Haryana are few and have focused mainly on the nature of indebtedness and unfreedom in labour relations. The available evidence is particularly inadequate in view of the fact that there is a large diversity of agro-economic conditions in different parts of Haryana.

In this paper conditions of employment and forms of labour hiring are studied using primary data collected from two villages – Dhamar in Rohtak district and Birdhana in Fatehabad district – during 2002–3. Dhamar is a medium-sized village. In 2002–3, there were a total of 675 households in Dhamar. Of these, 404 households belonged to the *Jat* caste. There were a few households belonging to other non-*Dalit* castes: *Brahmin*, *Baniya*, *Lohar* (blacksmith), *Chhippi* (tailor), *Khati* (carpenter). There were 167 *Dalit* households, of which 96 belonged to the *Dhanak* caste; the rest belonged to *Valmik*, *Chamar*, *Jheemar* and *Kumhar* castes. There were 34 Muslim households.

By comparison, Birdhana is a relatively large village with 1629 households living in the village in 2003. Birdhana was also a caste heterogeneous village. Households in Birdhana belonged to 35 different castes and communities. Of all the households, 65 per cent came from backward castes, 15 per cent were *Dalit* and 18.3 per cent were from other Hindu castes. About 0.6 per cent of the households were Muslims. The village was divided into three settlements: the main village settlement, Rampura and Bailbhamiya. In addition, some land-owning households and a large number of agricultural worker households lived in the fields. The landowners typically lived in houses built in the fields, while agricultural workers lived in rooms built by landowners next to tubewells. Of a total of 1629 households in the village, 1398 lived in the main settlement, 67 lived in Rampura, 23 in Bailbhamiya and 141 in the fields.

## 2. THE FIELDWORK

Fieldwork in Dhamar and Birdhana comprised surveys of households that did not own any agricultural land and had at least one manual worker. In both villages, the survey was preceded by a house-listing survey.

In Dhamar, the house-listing survey covered all households normally resident in the village (temporary migrant workers were not included) and collected information on their caste, landownership, number of family members and number of manual workers in the family. From this schedule, a list of households that did not own any agricultural land and had at least one manual worker was prepared. There were 163 such households in Dhamar and a detailed household-level questionnaire was canvassed among all such households. The survey was done between December 2002 and January 2003.

The survey in Birdhana was a sample survey and was done in June 2003. In Birdhana, the house-listing schedule was canvassed among all households in the main village settlement, Rampura and Bailbhamiya. Households living in the fields were excluded from the houselisting at this stage. The sample frame comprising households with no ownership holding and with at least one manual worker was identified from the household list and a 30 per cent random sample selected from these households. The sample in Birdhana was divided into two sub-samples: one for the main settlement and one for Rampura. From both the main settlement and Rampura, 30 per cent of households were selected from the list of households through simple random selection.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to these two sub-samples, 30 per cent of a total of 141 landless manual worker households living in the fields were interviewed separately. In the case of these households, it was not possible to physically visit each field to prepare a household list as these households were scattered throughout the agricultural land of the village. Preparation of a household list, selection of households and interviewing the selected households were done simultaneously. We prepared a schematic map of the agricultural land of the village and divided it into different sections. A group of investigators went to each section, walked through the fields and prepared a list of households – collecting the name of the head of the household, caste, land owned and operated – from informed persons in the respective section. In other words, the household list for each was prepared on the basis of discussion with informed persons in the fields and not on the basis of visiting every household. Typically, these households, including both land-owning and landless manual worker households, live near tubewell installations in the fields. In general, the existence of a tubewell was used as a sign that a household might be staying in the field. The exercise of listing the households was done rigorously and care was taken to ensure that no households

<sup>1</sup> Bailbhamiya is a settlement of households that were displaced in the construction of a dam in Bilaspur in Himachal Pradesh and were resettled in Birdhana. All these households, belonging to the Brahmin caste, were given land in compensation and they all continued to own some land in 2003. As a result, all the households living in Bailbhamiya were excluded from the main survey.

were left out or counted more than once. Care was taken to individually spot all the tubewells and check if any households were living next to them. For each section, the investigators selected 25 per cent of households from this list in the field itself. Although it was not possible to conduct a statistically random selection at this stage, care was taken by the investigators to ensure that the selected households covered all parts of the section. Investigators were instructed to ensure that selection was not biased towards households living closer to the road or the points where the household list was prepared. The whole process was monitored very closely and these instructions were carefully adhered to.

The household questionnaire canvassed among these households collected information on casual and long-term employment, non-agricultural employment, employment under public works programmes, and employment in non-manual occupations. In addition, data were collected on livestock and dairying, household incomes, asset ownership and indebtedness, and access to the public distribution system. Information on employment and earnings was collected for a period of one year preceding the survey.

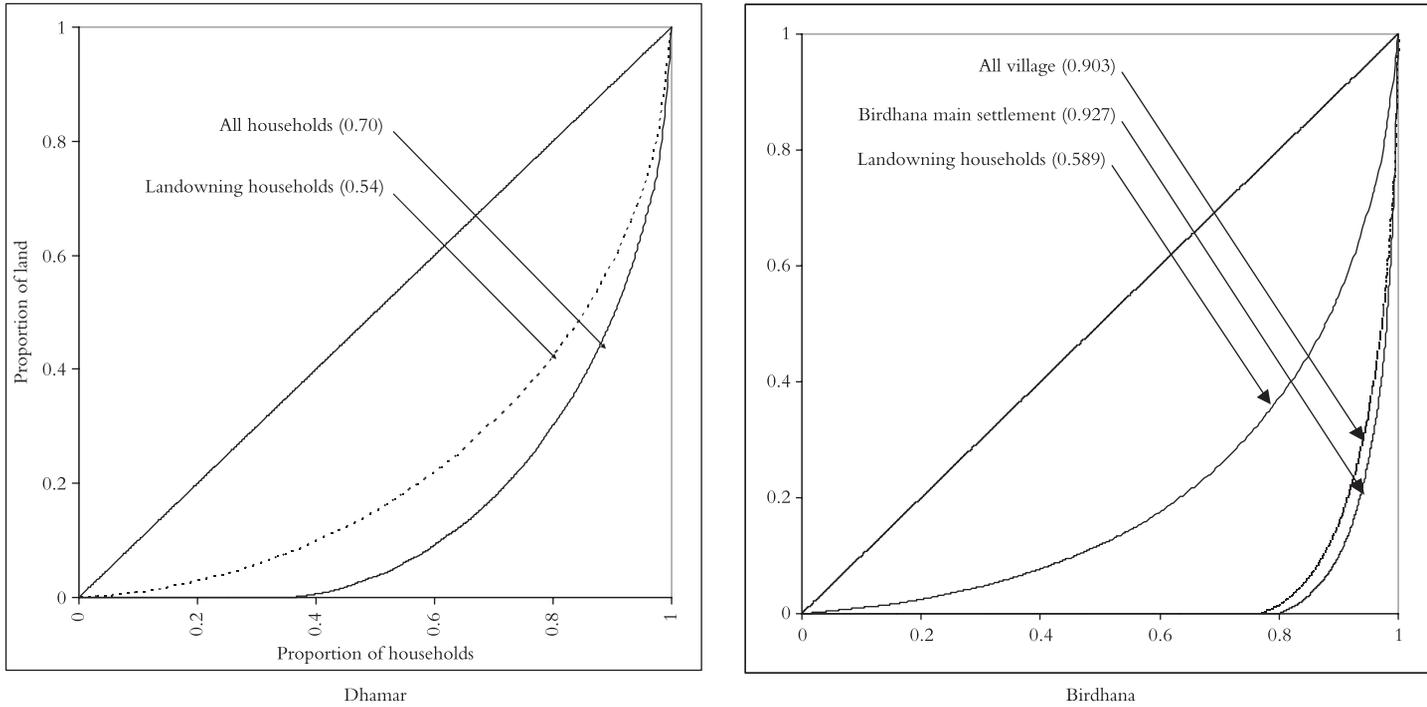
### 3. SOME BASIC FEATURES OF AGRARIAN ECONOMY OF DHAMAR AND BIRDHANA

The agricultural production systems in Dhamar and Birdhana were different in some important respects. First, although distribution of land was highly unequal in both villages, the inequality was exceptionally high in Birdhana. The Gini coefficient of ownership holdings in Birdhana was above 0.9 (Figure 1). About 77 per cent of the households were landless, while the top 2 per cent of households owned about 42 per cent of the land. The largest landowner owned 100 acres of irrigated land and 13 households had ownership holdings bigger than 40 acres each. In Dhamar, on the other hand, about 50 per cent of households were landless. The largest landowner owned about 40 acres of irrigated land. The Gini coefficient of ownership holdings in Dhamar was about 0.7 (Figure 1).

In Dhamar, *Jat* was the dominant caste in terms of land ownership. In Birdhana, the largest landowning households were from the *Mehta* caste.<sup>2</sup> Another caste that comprised many households with large amounts of land (though usually smaller than the amounts owned by *Mehta* households) was *Bishnoi*. These two castes, *Mehta* and *Bishnoi*, were the dominant castes in the village: they were the wealthiest, they dominated the *panchayat*, they were the local traders, they owned

<sup>2</sup> This caste comprised people (or their ancestors) who had migrated at the time of partition and had been resettled in Birdhana. Many of these households were provided with large stretches of what was then unirrigated land in compensation for the land they had lost as a result of partition. As resettlement preceded the enactment of land reform legislation, many of these households were in fact provided by the state with landholdings as large as hundreds of acres. Most of these landowners managed to evade land reform legislations that were enacted later and continued to own large tracts of land. Birdhana fell in the region that was at the forefront of the green revolution in India and benefited greatly in terms of expansion of groundwater irrigation from the mid-1960s onwards. Consequently, many of the resettled refugee households came to own fortunes in terms of large tracts of irrigated land.

Figure 1 Lorenz curves of ownership holdings of landowning and all households, Dhamar and Birdhana



Note: Figures in parentheses are Gini coefficients.

private schools in the village and the local political leaders came from these castes. *Jat* was a numerically a small caste in Birdhana; about 2 per cent of households were *Jat*.

Second, wheat, sugarcane and paddy were the main crops cultivated in Dhamar. On the other hand, in Birdhana, wheat, cotton and paddy were the main crops.

Third, agricultural workers in Dhamar were mainly hired on casual contracts. Only seven out of 237 adult male workers in Dhamar worked on long-term contracts. In Birdhana, on the other hand, the system of labour hiring in the village was based on widespread use of long-term labour. There were three kinds of agricultural workers in Birdhana. The first category comprised casual workers who did agricultural labour on short-term (time-rated or piece-rated) contracts. The second category comprised workers called the *siris*. Their contracts with the employer bordered between a tenancy contract and an attached labour contract. Broadly speaking, these *siris* were paid a share of produce and had to bear a share in the material costs of production. They also had to bear all the cost of hired labour. The contract often required the *siris* to live in the field with their families. The third category comprised the farm servants (*naukars*). Farm servants worked under a long-term (typically annual) contract that specified a fixed wage paid normally in cash.

