

***Labour Tying Arrangements: An Enduring Aspect of Agrarian  
Capitalism in India***

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

December, 2015

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## Table of Contents

List of Figures .....	vi
List of Tables and Boxes .....	vii
Abstract .....	viii
Acknowledgement .....	ix
Abbreviations .....	xi
Glossary .....	xiii
Introduction .....	1
Theoretical Constructions .....	3
Chapters .....	9
Chapter 1: Unfree Labour and Agrarian Neoliberalism .....	13
1.1 The Agrarian Question of Capital and Labour .....	14
1.2 Unfree labour under Capitalism .....	18
1.2.1 Theoretical Constructions within the Indian Context .....	22
1.2.2 Changing Unfree Labour Relations in India .....	29
1.2.3 Providing explanations of Unfree Labour through Interlocking Transactions in Agriculture .....	38
1.3 Using Gillian Hart to Understand Tied Labour Arrangements .....	45
1.4 Indian Agriculture and Development .....	48
1.5 Women in Agriculture .....	55
1.5.1 Labour relations and Labour Resistance: .....	65
1.6 Conclusion .....	68
Chapter 2: An Account of Methods .....	70
2.1 The Area of Enquiry .....	72
2.2 Making Field Choices .....	74
2.3 Getting down to Fieldwork .....	79
2.3.1 Accessing the field .....	80
2.3.2 Data Collection .....	88
2.4 Ethical dilemmas .....	99
2.5 Conclusion .....	100
Chapter 3: An Overview of Aranthangi and Chinsurah .....	102
3.1 Aranthangi: A Description .....	102
3.1.1 Physiology and Agriculture .....	103
3.1.2 Socio-economic descriptions of Aranthangi .....	109
3.2 Hooghly: A Description .....	121

3.2.1	Physiology .....	125
3.2.2	Socio-economic Background of Chinsurah .....	128
3.3	Labour Relations in Aranthangi and Chinsurah .....	141
3.3.1	Tied labour relations .....	144
3.4	Conclusion.....	148
Chapter 4:	Tenancy as a Route to Tied Labour? .....	150
4.1	Land Reforms and Land Ceilings in Tamil Nadu .....	152
4.1.1	Tenancy Reforms in Tamil Nadu .....	153
4.2	Tenancy Arrangements and Land Transactions in Aranthangi .....	155
4.2.1	Ensuring Production and Controlling Land through Tenancy Arrangements .....	156
4.2.2	Capitalist Farmers and Multiple Tenancy patterns.....	161
4.2.3	Tenants and Labourers .....	165
4.2.4	Survival and Exploitation .....	174
4.3	West Bengal Land and Tenancy Reforms .....	176
4.3.1	Left Rule and Land Distribution .....	179
4.4	Tenancy patterns in Chinsurah - Controlling Ownership of Land .....	180
4.4.1	Tenancy patterns in Chinsurah .....	185
4.5	Conclusion:.....	190
Chapter 5:	Labour Tying and Credit Relations: Interlinkages of Land Labour and Credit.....	194
5.1	Credit Institutions forging Credit relations .....	197
5.1.1	Rural credit Societies .....	198
5.1.2	Accessibility to Banks .....	200
5.1.3	Informal Rural Credit .....	202
5.2	Credit Interlinkage and Indebtedness.....	205
5.2.1	Loans and Rising Indebtedness .....	207
5.3	Informalisation of Credit and Increasing Indebtedness.....	212
5.3.1	Money Lenders, Credit and Indebtedness.....	217
5.3.2	Credit relations and <i>Pannaiyals</i> .....	219
5.3.3	Dadan and the <i>Bandha Kishen</i> .....	222
5.4	Self-Help Groups: An Alternative Livelihood Apparatus.....	224
5.5	Conclusion.....	230
Chapter 6:	National Rural Employment: Transformative Impact on Female Labour Relations .....	236

6.1	MGNREGA and Labour Relations:.....	238
6.1.1	MGNREGA, Labour Benefits and Labour Control: .....	239
6.1.2	Obstacles to MGNREGA: .....	252
6.2	Social Protection Measures, Power and Politics:.....	257
6.2.1	MGNREGA, an Aid to Agricultural Labour Movements? .....	261
6.3	Conclusion.....	267
Chapter 7: Bureaucracy, the State and the Ruling Classes .....		270
7.1	Public Distribution System- Ensuring Food Security .....	272
7.1.1	PDS within a Functioning State .....	273
7.1.2	Ambiguous Efficiency of the Food and Supplies Department in Chinsurah .....	280
7.2	State Allotted Subsidies and Technologies: Minimum Support Price .....	286
7.3	Encounters with the State and Labour Dependencies .....	291
7.4	Conclusion.....	295
Conclusion.....		299
Addressing the Question .....		300
Key Findings: Female Labour Tying and Interlocking Transactions .....		302
Tenancy.....		304
Credit .....		307
State Policies and Social Welfare .....		309
Contributions, Limitation and Policy Implications .....		313
Bibliography.....		318
Appendix 1 .....		334
Appendix 2 .....		335

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Location Map of Aranthangi, Pudukkottai .....	77
Figure 2: Location Map of Chinsurah, Hooghly.....	78
Figure 3: Focus Group Discussion with female agricultural labourers in Chinsurah .....	98
Figure 4: Layout of Village Karaimesu- Aranthangi .....	105
Figure 5: Layout of Village Thirasu- Aranthangi.....	106
Figure 6: Crop Calendar for Karaimesu and Thirasu .....	107
Figure 7: Making use of every square inch: Paddy fields in Aranthangi that are lined by coconut and banana plantations. ....	108
Figure 8: Displacing Paddy: Large fields taken over by eucalyptus plantations. ....	109
Figure 9: Distribution of Households based on Religion in Aranthangi. ....	110
Figure 10: A typical tiled roof with straw walls of a Pallar house and a thatched roof and mud house of an Ambalakar in Aranthangi. ....	115
Figure 11: Layout of Village Madhabpur- Chinsurah .....	123
Figure 12: Layout of Village Bardhanagar- Chinsurah .....	124
Figure 13: Agricultural Calendar of Chinsurah.....	126
Figure 14: Transplanting Paddy in Chinsurah: Female dominated task with a male labourer to oversee the group.....	127
Figure 15: Number of Hindu and Muslim Households in Chinsurah .....	129
Figure 16: A Santhal basti (locality) in Bardhanagar with mud floors and walls. ....	133
Figure 17: MGRENA Work: Digging a Pond in Chinsurah.....	253
Figure 18: Writing on the wall: The front wall of the ration shop in Karaimesu specifying quantities of item sold and the price of goods. ....	274
Figure 19: Ration Shop in Madhabpur that opens for two hours from 8am to 10 am.....	282
Figure 20: Encounters with the State: Female Agricultural Labourer and Big Farmer .....	292

## List of Tables and Boxes

Table 2.1: Number of households in selected villages/ hamlets in Aranthangi and Chinsurah .....	89
Table 2.2: Respondents selected from each caste and class group .....	93
Table 3.1: Land Use Pattern of Pudukkottai District.....	104
Table 3.2: Distribution of Caste Groups in Aranthangi.....	111
Table 3.3: Percentage Distribution of Landholdings According to Caste in Aranthangi.....	112
Table 3.4: Caste-Wise distribution of Households according to Economic Status in Aranthangi ..	114
Table 3.5: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Different Occupations Taken up by Women in Aranthangi. ....	118
Table 3.6: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Different Occupations Taken up by Men in Aranthangi. ....	119
Table 3.7: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Work Most Preferred in Aranthangi.....	120
Table 3.8: Land Use Pattern of Hooghly District.....	125
Table 3.9: Distribution of Caste Groups in Chinsurah.....	130
Table 3.10: Percentage Distribution of Landholdings According to Caste, Chinsurah .....	131
Table 3.11: Caste-Wise distribution of Households according to Economic Status in Chinsurah ..	132
Table 3.12: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Male Occupations in Chinsurah.....	136
Table 3.13: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Female Occupations in Chinsurah. ....	138
Table 3.14: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Work Most Preferred in Chinsurah .....	140
Table 3.15: Wage structure and Wage Gaps in Aranthangi and Chinsurah. ....	142
Table 4.1: Class Wise Distribution of Number of Persons Engaged in Tenancy in Aranthangi .....	156
Table 4.2: Land Tenancy Arrangements in Aranthangi.....	157
Table 4.3: Caste-Wise distribution of Land Leased.....	181
Table 4.4: Land Tenancy Arrangements in Chinsurah .....	184
Table 5.1: Cooperative Banks and Rural Credit Services in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal .....	199
Table 5.2: Sources of Credit in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.....	202
Table 5.3: Respondents who Accessed Banks for the purpose of Cultivation.....	204
Table 5.4: Sources of Informal Credit among Classes of Labour .....	204
Table 5.5: Class-Wise Distribution of Reasons for Taking Loans in Aranthangi and Chinsurah .....	208
Table 5.6: Number of Respondents from the Classes of Labour (including Small and Marginal farmers) accessing different Sources of Informal Credit Aranthangi and Chinsurah .....	213
Table 6.1: Caste Wise Distribution of Job Cards in Aranthangi .....	243
Table 6.2: Caste Wise Distribution of Job Cards in Chinsurah .....	244
Table 6.3: Number of Days of MGNREGA Work Received in Aranthangi and Chinsurah.....	253
 Box 3.1: Percentage of Different Categories of Workers to Total Workforce.....	 117
Box 3.2: Percentage of Different Categories of Workers to Total Workforce.....	134
Box 6.1: Aranthangi .....	241
Box 6.2: Chinsurah .....	242

## Abstract

This thesis explores the persistence of labour tying arrangements among female labourers in agriculture in India. This research is a comparative study of women's labour tying in Aranthangi (Tamil Nadu) and Chinsurah (West Bengal). I argue that these labour arrangements are driven through familial/gendered relations, exercise of power at the village level, and macroeconomic and political forces. Set against the backdrop of rising feminisation of agricultural wage employment coupled with growing insecurity of work and survival, this study identifies that rural female labour (which is predominantly agrarian) is commoditized and under-valued. Consequently, the female labourer is often drawn into exploitative labour contracts. I identify rural labour in this thesis through Bernstein's category of 'classes of labour' (1996; 2010).

In this study, I identify the ways in which the classes of labour enter labour tying arrangements in agriculture. The presence of labour tying is often understood through the ideological divisions of Classical Marxist and Neo-classical analyses. Classical Marxist analysis understands these labour arrangements as remnants of pre-capitalist society, which withers away with commercialization of agriculture. Neo-classical theorists identify these labour arrangements as mutually beneficial relations for both the employer and labourer. Moving away from this binary understanding of the presence of tied labour, I use Hart's analytical framework to show how the presence of tied labour among female 'classes of labour' are an outcome of multi-scalar power relations in rural society. I posit that these multi-scalar power relations in rural society create relations of dependency, obligation and privilege that draw female labourers into tied labour arrangements. I identify, these multi-scalar power relations as regimes of labour tying, where unfreedom experienced therein, are differentiated along gender, class and caste identities. The regime of labour tying, therefore, needs to be understood as a process that is here to stay, and of which female agrarian labour occupy an unfair share.



## Acknowledgement

The individual endeavour of completing my PhD is not conceivable without the help and support family, friends, colleagues and numerous people I have interacted with over the last five years.

First and foremost, I would like to extend my gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Sharad Chari, whose resolute dedication guided an idea that I had to a complete study. Not only did he provide me with the much required intellectual supervision but through times both high and low, has been patient with me and supported me through these four years. I would also like to thank Prof. Sylvia Chant whose support, feedback and kind and gentle words of encouragement have been instrumental towards the completion of my PhD.

A special thanks goes out to Indrani Mazumdar and Prof. Butola- the two people I could always turn to for help, whether it is through incessant emails or late night phone calls.

I would also like to thank my examiners Prof. Judith Heyer and Prof. Henry Bernstein who took the time out and to carefully go through my work, and provide me with insightful suggestions to help improve my work.

This PhD would not have been possible without the appropriate and much needed funding. I am grateful to the J.N. Tata Endowment and the Asia Research Centre - Bagri Fellowship, for providing me with necessary funding for my study. I would also like to thank LSE for that grants I received and for providing me with the opportunity to go to the University of Cape Town (UCT). I would like to thank Dr. Sophie Oldfield (UCT) and Prof. Dilip Menon (CISA- University of Witwatersrand) for their support. At the Department of Geography and Environment in LSE I would like to thank Elaine, without whose help I would not have come this far in my PhD.

The fourteen months I spent on fieldwork was made possible with the help of certain people- I would like to take this opportunity to thank Chitra, Mannikaam, Lenin K., Palanni, Meenatchi, and Jacinta who helped me in carrying out fieldwork in Aranthangi. A special thanks goes to my sister Shobana, who I dragged all across Aranthangi for over two months, and my *thambi* Lenin who initiated this entire process for me. My fieldwork in Chinsurah would not be possible without the help of Nasim and his family, Priyanka Bhattacharya, Priyanka Basu, Prasanjit Dutta, and Shubrata.

I take this opportunity to thank my family- my grandmother Srini Bai, my parents Anand and Sheila, my much loved second mother Sushma Aunty, my brothers Dhritimaan and Kirtimaan and my sister-in-law and dear friend Sejuti. Their faith, effort, encouragement, strength, nagging and love, always got me back on track. Mummy you get extra credit for being the only other person who has read my thesis cover to cover! I would like to thank my extended family, Lara, Ed and Caroline. Thank you for opening your home and your

heart to me, looking out and carrying for me every step of the way. Thanks to you guys I could come back to a home every day!

Sukhendu Kaku, Sushmita Aunty, Sohini di, Hari, Tulsi Di, Debo Da, Trivik, Mamchu, Malika and Arjun, thank you for all the love and warmth.

To my friends old and new- time and time again you have all borne my bad temper and provided me with much care, love and support. To my pillars of strength Ishaan, Bhai Sejuti, Regina, Anokhi and Jayaraj- you guys have been there every step of the way supporting me, cheering me on and made sure I get this done!!! Meredith and Sin Yee my two lovely friends, thank you for your constant words of encouragement and never ending support. To Shruti, thank you for always being there. Priyanka, Debanjali, and Rajpal thank you for all your help. Manamee, Indrani, Chandrani, Ishita, Sejuti B. Ananya, Abhi and Aditi, from your comments to gossip and most of all love, thank you guys for coming through for me every time.

