

'Rs 2,000 loan, had to slog for 30 yrs, they say I still owe them'

HAPPENS Labour exploitation is a hard fact across Punjab. It begins with a small loan, turning into a profit-making device for the landlord, vitiating lives forever



bitterharvest

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DHANDOLI KALAN (SANGRUR): Hamir Kaur slogged for 30 years and her daughter-in-law for another eight to pay the interest on a loan of Rs 2,000. After 38 years of hard labour, she says, the village landlord 'calculated' that she still owed him Rs 20,000!

Hamir Kaur's is too stark an example, but labour exploitation is a reality across Punjab's rural heartland. It is only that the means of exploitation differ. Rural labourers fall prey due to debt in such a way that their condition becomes like that of bonded labourers.

To meet their daily needs, the labourers generally have to borrow advance money from their employer (a land or brick-kiln owner). Soon, it takes the shape of a debt with a high interest rate. The debt becomes a trap and they have no option but to live on the mercy of the landowner.

Three years back, a study by the State Farmers' Commission

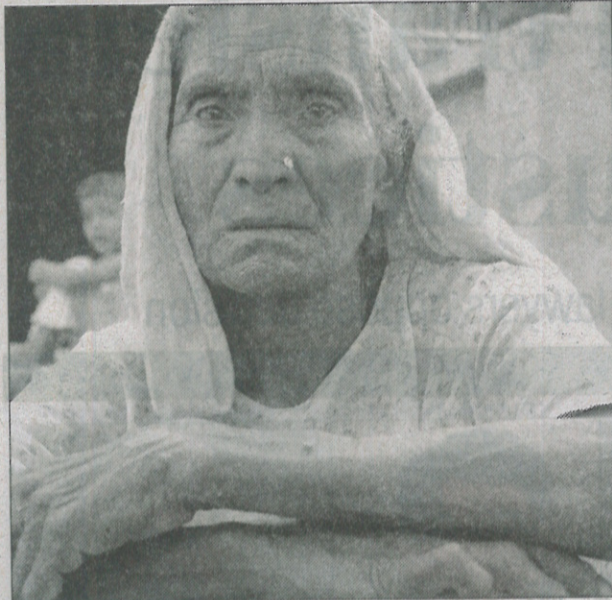
indicated that all the attached labourers were under loans ranging from Rs 4,000 to over Rs 15,000.

At times, children and women also land up in the trap. Women are more prone to such kind of exploitation. "They work for negligible wages. Sometimes wash dishes and clean cattle-sheds of rich farmers in the hope of getting two meals a day and some used clothes. Their life is just like hell," Karam Barsat, a columnist, writes in his book "Agrarian and Nationality Question in Punjab". Otherwise, cattle-shed cleaning in itself is full-time work that takes six-seven hours a day, but the wages are negligible.

The landowners also devise new ways to exploit attached agriculture labourers.

Commonly, a labourer gets five to 10 paid holidays a year. But in case of an ailment or if for some other reason the labourer stays absent from work for more than that period, a double of his daily wage is deducted. If it is harvesting or sowing season, the deduction will be triple. Else, he will have to send an adult member of his family as his substitute.

Take the case of Leela Singh (65) of Hodla village. Attached to a village landlord for Rs 35,000 a year, Leela after working for three days and nights in a row stumbled and fractured his ribs. He couldn't get back to work for a month-and-a-half. "Now the landlord says he will deduct Rs 300 a day," tells Leela.



■ Hamir Kaur's is perhaps too stark an example, but exploitation of labourers like in her case is not a rarity in Punjab. VISHAV BHARTI/HT

Such is the coordination among landowners that if Leela wishes to change his employer for the next season, his present employer will charge the entire money (which he claims Leela owes him) from his new employer before handing him over. "It is virtually like handing over the chains of a slave to a new master. It is feudal," says Harbhagwan Bhikhi, a CPI-ML activist.

The government has not fixed the minimum wages for most agricultural works, which is leading to exploitation of labour. For instance, attached labourers work for more than 12 hours

but are not given any overtime. Labour for poppy husk and food is another common form of exploitation.

Refusing wages after getting the work done is common. Most of the attached labourers are illiterate, so they are unable to keep an account of their wages. Generally, they are given money in bits and pieces, so at the end whatever the employer says becomes the ultimate truth.

To free oneself from such chains is never easy. Ask Hamir Kaur, who had to take care of 35 cattle for 30 years, that too

HARD TIMES

The State Farmers' Commission study on agricultural labourers:

- 64 per cent of labourers have to work between 8 and 12 hours a day. Such a proportion is highest in Malwa and lowest in Majha
- 32 per cent attached labourers get annual wages between Rs 15,000-20,000
- Another 42 per cent get Rs 20,000-25,000 and about 14 per cent of them get more than Rs 25,000
- Only 0.41 per cent attached labourers have cleared 10th

without salary.

When she turned too old to work, the landlord gave her a calf and asked her to send her daughter-in-law instead to work on the same terms. When one day, in 2004, her sons asked the landowner for the account, they said the books had been lost. When she stopped working, they said the family owed them Rs 20,000.

"Then they came up and beat up the family, including the kids. They took away the calf too," recounts Hamir.

This time, CPI-ML activists intervened. They got the calf back, got the debt waived off and the landowner booked under the SC/ST Act for beating them up. "I gave them my entire life and this is what I got," Hamir's eyes well up.

HT, 4 JUNE, 2010, CHANDIGARH