#### 4. EMPLOYMENT OF CASUAL WORKERS

Data from Dhamar and Birdhana show that despite substantial differences in the structure of landownership, cropping pattern and systems of labour hiring, the employment conditions of casual workers were strikingly similar in the two villages in many respects.

The work participation rates among both men and women aged between 16 and 60 years were high. Table 1 shows that in Dhamar 83.5 per cent of women and 88.8 per cent of men aged between 16 and 60 years did at least some work in the previous year. In Birdhana, in the same age group, the work participation rates were 85.8 per cent for women and 91.2 per cent for men. It is clear from the table that, although work participation rates for women were lower than that for men, the disparity was small.

Table 1. Work participation rates among landless manual worker households, Dhamar and Birdhana (%)

	<i>Dhamar</i>		<i>Birdhana</i>	
	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
Persons of all ages	51.0	54.5	58.1	58.6
Aged between 16 and 60	83.5	88.8	85.8	91.2

Note: Figures for Birdhana refer to only the main village settlement and Rampura.

The days of employment were much lower for female workers than for male workers. In both villages, this difference was entirely due to the lower employment of women in non-agricultural occupations. An average casual woman worker was employed in non-agricultural occupations for 9 days in a year in Dhamar and for 3 days in a year in Birdhana (Table 2).

*Table 2.* Percentage of workers engaged in agricultural and non-agricultural occupations and average days of employment, workers engaged in only casual manual labour, aged between 16 and 60, Dhamar and Birdhana

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Dhamar</i>				<i>Birdhana</i>			
	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>		<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>	
	<i>Workers (%)</i>	<i>Days</i>						
Agricultural labour	96.8	34.8	85.4	32.8	99.4	43	89	44.6
Non-agricultural labour	15.2	9.5	71.3	70.6	6.2	3.1	72.4	57.3
Total	100 (158)	44.4	100 (168)	103.3	100 (177)	46.1	100 (145)	101.9

*Note:* Figures in parentheses give absolute number of female and male workers in the two villages.

Overall levels of employment in agriculture were very low but of a similar order for both male and female workers. In Dhamar, agriculture provided 35 days of employment to an average female worker and 33 days of employment to an average male worker in a whole year. In Birdhana, agriculture provided employment for about 43 days to a female worker and about 45 days to a male worker in a year (Table 2).

Further, the earnings of manual workers were very low and there was a very substantial disparity between earnings of male and female workers. On average, male workers earned about Rs. 6162 in a year in Dhamar and about Rs. 6626 in a year in Birdhana. An average female worker, on the other hand, earned Rs. 1839 in a year in Dhamar and Rs. 1584 in a year in Birdhana (Table 3).

#### *4.1. Employment in Agriculture*

Agricultural production in both villages was characterized by very low levels of labour absorption. Such low levels of labour absorption were a result of a long process of decline in labour absorption in agriculture in Haryana caused by, most importantly, expansion in the use of labour displacing machines. An average female hired worker in Dhamar worked for only about 35 days in a year in

Table 3. Average annual earnings of casual male and female workers, aged between 16 and 60 years, Dhamar and Birdhana village settlements

	<i>Women</i>			<i>Men</i>		
	<i>Cash (%)</i>	<i>Kind (%)</i>	<i>Total (Rupees)</i>	<i>Cash (%)</i>	<i>Kind (%)</i>	<i>Total (Rupees)</i>
<i>Dhamar</i>						
Agriculture	26.2	73.4	1490	54.9	45.1	1800
Non-agriculture	83.1	16.9	354	96.6	3.4	4362
All labour	37.3	62.7	1839	84.4	15.6	6162
<i>Birdhana village settlements</i>						
Agriculture	53.6	46.4	1520	76.3	23.7	2775
Non-agriculture	100.0	0.0	64	95.1	4.9	3848
All labour	55.5	44.5	1584	87.2	12.8	6626

Note: Earnings in household-level piece-rated work were divided in proportion to the labour hours for which each worker in the household worked. This assumption results in reducing the disparity between earnings of male and female workers in agriculture.

agriculture. Of this, 15 days were spent in wheat cultivation, 9 days in sugarcane cultivation, about 6 days in paddy cultivation and the rest of the days in other crops and miscellaneous activities. An average male worker on the other hand, did 17 days of work in wheat cultivation, 8 days of work in paddy cultivation and 7 days of work in sugarcane cultivation (Table 6).

Machines were most widely used in wheat cultivation. For cultivation of wheat, workers were hired only for irrigation-related tasks (making bunds, clearing channels and watering), harvesting and threshing. All other tasks like land preparation, sowing, application of fertilizers and plant protection chemicals were done using machines and family labour. Manual weeding in the fields was replaced to a great extent by use of chemical weedkillers.

Before discussing the structure of agricultural employment in the two villages in detail, it is appropriate to point out some overall features of the agricultural labour market.

Casual agricultural workers were hired and paid in both villages either on an individual basis or as part of a group of workers. For some jobs, workers were hired individually on piece-rated or time-rated contracts. However, for jobs that required a number of workers to be hired at the same time, an individual worker was usually given a piece-rated contract and asked to mobilize other workers to get the work done. These jobbers could either mobilize these workers from their own households or, if the required labour could not be mobilized from within the household, ask other workers to join the group. Table 4 shows that much of the work, comprising over 51 per cent of all days of employment in agriculture in Dhamar and 45 per cent of all days of employment in agriculture in Birdhana, was done as part of household labour or labour groups.

Table 4. Share of employment in agriculture under different types of contracts, all casual agricultural workers aged between 16 and 60 years, Dhamar and Birdhana settlements (%)

	<i>Basis of payment</i>	<i>Dhamar</i>			<i>Birdhana settlements</i>		
		<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Persons</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Persons</i>
Individually hired work	Time-rated	11.4	39.1	26.3	4.7	36.0	19.1
	Piece-rated	37.5	7.3	21.3	48.8	20.0	34.0
	Total	48.9	46.4	47.5	51.2	56.0	53.2
Household-level work	Piece-rated	41.4	43.8	42.7	23.3	20.0	21.3
Work done with a labour group	Piece-rated	9.7	9.8	9.7	25.6	22.0	23.4
Average days of employment	(days)	36.0	37.5	36.8	43	50	47

Labour groups comprising workers from outside the household of the jobber were used primarily in paddy cultivation. These were typically organized for specific work and did not have a long-term existence. Typically, a cultivator contacted a worker (usually male) and asked him to arrange labour to do a specific task (say, transplanting, harvesting or threshing of paddy on a specified extent of land). This worker organized a group, comprising workers from among his family, his friends and neighbours, and they collectively undertook the task. Piece-rated earnings from the task done by the group were divided by the members in proportion to the days worked by each member of the group and there was no additional allowance for the person who organized the group. The number of members of a group was not always fixed for the duration of a particular task and sometimes varied from day to day.

The table also shows that agricultural workers were hired predominantly on piece-rated wages. Hiring agricultural workers on time-rated wages was restricted to only a few jobs. This was particularly true for women workers. Of the total days that women workers were employed, employment on 88.6 per cent days in Dhamar and 95.3 per cent days in Birdhana was on piece-rated contracts. In contrast, men did about 39 per cent of work in Dhamar and 36 per cent of work in Birdhana under time-rated contracts (Table 3).

Further, even when workers were hired under time-rated contracts, the employers did not pay a common standard wage for hiring of either men or women workers.

In Dhamar, casual workers were hired on time-rated wages not merely on a daily basis but also on the basis of what was called 'half-a-day'. In particular, women were hired almost exclusively on half-day contracts. Except for a few jobs like wheat threshing and irrigation, male workers were also primarily hired

on 'half-day' contracts. The duration of a 'full-day' was considered to comprise 12–13 hours while any work that took 6–8 hours was considered a 'half-day' work.<sup>3</sup> The time-rated wages, either for workers hired for a full day or for workers hired for half-a-day, were not standard and varied from employer to employer and worker to worker. For example, transplanting wages for women workers who were hired individually varied between Rs. 25 and Rs. 50. Weeding wages for women varied between Rs. 30 and Rs. 50. Women's wages for harvesting and threshing varied between Rs. 50 and Rs. 100. Similar variations were seen in case of male workers, though in most cases men were paid a higher amount than women.

In Birdhana, on the other hand, there was no fixed notion of either a full or a half-day. Workers reported having been hired for a job that took one hour to a job that took 20 hours of continuous work. Although there was a broad correspondence between duration for which a worker was employed and the wages paid, the correlation coefficient between wages paid and hours of work was not very high (0.49 for men), indicating that there were other factors that determined variations in wages.<sup>4</sup>

Table 5 presents the structure of employment of casual workers in Dhamar and Birdhana. I shall discuss some of the most important sources of employment for casual workers in the two villages.

*4.1.1. Wheat harvesting.* The table shows that despite a very high degree of mechanization, wheat was a major source of employment in both villages. Workers were hired in wheat cultivation only for irrigation, harvesting and threshing. Of these, in Dhamar, harvesting accounted for 13 days of employment for an average female worker and 12 days of employment for an average male worker. In Birdhana, where the extent of mechanization was still higher, wheat harvesting provided 9 days of employment to an average female worker and 8 days of employment to a male worker.

In recent years, harvesting and threshing of wheat in both villages were increasingly done with combine harvesters. In particular, the use of combine harvesters for harvesting and threshing of wheat was very high in Birdhana. As our data pertain only to landless (by ownership) households, we do not have estimates of the use of machines and hiring of workers by owner cultivators. In Dhamar, there were no tenants among the households that did not own any land. In Birdhana, we collected information on the use of machines and labour on fields cultivated under *siri* contracts.<sup>5</sup> These data show that about 65 per cent

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of the analysis of employment data, we have considered employment for one day, irrespective of whether it was on a half-day contract or a full-day contract, as a single labour day. We have standardized days of employment only for one operation, harvesting of sugarcane, which is generally done on a piece-rated basis and is usually done by each worker only for three to four hours. In case of harvesting of sugarcane, days of employment have been standardized to eight-hour days.

<sup>4</sup> This refers to wages for male workers; female workers were seldom employed on time-rated contracts.

<sup>5</sup> See Section 5 for an analysis of the *siri* system.