## Abbreviations

AAY	<i>Antodaya Anna Yojana</i>
ACA	<i>Additional Central Assistance</i>
AIADMK	<i>All India Anna Dravida Munnettra Kazhagam</i>
APL	<i>Above Poverty Line</i>
BDO	<i>Block Development Office</i>
BJP	<i>Bhartiya Janata Party</i>
BPL	<i>Below Poverty Line</i>
CPI (M)	<i>Communist Party of India (Marxist)</i>
DK	<i>Dravidar Kazhagam</i>
DMK	<i>Dravida Munnettra Kazhagam</i>
DYFI	<i>Democratic Youth Federation</i>
GDP	<i>Gross Domestic Product</i>
HYV	<i>High Yielding Variety Seeds</i>

JNU	<i>Jawaharlal Nehru University</i>
LAMPS	<i>Large-Sized Multipurpose Co-operative Society</i>
MGNREGS	<i>Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme</i>
MSP	<i>Minimum Support Price</i>
NDA	<i>National Democratic Alliance</i>
NREGA	<i>National Rural Employment Guarantee Act</i>
NSSO	<i>National Sample Survey Organisation</i>
PDS	<i>Public Distribution System</i>
PMSSS	<i>Pudukkottai Multipurpose Social Service Society</i>
SFI	<i>Student Federation of India</i>
SHGs	<i>Self-Help Groups</i>
TMC	<i>Trinamool Congress</i>
UPA	<i>United Progressive Alliance</i>

## Glossary

Common Terms	
<i>Landowner</i>	Apart from large landholdings, this category is identified as employers of rural labour, those who carry out multi-cropping, commercial agriculture and also operate as money lenders.
<i>Kharif</i>	Refers to a cropping season, where crops that are sown in May and harvested in December/ January.
<i>Rabi</i>	A winter cropping season, where crops are sown in winter and harvested in spring.
<i>Zaid</i>	The period between the <i>rabi</i> and <i>kharif</i> periods.
<i>Tehsil</i>	Sub-district
<i>Patta</i>	A government issued legal document stating the ownership of the land.
<i>Benami</i>	A land transaction made under a false or fictitious name.
<i>Patwari</i>	The village accountant, who keeps a record of the amount of land and crops grown.
<i>Pradhan</i>	The village head man, who is also the chief of the village council. There are elections held for this post.
<i>Gram Panchayat</i>	Village council. The gram panchayat is grass root level local government institution.
<i>Fasli</i>	Refers to a harvest calendar of twelve months from July to June.
Tamil	
<i>Punjei</i>	Dry land cultivation
<i>Nanjei</i>	Wet land cultivation
<i>Pannaiyal</i>	A system of tied labour, where the labourer and his/her family is tied to the landowner. They are paid wages in cash and kind.

<i>Thottam</i>	Garden Land
<i>Mirasidar</i>	Arabic term for landlord whose rights on the land were transferrable, by sale, mortgage or inheritance.
<i>Thaiye Mas</i>	Month of January in the Tamil Calendar.
<i>Coolie</i>	Unskilled worker
<b>Bengali</b>	
<i>Aman/Aus/Boro</i>	Three seasons of rice. <i>Aman</i> is harvested in November and December. <i>Aus</i> rice is sown in March/ April and is harvested in the Summer months. <i>Boro</i> is a summer rice that is sown in November and December and Harvested in May and June. <i>Aman</i> rice is grown in Chinsurah.
<i>Pāt</i>	Jute
<i>Chaasi</i>	Farmer
<i>Bhaage</i>	Land tenancy pattern where the share of the produce is shared between the landlord and tenant.
<i>Theke</i>	Land tenancy pattern where the landlord receives land rent.
<i>Bargadars</i>	Sharecroppers
<i>Bandha Kishen</i>	Tied labourer found in West Bengal. The labourer is tied to the landlord, and carries out both agricultural and house work for the landlord. Payments are received in cash and kind.
<i>Dhaner gola</i>	Storage unit for rice.
<i>Majdoor</i>	Unskilled labourer.
<i>Arathdar</i>	A local trader.
<i>Dhaan kata</i>	Harvesting rice.
<i>Dhaan tolla</i>	Make bundles of the rice stalks and carry it to cart. This is task carried out by men.
<i>Eksho diner kaaj/ noor naal valey</i>	Both terms in Bengali and Tamil respectively mean hundred days work, which referred to MGNREGA work.
<i>Dadan</i>	An advance payment made to recruit labour

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## Introduction

Savitri is a 32-year-old female agricultural labourer from Hooghly, West Bengal. She works as a wage labourer for a landowner, helps her *bargadar* (sharecropper) husband cultivate land, and has leased in land to grow vegetables. In 2009, Savitri borrowed money from a landowner to cover losses incurred in agriculture and to provide food for her family. In order to repay the loan, she decided to work as a *bandha kishen* (tied labourer), and continues to do so till date. Lata, a 45-year-old Dalit agricultural wage worker, from Pudukkottai, Tamil Nadu cultivates her own land, is a tenant farmer and works as an agricultural labourer. In 2011, Lata incurred heavy losses due to the poor monsoons, which she was able to cover by borrowing money from a private moneylender, and a landowner. Lata worked as a tied labourer for 6 months to repay the loan from the landowner, and to reduce the high and usurious interest rates on the loan from the private moneylender.

Two stories, chosen from two field sites (Tamil Nadu and West Bengal) in this research, highlight the multiple roles undertaken by rural female labour. This labour is predominantly agrarian and operates as agricultural labourer as well as cultivator. The labour relations are shaped by interlocking relations of labour, land and credit that are manoeuvred through debts, obligations and duties. These relations, embedded within the asymmetrical power relations at the village level, create conditions that draw female labour into labour tying arrangements.

This thesis investigates changing rural female labour relations in India, with specific reference to the persistence of labour tying arrangements in agriculture. Labour tying arrangements and the severity of unfreedom experienced by female labourers is understood in the context of exercise of power at the village level (i.e. the rural power structure, domestic politics) and the effect of macro-political and economic factors on labour-employer strategies. I conduct a comparative study of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal to explore the effects that rural power structures and local bureaucrats have on labour relations under different political systems. I use Gillian Hart's (1986b) framework of analysis to argue that the persistence of labour tying arrangements needs to be assessed



within a particular economic and socio-political context (macro level policies), as this affects the rationale of labour and landowner/employer strategies (micro level processes).

The primary emphasis in this thesis is on female labourers who enter labour tying arrangements, not men. This is not to assume that men do not become tied labourers any longer, even though their numbers are falling (see da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999). Instead, I attempt, through this thesis, to highlight the existence of tied labour arrangements among female labourers, who play a pivotal role in Indian agriculture<sup>1</sup> and whose work continues to remain 'invisible in the public domain' (Ghosh, 2015). The feminization of rural labour and the shift of labour tying from men to women make it important to revisit the question of persistence of labour tying.

The Census of India recorded an increase in the number of female agricultural labourers from 49.5 million in 2001 to 61.6 million in 2011 (a 24 percent increase over ten years). For the same time period, the number of female cultivators decreased from 45.8 million in 2001 to 36 million in 2011 (a 21 percent decrease over ten years). It is important to note that the categories of 'agricultural labourer' and 'cultivator' are not mutually exclusive. As evidenced in Savitri and Lata's cases, they are both cultivators as well as agricultural labourers, and there is an interlinkage of labour contracts with land and credit contracts (Srivastava, 1989). Evidence from the two field sites, in this research; shows how the nature of these interlinkages determines the extent of dependence, and exploitation experienced by the female labourer.

Studies on rural labour relations in India highlight that the presence of interlinked contracts, the rise of unfreedom and increase in tied labour contracts, appear as mechanisms used by landowners to combat periods of labour shortage (Bardhan & Rudra, 1978; Bardhan, 1983). Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) in their study of Chittoor

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<sup>1</sup> Women workers carry out a range of activities in agriculture; as farmers, co-farmers, agricultural labourers, unpaid helpers on family land and performing household chores (Ghosh, 2015).

district identify that it was primarily women who enter tied labour arrangements rather than men<sup>2</sup>. Other studies talk of tied labourers as '*naukars*' (servants), in Uttar Pradesh, who enter such relations in lieu of loan repayment (The National Commission on Rural Labour, 1991). Jodkha (1994, 2014) identifies such relations in Haryana as 'labour mortgage'. These studies describe variations in the degree of unfreedom experienced by labourers within a context of agricultural development<sup>3</sup>. It is in this context that Bernstein's (2006, 2010) argument remains important- that the agrarian question of capital has been bypassed and that there are no pre-capitalist relations/classes waiting to undergo transformation. What we have is a fragmented reserve army of labour, in insecure and exploitative work, unable to secure a generalised living wage under capitalism (see Lerche, 2011: p.386).

Bernstein's argument is placed within the political economy tradition that highlights the distress of the labouring class. Hart nuances it further by viewing labour relations as an outcome of power relations at the village level, as well as the macro level. In this thesis I show how labour tying processes are conditioned through the interplay of both micro level processes and macro level policies, creating what I refer to as a 'regime of labour tying'.

In the following section I justify why I use Bernstein's category of classes of labour to identify which labourers I am looking at. Once identified, I use Hart's framework to understand the presence of labour tying arrangements.

### **Theoretical Constructions**

As described above, this thesis uses Hart and Bernstein's framework of analysis to understand the conditions that result in the persistence of labour tying arrangements in agriculture in India. In the current global production system, it is important to understand

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<sup>2</sup>These gendered positions within tied labour create a docile and pliant workforce: a ploy often used by employers to discipline their labourers.

<sup>3</sup> Srivastava (1996, 2000), identifies a U-shaped relationship between development and attachment, with changes in the nature of attachment, especially in the case of long duration labour contracts.

the continued presence of labour tying arrangements and how women come to occupy an unfair share of this exploitative labour relation. In order to explain this phenomenon, this section addresses the theoretical debates that explain the presence of unfree labour relations in agriculture and the ambiguity in its very definition. This ambiguity further emboldens the idea of understanding labour tying through Bernstein and Hart.

Debates surrounding 'unfree' labour relations have focussed on definitional aspects of free and unfree labour, on concepts of relative freedom, how one understands free and unfree labour- are these an outcome of market mechanisms or an outcome of non-economic coercion (Thorner, 1962; Bardhan and Rudra, 1978; Brass, 1990; Ramachandran, 1991; see Guerin, 2013, p. 409). Brass (1990, 1994) identifies the presence of unfree labour as a process of deproletarianization; a process that labourers are drawn into through indebtedness. Brass (1990, 1994, 2000) talks about negative freedom, where the labourer is deprived of the ability to sell his or her labour power, and therefore, can be easily controlled, disciplined and cheapened- situations that keep the labour force fragmented and reduce their bargaining capacities.

Rao (1999) identifies unfreedom in terms of the ability of the labourer to exit a contract. This ability rests on the bargaining capacity of the labourer (positive freedom). Banaji (2003) on the other hand, identifies the impossibility of drawing a distinction between freedom and unfreedom in a labour contract, as any labour contract always involves some form of coercion. There are different understandings of freedom and in turn multiple findings of unfree labour contracts/relations (Rao, 1999). This thesis is not free from such bias; however, in order to avoid the complexities associated with the diverse definitions of unfree labour, I resort to understanding unfreedom through labour tying arrangements.

The different definitions and ways of identifying unfree labour stem from an understanding of the presence of unfree labour and its relationship with capitalism, i.e. capitalist development in agriculture. Neo-classical economists, such as Bardhan (1983, 2001), consider unfree labour relations as mutually beneficial under imperfect market economies. Bardhan's understanding of unfree labour (labour attachment) is based on

relations of reciprocity and actions followed by choice. The choice to be in a particular labour tying arrangement is to maintain job security. Bardhan (1983), in identifying these relations as voluntary, does call attention to the unequal nature of these relations, where the choice to 'choose an employer lies perilously close to the choice to starve' (1983, p. 502). Bardhan and Rudra (1979) in their study on West Bengal, identify that bonded labour is on a decline in agriculture, however labour tying in voluntary contracts is said to be on a rise. Labour tying here is understood as a risk averting behaviour and is a part of capitalist development in agriculture (Bardhan, 1983).

Brass (1999) is vehemently opposed to Bardhan's views and rationalisation of labour tying and unfreedom. Brass (1999, 2006) states that unfreedom is an inherent part of capitalism and refutes the notion of a labourer's choice. Instead, labour relations are conditioned through mechanisms of coercion and capitalist accumulation strategies that work to cheapen labour costs and control the labour force, in turn preventing class-consciousness to take form- the process of deproletarianization.

The semi-feudal thesis explains unfree labour as a remnant of feudal society. Within this semi-feudal logic, the presence of such labour relations is indicative of society being in a transitional phase of capitalism, where unfree relations will disappear with the complete transition to capitalism (Bhaduri, 1973; Patnaik, 1987). The reason for this continued debate with semi-feudalism, when dealing with Indian agriculture, is the presence of tenancy patterns such as sharecropping, bondage, usurious money lending, etc. (Bhaduri, 1987; Patnaik, 1987, 2001). The Left parties in India (CPI, CPM, CPI (ML) and CPI (Maoist))<sup>4</sup> continue to align themselves with the semi- feudal thesis. The presence of unfree labour is understood through a process of paternalistic landlordism, the primary drivers for exploitation among rural labour (see Shah, Harriss & Lerche, 2013).

A reason for the radical left parties in India to strongly hold on to the semi-feudal thesis is the classical Marxist understanding of capitalism and freedom of wage labour. In the

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to List on Abbreviations on page (iii)

Marxian debate, the development of capitalism relies not only on capital but on the availability of free wage labour. According to Marx, a labourer is free in a double sense-free (dispossessed) from the means of production and free (compelled) to sell his or her labour power, i.e. possessing the freedom to choose an employer. In a feudal society labourers lack this freedom (see Lerche, 1999; Guerin, 2013). The presence of unfree labour is then not compatible with capitalism (Rao, 1999).

The explanation of unfree labour using the semi-feudal thesis means that unfree labour will vanish with the onset of commercialization in agriculture. This however, is far from true. Studies in India have revealed the presence of unfree labour (with particular reference to attached labour) in regions that are commercialised and developed (Bhalla, 1976, Garikipati, 2009; Jodhka, 2013).

The presence of unfree relations such as tied labour needs to be placed within the current global production system, where unfreedom is one of the mechanisms used to control labour (Lerche, 2011). This understanding moves away from the rigid binaries of free/unfree labour. The relative freedom or unfreedom experienced by labourers under capitalism is a matter of degree, where unfreedom can be of mild or harsh forms. Discerning this continuum highlights multiple contracts that labourers enter into as well as the existence of intra-contractual variations (Rogaly, 1996).

Unfreedom experienced in different relations keeps the labour fragmented, with limited access to generalised living wages (Bernstein, 2004). Poor conditions of work and remunerations have created conditions where labour is no longer solely dependent on agriculture, but turns towards non-agricultural work for its survival- indicative of the crisis of labour reproduction (Bernstein, 2006; Lerche, 2013). This change has transformed the relationship of labour and capital, where pre-capitalist agrarian classes have given way to classes of labour (Bernstein, 2006).

The crisis of labour and its entry into exploitative and oppressive conditions of work is an outcome of agrarian neo-liberalism (Bernstein, 2001). Under such conditions, Bernstein's

framework of analysis and class categorisation is a useful analytical research tool. Since the research is on rural labour, I use Bernstein's agrarian class categorization, with emphasis on the third class category- the classes of labour, to identify who is to be studied.

The classes of labour, according to Bernstein (2001), cannot reproduce themselves as capital and therefore turn to informal, insecure and oppressive conditions of work to ensure everyday survival. The 'classes of labour' have diverse social locations and identities, which are further differentiated along lines of gender, caste and class. The classes of labour can secure their survival through a wide range of activities, such as agricultural wage labour, farming, and non-agricultural work (Bernstein, 2010). Using Bernstein helps identify and understand that the entry into oppressive conditions of work are taking place within the context of neo-liberal development, drawing away from the rigid binaries put in place by the debate of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production.

The main focus of this research is on rural female labour and the oppressive work conditions I identify are labour tying arrangements. Using the category of classes of labour helps identify that these are not oppressive labour relations that are entered by the landless labourers alone, but by a particular agrarian class that succumbs to the pressures of neoliberal growth, drawing them into informal and insecure work.

Bernstein acknowledges the changing effects of social, political and economic relations that give rise to the non-homogenous classes of labour category. However, in order to understand the different mechanisms through which labour tying arrangements persist, I use Hart's (1984, 1986a, 1986b) framework of analysis, which helps understand why this particular form of labour segmentation exists and persists in both labour slack and tight periods.