Table 5. Average days of employment in agriculture for workers engaged only in manual activities, by crops and operations, women and men, Dhamar and Birdhana, 2002

Crop	Operation	Dhamar		Birdhana				
		Women	Men	Women	Men			
Wheat	Irrigation-related tasks	0	5		2			
	Harvesting	13	12	9	8			
	Threshing	0	0	0	2			
	Collecting scattered grain and straw	2	0	4	1			
	Miscellaneous	0	0	0	6			
	Total	15	17	13	19			
Paddy	Transplanting	1	1	6	4			
	Irrigation-related tasks	0	2		1			
	Harvesting and threshing	5	4	3	5			
	Collecting scattered grain and straw	0	0	1	0			
	Miscellaneous	1	1	1	2			
	Total	7	8	11	12			
Sugarcane	Hoeing	0	2					
	Tying the plants	0	2					
	Harvesting	8	2					
	Miscellaneous	1	1					
	Total	9	7					
Cotton	Hoeing			1	2			
	Spraying pesticides				1			
	Picking			16	2			
	Miscellaneous			0	3			
	Total			17	8			
Other crops					4	1	2	5
<i>All agriculture</i>			35	33	43	45		
All employment			44	103	46	102		
Number of workers			158	168	177	145		

Note: Cotton in Dhamar and sugarcane in Birdhana generate only small amounts of employment and have been included in other crops. In general, I have not standardized the days of employment for hours for which a worker worked. The only exception to this was made in the case of harvesting of sugarcane in Dhamar, which was generally done only for about 3–4 hours in a day. The days of employment in sugarcane harvesting for this table were standardized to 8-hour days.

of land sown by *siris* with wheat was harvested using combine harvesters. In 2002–3, nobody in Dhamar owned a combine harvester. These were, however, available on rent. In Birdhana, on the other hand, there were about ten combine harvesters. These, and still others owned by outsiders, could be rented for wheat

harvesting. In both the villages, the rent of a combine harvester for harvesting and threshing of wheat was about Rs. 450–500 per acre.<sup>6</sup>

A factor that limited, at least to some extent, the use of combine harvesters was the fact that the combine harvesters harvested and threshed only the ears of the wheat plant. The stalk of the plant was not uprooted and chopped for use as fodder. The straw would typically have to be burnt on the field itself. As wheat straw was greatly valued as fodder, many cultivators preferred to get at least part of the land harvested manually. However, for the last three years, a new machine (attached to a tractor) called a straw reaper had become available in Birdhana which harvested the straw after wheat had been harvested by the combine harvester. The availability of straw reapers, the rent for which was only about Rs. 500 per trolley of straw it harvested, overcame the only barrier in the spread of combine harvesters.

Manual harvesting of wheat in both the villages was done through jobbers who mobilized workers from their own households. The work was contracted on piece-rated wages and was paid for in kind. On piece-rated contracts, it took about 14 labour days to harvest an acre of wheat. Typically, all members of the jobber's household, including children older than about 10 years of age, worked together to harvest wheat. In Dhamar, the modal rate of payment for wheat harvesting comprised 120 kg of grain and 120 kg of straw per acre of harvesting. In Birdhana, where combine harvesters were more commonly used, wages comprised only 120 kg of grain. Manual harvesting in Birdhana was done only for the sake of fodder. Large landowners contracted out only a small part (if at all) of their total land for manual harvesting. As fodder was the main reason why wheat was given for manual harvesting, no straw was paid in the wages in Birdhana.

Harvesting wheat has traditionally been an important way by which landless households obtained wheat for consumption over much of the year. The importance of wheat harvesting in this respect is evident from the fact that over 80 per cent of the workers in Dhamar and 76 per cent of the workers in Birdhana harvested wheat. Displacement of labour from harvesting and threshing of wheat as a result of use of combine harvesters had grave implications for food security of landless households in the two villages. On average, a household harvested 2.2 acres of wheat in Birdhana and 3.5 acres of wheat in Dhamar. Households that harvested wheat on household-level contracts got an average of about 67 kg of wheat per member of the household in Dhamar and only 52 kg of wheat per member of the household in Birdhana. It was a widespread and major concern among manual workers in both villages that declining availability of work in wheat harvesting had direct implications on food security of their households.

*4.1.2. Sugarcane harvesting in Dhamar.* In Dhamar, harvesting of sugarcane was an important source of employment, particularly for women. About 50 per cent of

<sup>6</sup> In comparison, the cost of manual harvesting followed by threshing, even at the going rate (which was lower than that in Dhamar), would have been about Rs. 1250. The expenses for manual harvesting followed by threshing would have included Rs. 756 worth of grain for harvesting labour, Rs. 400 for threshing labour and Rs. 100 for hiring the threshing machine.

women workers harvested sugarcane. Female labour accounted for about 80 per cent of the total hired labour used for harvesting sugarcane. In terms of days of employment, harvesting of sugarcane employed an average female worker for about eight 8-hour days out of a total of 35 days that she worked in agriculture in a year.

Sugarcane was harvested by workers for leaves of sugarcane, which were used as fodder. Sugarcane was primarily cultivated for sugar mills. Sugar mills sent a notice to individual cultivators for delivering the sugarcane. The crop was harvested in the morning of the same day that it was due for delivery to the mill to minimize drying of canes before delivery. The cultivator informed a group of workers in advance (usually on the previous evening) that sugarcane in the field was due for harvesting. Workers, mainly women from households which had some cattle to feed but no land to give them fodder, went in the morning to such fields and harvested sugarcane. In return, they were allowed to take leaves of the sugarcane that they harvested. As there was much demand for sugarcane leaves from the workers, the cultivators would often ration the amount of leaves that each worker was allowed to take. In general, each woman carried home about two bundles of sugarcane leaves (worth about Rs. 8 per bundle) after work of about 4 hours. One notes that there was no other wage payment for harvesting of sugarcane and that all this work was done entirely and only for leaves.

The agricultural labour process in Dhamar was closely linked with animal husbandry by the worker households and with the market for fodder. Fodder commodities formed a very important component of wages. A substantial amount of work done by agricultural workers, particularly women, was paid in terms of only fodder. Notably, straw and leaves from various plants were given as wage goods and were used as fodder commodities. Some of these were relatively inferior fodder commodities, were generally not used as fodder by landowning households, and had no market value. Fodder commodities that were paid as wage goods included sugarcane leaves, wheat straw, paddy straw, mustard straw, potato leaves, berseem and jowar.

A slight diversion is necessary at this stage to discuss the nature of livestock holdings of these households and analyse the linkage between agricultural labour and animal husbandry by manual worker households in Dhamar. Of the 163 manual worker households in the village, 111 had some livestock. Of the households that possessed livestock, about 47 per cent had obtained female buffalo calves or buffaloes through a peculiar kind of lease contract. Under this contract, the household that leased-in the cattle was required to rear it until it calved. At the end of this period, the owner of the cattle quoted a price for the cattle. The household that brought up the cattle over this period could either buy the cattle at half the price that was quoted by the owner, or if they were unwilling or unable to do so, the owner of the cattle could pay half the quoted price and take the cattle. Most commonly, households took milch buffalo calves under such agreements and the deals were finally settled after the calf grew up into a buffalo (which is roughly at about 3 years of age). About 26 per cent of the households had taken buffalo calves under such agreements. Another approximate 12 per

cent of the households had taken fully-grown milch buffaloes under such agreements. Grown up buffaloes were typically leased out after they stopped lactating and reared until they calved again and started yielding milk. In such cases, the buffalo had to be tended for a few months to a year. However, as the leased animal was fully grown, the cost and effort required for rearing it were higher than for the calves. In some of the cases when a fully grown buffalo had been leased, there was an asymmetric division of the cost of the buffalo when the deal was finally settled: the households that tended the cattle had to pay two-thirds of the price to get the buffalo, failing which, the owner could buy the cattle for only one-third the price that the owner quoted.

It is clear that the terms of these contracts were fixed adversely for the household that tended the cattle. In normal conditions, given that the household that brought up the calf had already incurred substantial expenses and a huge effort in the enterprise, it would be rational for the household to buy the animal if their own valuation or the market price is higher than the quoted price for the buffalo. However, given that these were generally poor, landless households with limited access to credit, in most cases they did not have enough money to pay for the animal and were therefore unable to buy it. Knowing this, it was common for the bidder to undervalue the cattle. It was often the case that the household that brought up the calf was unable to buy the buffalo even at half of the quoted price and the owner of the calf actually got away with the buffalo by paying a pittance.

*4.1.3. Cotton picking in Birdhana.* Just as sugarcane harvesting was an important source of agricultural employment for women in Dhamar, in Birdhana much of the employment for women was generated in picking of cotton. Cotton picking was largely women's work. Women's labour accounted for over 90 per cent of employment in picking cotton. Over 71 per cent of all women workers in the working age-group participated in cotton picking and it accounted for 16 out of 46 days that an average woman worked. Other than women, a few children and old people also picked cotton. Able bodied, working-age men were not hired for cotton picking.

This single most important source of employment for women was also one of the lowest-paid agricultural jobs. Like all other work that women did, wages in cotton picking were piece rated. A worker was paid Rs. 0.8–1.00 for every kilogram of cotton she picked. On average, an adult woman worker picked up to 25 kg of cotton after working for about 8 hours and earned about Rs. 22 per day.<sup>7</sup>

*4.1.4. Paddy transplanting, harvesting and threshing.* In paddy cultivation, men and women worked together in transplanting, weeding, harvesting and threshing

<sup>7</sup> The extent of cotton cultivation was relatively less in Dhamar and very few workers were employed for cotton picking. In Dhamar, one-tenth of cotton picked by a worker was paid as wage for cotton picking. No cash wages were paid for cotton picking. The work was typically done by women who needed cotton to make mattresses and quilts for use in their homes.

paddy. On the other hand, irrigation, applying fertilizers and spraying pesticides were tasks that were done exclusively by men.

There were two important differences in organization of paddy cultivation in the two villages. First, in Dhamar, male migrant workers from Bihar did a lot of work in paddy. As the survey in Dhamar did not cover migrant workers, our estimates on gender composition of workforce hired in paddy cultivation excludes these workers. The use of migrant labour was relatively less in Birdhana. Second, in Birdhana, harvesting of one of the three main varieties of paddy (*parmal*) was done using combine harvesters. In Dhamar, all tasks in paddy cultivation other than land preparation were done through manual labour.

In paddy cultivation, labour was mainly hired against cash payment. Paddy transplanting, and harvesting and threshing were done both through time-rated individual hiring of workers and through piece-rated contracts where large labour groups of workers were organized by jobbers. The piece-rates for these tasks, however, varied a great deal from contract to contract. The modal wage for transplanting was Rs. 400 per acre in both villages. Paddy harvesting and threshing were done either separately under different contracts or under one single contract for both harvesting and threshing. In Dhamar, rates for harvesting and threshing of paddy under a single contract varied from Rs. 500 to Rs. 1000 per acre. In Birdhana, on the other hand, the rates for harvesting and threshing of paddy varied from Rs. 750 to Rs. 1400 per acre.

In general, labour groups in Birdhana were smaller than the groups in Dhamar. In Dhamar, transplanting of paddy, when contracted to labour groups, was done by groups that comprised, on average, about 12 persons. The smallest group in Dhamar comprised nine workers and the largest comprised 20 workers. In Birdhana, in contrast, the average size of the labour group that transplanted paddy was six workers. The smallest groups comprised only two workers, while the largest had 15 workers.

#### 4.2. *Wages and Earnings in Agriculture*

The fact that a substantial part of the work done by casual workers was contracted to household-based labour groups poses a methodological problem in respect of the calculation of remuneration of individual workers for such tasks. Such a calculation can only be done with the assumption that each worker in the household got an equal wage and the total remuneration was divided in proportion to the days that each worker worked on the job. This, however, can give a totally misleading picture of the gender differential in wages.

Tables 6 and 7 present average daily earnings of male and female workers in the working age-group in the two villages for tasks in which they were hired on an individual basis. The tables show that on the whole the daily earnings of manual workers in both villages were very low. The gender disparity in wages, particularly in Birdhana, was very high and women received very low wages. On average, a male worker earned about Rs. 52 per day in Dhamar and Rs. 72

Table 6. Daily earnings of male and female workers (aged between 16 and 60 years) in individually hired agricultural occupations, Dhamar (Rupees)

Crop	Operation	Women			Men		
		Cash	Kind <sup>a</sup>	Total	Cash	Kind <sup>a</sup>	Total
Wheat	Irrigation-related tasks				50.5		
	Threshing	0.0	61.0	61.0	95.3	1.1	96.4
	Collecting scattered grain and straw	0.0	44.7	44.7	62.5	7.0	69.5
	Miscellaneous	10.5	10.9	21.4	71.5	0.0	71.5
Paddy	Transplanting	47.2		47.2	52.5		52.5
	Irrigation-related tasks				53.3		53.3
	Weeding	48.6		48.6	53.2		53.2
	Harvesting and threshing	68.2	4.2	72.3	78.0	0.0	78.0
	Collecting scattered grain and straw	0.0	31.5	31.5			
	Miscellaneous				38.0		38.0
Sugarcane	Hoeing	50.0		50.0	52.4		52.4
	Tying the plants	17.4	10.4	27.9	54.4	0.0	54.4
	Harvesting	0.0	13.3	13.3	1.3	13.6	14.8
	Miscellaneous	0.0	12.7	12.7	41.7	3.7	45.4
Other crops	Miscellaneous	14.7	10.7	25.4	40.1	5.8	46.0
All agriculture <sup>b</sup>	Rupees	10.8	20.5	31.3	48.9	3.2	52.1
	(per cent)	(34.5)	(65.5)	(100)	(93.9)	(6.1)	(100)

Notes: <sup>a</sup>Earnings in kind are reported in terms of value in Rupees. <sup>b</sup>The average wages for all labour have been computed by treating each day of work in sugarcane harvesting as half a day.

Table 7. Daily earnings of male and female workers (aged between 16 and 60 years) in individually hired agricultural occupations, Birdhana main settlement and Rampura

Crop	Operation	Women			Men		
		Cash	Kind	Total	Cash	Kind	Total
Wheat	Irrigation				66.4		66.4
	Harvesting					84.0	84.0
	Threshing				136.0		136.0
	Loading straw				85.9		85.9
	Collecting scattered grain and straw		35.9	35.9	9.9	21.1	31.0
	Miscellaneous				72.5		72.5
Cotton	Hoeing	44.1		44.1	54.5		54.5
	Spraying pesticides				62.3		62.3
	Picking	22.2		22.2	23.8		23.8
	Miscellaneous	13.1		13.1	66.5		66.5
Paddy	Irrigation				64.5		64.5
	Harvesting and threshing	50.0		50.0	65.7		65.7
	Collecting scattered grain and straw		49.9	49.9	21.9	74.1	95.9
	Miscellaneous	20.3		20.3	64.7		64.7
Vegetable crops	Miscellaneous	12.5	4.9	17.3	23.3		23.3
Other crops	Miscellaneous	16.9	5.7	22.6	79.2	0.1	79.3
All agriculture	Rupees	19.4	6.2	25.7	70.4	1.1	71.6
	(Per cent)	(75.5)	(24.1)	(100)	(98.3)	(1.7)	(100)

Notes: Earnings in kind are reported in terms of value in Rupees. Workers belonging to *siri* households have been excluded. Figures in parentheses indicate the percentage share of cash and kind wages.

per day in Birdhana. In contrast, a female worker earned about Rs. 31 per day in Dhamar and about Rs. 26 per day in Birdhana.

Kind payments accounted for over 65 per cent of a woman's wage in Dhamar. As noted in Section 4.1, this included wage payments that comprised only fodder commodities, in particular sugarcane leaves. In contrast, in Birdhana, only 24 per cent of a woman's wage was paid in kind. This difference between Dhamar and Birdhana was largely because a major source of women's employment in Dhamar, sugarcane harvesting, was paid for in terms of sugarcane leaves while a major source of employment for women in Birdhana, cotton picking, was paid for in cash.

Low wages combined with low employment resulted in very low annual earnings in agriculture for male and female workers. As shown in Table 3, average annual earnings in agriculture in Dhamar were only Rs. 1490 for a female worker and Rs. 1800 for a male worker. In Birdhana, average annual agricultural earning was only Rs. 1520 for a female worker and Rs. 2775 for a male worker.

#### *4.3. Non-agricultural Employment*

In both Dhamar and Birdhana, male workers found much greater employment in non-agricultural occupations than in agriculture. In contrast, women workers in both villages, and particularly in Birdhana, found very little non-agricultural employment. In fact, gender disparity in employment was entirely on account of the difference in employment in non-agricultural occupations (Table 2). More than 70 per cent of male workers in both villages did some non-agricultural work. In contrast, only 15 per cent of female workers in Dhamar and only 6 per cent of female workers in Birdhana did any non-agricultural work.

Table 8 shows the structure of non-agricultural employment in the village. Construction work was one of the most important non-agricultural manual activities for men in both villages. About 54 per cent of male workers in Birdhana and about 34 per cent of male workers in Dhamar did some construction work over the year. In Birdhana, construction provided about 33 days of employment to an average male worker. In Dhamar, construction work accounted for about 14 days of employment for an average male worker.

In Dhamar, selling rubber *chappals* (slippers) was another major source of non-agricultural employment for male workers. These men worked for traders who bought rubber *chappals* from Delhi and transported them to far-away places. The traders took a group of workers to these places where the workers were required to carry bundles of *chappals* on their backs and sell them in the streets. Workers got Rs. 5 for every pair of *chappals* they sold. The workers had to bear the cost of travel and lodging themselves. These workers travelled to various states (among them, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat) and sold *chappals*.

Another important occupation for male workers in Dhamar was cutting wood. Typically, a person bought a tree and either cut it with an axe himself or hired

Table 8. Percentage of workers and average annual days of non-agricultural employment of male and female manual workers having no non-manual employment (aged between 16 and 60 years of age), by occupation, Dhamar and Birdhana settlements

Occupation	Dhamar						Birdhana settlements					
	Men			Women			Men			Women		
	Av. days for non-ag. workers	Av. days for all workers	Per cent of all male workers	Av. days for non-ag. workers	Av. days for all workers	Per cent of all female workers	Av. days for non-ag. workers	Av. days for all workers	Per cent of all male workers	Av. days for non-ag. workers	Av. days for all workers	Per cent of all female workers
Construction work and related activities	19.1	13.8	33.9	1.3	0.2	3.2	45.1	32.6	53.8	0.4		0.6
Selling <i>chappals</i>	32.0	23.2	19.9			0						
Brick kiln work	6.6	4.8	3.5	32.6	5	3.8	6.8	4.9	3.5			
Cutting wood	11.2	8.1	14.6			0						
Loading	4.9	3.6	9.4			0	5.0	3.6	6.2			
Domestic work			0	3.5	0.5	1.3				16.5	1	3.4
Sanitation work			0	14.1	2.1	1.9						
Public works programmes	5.9	4.3	21.1	6.7	1	5.7	3.5	2.5	18.6	2.3	0.1	0.6
Miscellaneous	18.4	13.4	11.1	8.8	1.3	1.3	18.8	13.6	15.9	30.0	1.9	2.3
All non agriculture	97.2	70.6	71.3	62.8	9.5	15.2	79.1	57.3	72.4	49.2	3.1	6.2
All employment	130.5	103	100	103.3	44	100	126.1	101.9	100	94.8	46.1	100
Number of workers		122	168		24	158		105	145		11	177

Notes: Non-agricultural workers in this table refers to those workers who did at least some non-agricultural labour. Sanitation work in Dhamar was done by women from the *Valmik* caste. As the work was done regularly for about 3–4 hours every day, I have standardized the days of employment to 8-hour days.

male workers to do so.<sup>8</sup> About 15 per cent of male workers in Dhamar were employed in cutting wood. For an average worker, cutting wood provided employment for about 8 days in a year.

Public works programmes provided only a small amount of non-agricultural employment. In particular, they provided very little employment to female workers. About 21 per cent of male workers in Dhamar and about 19 per cent of female workers in Birdhana did any work under the public works programmes. In contrast, less than 6 per cent of female workers in Dhamar and less than 1 per cent of female workers in Birdhana were employed in public works programmes. Public works programmes in the village comprised, most importantly, de-silting of ponds and construction of roads. The most important work in these tasks was digging earth with a hoe. Low employment of women in public works programmes was, at least in part, a result of the historical cultural barrier in Haryana against use of the hoe by women.<sup>9</sup> A few women who did some work under public works programmes worked with their husbands and in such cases their job was generally to carry the earth that was dug.

Wages in public works programmes were paid on piece-rated basis (in terms of per unit area of pond de-silted). In Dhamar, daily earnings of 89 per cent of female and 49 per cent of male workers in public works programmes were lower than the minimum wage for agricultural workers (Rs. 74 per day) in Haryana.

It must also be noted that respondents in both villages reported that the employment generation programmes were often done via the *panchayat* through contractors who used earthmoving machinery for de-silting ponds. Use of heavy machinery led to displacement of the workers and defeated the very purpose of the programme.

Most non-agricultural occupations were characterized by significant barriers to entry. In some cases, the barrier operated through the cost a worker had to incur in searching for work. For example, much of the construction work was available in the nearest towns (Rohtak and Fatehabad). Construction workers had to go to the town and wait at the *Labour Chowk* for an employer to ask them to work for him. On several occasions, workers went to the town only to find that they got no work and came back to the village without earning. Workers from Dhamar would spend, on such occasions, at least Rs. 16 on travel to Rohtak and back. In the case of selling rubber *chappals*, workers had to bear their own cost of travel and lodging. In several cases, there would be a delay in the

<sup>8</sup> There were some contractors who only invested in buying trees and did not do the manual labour themselves. Such contractors were not counted as manual workers. There were also some persons who did both activities. For the purpose of our analysis, investment of capital in buying a tree was not classified as hired manual labour. If, however, a person was hired to cut the tree and wood, the work was classified as hired manual labour.