Hart's analysis draws on aspects of social control and power relations present in rural society to explain the persistence of labour tying arrangements. Hart (1986a) identifies certain practices that operate along the lines of exclusion and selectivity (p. 189). These

practices put in place privileges that keep the labour force fragmented, and create a compliant and disciplined labour force. These practices act as instruments that control labour, as these privileges 'carry with them the threat of withdrawal', often making the labour arrangements self-reinforcing (Hart, 1986a: p. 194). Understanding tied labour arrangements through the processes of social control and labour management draws labour relations out of the debate of agricultural backwardness and advancement- an analysis which provides only a partial explanation of the nature of labour arrangements (Hart, 1984).

Hart (1986b), highlights the symmetrical distribution of power in rural society and the presence of other forces that shape tied labour arrangements. The other forces recognised by Hart (1984) are political and social relations. This is typically the relationship of the rural elite with local bureaucracy, which exerts social control over the labourer and labour process. Social control, understood through relations of power is multi-layered, which is altered with changing political regimes and socio-political interests. In understanding labour tying arrangements through a multi-tiered power hierarchy, Hart (1986) moves away from explanations that rely only on class relations or imperfect markets (see Rogaly, 1996).

Hart identifies the presence of labour tying arrangements through power relations at the village level and through larger macro political economic forces. Using Hart's analytical framework (that is based in Java) is useful in the Indian context, as this is a country that has experienced differentiated rates of development in agriculture. It is also a country where asymmetrical power relations, driven predominantly along the lines of caste and gender, mark rural societies. The relations of power at different levels are understood through relations of privilege, exclusion and selectivity. The privileges that Hart (1986b) identifies in her work are used in this thesis to understand the presence of tied labour among the female classes of labour. These privileges include relations that the classes of labour have with land, credit relations, the impact of state policies, and how the effects of these are conditioned through networks of power between the rural elite and the local bureaucracy.

Furthermore, since the research focus of this thesis is on rural female labour, power hierarchies generated through patriarchal/gendered relations play an important role in understanding the nature of tied labour arrangements. The multi-layered and multi-scalar relationship highlights, the continued presence of tied labour relations in rural society in India. These relations constitute the politics of tied labour that I refer to as the 'regime of labour tying', set in the larger political economy debate.

The multi-scalar relations that give rise to tied labour relations observed among the female classes of labour are identified in the different chapters of this thesis. The following section discusses the layout of the thesis and the questions I answer in each chapter.

## **Chapters**

The thesis, which is a comparative study of two states in India, on the persistence of labour tying arrangements in agriculture, is organised in the following manner. Chapter 1 discusses the works of scholars who have engaged with the presence of unfree labour within the much larger debate of agrarian capitalism. The chapter is divided into two broad sections. The first section charts out a discussion of free versus unfree labour, bonded labour and tied labour. Drawing on work specific to India, this section examines the changing debates surrounding the nature of bonded labour, and unfreedom experienced by labourers. The drivers of unfreedom are understood through the labour-employer relationship, interlinkages between factor markets, and interactions of larger macro-political and economic structures, following which I lay down my framework of analysis. The second part of this chapter turns towards more specific debates on female labourers and cultivators within India.

Studies on tied female labour in India highlight how, apart from market interlinkages, gender politics, both within the domestic arena and workspace, generate dependencies that push women into disadvantageous and exploitative work contracts. The discussion draws attention to the multiple ways in which women enter labour tying arrangements, as female labourers within India are not restricted to the singular identity of a wage labourer.



Women workers enter labour tying arrangements with varying degrees of exploitation, often differentiated along the lines of gender, caste and class. The nature of work contracts is further altered through larger broad-based policy interventions. The discussion on micro level processes and macro level policies determines the focus of the study and the subject to be studied- the persistence of tied labour arrangements among female classes of labour.

Chapter 2 discusses the rationale behind employing certain methods, and the reasons for choosing the two states of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, the sequence and different phases in which the fieldwork was conducted, and the respondents selected for my interviews. By working on two regions, I aim not to present them as two case studies, but by using a relational concept of comparison, I attempt to highlight the existence of labour tying arrangements through the interconnectedness of multiple layers of practice, power and meaning (see Hart, 2002). The chapter also discusses the experiences and obstacles I faced as a researcher in the field sites and the way in which it moulded my access to and understanding of the information gathered.

Chapter 3 is a description of the two chosen field sites (Aranthangi in Tamil Nadu and Chinsurah in West Bengal). The chapter draws on data obtained from the household level village survey of the two regions. A total of four villages were selected, two from each region, and data on caste, occupation, migration, income status of household, land use, agricultural labour days, and MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), were collected. In addition to socio-economic data, the chapter provides a description of labour relations and associated wages observed in the regions.

The evidence gathered for the purpose of this research is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on interlinkages between land, labour, credit, and the generation of labour tying (Chapter Four and Five). The second section turns its attention towards the effects of broad based social welfare policies in the rural landscape, which come with the promise of poverty alleviation, that affect livelihood and labour deployment strategies of rural female labour (Chapter Six and Seven).

Chapter 4 and 5 discuss contracts and interlinkages with land and credit respectively. Chapter 4 discusses land tenancy patterns observed in Aranthangi and Chinsurah among female labourers and marginal farmers. Women entering land contracts are conditioned by socio-cultural norms associated with the woman's capacity to cultivate and plough the land. For female agricultural labourers, cultivating land is a means to make them independent, and reducing dependence on agricultural wage work. The chapter discusses the extent to which dependence on agricultural wage work and labour relations are altered through tenancy arrangements. The second interlinkage addressed in this thesis is credit. The increasingly poor access to formal credit sources has driven the classes of labour to rely on private moneylenders and their usurious rates of interest. Chapter 5 discusses the various credit institutions and relations that either directly or indirectly transform labour relations, resulting in different labour tying contracts.

The second section of this thesis takes a look at macro level policies and their effects at the village level. Since the time of Indira Gandhi's famous populist slogan of '*Garibi Hatao*' (abolish poverty), the Indian government has time and again introduced anti-poverty policies and directives (Frankel, 1978; Gupta, 1999; Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987). Chapter 6 examines the effects of one such broad based social welfare programme- MGNREGA. Scholars talk of the success of MGNREGA (particularly in Tamil Nadu), and how it has not succumbed to clientelistic and patronage politics (see McCartney & Roy, 2015). The chapter provides a comparative examination of the impact of MGNREGA on labour relations in both regions, and the ability of the scheme to free labour days and improve negotiating capacities of female labourers, especially within labour tying contracts.

Chapter 7 highlights the spatial interconnectedness between micro and macro level political practices, and the extent to which state complicity with the local elites is maintained in the presence of poverty alleviation policies. This chapter looks at the effect of the Public Distribution System (PDS) and Minimum Support Price (MSP) on labour relations. The chapter discusses the inadequacies of PDS and MSP and how access to schemes are determined throughout networks maintained with the local bureaucracy and

landowners, generating relations of debt and obligation- relations which determine the nature of labour tying.

The empirical findings presented in this thesis bring me to my conclusion; that the persistence of labour tying arrangements among female labourers is a mechanism that keeps labour fragmented with the exercise of power at the micro level and macro level policies. The comparative nature of this study highlights how the female classes of labour in Aranthangi have better access to land, credit and state policies. This has provided female labourers with the ability to negotiate labour and land contracts, a phenomenon witnessed in negligible proportions in Chinsurah. Notwithstanding the positive effects, labour tying arrangements exist in both regions, although the degree of exploitation and nature of contract vary in the two regions. The manner in which macro level policies are implemented in the two regions clearly affect the nature and unfreedom experienced by these tied female labourers.

The presence of labour tying arrangements is understood through relations of debt entered into by female labourers. Interlocking transactions of land, labour and credit preserve the constant generation of debt. Debt, an intrinsic part of the lives of rural female labour, is perpetuated through domestic and production politics. The ability of female labourers to negotiate labour contracts is further affected by the improper implementation or manipulation of state benefits such as MSP, PDS and even MGNREGA (maintained through networks between the local elite and bureaucracy). The presence of these diverse institutions shape labour tying contracts and the degree of exploitation experienced by female labourers. As a process of social control and labour management, labour tying arrangements persist in different forms within a constantly evolving social and political environment. The presence of such labour relations, as discussed in this thesis, needs to be understood in terms of relations of power at multiple levels, its complexities, tensions and contradictions, which draws this analysis away from the dogmatic theoretical analyses.

## **Chapter 1: Unfree Labour and Agrarian Neoliberalism**

This chapter, through its discussion on various theoretical debates surrounding labour relations and class formation, lays down a theoretical framework for the dissertation. It also spells out the objectives of this research. For the purpose of this research, I draw on the works of Henry Bernstein and Gillian Hart. The research, with its emphasis on female labour, focuses on tied labour relations in Indian agriculture and argues the same has continued presence. The investigation of tied labour arrangements looks at how power relations at the village level and relations with macro-political and economic forces shape such arrangements. The tied labour arrangements are identified across four villages in the states of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in India.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section uncovers the larger debates surrounding the agrarian question, within the context of neoliberal capitalism. The section highlights Bernstein's development perspective and categorisations of rural labour classes, which provide a relevant analytical tool to decipher the category of labour in the neo-liberal context. The agrarian question from below has been replaced by the relationship of labour and capital. This relationship has transformed pre-capitalist agrarian classes, giving way to the 'classes of labour'. The classes of labour, within contemporary capitalism, are a modern fragmented reserve army of labour, characterised by growing insecurity of employment, lack of a generalised living wage and are marred by the inability to procure minimum reproduction costs (Bernstein, 2006; Lerche, 2013: p. 389). In order to sustain themselves, the classes of labour take up non-agricultural wage work but do not leave farming. The partial move towards non-agricultural wage work is indicative of the crisis of labour reproduction (Lerche, 2013). Drawing on this category of 'classes of labour', I present a case for 'tied labour relations' to highlight the exploitative ways in which labour survival is sought. The second section highlights the debates on unfree labour relations, drawing on empirical studies, spanned across the country, with specific reference to tied labour arrangements. In uncovering the varied understanding of the presence of tied labour arrangements, I turn to the work of Gillian Hart addressed in the third section. Hart's

work, though set in rural Java, highlights how the constant negotiation of relations of power at the village level and the relationship of the rural elite with local bureaucracy embody tied labour arrangements. Understanding tied labour arrangements through the lens of social control and labour management explains why these labour relations continue to persist even with changes in the political and economic structures. The fourth section draws on more specific examples of India, highlighting agrarian distress within the region. The fifth section looks specifically at tied labour arrangements among female labour and how their relations are shaped through, domestic relations, caste and kinship ties, work conditions and labour struggles, all of which generate varying degrees of unfreedom.

### **1.1 The Agrarian Question of Capital and Labour**

The section focuses on a theme 'the agrarian question of capital and labour' from scholastic perspectives offered by Lerche, Byres, Bernstein and Harriss. In light of the theme, the category of classes of labour - which is the focus of the thesis - is discussed.

The agrarian crisis witnessed during the ninth (1997-2002) and tenth (2002-07) plan periods in India registered a decline in agricultural GDP rates from 4.8 percent in 1992-97 (eighth plan) to 2.5 percent in 1997-02 and 2.4 in 2002-07 (Economic Survey, 2011). This period of crisis, which accompanied the adoption of neo-liberal policies, was marked with reduced public investment in agriculture, the withdrawal of subsidies, the reemergence and growth of private money lending and usurious credit (Lerche, 2011; Kannan, 2014; Lerche et al, 2013). A publicized manifestation of this period of crisis was the growing number of farmer suicides (Kannan, 2014). The 11<sup>th</sup> plan period in the country witnessed a recovery from this crisis, where the agricultural growth rates increased to 3.5 percent, following an increase in state investments (Economic Survey, 2011; Lerche et al, 2013).

The periods of crisis and growth in agriculture in India have been uneven and affected the agrarian classes differently. Rich farmers, through investment, are continuously accumulating, creating a dividing line between different rural classes (Lerche, 2011: p. 112-113). The uneven rates of growth across the country implied a slow transition to capitalist development. This transition was characterised as a semi-feudal stage (Bhaduri, 1973;

Patnaik, 1991). According to Bhaduri (1973), the obstacles to capitalist growth in the countryside were an outcome of landlord dominance— which thrives on rent — termed as landlordism. Harriss (2014), highlights that the built in depressor associated with semi-feudalism does not hold true any longer, as landlordism is on a decline. The landlords have no or declining control over the people. The landlords continue to remain economically and politically powerful, but this is done through consolidation of power outside of agriculture, such as access to government funds and public sector jobs (in Lerche et al, 2013: p. 342). Rural workers are no longer dependent on landlords for survival, and have branched out to non-agricultural wage work<sup>5</sup>. Within the country's current mode of capitalist development, the importance of agriculture, as a provider of capital has declined, i.e. the country is 'progressing without proper agrarian transition' (Lerche, 2011: p. 105). According to Bernstein (1996, 2006), the agrarian question of capital has been bypassed.

Byres (1996, 2003), who takes a classic political economy approach, states that the agrarian transition has not taken place in the country. The transition would lead to increasing class differentiation with the creation of a dominant and growing capitalist class from the peasantry, and an increase in wage workers from among the poor peasants. Any surplus generated by the capitalist class is then used to fund industrial investment (Byres, 2003)<sup>6</sup>. This understanding of agrarian transition rests on the development of agriculture. Bernstein (1996) proposes an alternative argument to agrarian transition. He identifies that industrial development, in the era of globalisation is no longer dependent on agriculture in the national market, but on international finance and global product markets. Lerche (2011, 2013), drawing on evidence from India shows that development in the country aligns itself to Bernstein's argument, where agriculture is not supporting growth of the economy, i.e. the interdependency of industry and agriculture have declined

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<sup>5</sup> Lerche (2013) shows that there is growing inequality between landowners and landless, where 'marginal farmers are becoming *de facto* wage earners' (Lerche et al, 2013: p. 342).

<sup>6</sup> Byres (1996) counters Bernstein's claims by drawing on examples from India, where capitalist transition in agriculture is limited to the northern states of Punjab and Haryana, and the rest of the country still displays pre-capitalist forms of production.

(Lerche et al, 2013: p. 344). In the 1990s the non-agricultural sector grew at a rapid rate despite the weak growth experienced in the agricultural sector (Lerche, 2013). Hence, the agrarian question for capital does not hold relevance today (Bernstein, 2006). With the agrarian question of capital bypassed, labour relations and conditions are understood through relations with capital and not with agriculture. The survival of labour is no longer dependent on agriculture alone, but is pursued through non-agricultural wage labour. The ruling class does not rely on agrarian surplus and labour does not require agriculture alone to survive. Under such conditions, land reforms, drawn out through political alliances, are not feasible to bring capital and peasants together to generate accumulation from below. Instead, land reforms operate with the agenda of social justice (Bernstein, 2006).

The class positions and differentiation identified by Bernstein (1996, 2001) arise from petty commodity production and the combined interactions of capital (such as land) and labour. Peasants, small farmers or family farmers are transformed into petty commodity producers, who depend on subsistence agriculture, commercial agriculture and labour commodification. The different combinations of wage labour, self-employment and farming, under capitalist systems, lead to the disintegration into classes of labour or capital (Bernstein, 2001). In identifying capitalist development and accumulation through petty commodity production, Bernstein draws in specificities of accumulation and class dynamics. Unlike the conceptualisations of Patnaik (1987), which understand class formations through the peasantry<sup>7</sup>, Bernstein's framework highlights the dynamic nature of rural class formation, conditioned by capital, labour and non-class attributes such as gender, kinship structure, caste, asset ownership, dispossession/proletarianization of weaker farmers, etc. (see Bernstein, 2010).