<sup>9</sup> Working with a hoe is considered inappropriate for a woman. The exception to this general use is the work done by a small and light-weight hoe used for hoeing in the fields. Hoeing in the fields comprised only loosening the earth and the worker was not required to lift earth on the blade of the hoe. A different type of hoe is used when the task involves both digging and removing the earth. This has a bigger blade and handling it is considered more strenuous than handling the hoe used in the fields.

supply of *chappals*. On such occasions, the workers could end up spending money on their travel and lodging without any earnings for days on end. Several workers reported having made net losses in some years for these reasons. In Dhamar, non-agricultural employment was also closely linked to the caste of the workers. Table 10 shows that certain tasks were largely caste-specific. Construction work, loading and the work on public works programmes were done by persons (mostly men) from all castes. Most of the contractors in Dhamar and neighbouring villages who employed workers to sell *chappals* and to cut wood came from the *Dhanak* caste. They employed, for these jobs, workers only from their own caste. Persons from the *Jheemar* caste made baskets. Brick kiln work was done by *Dhanak*, *Prajapati* (potmaker) and Muslim workers.

Moreover, low employment of women in non-agricultural occupations was closely related to the fact that the availability of employment within the village, and in the neighbouring villages, was very low (Table 9). Women primarily worked either within the village or in the neighbouring villages. In particular, almost all the non-agricultural work done by women workers in Birdhana was home-based. This included domestic work, mud plastering the houses, making quilts, making ropes, spinning on the manual spinning wheel and working as a midwife. In our sample in Birdhana, there was only one woman worker who worked in construction, only one who worked in a public works programme, only one who worked in a brick kiln and only one who reported having worked on loading earth in trolleys. On the other hand, a large percentage of male workers who were employed in non-agricultural manual occupations had to go out of the village to seek for work. In particular, in Dhamar, non-agricultural employment took male workers to far-away places.

Table 11 shows non-agricultural wages in Birdhana. The table shows that there were wide disparities in wages of male and female workers. Just as in the case of agriculture, non-agricultural wages for male workers were higher in Birdhana than in Dhamar, while non-agricultural wages for female workers (in whatever little employment they got) were lower in Birdhana than in Dhamar.

## 5. THE *SIRI* SYSTEM OF LABOUR HIRING IN BIRDHANA

The most important difference in the structure of the labour market in Dhamar and Birdhana was in respect of the use of long-term workers. Use of long-term agricultural workers has had a long history in most parts of Haryana. Over the last three decades, however, this system has been on the decline in most parts of the State. Western districts of the State – Hisar, Fatehabad and Sirsa – are, however, an exception to this general pattern. In this section, I shall discuss the forms of hiring of long-term workers in Birdhana and the factors that have helped sustain the use of long-term labour in agriculture in the village.

There were two kinds of long-term workers in Birdhana: *naukars* and *siris*. *Naukars* were farm servants who were hired on a seasonal or an annual basis and paid a fixed cash wage. Of a total of 367 working-age male workers that were covered in our sample of 282 households, only five worked as *naukars*. In

Table 9. Number of workers who were employed in different non-agricultural occupations, by sex and caste, Dhamar

<i>Sex</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Dhanak</i>	<i>Chamar</i>	<i>Jheemar</i>	<i>Prajapati</i>	<i>Valmik</i>	<i>Chhippi</i>	<i>Muslim</i>	<i>All</i>
Women	Brick kiln work	3			2			1	5
	Construction work and related activities	4			2				6
	Domestic work	1	1					1	2
	Making baskets			1					1
	Public works programme	5	1		2	1			9
	Sanitation worker					4			4
	Miscellaneous	1				1			2
Men	Brick kiln work	4			3			1	7
	Construction work and related activities	35	8	4	7	6		13	60
	Cutting wood	28				2		1	30
	Loading	4	2	2	1	3		8	12
	Making baskets			3					3
	Miscellaneous	9	3	1		1		2	14
	Public works programme	18	9	3	6	3	1	9	39
	Selling <i>chappals</i>	37	1						38
Selling other goods	2					1		3	

*Table 10.* Non-agricultural workers and employment by place of work, Dhamar and Birdhana (%)

<i>Place of work</i>	<i>Dhamar</i>				<i>Birdhana</i>			
	<i>Men</i>		<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>		<i>Women</i>	
	<i>Workers</i>	<i>Labour days</i>	<i>Workers</i>	<i>Labour days</i>	<i>Workers</i>	<i>Labour days</i>	<i>Workers</i>	<i>Labour days</i>
Village	54.0	21.6	70.4	45.6	65.4	47.9	91.7	93.0
Neighbouring villages	55.0	37.3	33.3	35.0	17.3	12.3	8.3	6.7
Nearest town	16	9.4	0	0	34.6	36.4	4.2	0.2
Other places in Haryana	5.0	4.4	3.7	6.0	1.2	0.6	0.0	0.0
Outside Haryana	27.0	27.3	3.7	13.4	2.5	2.8	0.0	0.0
No. of workers/Av. days of employment	100	131	27	62	162	65.3	24	77

Table 11. Daily earnings in non-agricultural occupations, workers aged between 16 and 60 years, Dhamar and Birdhana settlements (Rupees)

Occupation	Dhamar						Birdhana settlements					
	Men			Women			Men			Women		
	C	K	T	C	K	T	C	K	T	C	K	T
Construction work and related activities	87	0	87	70	0	70	70.5		70.5			
Selling <i>chappals</i>	64	0	64									
Brick kiln work	60	0	60	53	0	53	67.3		67.3			
Cutting wood				93	0	93						
Loading	75	0	75				60.5		60.5			
Domestic work				6	6	12				12.2		12.2
Sanitation work				0	3	3						
Public works programmes	43	32	75	3	52	55	22.0	58.4	80.4			
Miscellaneous	50	1	51	14	0	14	59.8	3.9	63.7	27.5		27.5
All non-agriculture	68	10	78	38	17	55	65.1	3.5	68.5	22.0		22.0

Notes: C: Cash, K: Kind, T: Total. Earnings in kind are reported in terms of value in Rupees.

comparison, hiring long-term workers as *siris* was a more widely prevalent practice. The contract of a *siri* resembled a sharecropping contract in terms of the mode of payment. The *siri* and the landowner shared the material costs of production and the agricultural produce in a pre-decided proportion. The *siri*, in addition, provided all the labour that was required for production. This included any labour that needed to be hired for the work. In our sample, 44 households living in the settlements and 43 households living in the fields worked as *siris*. In this section, I shall describe the *siri* system of labour hiring in some detail.

The contract, however, differed from a sharecropping contract in two very important ways. First, unlike typical sharecropping contracts, the share of the *siri* in the material costs and output was very low. Most commonly, the *siri* provided one-fifth of the material costs and provided all the labour. In return, the *siri* got only one-fifth of the produce. Second, and this was the more crucial difference, all decision-making powers in respect of the choice of crops to be sown, the amount and types of inputs to be used and farming practices were vested solely in the landlord. The landowner closely supervised work on the field on a daily basis. Most landowners visited the field at least once every day and gave instructions to the *siris*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Some of the largest landowners had even installed telephones in the fields and gave instructions to the *siris* over the phone.

The *siri* contracts were always oral. We did not come across a single instance where there was a written agreement between the landowner and the *siri*. In this context, it may be noted that in a study of labour relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in south-west Punjab (broadly covering present-day Haryana), Bhattacharya (1985) reported that by the early twentieth century a system of written *siri* contracts emerged. In the early green revolution period, Sheila Bhalla had reported a rising incidence of written contracts in long-term labour contracts in rural Haryana. The evidence from Birdhana about two decades later does not suggest that this trend was sustained at least in this village and there has perhaps been retrogression in this respect.

There is another respect in which the terms of contract seem to have turned against the *siri*. Bhattacharya (1985) records that an essential feature of the *siri* contracts, as they existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was that landlords did not charge interest on the advance given to the *siris*. This practice of providing interest-free credit to the *siri* had been completely abandoned by the landlords. Typically, the *siri* took an advance from the landowner at the start of the contract. Our respondents in Birdhana reported that this advance was treated as a loan and the landowner charged interest at the rate of about 2.5–3 per cent per month. Moreover, the landowner purchased all inputs, made all the payments in respect of rent of machinery and paid wages to all hired workers. The share of the *siri* in these expenses was treated as credit and the landowner charged interest on this credit from the day each payment was made to the day the accounts were settled after the harvest.

The terms of *siri* contracts in Birdhana were not standardized. The main terms of the contract, that is, the share of the *siri* in material costs and output, itself varied a great deal. The share of *siris* in material costs and output was one-fifth for about 58 per cent of the *siris* interviewed by us. The share was more than one-fifth for only about 11 per cent of the *siris*. The share was one-sixth for about 22 per cent of the *siris*. In a few cases, the share of the *siri* was as low as one-twelfth. The *siri* contracts also varied in respect of what costs were covered under the specified proportion. Typically, there were also other subsidiary terms that defined the share of the *siri* and the landowner in provision of specific inputs. Usually, the tractor and water were provided by the landowners. The cost of water, however, was shared if the landowner did not own a tubewell. Depending on the relative bargaining capacity of the *siri* and the landowner, the share contract covered costs of wheat and paddy harvesting, cotton picking and various other inputs. Usually, the *siri* paid for harvesting of wheat, irrespective of whether it was done manually or by combine harvesters. On the other hand, the cost of paddy harvesting was often shared. The cost of cotton picking was generally shared by the landowner and the *siri*. In such cases, the landowner paid his share of cost even when some family labour was used in cotton picking. The extent of sharing the cost of these tasks – harvesting of wheat and paddy, picking of cotton – however varied a great deal from *siri* to *siri*.

Many *siris* complained that over the years the landowners had reduced the share of the *siris*. According to some of the old workers we spoke to, the share of

the *siri* had been reduced on account of provision of tractors, when tractors replaced bullock ploughs, and on account of provision of tubewells by the landowners. We were told that the *siris* and the landowners shared the costs equally (one share for land and one share for labour) before the tractors and tubewells were introduced. When tractors and tubewell irrigation were introduced, the landowners insisted that the produce be divided into four parts of which the landowners took three (on account of land, tractor and tubewell), while the *siri* got only one (on account of his labour). In recent years, however, the landowners had further reduced the share of the *siris*. Importantly, this had been done by the landowners purely out of bargaining with the workers aspiring to be employed as *siris* and had not been linked to any additional expenses being borne by the landowners.

The landowners kept detailed accounts of the expenses, credit and interest to be charged from each *siri*. These accounts, particularly in respect of calculation of interest, were quite complex. Barring a few exceptions, *siris* did not keep parallel accounts.<sup>11</sup> Only in a few cases did the landlord give a detailed written account of the expenses to the *siri* at the end of the season. Most of the *siris* we interviewed could not give detailed accounts for the previous season. Usually, the *siris* were aware of the amounts of the material inputs used, the rates of rent for the machinery and the usual rates of interest charged. Most *siris* also knew their actual net income – in terms of grain for wheat and in terms of cash for paddy and cotton – that they received at the end of the season. If they made a loss, they usually knew their outstanding debt at the end of the season. In many cases the *siris* felt that they had been cheated by the landlord but were unable to add the figures to point out how the net income was calculated. In some cases, the ignorance of the *siri* was so extreme that all that they could report was the amount of grain that they got, not knowing how much of it was their income and how much was a credit.