Bernstein (2010) identifies a distinct yet fluid hierarchy of classes among petty commodity producers. The accumulating class at the top of the hierarchy are the petty capitalists. The

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<sup>7</sup> Patnaik (1987) identifies peasant class differentiation through the labour exploitation criterion. Differentiation of the peasant class depends on the concentration of means of production. These include landholding, size and composition of the family, the cropping pattern, and the amount of labour used.

petty capitalists, emergent or rich farmers are able to reproduce themselves as capital and pursue numerous economic activities to ensure accumulation (Bernstein, 2010b). Theoretically, this category is distinct from the category of big capitalist farmers as defined by Patnaik (1987) and Ramachandran (2011). The subject of this study is on female labour and therefore, I have not theoretically engaged with the category of rich/ capitalist farmer.

The middle is occupied by petty producers who combine labour and capital for survival. In India they could be the middle and small farmers (Reddy and Mishra, 2009). Placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, the third category is what Bernstein (2010b) calls the classes of labour. The classes of labour cannot reproduce themselves as capital. For these labourers, daily survival is difficult and ensured through insecure and oppressive wage employment, informal sector activities, small-scale farming and non-remunerative activities. The wide range of activities undertaken to secure their survival highlight the diverse social locations and identities of the labour. Such diversity within the category suggests that there is barely any homogeneity with the proletarian class, other than their need to secure their survival (reproduction) through 'direct or indirect sale of their labour power' (Bernstein, 2001: p.5). The classes demarcated by Bernstein are dynamic categories, where class differentiation is heightened through social, economic and political factors such as gender, caste, asset ownership, livelihood diversification, change in farming practices, etc.

Bernstein, in dealing with the agrarian question of capital and labour, theorises the changing nature of capitalism and labour. Labour is in a state of crisis as a result of agrarian neo-liberalism (understood in the context of trade liberalisation, reduced state support, especially to small farmers, etc.), and under such conditions labour cannot secure its survival through farming and turns to insecure, unstable and oppressive employment. Bernstein's class differentiation of petty commodity producers presents itself as an analytical tool for the purpose of this research. First, the fact that attributes such as gender and caste, are a key feature of class differentiation, finds place within the Indian context. Second, Bernstein's class categorisations help identify the rural labour class, the primary subject of this study. Third, the 'classes of labour' category, underscores the extremely



fluid nature of class locations brought about through interactions between capital and labour. The thesis researches a specific labour relation- labour tying arrangements, and using Bernstein as a theoretical reference point helps identify who is to be studied, and more importantly, the changing nature of these relations, in terms of survival strategies.

The following section provides a detailed discussion on debates surrounding unfree labour relations, with specific reference to tied labour relations in the Indian context. Drawing on different empirical works, the section highlights the changing nature of unfree labour relations taking place alongside agrarian development. The section ends with the proposed framework of analysis for this research, which borrows broadly from the works of Gillian Hart.

### **1.2 Unfree labour under Capitalism**

The agrarian structure as defined by Daniel Thorner (1976: 8) refers to a “network of relations among various groups, who draw their livelihood from the soil”. This definition highlights the presence of a diverse set of agrarian relations between those who buy and sell agricultural labour, which result in numerous contractual forms and labour arrangements (Rogaly, 1996). Empirical work undertaken in India explores the diversity of agrarian labour arrangements and the continuous transformations they have undergone. The labour arrangements range from single-stranded daily wage contracts to multi-stranded complex contracts, within which a labourer is under obligation to sell his/her labour to a particular employer for longer and unspecified durations (Hart, 1986b; Karnath 1995; Ramachandran 1990; Rogaly, 1996). To put it simply, labour arrangements range from casual daily wage labourers (considered free) to unfree labourers. The multiple forms of labour arrangements vary in duration of the contract, form of payment, type of payment received, degree of obligation and the nature of interlocked markets of land, credit and labour (Hart 1986a; Rogaly 1996). The existence of these diverse forms of labour arrangements have sparked debates on the degree and kind of agrarian development experienced in India. These debates are explained in the following section through an understanding and presence of free and unfree labour.

Classical Marxist political economy identifies free labour (an inherent part of capitalist development) as being doubly free, i.e. free from ownership of production and freedom to sell his/her labour power and freedom to choose and change the employer (Ramachandran, 1990). The freedom to choose and change employers, as highlighted by Ramachandran in his book *Wage, Labour and Unfreedom in Agriculture*, implies a move away from servitude, which places the presence of unfree labour in pre-capitalist systems. A free labour is therefore, considered to be 'free' from any coercive power and available for production, having the ability to commodify and recombine themselves within the agricultural cycle (see Brass, 1999; Guerin, 2013: p. 409). Daniel and Alice Thorner (1962) consider a labourer free if he or she is able to reject the conditions of work and wages offered. The labourer can do this prior to or even after taking up a job by giving notice. The Thorners do agree that there might be economic conditions that could make the labourer agree to terms he/ she does not consider favourable, however, this is done only for a temporary period (p. 21).

Using this definition of 'free labour', an unfree labourer is one who does not have the ability to choose or change their employer, in turn they lack or have even surrendered any bargaining power which does not provide them with the freedom to exit the relationship (see Ramachandran, 1990; Srivastava, 2005; Geurin, 2013). 'Through custom, compulsion or specific obligation, this bond labourer is tied up to his master's needs. He can neither quit nor take up work for another master without first receiving permission' (Thorner, 1962: p. 21).

The nature of unfree labour in the present context is generally identified through relations of debt/credit, often resulting in what is referred to as debt bondage (Srivastava, 2005; Breman, 2008; Lerche, 2007, 2011; Guerin, 2013). Within the context of debt bondage, Daniel and Alice Thorner were among the earliest to classify unfree labour 'a) labourers who are under full time service and receive an annual pay; b) labourers who work for a single employer and are under the beck and call relationship, and c) which is a situation of

forced labour, in which, tenants have to perform certain tasks in a year for the landlord, where the wages received are nominal and at times there might be no pay at all' (p.22).

The categories of unfree labour as described by Thorner characterise a period prior to technical advancement and growth in Indian agriculture — Green Revolution — and therefore, it is not considered to be representative of the so called 'modern' labour relations, particularly when labourers are wanting to escape from their dependence on a single employer coupled with the more general move away from 'thralldom' (Ramachandran, 1990). Unfree labour consists of a range of labour relations. (For the purpose of this research, I focus on tied labour arrangements, a form of unfree labour)

One of the most extensive works, which documents the changing nature of unfree labour in both the pre and post-independence era in India, is that of Jan Breman. Breman (1974, 2007) traces the changes experienced in the bonded labour system in Gujarat, known as *halipratha*. His work recognises the changes that the *halpatis* (a labour community who are Scheduled Castes) underwent with a rise in free labour relations, and the transformation to new forms of capitalist unfree labour relations. Breman refers to this unfree labour as 'neo-bondage', as their basic characteristics have undergone certain changes. They are based on a labour contract that are exclusively economic in nature. Breman (2007) here refers to a change in the patron client relation and a decline in the landlord's 'need' to retain social hierarchy through such ties. Labour under neo-bondage find themselves in more time-bound contracts, where the labour can be bonded for just a season and not for an unlimited period of time. One of the reasons for these short-term seasonal ties is that most of these labourers tend to be migrants and, hence, are not tied to employers for a long period of time. In addition to this, the labourers are hired and fired by a labour contractor and the employers, in turn, have distanced themselves from the labour hiring process (Breman and Guerin, 2007). Empirical studies on neo-bondage, have focused on non-agricultural activities, such as in brick kilns, or rice mills (Breman and Guerin, 2009). These studies show that the reason for debt bondage and bonded labour relations is due to the rise of seasonal migrant labour flows and the role of the labour contractors and

intermediaries (Bremar and Guerin, 2009; Srivastava, 2009). Guerin (2013) sees this as shift in patronage ties from the employer to the labour contractor, who is very often from the same caste and class as the labourer. The transformation in labour employment relations and whether bargaining capacities and/or work conditions have improved in such cases is, however, a debatable issue. The shifting of patronage ties to the labour contractor, creates unfreedom, under capitalist conditions, which impacts the labourer's work conditions and bargaining capacity, and is different from that experienced under old forms of bondage (Guerin, 2013).

Changes in labour relations, accompanied with the changes in wider social structures, and has altered the nature and extent to which labour is and remains unfree. Unfreedom is experienced in varying degrees, often taking up indiscernible forms. The worker, therefore, experiences different impacts of freedom and unfreedom (Ramachandran, 1990). Along with the presence of casual wage labour that is considered free, there is an entire spectrum of labour relations that emerge, where a labourer may be attached (henceforth referred to as tied) to an employer or credit relations (Brass, 1991; Srivastava, 2000) (for example, labourers who are tied through debt bondage), labourers who experience unfreedom through the extension of labour services or obligations (Ramachandran, 1990), etc. The mode of payment and duration for which the labour remains tied varies with different contracts. Often labour tying is seasonal in nature, where the labourer is tied due to tenancy arrangements or credit relations. The presence of such tied labour arrangements are often attributed to employers securing labour during tight labour markets and to ensure the timeliness of operations (Bhalla, 1976; Bardhan and Rudra, 1980). However, tied labour cannot simply be viewed as a mechanism to secure labour, where loans taken are considered as advance on wages (Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999). Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999), in their study in Andhra Pradesh, highlight that labourers in tied labour arrangements receive far less wages than that set by the market rate. In addition to this, the unfreedom experienced depends on the ability to negotiate the contract. If the labour arrangements are too time-consuming then

they might deprive the labourer of seeking work elsewhere (Ramachandran, 1990; Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999). Labour tying contracts can have varying durations, depending on which, labourers can be tied for a particular season, the period of repayment of loan, an entire agricultural year, or even be tied multiple times within a year. Caught in a perpetual cycle of indebtedness, the labourer can be tied due to lease arrangements and credit relations (Bardhan, 1983, Srivastava, 1989, Brass, 1990; Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999, Guerin, 2013; Jodhka, 2014). The diversity and complexity of tied labour arrangements, and its associated unfreedom, raises questions about whether its presence needs to be understood as an intrinsic part of capitalism.

As the discussion highlights, unfree labour encompasses an entire spectrum of labour relations. For the purpose of this research, I focus on labour tying arrangements. The persistence of unfree labour relations within agriculture has raised questions on the kind of agrarian development experienced in the Indian context. The theoretical debates surrounding the nature of agrarian development has provided numerous interpretations and definitions to understand the complexity and diversity of labour contracts. The following section looks into debates that have emerged within Marxist political economy.

#### **1.2.1 Theoretical Constructions within the Indian Context**

Numerous interpretations have emerged in trying to understand the presence of unfree labour within the Marxist political economy framework. These have been discussed in this section representing the various ways scholars within the Marxist framework have understood and theorised unfree labour. Some scholars (such as Bhaduri, 1983; Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney, 1985) identify unfree labour as remnants and relics of past 'traditions', and therefore, unfree labour is said to disappear with the transition to 'mature' capitalism. This is the underlying argument of the semi-feudalism thesis, where the presence of such labour relations retards the onset and development of capitalism, thereby keeping most of the agrarian sector into what Patnaik (1987, 2001) refers to as

oppressive semi-feudal capitalism or Junker style landlord capitalism<sup>8</sup>. Under this form of landlord capitalism, despite numerous land reforms, the monopoly of landholdings is preserved, contributing to continuance of unequal power relations in rural society. Bhaduri (1983) identifies the presence of semi-feudalism in India through sharecropping and usury, all of which act as deterrents to development, and incompatible to capitalist accumulation (Brass, 1999) Patnaik's (2001), assessment of semi-feudal production relations is understood not through the presence of free or unfree labour relations but rather the inability to reinvest in agriculture. Therefore, even though there exists a burgeoning presence of capitalist farmers, non-capitalist modes of production relations continue to operate, fixing Indian agriculture in a semi-feudal mode of production (Patnaik, 1987, 2001).

The semi-feudalism argument and landlord capitalism find resonance in Byres's (1996) discussion on the agrarian question, i.e. the transformation to capitalism. According to Byres (1995, 1996), capitalist development will ensue when there is successful agrarian transition and the reverse will take place when agrarian transition is faced with many obstacles<sup>9</sup>. The multiple paths of capitalist development rests on the kind of landlord class, class differentiation and struggles (Byres, 2009). The Prussian path of development sees the transformation of the feudal landlord class to a capitalist class. Under these conditions,

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<sup>8</sup> Patnaik (1972, 1986, 2001), drawing from examples in India, identified that a large part of the Indian agrarian economy can be categorised as Junker-style landlord capitalism. However, the northern belts, which benefited from the Green Revolution, particularly the states of Punjab and Haryana, are driven by 'dynamic agrarian capitalism', i.e. a region characterised with high productivity, free wage labourers and a dominant peasantry. This dynamic agrarian capitalism that Patnaik (2001) talks about is attributed to landlord capitalism, which is an intrinsic characteristic of the Indian agrarian economy and was promoted through land reforms (p. 22). The *zamindars* are now referred to as capitalist landlords who utilise pre-capitalist relations of caste based oppressions to appropriate surplus. In addition to this the capitalist landlords would only invest in agrarian development if the profits they received were more than the amounts earned by ground rent and in investment in non-agriculture (Ramachandran, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Byres' (1996) explanation of the transition is seen through two paths that he borrows from Lenin- the Prussian and the American path. The Prussian path is described as capitalism from above where the only transformation is of feudal landlords (such as the *zamindars*) to capitalist landlords and maintaining other relations of production. The American path is described and capitalism from below where the rich peasants become the capitalist class and the poor peasants work as agricultural or wage earners. The landlord class does not exist or is broken up by the revolution (Lenin, 1962).

class consciousness arises only among a small proportion of the landlord class and the majority of farmers and landless labourers remain suppressed and exploited (Bernstein, 2010b; Byres, 1996, 1999; Lerche 1998, 1999). Within the Prussian path, transition to capitalism is marked by semi-feudal features. The other is the American path which does not stifle the development of the peasantry and they transform themselves into capitalist farmers. Byres (1996), drawing from examples in India, explains that capitalist transition in the country has taken place in a sporadic manner and tends to be limited in the northern states of Punjab and Haryana, and the rest of the country still shows persistence of pre-capitalist forms of production, as described by Patnaik (1987).

The semi-feudal thesis is the first school within the Marxist political economy that can be identified which continues to be communicated through the party programmes of the Leftist parties in India, such as the CPI, CPI (Marxist), CPI (Marxist, Leninist) and CPI (Maoist) (Shah, et al, 2013). The CPI (M) party strategy clearly states that landlordism (where the oppressor is the landlord) and exploitative tenancy contracts are the reasons for the worst forms of exploitation experienced by the 'Indian peasantry' (Karat, 2000). A change in the party programme of 2000 from that of 1964 recognizes that there is a change in the nature of landlordism from semi-feudal landlords to capitalist landlords. However, this manner of landlordism is said to have only superimposed capitalism, and in doing so has preserved an entire gamut of exploitative semi-feudal relationships. For any concrete and successful agrarian revolution to take place, these capitalist landlords need to be eliminated in order to transform production relations. While the CPI (M) recognizes the presence of a capitalist landlord, the relations of production are semi-feudal in nature, which does not allow development in agriculture (i.e. the transition to capitalism) to take place<sup>10</sup>.