Although the *siris* had to bear all the cost of labour, they seldom had enough money to foot the wage bill. As a result, while the workers were called for work by the *siri*, the wage payments were usually made by the landowners and credited to the accounts of the *siris*. The *siris* informed the landowners when any workers were hired and of the wages to be paid to various workers. These casual workers collected their wages from the landowner.

The fact that a *siri* had to provide all labour used in cultivation had important implications. First, the *siri* system created a class of workers that were employed by the landowners and that in turn were the employers of casual workers in the village. Second, as the *siris* had to bear all the cost of labour to get a small share in the output, their only hope to make a small net income lay in maximizing the use of family labour. In general, all able-bodied workers from the *siri* households worked every day from the time land preparation work started till the crop was

<sup>11</sup> Only about 14 per cent of *siris* in the settlements and 19 per cent living in the fields were literate. About 39 per cent of *siri* households in the settlements and about 51 per cent in the fields had no adult literate member in the family.

harvested, threshed and stored. On double cropped land, this meant about 9 months of work. During these months most workers from the *siri* households were in the field every day. Even old persons, children and workers who were involved in other occupations contributed as much labour as they could.<sup>12</sup>

Table 12 presents work participation rates in *siri* and non-*siri* households. The table brings out a number of interesting findings. First, the table shows that the

Table 12. Work participation rates of men and women in *siri* and non-*siri* households, Birdhana

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

Notes: <sup>a</sup>There were only a few persons in this age group particularly in the households living in the fields because generally such households comprised young couples living in the fields with their children.

work participation rates among men and women in the *siri* households were very high. Second, it reveals that among children, particularly girls, they were very high. Third, it emerges that among the households living in the fields, work participation rates for women were higher than for men in all the three age groups. Among the *siri* households living in the settlements, this was true for children (that is, more girls participated in work than boys).

<sup>12</sup> It may be noted that the *siris* maximized the use of 'family labour' by not only using the labour power of most persons in their own households but also by using the labour power of their extended families, their parents, siblings and children, and at times, even other close relatives. All such workers, who were close relatives of the *siri* and worked without any wage payment, obviously, were recorded as part of the family when data on labour use were collected. This was particularly important in the case of households where a *siri* lived with his wife and children in the field while the rest of the family continued to live in the village settlement. In such cases, some members of the family living in the village settlement came to the fields to work during the day on a regular basis. Among the *siris* living in the fields, such workers constituted 6 per cent of female and 8 per cent of male family workers. Among the *siris* living in the settlements, such workers constituted 6 per cent of both male and female family workers.

Conversely, the *siri* system also ensured that the cost of hiring of casual labour was minimized. The cost of hiring casual workers was reduced by using as much family labour (of the *siri*) as possible and by using labour-displacing machines that were cheaper to hire than hiring casual workers. Given the design of the *siri* contract, and the fact that it was cheaper to use machines like combine harvesters than getting the work done using hired labour, the interests of the *siris* and the landowners converged on the use of labour-displacing technology. Casual workers were hired only for those operations which could not be done by machines and which required a large number of workers to work at the same time (and therefore could not be done by family labour alone). Even when casual workers were actually hired, the *siri* system helped in cutting wage costs by placing the *siri* between the casual workers and the landlord. The *siris* typically hired workers through their social and caste relations. This helped them hire workers who worked for lower wages and worked longer hours.

The landlords always entered into a *siri* contract with male workers. As a result, the title *siri* necessarily applied to a male worker. The important point, however, is that while a landlord and a male worker entered into a *siri* contract, the contract encompassed the use of labour power of all workers in the household including women. The use of female labour was, in fact, central to production under the *siri* system. Women from *siri* households provided a large part of family labour for tasks like weeding, harvesting of wheat, harvesting and threshing of paddy, winnowing, loading of grain and straw, cotton picking, picking and harvesting of vegetables, and harvesting of fodder crops. Unlike the casual workers in the village, the distinction between tasks done by male and female workers of the *siri* household was not clear-cut. Women from these households did a number of tasks which, whenever casual workers were hired, were reserved for male workers. These tasks included application of fertilizers, spraying pesticides, clearing of field channels, making bunds, irrigation and threshing. Similarly a lot of male workers from the *siri* households did cotton picking, an operation for which only women workers were hired. Typically, the cost of cotton picking was shared equally between the landlords and the *siris*. In such cases, workers from *siri* households did a lot of cotton picking themselves and the landlord paid his share of the wage for such work.

The nature of participation of women in *siri* cultivation was such that only a few of the various tasks done by women required full-day participation. Such tasks typically were done on a single day and required every member of the household to work together. These tasks included, most importantly, threshing and loading. There were still other tasks that could be done for part of the day but where the quantum of work was definite and the period in which the work had to be finished was short. These included tasks like harvesting, transplanting and picking of cotton and okra. In the case of all such tasks, respondents generally had a fairly clear idea of the participation of each worker. Table 13 shows that women from *siri* households had a substantial participation in cotton picking, paddy transplanting, and in harvest and post-harvest operations in wheat

Table 13. Use of family and hired labour on land cultivated under *siri* contracts, Birdhana (%)

Crop	Operation	Households living in the settlements					Households living in the fields				
		Family labour		Hired labour		All	Family labour		Hired labour		All
		Women	Men	Women	Men		Women	Men	Women	Men	
Cotton	Picking	30	20	42	8	100	38	26	37	0	100
Paddy	Transplanting	12	11	43	34	100	12	14	51	23	100
	Irrigation-related tasks	2	98	0	0	100	12	88	0	0	100
	Harvesting and threshing	14	18	17	51	100	4	7	17	73	100
Wheat	Irrigation-related tasks	4	94	0	2	100	13	86	0	1	100
	Harvesting	19	27	25	29	100	24	28	21	26	100
	Threshing	12	18	7	63	100	15	19	3	63	100
	Loading straw	28	61	0	11	100	22	54	0	24	100

and paddy. The table also shows that women from *siri* households living in the fields did a substantial amount of irrigation-related tasks.

In addition, there were a number of other tasks, many of them done by women, which were done on a regular basis over a long duration. These included, most importantly, weeding and hoeing. Women typically spent a few hours on most days weeding in the fields. Similarly, women did a lot of work over a long period hoeing the cotton fields. Women typically removed grass from the field bunds and channels every day, collecting them for use as fodder. The participation of women in such tasks was not quantifiable. The problem of quantifying women's work was particularly complex for women from *siri* households because in most cases the domestic work done by the women, their participation in animal husbandry-related tasks and their work in the fields were so closely inter-mixed that it was impossible to figure out the extent of their employment in any single activity. On most days, women workers did a number of these tasks.

It is important to note that the burden of work on women from the *siri* households was truly enormous. A normal day started very early and finished very late. Over such a day, a woman cooked for everybody in the family, milked cattle, cleaned the cattle-shed and made dung cakes (for use as fuel), bathed and fed cattle, attended to other household chores, took care of her children, and served tea to the landlord when he came for supervision. Along with all this, she spent every spare minute she could doing agricultural labour on the land. In the evening, after having done backbreaking work for the whole day, she collected grass and firewood, and harvested fodder. In the case of households that did not live in the fields, women had to do a number of domestic and animal husbandry-related tasks in the morning, carry food for the rest of the members to the fields, participate in the agricultural work, collect grass and firewood, harvest fodder, and carry them home. After that, they again got back to household chores, cooking, taking care of children, milking cattle and moving them into the shed. While most women from agricultural worker households combined agricultural labour with domestic work and work related to animal husbandry, the burden of work was much greater when a household entered into a *siri* contract. The necessity to use the family labour as much as possible resulted in a very high burden of work on the women of these households. The burden became still greater on days when a major agricultural operation like transplanting, harvesting, threshing or loading of grain had to be completed.

The *siri* system of labour hiring has a long history in Haryana. In some parts of the State a *siri* was historically known as a *sajhi*. Bhattacharya (1985) has described the nature of *siri* contracts between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. In most parts of the State, the *siri* system has been on the decline, particularly in the last three decades. The widespread prevalence of the *siri* system of labour hiring in Birdhana, albeit in a form that was very different from the one described by Bhattacharya, was based on two very important features of the village economy: concentration of landholdings and a very

substantial technological advancement in agriculture. Expansion of groundwater irrigation extended the agricultural calendar to the whole year and made cultivation of two to three crops in a year possible. Modern technology, particularly mechanization and weedkillers, considerably smoothed the demand for labour over the crop cycle. As a result, while a few workers were always required on large farms on a regular basis, there were only a few occasions when the landowner needed to hire many workers. The concentration of landholdings was so high in Birdhana that about 1955 acres of agricultural land there (58 per cent of ownership holdings of all households) was owned by 62 households that had more than 15 acres of land each. Such landowners in Birdhana typically managed agriculture on their land through the hiring of *siri* workers. Landowners who had very large holdings (say more than 30 acres) typically divided the land into plots of 15–20 acres and employed a different *siri* household on each plot. We came across landowners who had simultaneously employed more than 10 *siri* households on contiguous plots, each with an area of about 15–20 acres and irrigated by a separate electric tubewell. These two features, the large size of landholdings and technological advancement, enabled the maintenance (though with substantial transformation) of the *siri* system of labour hiring despite major transformation in the productive potential of agriculture over the last three decades.

## 6. THE NATURE OF UNFREEDOM IN LABOUR RELATIONS

There has been a substantial debate on the nature of unfreedom in labour relations in rural Haryana. Jodhka (1994, 1995a, 1995b) has argued that unfreedom is not a common feature of labour relations in contemporary Haryana. He has suggested that the incidence of long-term workers has been on the decline in rural Haryana ‘mainly because of growing reluctance on the part of the labourers to work as attached labourers’ (Jodhka 1994). He further argued that the trend towards casualization of labour implied that workers were relatively free to choose their conditions of employment.<sup>13</sup> In a later comment, Jodhka suggested that although employers sometimes used debt as an instrument for tying casual workers in the peak seasons, these arrangements were of mutual benefit to employers and workers (who got high wages in the peak season), and worked mainly against small farmers (who could not tie workers) (Jodhka 1995a). Long-term workers, where they exist, enter into such contracts ‘voluntarily’, and patron–client relationships are absent in the employment of long-term workers (Jodhka 1994). He found that attached workers often changed their employers and argued that this indicated the partial freedom enjoyed even by attached workers in contemporary Haryana.

<sup>13</sup> Implicit in this argument is the belief that the shorter the duration of a contract, the more free is the relationship. Ramachandran (1991) points out the distinction between the duration of contract and the socio-economic dependence of the worker on the employer, and guards against conflation of the two categories.