Mohan Rao (1999, 2014) adheres to a similar understanding, where he believes that unfree labour and capitalism are not compatible with one another. Unfree labour typifies pre-

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<sup>10</sup> Despite what the semi-feudalism thesis postulates, Bhalla (1976) and Jodhka (1993, 2013) identify attached labour relations in the agriculturally developed state of Haryana.

capitalist modes of production, which are not economical in nature and will be replaced by capitalist labour relations (primarily the commodification of labour). In addition to this, Rao (1999) does not consider the payment of advances as loans that create unfree relations. If the labourer is able to pay back the loan amount, he or she is able to exit the labour relation without being tied down to so-called non-economic coercions (see Lerche, 2007). For the labourer and employer to be embroiled in advance payments is considered a normal aspect of contractual payment (Rao, 1999). According to Rao, when certain advance payments transform themselves to debt bondage, they do so under semi-feudal power relations (where the ruling class has control of both economic and political wealth) keeping the labourers in bondage. In this explanation, the labourer ends up serving the lender during peak seasons but is left on their own during slack seasons. Rao (1999) recognises this skewed balance of power that does not work in favour of the labourer and in doing so recognises the presence of exploitation in numerous labour contracts. However, he does not believe that it would necessarily be tantamount to an unfree relationship (see Lerche, 2007). What Rao neglects in his assumptions is that the oppressive and coercive conditions of work make the labour unfree (Srivastava, 2009), which is a mechanism used by the rural elite to exercise control over labour and demobilise agrarian organisation (Brass, 1990).

A second school of thought within the Marxist political economy framework is that proposed by Brass (1999, 2002, 2014, 2015), where unfree labour is compatible with capitalism. Under these conditions the labour loses control over the sale of their labour and labour costs are cheapened. In doing so, their class consciousness is arrested and results in what Brass terms as de-proletarianisation. The idea of de-proletarianisation challenged the notion of capitalist transformation from free to unfree labour, as this phenomenon is not restricted to the early stages of capitalism alone (Brass, 2015). Drawing on examples from Peru and Haryana, Brass focusses on relations of debt bondage, usually an outcome of advance payments taken from the employer. He argues that any form of debt-based labour relation, whether permanent or casual or for short or long durations, is unfree, as



these conditions create situations where the labour power either ceases to be a commodity or is recommodified by someone else, that is, the labourer does not have the freedom to sell their own labour power (Brass, 2015: p.291). Under such conditions the labourer ceases to be free. From the case studies of India (Haryana) and Peru, Brass comprehends the basic nature of such unfree labour; a) they might voluntarily enter the labour contracts but lose control over their labour and cannot exit the contract freely, b) the labour under relations of debt works for much longer hours than those who are debt free and unattached, c) the higher rate of exploitation experienced is a result of the growing relation of dependence on the employer/lender; and d) unfree labour is largely driven through non-economic coercion. However, unlike the traditional forms of unfree labour, the modern forms do not restrict themselves to a single employer. Brass's concept of de-proletarianisation provides a critique to the semi-feudal thesis that views unfree labour as an obstacle to growth. Unfree labour is an intrinsic part of capitalist development in agriculture and what he identifies as capitalist farmers/employers are successfully creating unfree labour conditions to prevent class struggle from below (see Kapadia and Lerche, 1999; and Lerche 2007a).

Brass (1994) asserts that within capitalist production relations, unfree labour is preferred over free labour and the production system operates to eliminate any freedom of the workforce, hence de-proletarianisation. The de-proletarianisation thesis has been criticised for intensifying the dichotomy of free and unfree and that free and unfree labour need not be viewed in terms of such 'rigid binaries' (Guerin, 2013; Lerche, 2011). This criticism draws from the theoretical understanding of unfree labour and capitalism as discussed by Banaji (2003). In capitalist production relations, all workers experience some form and degree of domination and exploitation, and according to Banaji, to have such strict binaries undermines 'the basis of Marx's critique of wage labour and its legal mystification' (quote from Bernstein, 2013: p. 313). Banaji draws on Marx's dual sense of freedom where even when a labourer is free, he/ she operates under unequal power relations, starvation and exploitative and oppressive work conditions (see Daum, 1990).

Banaji (2003), in his analysis, points out that capital is of two kinds, total social capital and individual capital. The latter is driven through surplus accumulation and not the presence of free or unfree labour. Individual capital is not restricted to free wage labour. For the purpose of and for generating surplus, it can incorporate multiple kinds of exploitation like exploitation of peasant family labour, less free forms like coerced wage labour, and unfree labour. Exploitation experienced by the labourer is an inherent part of neo-liberal capitalism, where labour is constantly cheapened and disciplined and made more docile (Lerche, 2011). The conditions for formal labour are becoming worse and are replaced with informalised contract labour, and within this global production system, unfreedom is just one of the ways in which labour is controlled (Lerche, 2011).

Moving away from the rigid binaries of unfree labour, Lerche (2007, 2011) advocates that the unfree-free dichotomy needs to be understood more as continuum of relations, 'all containing degrees of unfreedom' (Lerche, 2011: p. 11). In such a situation, unfree labour as expressed in Brass's term of de-proletarianised labour is the extreme end of the continuum. Within present day neo-liberal capitalism there is a hierarchy of occupation which Lerche (2011) also refers to as the 'hierarchy of powerlessness' (p. 69). Lerche (2011) constructs this hierarchy of occupation using the National Statistical Survey data in India, where bonded labour occupies the lower end of the hierarchy, who are generally tied to an employer through interlocked credit markets and have labour obligations. Formal hired labour, who are protected through labour legislations and have proper contracts, mark the other end of the hierarchy. The self-employed are also identified in this hierarchy, where they are self-employed for the purpose of survival, along with those who are unpaid, to those who are self-employed with assets to support them (such as capitalist farmers) (p. 69). Labour is not restricted to a particular category; household members and a single labour might occupy more than one position on the hierarchy. The positions occupied determine the extent of poverty experienced and the degree of exploitation and unfreedom experienced by the labourer. The occupation hierarchy highlights conditions of differentiation and exploitation that is experienced by labour under capitalism (Lerche

2010). The labour conditions and labour relations keeps the labour fragmented and exploited with limited access to a generalised living wage (Bernstein, 2004). The relationship is best understood as that of labour and capital and not between labour and agriculture; for which reason the agrarian question has now been bypassed (Bernstein, 2004, 2006). The relationship between capital and labour, dominated by capitalist social relations, brings together a new 'classes of labour', which tries to secure its reproduction through insecure and oppressive means, emphasising the growing distress of labour under capitalism (Bernstein 2001). The hierarchy of occupation (Lerche 2010) and classes of labour (Bernstein 2001, 2004, 2006) both elicit the varied nature of labour relations, thereby reaffirming the errors in viewing labour free and unfree, within the current global production system.

Guerin (2013) further advocates the need to study aspects of unfreedom as a continuum. Her work looks at bonded labour in Tamil Nadu (brick moulders, cane cutters and those employed in the rice drying industry), and highlights how labourers experience mild to harsh forms of bondage. The labourers identified in Guerin's study worked in almost near captive conditions to those who were tied only through debt bondage for a single season (see Lerche, 2011: 23). Guerin (2013) identifies these bonded labourers as those who have their freedom, wages and bargaining power restricted significantly by relations of debt (p.411). This continuum of labour bondage (where labour need not be bonded for an indefinite period of time) contains within it both the economic and social compulsion to sell their labour (Rogaly, 1996). This compulsion is witnessed in both agricultural and non-agricultural work. Studies show the presence and growing dominance of unfreedom in non-agricultural work, however, keeping this in mind, one also needs to look into the extent to which labourers have the option of moving out of agricultural wage work, and the conditions of unfreedom experienced therein.

This section discussed the present and continuing debates in understanding the presence of unfree labour relations; whether they are remnants of pre-capitalist relations or an inherent part of capitalism. Referring to unfree labour as a part of a pre-capitalist society

exclusively, confines our understanding to a binary — free and unfree labour. Instead, viewing labour unfreedom as an intrinsic part of capitalist development and characterised as a continuum highlights the degrees of exploitation that is experienced by the labour. The following sections highlight this very point when looking into changing unfree labour relations in agriculture and the different definitions used to identify unfree labour relations in the Indian context.

### **1.2.2 Changing Unfree Labour Relations in India**

The following section is a discussion on labour arrangements focusing primarily on work of two scholars, Jan Breman and V.K. Ramachandran. This section identifies that traditional bonded labour relations are on a decline and the very nature of tied arrangements has shifted to an individualised contract. Breman (1974) identifies this through the process of neo-bondage and depatronisation. Ramachandran (1990) and others identify unfreedom experienced in labour relations as an outcome of commercialisation of agriculture. However, the debates highlight the different ways in which unfree labour is understood within the Indian context, often giving rise to conflicting findings.

Possibly the most prolific scholar who has written about the changes in labour bondage experienced in Indian agriculture is Jan Breman. His work on South Gujarat spans across three decades. Breman (1974) looks at a particular labour arrangement that is based on the relationship between patronage and exploitation; he discusses the changes this arrangement has undergone over time based on revisits to the field. The relationship is between landlords/masters and labourers/farm servants. The farm servants (*halis*) identified were Dublas who are SCs and were attached to the landowners. This relationship of servitude lasted the entire lifetime of the *hali*, and in most cases, would get passed on to the next generation. Breman (1974, 2007) notes that those from the Dubla community ended up becoming a *hali* as a result of taking an advance from the landowning caste. This advance was (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) in most cases made to meet marriage expenses. Once committed as a *hali*, a *Dubla* carried out an entire range of activities for the landlords; from cultivating the fields to any other activity that was demanded of him by his master. This

relationship of *halipratha* was not confined to the male Dubla workers, but extended to his family members, where his wife would work as a maid and their daughter would help their mother in tasks such as washing clothes, grinding the grain, fetching water from the well, keeping the house clean, etc. The *hali's* sons would tend to cattle (Bremar, 2007: p. 35). The *hali* was provided a meal and would receive wages, in the form of grains, at the end of day. The amount of grain received was often just about enough to feed the *hali's* family. The *hali* lived on the master's land and was provided material by the master to build a hut. In addition to this, the *hali* was also given a piece of the land which he could cultivate and keep the yield for himself. The *hali* received other benefits and gifts in the form of clothing, shoes and sometimes even some tobacco and some money to buy drinks as well. Under this system of *halipratha* the master was obliged to look to after the basic needs of the *hali*. This system of patronage that Bremar (1974) describes in his work refers to a 'pattern of relationships in which members of hierarchically arranged groups possess mutually recognized, not explicitly stipulated rights and obligations involving mutual aid and preferential treatment. The bond between patron and client is personal, and is contracted and continued by mutual agreement for an indeterminate time' (p. 18). There are rights and obligations that the *hali* and the master have to fulfil, however, the relationship is asymmetrical and deeply exploitative (see Beteille, 1975).

*Halipratha*, under this relationship of patronage, was marked by indebtedness and bondage, but also provided some social protection. While the master did provide advances, he also tried to ensure that the debt did not increase unchecked. One mechanism of doing this was by providing the *hali* with land to cultivate for himself. However, in reality reduction and repayment of the loan was not possible and both the master and the *hali* were aware of this. The master would try and keep the debt to a minimal and the *hali* would try and maximise the loans. The *hali* was never able to repay the loan and this got passed on to his son and his family, creating hereditary attachment (Bremar, 2007).

This relationship of patronage between the *hali* and his Anvil Brahmin master was sustained through social and economic pauperisation. The landowners enjoyed good terms with the bureaucracy. During the period of 1920 to 1940s, Breman (1974) clearly shows how the political party in power (Congress) paid lip service to bringing about improvement for the Dublas, and other landless labourers, while they defended the interests of the landed classes. Left wing activists such as the All India Kisan Sabha led numerous strikes and agitations against the bonded labour system. The different institutions and organisations that were put in place all agreed on the abolition of the bonded labour system. Mahatma Gandhi (great leader) brought about a supposed abolition by referring to the Dublas as *Halpatis*. However, despite these interventions the removal of bonded labour was not enforced, instead it rested with voluntary implementation by the landowners (Breman 2007). The removal and shifting focus of left organizations and the Congress not wanting to disrupt its privileged political base left little room for transformation of this labour relation (see Lerche, 2007).

The post-independence period in India witnessed changes in *halipratha*. Breman (2007) highlights the declining importance of *halipratha* as a labour arrangement with incoming of capitalist methods in agriculture alongside shift in cropping pattern in Gujarat. Landowners wanted to minimize the advances that they would give out. No longer were the presence of farm servants synonymous to power and prestige for the landowners. Landlords all looked towards a comfortable lifestyle and having one or more servants was enough to cater to their lifestyle demands (Breman, 2007). The landowners, despite changes in their lifestyle, continued to substitute their labour power with that of the labourers. This phenomenon was prevalent among the Anvil Brahmins, who are the upper caste in the villages studied by Breman. Along with them, landowners who belonged to the lower caste groups employed labourers in their field to satisfy their social aspirations (Breman, 2007: p. 191). The dissatisfaction towards bondage was voiced by the *halis* deserting their work. However, this rarely took place, as the landowner's ties with bureaucracy meant that the *halis* could never go to the police for help.

The lip service provided by the Congress party continued, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1966-77) as part of her 18-point anti-poverty programme, focused on the removal of bonded labour- seen in the implementation of the Abolition of Bonded Labour Act (1976). While policies like this were implemented nothing was ever done to tackle the asymmetrical power relations that existed in rural areas (Breman, 2008).

The emergence of capitalism in the region brought along a change in *halipratha*. The Dublas were no longer confined to and dependent upon the Anvil Brahmins for work, with their labour freeing up they could now seek employment with different landowners. However, this change brought along with it a change in the patronage relationship. The landowner was now no longer obliged to provide employment to the Dublas during periods of no work, or even provide land for cultivation or building a house. The decline of these privileges coupled with the increasing use of migrant labour worsened the conditions for the landless Dublas (Breman, 1974, 2007). Under such conditions the Dublas looked for other means of employment, migrating out of the village. This movement resulted in Dublas escaping the village, agricultural wage work and the landowners. Migration was now viewed as aspirational among the younger *halpatis* (Breman 2007). The movement and dissent voiced by the Dublas brought along with it a change in the way the landowners perceived the Dublas. In the pre-independence era, movement of the Dubla was controlled by the masters, where the only hope of escape was desertion and that was considered a sin. Now, with Dublas refusing to work as *halis*, the landowners stereotyped them as lazy, irresponsible, disrespectful, and extravagant in their expenditure, lacking the ability to work hard and manage their lives. These attitudes, while a result of the Dublas moving out of bonded labour relations, was also reason for landowners not to continue to give grains during periods of lean or no work as it would encourage their uneconomical mentality (Breman, 1974; 2007). The change in attitude of landowners and reducing the need for farm servants is what Breman (1974; 2007; 2008) refers to as depatronisation

Depatronisation, within the capitalist system, brought along with it the removal of the labourers' right to work, which was ensured under *haliprtha*, and along with this the social

security of the labourer was no longer guaranteed. Labourers are dependent on the landowners for work but this is without the same aid and protection that they received previously: 'the risk of subsistence has shifted onto to the agricultural labourers (Bremar, 1974: 226). Increase in poverty is further perpetuated by the Dublas refusing to work as *halpatis* to break away from the relations of dominance perpetuated through inequality (Bremar, 2007). Despite the process of depatronisation taking place, with rising poverty, the fundamental relationship of dependency has remained the same and relations of coercion and at times even servitude are extracted through relations of debt (Bremar, 1974). Dependency results in perpetuation of unfree labour relations, differing in characteristics. The labourers are no longer bonded for an indefinite period of time, they are now contractual in nature, shorter in duration, monetised and the relationship between the employer and employee is less personalised (Bremar, 2010)<sup>11</sup>. This is similar to what was observed by Bhalla (1974) who identified a continuity in attached labour (*naukars*), but they were now formal and contractualised in nature.