On the other hand, Brass (1990, 1995) has argued that in contemporary Haryana, debt was increasingly used as an instrument of bondage in relation to both casual and attached workers, which had to be repaid 'in the form of debt-servicing labour contributions', while, at the same time, the borrowers had to forego 'the right to sell their own labour power so long as cash or kind loans remained unpaid'. Although casual and attached workers alike were involved in unfree labour relations, workers disliked attachment because of 'the low overall wage, the intensity of workload involved, the prolonged duration of daily labour, the beck-and-call nature of the relation, and the consequent inability to tend their own cattle', and because workers had to provide domestic labour and face verbal and physical abuse from the creditor-employer. Brass strongly argued that indebted workers could only postpone repayment and transfer attachment when they changed masters, and that this was not a sign of freedom of workers to choose the conditions of their employment.<sup>14</sup> On the whole, Brass was of the view that the incidence of unfree relationships was on the rise in Haryana and that this was part of a process of deproletarianization.

In the household survey conducted in Dhamar and Birdhana, we asked several questions designed to capture the nature of unfreedom in work relationships. These included pointed questions with respect to unpaid and underpaid labour services performed by members of the households. In addition, we also asked several open-ended questions. For example, we asked the respondents: if workers worked predominantly for any single or for a few employers; if the workers were free to choose to work with an employer of their own choice; if household members have faced any kind of extra-economic coercion by the employers or by lenders to whom the household might be indebted; and if women of the household felt safe going alone for work and if they had to face any kind of verbal, physical or sexual abuse. Usually, these questions were asked to prompt the respondents to give a descriptive response and the investigators recorded the response verbatim. I present here the evidence on unfreedom in labour relations from our field-study in respect of casual workers in Dhamar and *siris* in Birdhana.

### *6.1. Casual Workers in Dhamar*

The labour market in Dhamar was characterized by very significant informalization of labour hiring on the one hand and varied forms of extra-economic coercion and unfreedom in economic relations on the other. The process of labour hiring in Dhamar was informalized to such an extent that there was neither any fixed duration of a work day nor any standard wage that every worker was paid. Workers in the village were primarily hired on negotiable piece-rated wages. At the same time, workers in the village faced various forms of unfreedom and exploitation at the hands of their employers. These included widespread use of unpaid labour services by employers, the practice of untouchability and caste

<sup>14</sup> Also see Rao (1999) for a discussion of the arguments of Brass and Jodhka.

oppression against manual workers who were predominantly *Dalit*, and verbal, physical and sexual abuse.

Casual workers in Dhamar performed various kinds of labour services for *Jat* landowners. About 23 per cent of male workers and 21 per cent of female workers reported to have done some labour services (Table 14). These services included full-time agricultural tasks (like clearing channels, irrigation, applying fertilizers, weeding, harvesting, threshing), non-agricultural work (like participation in construction work), and domestic work (like cutting firewood, removing dung and laying dung cakes, washing and cleaning in the houses, and mud plastering the houses). Labour services sometimes took the form of a worker doing extra hours of work in agriculture or in construction. A worker could, for example, be asked to come a little early and collect the required tools and instruments before other workers arrive, and stay late after the work to put them back after other workers leave. Workers could be asked to harvest fodder for the employer/creditor. They were asked to cut fodder and feed the cattle. Women workers often did domestic work in the houses of the employers or creditors. They would remove the dung from the cattle-shed and prepare the dung cakes. They would do various kinds of work in marriages and other ceremonies in the houses of the employers and creditors. Women could be asked to regularly deliver some *bathua* (white goosefoot).<sup>15</sup>

*Dalit* manual workers faced severe caste hostility, including the practice of untouchability, from the upper castes. Verbal abuse was a common occurrence. Several women respondents in the survey reported that sexual abuse against women workers was not uncommon. A number of female respondents reported that they felt insecure in going to work in the fields by themselves and only worked in groups.

Workers cited various reasons why they felt obliged to perform labour services. Of 57 households that said that they had done some labour services, 35 reported that they were forced to perform labour services because of being indebted. Indebtedness levels among the manual worker households were very high. The average household debt asset ratio was 53.5 and on average a household had a debt of over Rs. 27,000. Further, employer landowners were the most important source of credit for these households; over 48 per cent of the total debt of manual worker households was towards employer landowners.<sup>16</sup> About 11 households reported that they got access to fodder from farmers' fields and in return were required to perform labour services. Several informants also pointed out that given severe unemployment among casual workers, they had to perform labour services in the hope that it would improve their chances of being employed. There was also one specific caste-related practice of

<sup>15</sup> *Bathua*, *Chenopodium album*, grows as a weed in the fields. It is collected by women workers and its leaves are cooked as a vegetable. Availability of *bathua*, however, has declined considerably in recent years because of the use of weedkillers.

<sup>16</sup> Data on indebtedness and sources of borrowing have been analysed in detail in Rawal and Mukherjee (2005).

Table 14. Number of workers who reported to have performed some labour services, Dhamar

<i>Type of labour service</i>	<i>Women</i>			<i>Men</i>			<i>Persons</i>		
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent of workers</i>	<i>Per cent of (8)</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent of workers</i>	<i>Per cent of (8)</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent of workers</i>	<i>Per cent of (8)</i>
<i>(1)</i>	<i>(2)</i>	<i>(3)</i>	<i>(4)</i>	<i>(5)</i>	<i>(6)</i>	<i>(7)</i>	<i>(8)</i>	<i>(9)</i>	<i>(10)</i>
Agricultural	25	15.3	40.3	40	19.6	59.7	67	18.2	100
Non-agricultural	0		0	9	4.4	100	9	2.5	100
Domestic	19	12.9	87.5	3	1.5	12.5	24	6.5	100
Any labour service	37	22.7	46.8	42	20.6	53.2	79	21.5	100
No labour service	126	77.3	43.8	162	79.4	56.3	288	78.5	100
All workers	163	100.0	44.4	204	100.0	55.6	367	100.0	100

providing labour services. Women workers from three households belonging to the *Valmik* caste performed sanitation work in the houses of upper caste households and in the streets where upper caste households lived because of the traditional *jajmani* relationship. Under the *jajmani* practice, households belonging to the *Valmik* caste were responsible for sanitation work for specific upper caste households. Workers, typically women, who performed the job were given two to four *chapatis* every day by each household for which they worked.

### 6.2. *Siris in Birdhana*

In Birdhana, severe forms of unfreedom were characteristic of employment conditions of most *siris*. In fact, many *siris* in Birdhana worked under conditions that can be characterized as bondage. They were indebted to the landlords and were normally not allowed to quit working for the landlord until their debts were cleared. In cases of eviction or when a *siri* quit working for a landlord, the *siri* was required to repay the debt. In the case of *siris* who lived in the fields, landlords often took possession of the assets of the *siri* and did not return them until all outstanding credit was repaid.

The *siri* contract typically involved restrictions on the freedom of the *siri*, and sometimes even on other workers from his family, to work for any other employer. The *siris* were usually not allowed to leave the land unattended and at least one person from the *siri* household was required to be present on land at all times. Some landlords even restricted the *siris* themselves from leaving the fields except for specific purposes (such as going to the landlord's house, going to the market once in a while and on the occasion of a death in the family). We asked the *siris* we interviewed if they and their family members could work for other employers and if there were any restrictions on their leaving the fields. Their responses to these questions, a selection of which are presented below, are self-explanatory.

We can't leave the fields during the season and are allowed to leave the field only when there is no crop on the field. Since we are under contract for one year we have to be there for the whole year and work. Our previous landlord, Laddu Ram, had roughed us up when we (*Kanha Ram and Gudia Ram*) went to work for daily wages while being his *siri*. That is why we left working for him

Kanha Ram

I cannot go out and work for anybody else even when there is no work on the (*siri*) fields.

Amir Singh

When my uncle died, I could not attend his funeral because we were bonded to the landlord. We have no freedom.

Mahendra Singh

Nobody in the family can work in anybody else's fields. We cannot leave the fields to go to the village either. All of us are not allowed to leave even when there is some ceremony that we want to attend.

Santlal

Other than myself, rest of the members of the family can go out for casual labour.

Billu

The landlord forbade us from working in fields of others. In spite of that, other members of the family worked as casual labour.

Surjeeth Singh

The landlord does not allow us to go for wage labour. But we go without his knowledge. If he gets to know, he scolds us and tells us to work only on his land.

Shyamlal

The landlord does not allow us to go for casual labour. We have to stay on the fields even when there is not much work to do.

Amrik Singh

The landlord does not allow us to work for others. If we want to help our relatives in their work, we have to take the landlord's permission. We are required to be present in the fields all the time.

Sish u Ram

Landlord can object if we work for anybody else. What shall we say if something happens in the fields while we are away? It will be a problem if we are away from the fields and the landlord comes here. We have to take landlord's permission in advance if all of us have to go for some family affair. Last year we went for my nephew's wedding. We had to hire and leave a worker to take care of the crop and attend to the landlord while we were away.

Balwant

We cannot leave the *siri* fields and go to work for others. In winters there is not much work in the fields. Even then we are not allowed to go out and work.

Surjeet

Shyamlal (*her husband, a siri*) has not visited his village for over 10 years. We cannot go away from the fields for any ceremony in the family other than one for a death.

Amarjeet

Ten years ago, our son was injured by a tractor plough. He had to undergo surgery and a steel rod was fixed inside his leg. Sulakhan (*her husband, a siri*) had to borrow Rs. 50000 from various people including Santlal for our

son's treatment. For that he had to become a *siri* for Santlal. Sulakhan cannot leave the contract until he repays the debt. He is not allowed to work on anybody else's fields. He will have to sell all his property if he wants to leave, otherwise the landlord will not allow him take his assets from the field. Sulakhan is allowed to leave the fields for a day or two after taking permission from the landlord. Other members of the family are not restricted in the same way.

Jeeto Bai

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

In Birdhana, the need for credit and the severity of unemployment among casual workers were the two most commonly cited reasons for accepting unfree conditions of employment under the *siri* system.

The *siri* system provided *siri* households with access to credit from the landlords. In Birdhana, unlike in Dhamar, credit from landlords was available only to *siris* and farm servants. Data on outstanding credit of households showed that *siri* households had a greater burden of debt than the casual worker households and that about 49 per cent of outstanding credit of *siris* living in the settlements and about 60 per cent of outstanding credit of *siris* living in the fields had been taken from landlords.<sup>17</sup>

The pattern of lending and employment under the *siri* system suggests that while advancement of credit was an integral part of the contract and an important reason why workers became *siris*, it was not necessarily used as an instrument of bondage to individual landlords. In general, the debt of a *siri* worker seldom exceeded by a substantial extent the amount that was generally available as *siri* advance if the *siri* were to seek employment from another landlord. The landlords, on the one hand, regularly deducted repayments of loans from the share of the *siris* in net income after every harvest, and on the other, rationed the amount of credit that would be given to the *siris*. If a *siri* was unable to produce enough to meet his debt obligations, he could face eviction and forfeiture of his assets (typically livestock, bicycles and other domestic assets).

The *siri* contracts were typically one-year contracts and could be renewed every year. Data show that the *siris* frequently changed employers or were evicted.

<sup>17</sup> See Rawal and Mukherjee (2005) for detailed data.

Most of the *siris* we interviewed – 72 per cent in Birdhana main village settlement, 57 per cent in Rampura and 47 per cent in the fields – had been working for not more than two years for their employer (Table 15). Just as a majority of *siri* households had been working for the same employer for less than two years, there were a number of non-*siri* households in our sample who had worked as *siris* in recent years but were casual workers at the time of the survey.