From the discussion above, Bremar, through his socio-historical analysis, identifies capitalist processes in agriculture, identifying how labour segmentation (driven through non-class associations like gender, religion, etc.), migration and the obstructive role of political parties result in changing accumulation patterns in rural society. Despite providing such rich material spanning across 50 years of research, Bremar's work lacks theorisation, does not pay much attention to conceptual categories and, though he talks about marginalisation of women<sup>12</sup>, there is very little emphasis on gender relations. However, Bremar's work is important, mainly through its empirical analysis, where he highlights the

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<sup>11</sup> An important contribution made by Bremar, in recognising a new form of unfree labour relation as neo-bondage is that this relation is not confined to the agricultural sector; but is rampant throughout the non-agricultural sector such as construction and brick kilns (Bremar & Guerin, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Bremar (2007) observes that women are usually found to work in or near their villages due to their domestic and reproductive responsibilities, and female workers are preferred because of certain attributes of docility and diligence that are associated with them that maintains or deepens the gendered division of labour.



changing rural class relations in Gujarat, which can be used as an important point of reference to understand these phenomena in other parts of the country.

While Breman highlights the decline in traditional bonded labour relations in South Gujarat, similar kinds of work carried out in other parts of India show a decline in traditional bonded labour arrangements as well (Cerderlof 1997; Gough, 1981; Heyer, 2000; Lerche, 1996, da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999; Jodhka, 2014, Carswell & De Neve, 2013)<sup>13</sup>. Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) observe a decline in the traditional permanent attached (tied) labourers (*jeethagallu*) in Andhra Pradesh, complimented by an increase in non-permanent tied labour arrangement. They identify two mechanisms through which labourers are tied through credit and through lease. In a tied labour arrangement through credit, the labourer remains tied till the loan is repaid. However, the frequency and purpose of loans taken have an impact on the duration of labour tying. Tied labour arrangements through lease are more seasonal in nature compared to credit relations. Tied labour through lease is a mechanism used by landowners to secure male labour during labour-tight seasons. Tied arrangements through lease combined with loans intensified the landowner's claim on labour. Labourers commonly enter such relations in order to meet their consumption costs (da Corta and Venkateshwalru, 1999).

The change in labour relations was also noted by Breman (1974), where apart from social and political factors that have resulted in this change, a reason for the decline of bonded labour and the subsequent shift to neo-bondage is an outcome of change in cropping pattern (cultivating fewer labour-intensive crops). In addition to this, the decline of bonded labour is also attributed to the increasing migration of workers, and a decline in the patron-client relations which is viewed as an economic liability by the landowners (see Ramachandran, 1990).

Gough (1981, 1987) finds similar decline in patron client relations in Thanjavur. Gough identifies three broad types of labour relations in her field studies- the *pannaiyal* (who is

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<sup>13</sup> Heyer's study of villages in Coimbatore from the 1980s to 2008-9 shows a decline in the number of *pannaiyal* labour, replaced by casual and contractual labour.

the farm servant) who belonged to the ex-untouchable castes, a second group of farm servants who belonged to the middle or low ranking caste and casual labourers. The *pannaiyals* were bonded to the landowners through relations of debt which were bound by legal sanctions. Desertion was uncommon as the bonded labourers were always brought back by the police. As *pannaiyals* they had access/rights to some resources, such as leaves to build their huts but they were bound to the socially and economically dominant landowners in the village. The decline in the number of *pannaiyals* and an increase in the number of casual labourers in the region of Thanjavur, was associated with an increase in migration, increasing fragmentation of the land, and a decline in the grain payments and the subsequent decline of subsistence earnings of the labourer provided by the landlords. However, in this region one of the most important factors, which brought about a decline in the number of *pannaiyals*, is the active role played by the Communist Party. The intervention of the Communist Party ensured decline of punishment that labourers experienced at the hands of the landlords. Gough (1987) shows that with the increase in the casual labour force, the agricultural labour force is less pre-capitalists and more proletarianised (p. 289-90). However, at the same time she recognises that poverty is acute and a growing problem of this labour force. As both Gough (1987) and Breman (2007) note, even under added circumstances of deprivation, the agricultural labourers no longer succumb to a regime where their survival is dependent upon being farm servants.

One of the stark differences noted with the decline of traditional bonded relation is the shorter duration of contract (Breman & Guerin, 2009) and the fact that it is more an individual labourer who is bonded, rather than an entire family<sup>14</sup> (Ramachandran, 1990). The change in labour relations brings along with it associated changes in unfreedom experienced by the labourer. The degree of unfreedom experienced within different labour relations is no longer time bound. Ramachandran (1990), in his work in Gokilapuram,

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<sup>14</sup> While Ramachandran does make this distinction, he recognises that, in the case of male labourers who are tied, their wives do work (primarily domestic work) for the landlords as well. However, the changing gender dynamics, as discussed in section 2.5, show that the same is not the case when female agricultural wage workers enter tied relationships.

describes that a labourer in bondage and a free labourer 'stands at two ends of a continuum of degrees of unfreedom' (p. 170). The *halis*, *pannaiyals*, *jeethagallu* and *naukars*, who formed the traditional bonded labour relations, were all farm servants. However, as explained above, the duration of bonded labour relations have shortened and the continuing presence of farm servants need not imply that they are bonded, as they can quit the current employment and even repay the debt working for another employer (Ramachandran, 1990).

Freedom and unfreedom, two theoretically distinct concepts, in practice operate side by side, one overlapping with the other. Ramachandran (1990) observes a growing number of casual wage labourers in Gokilapuram, however, these labourers are subjected to varying degrees of unfreedom. Unfreedom is recognized with the presence of labour services rendered to the landowner/employer. Labour services and its associated obligations often make it difficult to differentiate between freedom and unfreedom of the labourer. The range of services relate more to domestic tasks than agricultural tasks<sup>15</sup>. These labour services can last a few days to an entire year, a lot depends on the extent to which the labourer is at the 'beck and call' of the employer. These labour services range in duration, remuneration, wages received, nature of tasks, form of contract, mobility and the type of obligation (Ramachandran, 1990). Breman's (1974, 2007) discussion of freedom, within the context of landlessness, casualisation of the labour and neo-bondage, remains confined to two ends of the social hierarchy, the Anvils and the Dublas. There is limited discussion on the intermediate classes and the changes they have undergone. In taking unfreedom to incorporate a range of activities (labour services), Ramachandran (1990), Lerche (2011) and Guerin (2007, 2013) broaden the radius of understanding the presence of unfreedom alongside the commercialization of agriculture.

Ramachandran (1990) notes the agrarian revolution in the region affected labour absorption and labour demand in the region. The improvement in farming practices and

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<sup>15</sup> For activities listed as labour service, see Ramachandran, 1990; p. 177-78.

technology (HYV seeds, conversion of dryland to wetland, etc.) increased the demand for labour. This demand in labour grew for short term contracts in particular, whereas long term contracts declined. However, an increase in wage labour does not bring about a 'freer' labour system as the case points out.

Ramachandran (1990) refers to these labour services as tools of subordination used by the employers, in present times, to keep costs low (see Brass 1995 and da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999). The increasing casualisation of the labour force and the unequal distribution of assets results in increased pauperisation of the labour (Lerche, 2013). The labour services entered furthers the dependent relationship of the labourer upon the landlord/employer. This dependency is mutual, as the employers do require labourers during periods of peak labour demand (Rogaly, 1996). However, this relationship is asymmetrical, with economic power reinforcing cultural and even religious domination (see Rogaly, 1996), often resulting in tied or fully attached labourers (Jodhka, 1996). The labour relations identified in Ramachandran's study hint at not only economic changes which he provides a detailed discussion of, but of social and political conditions in the region.

This section introduced some of the important literature on unfree labour in India, and the changes from long-term to short-term bondage, often driven by relations of debt. Whether it is Breman, Gough or Ramachandran, all talk of economic and 'extra-economic' (social and political) coercion experienced by the labourer often rendering him/her unfree and tied to a relation of debt. However, it is important to note that the different authors take different value positions in terms of unfree relations, where Breman finds short-term monetized forms of bondage insecure due to lack of patronage available in earlier arrangements (similar to that identified by Rudra, 1987), Ramachandran (1990) considers labourers caught in long-term contracts to be in worse-off relationships. It was found that the presence of unfreedom and that of tied labour is perpetuated through interlocking transactions between factor markets and through relations of power and dominance;

credit plays a critical role in these transactions. The following section discusses the debates surrounding interlocked factor markets and the presence of tied labour in agriculture.

### **1.2.3 Providing explanations of Unfree Labour through Interlocking Transactions in Agriculture**

The factors of production are land, labour and capital, hence the market where these are sold and bought are the factor markets. Ideally, these ought to be determined freely by demand and supply if a classic economic view is taken. The Marxist perspective highlights that the commodification of land, labour and credit has not emerged independent of each other, but rather in bundled or interlocked ways, mediated by agrarian institutions. This phenomenon has been discussed from multiple scholastic perspectives here.

The diverse forms of labour services highlight the extent of exploitation and coercion that the labourer experiences. The unfreedom experienced in labour arrangements determines the incidence of tied labour (Rogaly, 1996). However, the ideologically diverse ways in which exploitation, coercion and unfreedom is explained provides varied understandings of the ways in which labour is tied and what constitutes attachment. The extent of unfreedom needs to be understood in terms of the relationship between the labourer and employer and between different factor markets, such as credit and land: the multiple ways in which surplus is appropriated (Srivastava 1989, Rogaly, 1996). The studies mentioned above all talk of change in labour relations witnessed with the casualisation of the labour force, driven primarily by growing poverty and increasing indebtedness. The dynamic nature of labour relations, the labour recruitment process and exploitation experienced by the labourer are outcomes of interrelations between the different markets/surplus appropriation strategies (Srivastava, 1989: 493).

The debates surrounding interlocked markets and the incidence of unfreedom are often placed within the capitalist and pre-capitalist development debate in agriculture. Bhaduri (1973) identifies the interlinkage of tenancy and credit contracts as obstacles to development in agriculture. Bhaduri argues that market forces which are not properly

developed result in semi-feudal forms of exploitation. Peasants engaging in market transactions do so under the compulsion of subsistence consumption, which are met by loans from the dominant landowning class (Bhaduri 1983; see also Swain, 1999). The tenancy-cum-credit interlinkage discussed by Bhaduri, results in surplus extraction; through rent and through greater claims on the peasant's produce through usury, keeping the peasant under semi-feudalist control and obligations (often seen in the form of labour services). Within this system, the landlord, to maintain his economic and political power, would resist the use of technological innovations to increase yield, thereby maintaining an inadequately formed market and oppressive labour relations (Bhaduri, 1973). Bhaduri's understanding of such so called semi-feudal practices draws from Lenin's description of labour services as a relic of feudalism and which takes numerous forms and results in low productivity.

'Sometimes peasants undertake for a money payment to cultivate with their own implements the fields of the landowner...Sometimes the peasant borrows grain or money, undertaking to work off either the entire loan or the interest on it. Under this form a feature particular to labour-service system, in general stands out with great clarity- the bondage, the usurious character of this sort of hire of labour. In some cases the peasant works "for trespass"...or "work simply out of gratis", or just for a drink, so as not to lose other employments by the landlord. Lastly, labour service in return for land is very widespread in the shape of either half-cropping, or directly of work for land rented, for grounds used etc.' (Lenin 1899: 200 cited in Hart, 1986a).

The quote clearly states that the labourers' dependency upon the landlord is fortified through relations of credit, access to land and securing future employment opportunities. Bhaduri (1973) uses this understanding to show that, in the Indian context, these semi-feudal practices retard development and operate on a system of domination and subordination of the laboring class, keeping them tied to the landowners/employers. The semi-feudal relations as described by Bhaduri are representative of the pre-independence

labour relations observed by Breman (1974, 2007) where the Dublas worked as a bonded category, and the Anvil Brahmins maintained such relations to hold on to positions of power and prestige. However, as described in the previous section, these labour relations have undergone numerous changes and traditional bonded labour are found only in handful of cases (see Heyer's (2000), work on Coimbatore).

Bhaduri's understanding of retarded agrarian development under tenancy-cum-credit interlocked markets was supported by Bharadwaj (1985), who claimed that interlocking transactions resulted in increasing the exploitative power of the employers/landlords, the dominant sections of society. Interlocking according to both Bhaduri and Bharadwaj result in 'underformation' of markets (see Srivastava, 1989: 498). The semi-feudal and underdeveloped market thesis, which reinforces exploitation, was criticised by Bardhan and Rudra (1980), who argue that the presence of interlocked markets was more prevalent in technologically advanced agricultural regions. Bardhan (1980) shows that the nature of agrarian development does not depend on the presence but rather on the nature of interlinkage of factor markets (p.82). Bardhan (1980, 1984) recognizes that the landlord and the tenant enter into numerous transactions that span across different markets, renting of land, hiring of labour, in marketing of outputs, in credit, etc., which reinforce market imperfections. The presence of attached labour in India does not share similar characteristics with that of a feudal serf. Bardhan (1980) does not consider labourers bonded if they are indebted to an employer for consumption credit or for land. Rather, it is a situation of mutual dependence- regarding it as a market relationship between the employer and employee. The employer hires in labour for either long or short contracts to ensure their supply during periods of peak labour demand. In the peak season, the wage rate might be lower, but this is adjusted with the labourer receiving 'higher wages than the marginal product of labour' during lean seasons (Bardhan, 1984: 67).

Bardhan and Rudra's (1983) work on West Bengal shows that with the improvement in agricultural technology there is a substantial change in the agricultural crop cycle which requires the timeliness of operations and a demand for labour at short notice (p. 506).

Under such conditions, the optimal labour arrangement that the employer would prefer is that of tied labour. Bardhan and Rudra (1983) identify the decline in bonded labour, but highlight the significant incidence of varying degrees of labour tying arrangement- which includes labour under annual or seasonal contract or contract specified for a certain period, even a few days. The presence of such labour relations is explained along the lines of risk-sharing behaviour. Tied labour that operates within this imperfect market has multiple personalized ties, which are beneficial for both the employer and labourer. The presence of tied labour is explained as a two-tiered labour system on the farm. According to Bardhan (1983, 2003), for the labourer, tied labour relations are understood as a mechanism to attain job security. For the employer, the presence of tied labour ensures a mechanism of control over the growing demand of hired labour in agriculture. The tied labour in this context carries out labour supervision and controls and disciplines the casual labourers. This double-tiered system of labour hire is a way to put a check on class solidarity among agricultural labour, where the tied labour would not participate in many of the labour movements (Bardhan, 2003). Bardhan and Rudra (1983) attribute presence of interlocking transaction and tied labour as an outcome of uncertainty of labour and asymmetry of information (see Srivastava, 1989: 499).

In Bardhan and Rudra's (1980) study on West Bengal, the interlocking factor markets resulted in a range of labour contracts within agriculture<sup>16</sup>. These include the a) unattached labourer (casual worker), b) attached worker (farm servant) who work on annual contract and exclusively for a single employer, c) semi-attached labour, which are of three types; Type 1 if they work for an employer for a designated period of time, but are free to work for other employers; Type 2- if they are obliged to work for a particular employer for a particular number of days and Type 3, if they are obliged to work for an employer for an

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<sup>16</sup> In their categorisation, Bardhan and Rudra (1980) clarify that a casual daily wage labour may not necessarily receive payments on a daily basis, or that a long term contract assumes a relation of dependence and dominance. In fact, they assert that a casual labourer might be more dependent upon the employer for work than a labourer in a long term contract. The daily wage labourer might be under very different kinds of dependence relations (p. 1477).



indefinite period of time. In their analysis, *krishen* is another category of attached workers identified, who cultivate land and get paid a portion of the total produce and are different from bonded labourers that are said to be on a decline in the region of West Bengal (Bardhan and Rudra, 1980: 1478-79).