Table 15. Number of *siris* by the number of years for which they had been working for their employer

<i>Number of years working for the present employer</i>	<i>Birdhana main settlement</i>	<i>Rampura</i>	<i>Siris living in fields</i>
Less than one year	14	2	5
1–2 years	7	2	12
2–5 years	6		13
6–10 years	2		3
More than 10 years		3	3
All	29	7	36
Average number of years	2.31	10.14	4.08

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

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

In cases of eviction or when a *siri* quit working for a landlord, the *siri* was required to repay the debt. It was common for the landlords to prevent the *siri* from taking away his possessions from the field unless the debt was repaid. As a result, *siris* who lived on the fields faced the threat of dispossession of their cattle and other assets unless they repaid the debt.

A number of *siris* who were evicted or who quit working for a landlord in the last year repaid the debt by becoming *siri* for another landlord and taking an advance from him. Loans taken by current *siris* for repayment of old debt accounted for about 8 per cent of total debt of both *siris* living in the settlements and *siris* living in the fields. Ved Prakash, a *siri* in the main village settlement,

aptly described the situation as follows: 'We can leave the landlord only after repaying all the loans taken from him. That can be done only by taking a loan from another landlord and accepting to become his *siri*. So you can free yourself of one only by becoming bonded to another.'

### 6.3. Conclusion

In the end, one may conclude that the evidence from Dhamar and Birdhana is not consistent with either Jodhka's or Brass's characterization of unfreedom in rural labour relations in Haryana.

First, the relationships of both casual and long-term workers with their employers were characterized by a significant degree of unfreedom in the two study villages. This refutes Jodhka's argument that rural workers in Haryana freely choose the conditions of their employment. Jodhka's observation about the decline in the incidence of attached workers is central to his argument that workers in contemporary Haryana had considerable freedom in choosing conditions of their employment. A comparison of forms of labour hiring in the two villages suggests that the decline in hiring of long-term workers was not uniform in all parts of the State.

While Jodhka limits his treatment of unfreedom to attached workers, Brass argues that all types of workers alike face unfree labour relations when they become indebted. Brass's treatment of unfreedom in labour relations does not have room for the fact that workers face varying degrees of unfreedom. The evidence from Dhamar and Birdhana brings out considerable variations in the nature of unfreedom among workers. In most cases, casual workers worked under conditions of restricted freedom. On the other hand, many *siri* workers in Birdhana worked under conditions that were akin to bondage. In most cases, even the *siri* workers were not tied to individual landlords for a long time. The dependence for credit and employment, however, meant that they remained bonded to the landlord class as a whole and worked under extremely exploitative and oppressive conditions.

Jodhka also argued that long-term workers in contemporary Haryana entered into such contracts out of their voluntary choice and that such contracts were beneficial to both the employer and the employee. The question of whether *siris* entered into long-term labour contracts out of choice or out of compulsion is quite meaningless in the context of agrarian conditions that prevailed in Birdhana. There can be no free choice in a situation where the alternatives on offer are bondage on the one hand and acute unemployment and insufficient access to food on the other. In Birdhana, we came across *siris* who felt that accepting bondage was better than having to go hungry day after day. We also came across casual workers who were struggling to avoid bondage even if it meant being unemployed for most of the year and not having an adequate amount of food.

Second, the debate between Jodhka and Brass focuses on indebtedness as a cause and as a symptom of unfreedom. In fact, both Jodhka and Brass identify

indebtedness as the only reason why workers accepted attachment.<sup>18</sup> In Dhamar and Birdhana, dependence on the employer for credit was an important reason why workers entered into unfree relationships. However, there were also factors other than indebtedness that made workers enter into unfree relations. In particular, given the severe scarcity of employment opportunities, workers had to accept unfree relationships to get more employment. Many landless households had to perform labour services for landowning households to get access to fodder. All these factors together helped sustain the system of unfree labour relations.

Macro-level statistics indicate that there was a decline both in availability of employment and in availability of formal-sector credit in rural Haryana over the 1990s. NSSO data on rural employment show that, in Haryana, availability of agricultural employment declined in absolute terms over the 1990s. Over this period, growth of aggregate employment also declined and was considerably lower than the growth of population (Sen 2002). Macro-level statistics on rural banking show that disbursement of bank credit in rural Haryana and the share of bank credit that was given to landless and land-poor sections of the rural population declined sharply over the 1990s (Rawal and Mukherjee 2005). Existence of unfree labour contracts in these two villages was sustained by, most importantly, conditions of severe unemployment and dependence of workers on their employers for credit. Shrinking employment opportunities and decline in availability of formal credit over the 1990s are likely to have contributed to the grim picture we found in the two study villages with respect of widespread prevalence of unfree relationships.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

A substantial growth in overall rural employment and a particularly high rate of growth of non-agricultural employment took place in Haryana, a State that was in the forefront of the Green Revolution in India, over the 1970s and 1980s. Macro-level statistics show that agricultural wages in Haryana were among the highest across all states and rose significantly over the 1970s and 1980s. These trends were, however, reversed around the late 1980s. From the late 1980s through the 1990s, a period that broadly corresponds to the period of economic reforms in India, the growth of total usual status employment in rural Haryana declined and the growth of agricultural employment turned negative. While macro-level statistics clearly bring out the decline in growth of employment in rural Haryana over the 1990s, these statistics do not provide adequate information on the impact of these trends on structure of employment and earnings, terms of contracts in labour markets and the nature of unfreedom in labour contracts.

<sup>18</sup> According to Jodhka (1994) the compulsion to work as attached labour 'always arose out of a need for credit'. According to Brass (1990) 'only through debt would a free worker become an annual servant'.

This paper analyses primary data from two villages to provide some insights on these issues. The two villages, Dhamar and Birdhana, selected from two different agro-economic regions of Haryana, differed considerably in terms of size, caste structure, land ownership pattern, cropping pattern and forms of labour hiring. Yet, data from both villages show very similar and severe levels of under-employment among casual workers. An average male worker in both villages was employed for just about 100 days in a year, while an average female worker was employed for just about 40 days in a year. In particular, employment in agriculture was very limited. Male casual workers in both villages found more work in non-agricultural occupations than in agriculture. In contrast, women found very little employment in non-agricultural jobs. Women found little employment even in non-agricultural occupations created through public works programmes.

Wages in both villages were very low and gender disparities in wages and earnings very high. In both villages, piece-rated wages were the dominant form of wage payment to casual workers. In both villages, the time-rated wages were not standardized nor was there a common norm of duration of a day for which workers were hired.

A unique feature of the labour market in Dhamar was that much of the work, particularly the work done by women workers, was paid for in wages that took the form only of fodder commodities. This was closely linked to a system of leasing of cattle for rearing.

Finally, labour relations in both villages were characterized by very strong elements of unfreedom. Casual workers in Dhamar were dependent on *Jat* landowners for credit and fodder; this made them regularly perform labour services for landowning households. *Dalit* workers and women faced various forms of harassment at the hands of upper caste farmers.

The nature of unfreedom in labour contracts was even more severe in Birdhana. In Birdhana, a number of long-term *siri* workers lived under conditions of bondage. *Siris* were hired on a contract under which they shared the material costs of production and output with the landlord. The share of the *siri* in these contracts was extremely low. At the same time, *siris* were required to provide all labour that was needed in cultivation. In addition, landlords charged very high interest on advances taken by the *siri* and on his share of cultivation expenses. These *siris* faced severe restrictions on mobility and were treated as servile labour by the landlords. The *siri* contract was designed in such a way that the landlords extracted almost all the surplus either in the form of rent or in the form of interest. *Siris* often made losses, incurred debt and were evicted. In such cases, they faced the threat of dispossession of their assets and had to usually find another landlord who would take them as a *siri* and give them an advance. While the need for small amounts of credit was an important reason why workers accepted attachment in the first place, debt was not necessarily used as an instrument of bondage to individual employers. More importantly, it was the alternative scenario of facing severe under-employment as casual workers and not having access to credit that made *siris* as a class bonded to the class of landlords.

To sum up, in light of the macro-level evidence that employment growth in rural Haryana declined sharply over the 1990s, this paper examines primary data on conditions of life and work of rural workers in two villages. The analysis shows that labour markets in these villages were characterized by severe under-employment, low earnings and informalization of casual labour contracts in contemporary rural Haryana. On the other hand, long-term labour contracts in agriculture were extremely exploitative. Members of long-term worker households had to struggle throughout the year in an effort to maintain a minimum level of subsistence, prevent the debt burden from mounting, and avoid eviction.

Unfreedom was a characteristic feature of labour relations in both villages. The existence of unfree labour relationships was sustained by, most importantly, severe unemployment and dependence of rural workers on their employers for credit. In this context, it is significant that the decade of 1990s was characterized by absence of growth of employment and a decline in availability of formal credit to rural areas in Haryana. These macro-level trends are likely to have contributed significantly to defining the conditions of the labour market that we witnessed in the two study villages.

#### GLOSSARY OF TERMS

*Backward Castes*: castes that were not untouchable under Hindu traditions but have historically been socially and economically backward. These castes have been identified in the Constitution as 'Other Backward Castes' for purposes of affirmative action.

*Baniya*: an upper caste, whose traditional caste occupation was trading and commerce.

*Bishnoi*: a dominant peasant community whose origins can be traced to the sixteenth century.

*Brahmin*: the purest caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy; under the caste system, persons from this caste were not supposed to do manual labour themselves.

*Chamar*: a Scheduled Caste; their traditional caste occupation was skinning dead animals and working with leather.

*Chhippi*: a Backward Caste; their traditional caste occupation was tailoring.

*Dalit*: those belonging to Scheduled Castes. See Scheduled Castes.

*Dhanak*: a Scheduled Caste whose traditional caste occupation was weaving.

*Jheemar*: a Scheduled Caste whose traditional occupations were making baskets and ropes, and drawing water from wells.

*Khati*: a Scheduled Caste whose traditional caste occupation was carpentry.

*Jat*: the dominant peasant caste in north-west India.

*Kumhar/Prajapati*: a Scheduled Caste whose traditional caste occupation was pottery.

*Lohar*: a Scheduled Caste whose traditional caste occupation was making iron implements.

*Mehta*: a community that migrated from Pakistan in the aftermath of partition in 1947.

*Naukar*: farm servants who were given a fixed time-rated wage.

*Panchayat*: the lowest, village-level institution of the three-tier structure of democratic institutions of local government established in the early 1990s under provisions of the 73rd amendment of the Constitution of India.

*Scheduled Castes*: castes that were condemned to untouchable status under Hindu traditions. These castes are specified under the provisions of the Indian constitution for purposes of affirmative action and are commonly referred to as Scheduled Castes.

*Siri*: a category of long-term workers who were given a share wage.

*Valmik*: a Scheduled Caste whose traditional caste occupation was sanitation work.

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