A key element in the understanding of attachment or tied labour is that by looking at the entry of such labour arrangements, Bardhan and Rudra (1980) do away with unfreedom, and view these relations purely based on market transactions, where attachment is a response to reduce higher costs experienced during peak season (see Jodhka, 1994). Brass (1990), as discussed previously, dismisses the notion of voluntary entry into a contract on part of the labourer, instead the presence of tied labour and unfree labour relations is a strategy used by the employers to control labour (also see Rogaly, 1996). Jodhka's (1994, 2013) field study in three villages in Karnal, Haryana, shows that attached labour, are not a privileged section of workers as envisaged by Bardhan and Rudra (1980,) instead they are more indebted than casual labourers. While the labourer might have entered the relationship voluntarily, at no point was the relationship free from exploitation and unfreedom (Jodhka, 1994)<sup>17</sup>. Social positions within agrarian society also determine the extent of unfreedom experienced by the labour class. Lerche (1998), in his work in Uttar Pradesh, highlights how the Chamars (Scheduled Caste) prefer working for the Yadavs during peak season, as they get paid better wages. On the other hand, during the lean season, the Chamars are forced to work for the Thakurs<sup>18</sup> at a lower rate in a *niji* relations, which often leaves the Chamars indebted. In this particular case, the caste position held by the landowners determines the extent to which the Chamars can negotiate both wages and work conditions.

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<sup>17</sup> A similar analysis was provided by Bhalla (1976) who identified that along with growing technological advancement in Haryana tied labour contracts took on different permutations and combinations, which was used as tool by the employers to suppress the growing bargaining power of the rural labour force, which she called the 're-designed fabric of conservative rural power' (p. A 27).

<sup>18</sup> The Thakurs are the highest caste in the region followed by the Yadavs.

Srivastava (1989), in his study on three villages (which covered both advanced and backward villages) in Uttar Pradesh, highlights two routes of entry for labourers into interlocked transactions. The first route is by debt. This debt is generally taken due to some compulsion and can operate through sharecropping or wage labour. Very often, in taking a loan, the labourer becomes indebted. The second route is where the labourer might become indebted after working as a farm servant, entering interlinked transactions, where payments are extracted through wages (own labour) or through tenancy arrangements (family labour) (p. 516). Srivastava goes on to add that, even if the labourer ceases to be a farm servant, interlinkages can continue to operate, with the ex-farm servant 'working on a priority basis' (p. 516). Srivastava (1989) describes the interlinkage of tenancy, credit and labour with both farm servants and daily wage labourers. In eastern Uttar Pradesh (a region which has resemblance to backward agriculture), the presence of tied labour in agriculture was more contractual. The 'adverse' forms of labour tying, such as labour service, priority labour or underpayment, were found in the western region of Uttar Pradesh (resembling agriculturally advanced regions), very often reinforced by traditional patron-client relations. Srivastava (1996), like Breman (2007), notes that the landowners started moving towards less labour-intensive agriculture in Uttar Pradesh, and this was accompanied with an increase in migrant labour, often drawn into oppressive work conditions. Both west and east Uttar Pradesh recorded a decline in traditional bonded labour/ 'unfree permanent labourers' from the post-Green revolution period (1960s onwards), and an increase in monetised and interlinked contractual relations (see Devi, 2006: 204). Interlinkage, irrespective of whether operating in a backward or an advanced region, generates surplus, for example, through credit, wages, rent, etc. (Srivastava, 1989). Interlinkage of credit and land markets does not necessarily indicate an increase, but rather just another mechanism of appropriating surplus, which helps understand the persistence of tied labour relations.

Srivastava (1989; 1996; 2005) moves away from the debate of capitalism and semi-feudalism and asserts that the relationship of labour attachment, as an outcome of

interlinked markets, has a U-shaped relationship with agricultural development. There is a decline in labour attachment in the initial stages of agrarian development, which increases and intensifies with advancement in agriculture. This notion finds support in Rudra's (1987) work on West Bengal, where a comparison of backward and advanced agricultural regions showed tied labourers to be more unfree in the latter. Srivastava's (2005) emphasis on tied labour has shifted from local to migrant populations. In his initial study (1989), he notes an increase in recruitment of attached labour which came from Bihar or Nepal, who are drawn into what he refers to as more adverse forms of interlocked contracts (Srivastava, 1999). What Srivastava (1996, 1999) describes is that while interlocked transactions might be beneficial for labourers and they might enter such relations voluntarily, it does not necessarily imply freedom on behalf of the labourer. Instead, freedom is determined by the conditions of work, the ability to leave a contract and existing socio-economic conditions of the labourer entering such relations. Srivastava's discussion on market interlinkage and labour tying focusses more on the consequences of debt rather than focusing only on debt as indicated by Brass (1999) (cited in Guerin, 2013).

The presence of interlocked contract is seen in both commercialised and 'traditional' production relations (Srivastava 1989). Labour tying arrangements as an outcome of interlocked markets cannot be understood as a transitory phenomenon, as they are seen to reappear in places which are capitalist (for example, Bhalla, (1976) and Jodhka, (2013)). The very nature of ubiquity, and reappearance, indicates that these relations cannot be explained away as relations of mutual dependency arising out of market seasonality (see Hart, 1986a). This makes interlocked markets an insufficient category to understand single or multi-stranded labour relations (see Rogaly, 1996: 127). Hart (1986a) proposes that interlocking transactions need to be understood through mechanisms of social control that ensures labour management (supply and compliance). Social control is understood through relations of privileges (and attached to this is the threat of withdrawal), relations with the rural elite and political forces, etc. The relations that embody social control give rise to exclusionary labour arrangements, represented for the purpose of this thesis as

labour tying arrangements. In order to understand the contractual diversity that exists in the labour market, I use Gillian Hart's framework (drawing on aspects of social control and labour management) to identify the presence of labour tying arrangements.

### **1.3 Using Gillian Hart to Understand Tied Labour Arrangements**

Discussions in the previous sections highlight debates surrounding unfree labour relations and the different ways in which they experience unfreedom. Explanations regarding the changing nature of labour relations in agriculture in India show a range of labour arrangements, from daily wage contracts to multi-stranded permanent contracts that places restrictions on the labourer, and draws out obligations to work for certain employers. The diversity in labour arrangements emerges out of relationships between individuals or groups, degrees of obligation, duration of the contract and interlocked market relations (Rogaly, 1996: p.103). The ambiguity in categorising tied (attached) or casual labour is further enhanced through this diversity, as labour arrangements are not formed along a singular axis and neither is their experience of freedom. Power relations between the different players along the multiple axes in labour arrangements become key to understanding its current nature and presence. In order to understand this, I turn to Hart's (1986b) work on labour relations in Sukodono in rural Java. In her analysis, Hart (1986) highlights the coexistence of different institutional arrangements that generate social control, which can shape and constrain the labour process.

Drawing on the empirical findings, Hart (1984, 1986b) highlights the numerous employer strategies involved in recruiting, organising and disciplining the labour force, labour deployment strategies and accumulation strategies of employers. Hart (1984, 1986b) identifies variations in earnings based on crop production in the villages and the place of employment, that is, whether within or outside the village. She observed that poorer households looked for job security and opted to work for a longer duration contract which paid them lower wages. However, job security was not the only condition that determined access to these 'privileged' employment opportunities; personal ties with the employer also played a key role.

In the formation of the different labour arrangements, Hart (1986) distinguishes between different forms of social control and labour management. One form of labour control is seen in the more direct form of supervision of workers, the threat to withhold payment or terminate the contract, so as to ensure work and effort from the labourer. The other end of the spectrum of labour control is identified as “cheaper and more effective methods of labour management” (Hart, 1984: p. 49). These subtler methods are identified as privileges that are extended to the labourer, benefits that are under the constant threat of withdrawal, either implicit or explicit. The presence of certain privileges and the nature of the worker-employer relationship creates certain exclusionary labour arrangements that keeps the labour force fragmented. Hart notes that if employers substitute the benefits with higher wages, it has a similar impact on the labour relationship, but the ability to withhold non-wage benefits has a greater impact on the labour relationship. The nature of privileges is varied, where on the one hand it can be understood through land allotment and credit facilities, and on the other through protection services. The protection services do not necessarily refer to traditional patron client relations, rather protection services are understood as a means of job security. However, the nature of these privileges are not static and changes based on the discretionary capacity of the employer. The extension or withdrawal of privileges coupled with economic vulnerability of the poor household ensure labour effort (labour management) and worker docility (social control) (see Rogaly, 1996: p.129). For the privileges to be effective tools of labour management and control, they need to be applied selectively. Employers can choose to extend privileges to a certain group of employers which keeps the labour fragmented. Under such conditions, labour fragmentation can take place in slack or in labour tight seasons. Therefore, labour market forces provide a partial explanation of the nature of labour arrangements (Hart, 1984).

Hart (1984) draws attention to the presence of ‘other forces’ that give rise to, shape and place limits on labour processes. The other forces that result in the process of labour tying are not only land and credit, but social and political relations as well. Hart (1984) recognises that these social and political relations are deliberate strategies used by the employer to

'influence the worker in non-labour spheres, or to use social connections in order to enhance the labour process' (p.52). These relations are not remnants of traditional patron-client relations, which will die out with market rationality, but a mechanism to exert social control over the labour force, not only within, but beyond the workplace (Hart, 1986b). Social control, therefore, is multifaceted and can emerge from numerous sources (Hart, 1984), differentiated along the lines of gender, class and caste.

Social control and labour management are understood through the relationship of exercise of power at the village level and the effect of macro-political and economic factors on employer strategies (Rogaly, 1996: p. 128). In the case of Sukodono, Hart (1986b) shows this through the relationship of the rural elite with the bureaucracy that ensured their access to subsidised credit and other state benefits. The relationship with the bureaucracy is essential because access to state incentives determines the nature of the relationship forged with the workers. In addition to this, the role and nature of the state influences the labour arrangements in a region, such as maintaining social stability and containing the behaviour of the rural poor that could be considered disruptive (Hart, 1984). Hart (1984), through her comparison of Bangladesh and Java, shows how different national political systems influence employer strategies and labour arrangements.

Hart's framework, though drawn out from her empirical findings in Java, provides a coherent foundation that can be applied to the Indian context in understanding the presence of tied labour arrangements. Hart looks at the asymmetrical distribution of power and how it reverberates and aligns itself to the differentiated agendas of employers and workers, and the effect of changes in political regimes on rural power structures and labour arrangements. In dealing with power hierarchies at multiple levels, Hart moves away from explanations relying completely on imperfect markets and or class relations alone (see Rogaly 1996, p. 130-131). For the purpose of this research, I use Hart's inclusive framework to identify contractual diversity in labour arrangements and explain and understand the presence of tied labour arrangements in India. With regards to the Indian context, I use Hart's framework in conjunction with Bernstein's work on the agrarian

question of labour as a crisis of reproduction. The purpose is to identify contractual diversity within the larger political economy debate.

The following section provides a discussion on the Indian agrarian economy, addressing aspects of agrarian distress, the role of the state and the state of farmers and labourers in relation to neo-liberal capitalism. This discussion identifies the crisis of labour experienced under current agrarian capitalism.

#### **1.4 Indian Agriculture and Development**

The economic reform introduced by the Congress Party in 1991 led to high growth of the Indian economy, making it one of the emerging markets (Reddy and Mishra, 2009). However, between the periods of 1994/95 to 2004/05, agricultural growth rates dropped to 0.6 percent a year (Lerche, 2011). This was the period of agrarian crisis, which witnessed increasing farmer distress and a growth of usurious money lending. The period from 1991 to 2003 witnessed a stagnation of public investment (0.05 percent growth rate), and an increase in private investment (3.71 percent growth rate) (Chand, 2009). The decline in public investment, which began in the 1980s, escalated in the 1990s with liberalization (Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010). The small and marginal farmers, during this period, face constant struggles in adapting to changing technologies and state inputs (Reddy and Mishra, 2009)<sup>19</sup>. The unevenness of growth, marginalisation and declining productivity can be traced back to the period of Green Revolution. By the 1980s the high productivity that was promised by the Green Revolution had reached its limit, yields started stagnating and costs of production began increasing (Harriss, 2013: p. 203). The rising cost of production was an outcome of farmers being forced to use expensive and inefficient fertilisers and pesticides, and the rapidly declining groundwater levels (Harriss-White and Janakarajan, 2004). There was also a decline in both private and public investments in agriculture, which

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<sup>19</sup> As Reddy and Mishra (2009) note, the Green Revolution package and the implementation of HYV seeds, worked in favour of those farmers who had better access and control over the resources. The Green Revolution technology, though being scale neutral, was in no way resource neutral (Byres, 1981). A result of this was that benefits and profits accrued to a small group of farmers, who had access to better resources through formal and cheap credit facilities, and better input-buying capacity (Reddy and Mishra, 2009, p. 14).

escalated with liberalisation policies adopted by the country (Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010; Ramachandra, 2011). The country has emerged out of its period of crisis, however, growth and development has taken place in an uneven manner. Studies showed that for small farmers, cultivation of crops alone was insufficient for family survival, whereas larger landowners (those who had 10 acres or more) were able to generate profit (Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010; Basole and Basu, 2011). In addition, the Green Revolution, which ushered in technological transformation in agriculture, did little to increase crop employment (Harriss-White and Harriss, 2007).

#### **1.4.1.1 Land**

Agriculture in India employed 70 percent of the population in the 1970s, and in 2009-10 this figure dropped to 53 percent (Lerche, 2013). In 1981-82, 46 percent of landowners had less than a hectare of land. Agriculture in the country witnessed massive structural changes, where in 2002-03, 63 percent of landowners were marginal farmers, and carried out wage work, with the latter generating a significant portion of their income (Reddy and Mishra, 2009; NCEUS, 2008, cited in Lerche et al, 2013). Under such conditions, marginal farmers actually operate as wage labourers and receive only a subsidiary income from their plot of land (Reddy and Mishra, 2009; Lerche, 2013). These are conditions that were exacerbated by the adoption of neo-liberal policies, which brought along with it the reversal of land reforms, declining public investment, deterioration of social and development banking, public infrastructure for storage and marketing, cut backs in public distribution, etc. (Chandrashekar and Ghosh, 2002; Frankel, 2005; Krishnaraj, 2007; Ramachandran, 2011). Marginal improvements in agricultural growth, were observed in the period immediately after the crisis, were possible through increased state expenditure (Lerche, 2011)<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> The gross capital formation in agriculture and allied activities as a proportion of agricultural GDP increased from 2.9 per cent in 2004-05 to 3.7 per cent in 2006-07. This increase was an outcome of increased expenditure in agriculture by the state (Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010).



The impact of agrarian distress is differentiated and, as briefly discussed, the reasons for this are many fold. Ramachandran (2011) observes that with trade liberalisation, a distinct line of division emerged between the rich farmers/capitalist farmers and the marginal and small farmers. Drawing on evidence from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh, Ramachandran (2011) shows that the rich farmers had higher incomes because they owned most of the land, agricultural technology and had control over input costs. The poor farmers succumbed to high rent costs. In addition, land reforms within the country, initially aimed towards distributive justice, were being revised (for example in Maharashtra and Karnataka), where the state wanted to promote agribusiness, which benefited the rich farmers and large corporations (Patnaik, 2003; Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010; Ramachandran, 2011). The repercussions of such moves on the poor farmers, especially women and those who belonged to lower castes, has a deeper and harsher impact on livelihood survival (Athreya, 2009).

The liberalisation period witnessed an increase in tenancy, including reverse tenancy (Ramachandran et al, 2010). The purpose and type of cultivation sheds light on the conditions of distress experienced by farmers. Rich farmers who leased land from poor farmers did so for cultivation of cash crops. Poor farmers leased land from rich farmers for the cultivation of food crops, where they paid a portion of the produce as rent. For the poor farmers, the increase in yield was complimented with an increase in cost of production, often making it difficult for these farmers to cover all costs, and pushing them into debt. A majority of these farmers belong to the Scheduled Tribe or Schedule Caste category, and in order to meet payment costs had to supplement agriculture with other activities and this was seen with the out-migration of men and the concentration of women in the villages (Ramachandran et al, 2010).

#### **1.4.1.2 Credit**

Credit among workers and farmers lower down in the rural hierarchy, was obtained through informal debt, a process aggravated with the adoption of neo-liberal policies that brought along with it the gradual destruction of rural banking facilities (Ramachandran,

2011). From the 1990s, social and development banking has been on a decline, which has resulted in increased indebtedness, especially among labourers and small and marginal farmers (Ghosh, 2005). Small borrowal accounts of total bank credit, registered a decline from 25.4 percent in the early 1990s to 3.1 percent in 2001 (Shetty, 2009). A reason for this was public sector rural banking, where a large number of rural banks were shut down. The policy move added to the inadequacy and fragmentation of rural credit facilities (Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010). This trend, though partially redeemed in 2004, overall led to an increased dependence on informal credit (Ghosh, 2005; Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010). According to the 59<sup>th</sup> round of the National Sample Survey report on the Situation Assessment Survey of Farmer Households (2003), for households with less than 0.01 hectares of land, 77.4 percent of their loans were from non-institutional agencies and the remaining 22.6 percent from institutional agencies<sup>21</sup>.

The dependence on informal sources of credit has created an elaborate structure of coercion, where the high rates of interest keep farmers under conditions of continued distress (Shetty, 2009; Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010). These structures of coercion are magnified and differentiated along lines of gender, caste and class (Hart, 1991). Ghosh (2005) observes the dependency of informal credit among tenants (also includes those who did not own any land in their name) and women farmers. Debt incurred by this group of cultivators was an outcome of privatisation- privatised and increased groundwater usage, health and education services, increased power tariffs, privatisation of institutes dealing with seeds, etc. (Patnaik, 2003; Ghosh, 2005).

#### **1.4.1.3 State Policies**

Farmers, with liberalisation, faced problems with rising cost of production and a decline in agricultural commodity production (Reddy and Mishra, 2009, Ramachandran, 2011; Harriss, 2013). In adhering to the WTO trade regime, farmers are now faced with problems of market volatility, which are much more severe than internal market fluctuations. State

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<sup>21</sup> Of this amount, 47.3 percent were from money lenders (NSS, 2003).

policy in the form of Minimum Support Prices (MSP) is unevenly implemented throughout the country and does not cover the total cost of production incurred by farmers (Ramachandran & Rawal, 2010). The rich farmers in the district of Bardhaman in West Bengal reported that the MSP for paddy increased by Rs.30/- per quintal (Rs.1050/- to Rs.1080/-) in 2011-12, but farm input costs have more than doubled in 2012 (Bera, 2012). The increase in farm costs and reduced MSP has varying effects on the classes of farmers and aggravates class differentiation, where small and marginal farmers are the worst affected.

The dynamic nature of class relations of capital and labour and the role of the government is further understood through agro-commercial capital in post-harvest trading and processing (Lerche, 2011). Harriss-White (2008) in her work on West Bengal, highlights the class character of government policies in West Bengal, which supports the rice mills in the regions. The case of West Bengal is particularly interesting because, the Left Front government, who were committed towards implementing pro-poor policies, were now aligning themselves to the rice mill owners and promoting agro-businesses. Processing and trading in this region took place on the one end with petty trading and processing, where profits were reinvested in farming. At the other end were large rice mills that were run by the ex-landlord elite and a trading community called the Marwaris. Capital is accumulated through trading, moneylending and renting out of land. The lower-level traders and farmers are tied to the large-scale traders through pre-harvest and pre-delivery loans. This relationship often results in the tied-in farmers to accept lower rates and delayed payments for their produce, which then squeezes out any profit margins from these farmers. The large scale rice mill owners created monopolies, and any increase in state procurement prices rarely percolated down to the farmers. In addition to this the state regulated banks were providing cheap finance to the mills, which sustained the network of lending that the large-scale rice mill owners were thriving on (Harriss-White, 2008).

A reason for promoting finances among the rice mill owners was to allow the West Bengal government to procure paddy from these mills to distribute subsidised rice in cities. The Left Front, in colluding with the interests of the large-scale mill owners, has placed this agro-commercial class at the apex, which has created unequal trading relations, and strengthened class differentiation and commercialization (see Lerche, 2011: p.110)

Another important policy that needs mention here is the Public Distribution System (PDS). PDS is concerned with food security and has experienced setbacks with economic liberalisation (Swaminathan, 2008). The effects of these setbacks do vary from region to region. In 1997, subsidised goods distributed through PDS were to be done in a targeted manner. The government, in working towards food security, set itself the role of identifying the poor. The process of identification left out a large section of the poor populations. Data from NSS (61<sup>st</sup> round) showed a large number of labour households and Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe households were excluded from this scheme (Ramachandran and Rawal, 2010). Those households that were given Below Poverty Line (BPL) and Anna Antyodaya Yojana (AAY) cards received subsidised food grains. Those who did not receive cards, or owned Above Poverty Line (APL) cards, were left out of this scheme (Swaminathan, 2008). The problem with the targeted PDS lies not with food distribution, but with the fact that identities among the rural poor are being carved out by the state, which in turn determines access to state benefit. The state, through its targeted PDS scheme, is encouraging a process of social exclusion (Swaminathan, 2008). Such exclusions add to growing problems of food security and distress among the rural poor. The system of targeted PDS was, however, not accepted by all states in the country. Tamil Nadu is the only state which has replaced the targeted PDS system with a universal PDS system (see Harriss et al, 2010, Khera, 2011). PDS in Tamil Nadu expanded the quantity and number of commodities it distributed, which reduced the number of days of work both

women and men had to carry out, particularly among the Dalit community (Heyer, 2010)<sup>22</sup>. The positive impact of universal PDS on food security, while beneficial for the classes of labour, is not a policy change that is being encouraged throughout the country. The universalisation of PDS can be seen as move towards poverty alleviation.

Apart from the problems associated with targeted PDS, the institution itself suffers from problems of diversion (Dreze and Khera, 2011). Grains such as rice and wheat, that are supposed to be distributed to the fair price shops, are often sold in the open market by corrupt intermediaries (Dreze and Khera, 2011). While PDS itself has witnessed improvements, reduced availability of commodities, adds to the distress of workers and farmers lower down in the hierarchy.

Ramachandran and Rawal (2010) note that the government's focus on employment guarantee schemes, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which provides 100 days of employment per household, can encourage rural development<sup>23</sup>. The MGNREGS has had positive effects on female wages and female work participation (Khera and Nayak, 2009). Jeyaranjan (2011) observes the positive effects of MGNREGS on wage rates of women workers and even on their capacity to negotiate work contracts in a village in Tamil Nadu. Despite these positives, Jeyaranjan (2011) notes that the scheme in itself cannot promote rural development, where the economy is marked with low growth and poor infrastructure. Moreover, MGNREGS is not universally successful throughout the country, and suffers from problems of corruption, insufficient work availability, delayed payments, etc. (Dreze and Khera, 2009). Even though the scheme has improved female work participation rates, the scheme has increased the burden women have taken upon themselves, between wage work and domestic work (Chant, 2007).

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<sup>22</sup> Heyer (2010), from her studies, shows that male labourers had to work fewer days (1-2 days) to feed their families under the expanded PDS in 2008-9.

<sup>23</sup> For more details on the scheme, see (<http://www.nrega.ap.gov.in/Nregs/>)

The discussion in this section highlighted important aspects of the Indian agrarian economy. The adoption of neo-liberal policies in the country has dragged a significant portion of the agrarian population into poverty, food scarcity and declining wage employment (Ghosh, 2005). The discussion on land, credit and state policies, highlights the need to understand the entry into insecure and exploitative wage employment, through power relations operating across a number of levels. The presence of insecure wage employment in agriculture in particular cannot be explained through principles of market essentialism, but through agrarian power relations that keeps the labour fragmented.

The NCEUS report (2009) recognises that the growing number of small and marginal farmers in agriculture are the group worst hit by the crisis, along with agricultural labourers (NCEUS, 2007, 2008). In the period of crisis, a large number of male marginal and small farmers diversified in search for non-agricultural employment. The same was not witnessed for women, who due to socio-cultural restrictions and lack of employment opportunities, were concentrated in agriculture (NCEUS, 2007). The NCEUS report in 2009, recognises the increasing number of female farmers (where 40 percent of farmers in India were women), especially among the marginal and small farmers (p. 242). Despite the agrarian economy having come out of its period of crisis, the concentration of women farmers and agricultural labourers is indicative of distress, inequality and associated patriarchal ideology. Such situations push the need for a gendered analysis. The following section discusses women in agriculture and the associated labour relations.

### **1.5 Women in Agriculture**

The previous sections discussed theoretical debates surrounding the identification and understanding of tied labour relations in agriculture, the framework of analysis I propose to use for my research, and the situation of agriculture in India. This section highlights the main subjects of my research- rural female labour and gender relations. The section uncovers the debates surrounding feminisation of the labour force in India and the gender division in the work space. The discussion moves into more specific examples of

feminisation in relation to tied labour arrangements. The third part of this section deals more specifically with aspects of gender, class and caste in determining the varied nature of labour struggles in the country.

Over the past five decades, rural labour in India, particularly agricultural labour, has experienced rapid feminisation. The intensification of the production process in agriculture with the onset of the Green Revolution is said to have increased the demand for female labour (Harris, 1982; Athreya et al, 1990; Ramachandran, 1990, 2006). Data from the census of India shows an increase in female agricultural labourers from 24.6 percent in 1961 to 48.5 percent in 2011. The male agricultural labour population increased from 16.2 percent to 34.4 percent. Though the male agricultural labour population is considerably high, female agricultural labourers occupy a greater share in the workforce<sup>24</sup>. There are however interstate variations, where women comprise 66.30 percent of the workforce in Madhya Pradesh, 73.09 percent in Gujarat, 47.8 percent in Maharashtra, 48.17 percent in Tami Nadu, 15.87 percent in West Bengal and 27.92 percent in Odisha (Census of India, 2011). The uneven patterns in female work participation draw attention to socio-economic variability, but also to variations in gender relations in these regions. Martha Chen's (1989) work clearly denotes the changing nature of female work participation, according to changing agro-ecological zones. Chen (1989) draws out five agro-ecological zones- a) irrigated paddy cultivation (Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu), b) rain-fed paddy cultivation (West Bengal, Odisha and parts of Bihar), c) irrigated wheat (Haryana and Punjab), d) rain-fed wheat (Maharashtra), e) hill regions and tribal belts. Apart from the hill regions, in all other regions women are found in the 'residual category' of wage labour, while men are in contracts with greater security. The labour relations described by Chen have undergone changes over the decades, with men moving out of agricultural wage work, and women substituting the male agricultural labour force (Da Corta and Venkateshwrlu, 1999; Olsen

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<sup>24</sup> Da Corta and Venkateshwrlu (1999), in their study in Andhra Pradesh, show how data on feminisation of agricultural labour is underrepresented. One of the reasons they highlight is that data collected is based on primary occupation and this disguises the actual number of days of work and occupations that are taken up by women.

and Ramana Murthy, 2000). Despite inter-state variations, the larger process of feminisation has raised questions on the extent to which the process has been empowering, whether it has improved the status of women within households and if it has improved bargaining powers in the work space (Kapadia, 1992, 1993; da Corta & Venkateshwarlu, 1999; Garikipati, 2009).

The Marxists thesis posits that the feminisation of labour is taking place under conditions of casualisation of the workforce, unprofitable crop production, distress-driven migration, wages bordering on starvation and gender divides in agricultural wage work and wages, and therefore, does not result in women's upward mobility (Agarwal, 1984; Duvvury, 1989; Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999; Harriss-White and Gooptu, 2001; Vepa 2007). The increased work participation of women has increased their responsibility and subsequent burden of meeting basic household provisions (Olsen and Ramana Murthy, 2000). Moreover, women's debt obligations have also increased, which often results in women accepting lower wages, accompanied by increased unfreedom and worsening of work conditions (Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999). Garikipati's (2009) study in Andhra Pradesh critiques the Marxist debates on the grounds that studies on feminisation of labour have remained confined to an understanding of class, and that the process of feminisation needs to be understood in relation to women's position within the household.

The neo-liberal debates understand the feminisation of labour as being a demand-driven process, where female labourers experience an increase in wages and subsequently better work conditions (Bennett, 1992, as cited in da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999). The increase in demand of female labour, witnessed across the country and especially in the southern states in India, accompanied the intensification of farming and use of High Yielding Variety (HYV) seeds, which accompanied the Green Revolution (see Chand et al, 1985). Bennett (1992) draws on evidence to suggest that under conditions of demand driven employment, the conditions of female labourers have improved, particularly with a decline in the wage differential gap between male and female labourers. Such suggestions, made within the neoliberal debate that focuses on aspects of production, employment



trends and income, assume that with growth there is a parallel increase in women's status and welfare (see da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999). Under such circumstances, policies that are geared towards improving women's welfare should then focus on improvement in agricultural growth alone. For various rural employment schemes implemented in the country, this has been the guiding paradigm, with very little consideration on the gender-specific impact of policies (Garikipati, 2009: p. 520)<sup>25</sup>.

Studies carried out on rural female agricultural labour show that this is far from true. Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999), in their study of Chittoor district in Andhra Pradesh, show that within the workforce there is a gender-based class division. According to their findings, 62.4 percent of women's time was spent on both agricultural and non-agricultural tasks, whereas for men, 51.8 percent of their time was occupied in self-employed activities. In this context, the gender divide draws women to agricultural wage work and to work as exchange labour. Men, on the other hand, are self-employed and avoid agricultural wage work (p. 104). Chaudhry (1994) and Garikipati (2009) have described similar gender divisions in Haryana<sup>26</sup> and Telengana, respectively.

Another manifestation of class division is seen in wage differences. The rising share of female participation has not witnessed a similar increase in their real wages, in comparison to men. In Andhra Pradesh, Garikipati (2009) shows that while men earned 72.3 percent of the minimum wage in the state in rural activities, women earned a mere 38.5 percent of the minimum wage. A look at the National Sample Survey (NSS) from two rounds (2009-10 and 2012-13) on agricultural wages in India, shows an increase in real wages and along with an increase in wage gaps between men and women workers carrying out similar tasks.

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<sup>25</sup> A look at Mahatma Gandhi Employment Guarantee Scheme shows increased participation of women (Guerin and De Neve, 2013). This increased participation, while understood as voluntarism on behalf of women workers, further adds to their work load burdens (Chant, 2007; Garikipati, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> According to Chaudhry (1994), with men continuing to look after their holdings and seek off-farm employment, repercussions of these are felt with a visible proletarianisation of women. Within this capitalist system, men having access to the means of production and ownership rights places him in a different class than women who enter this system with the designated role of an agricultural labourer (p.177).

Ploughing, predominantly a male task, shows the maximum wage gap increase from Rs.56.06/- in 2009-10 to Rs.81.17 in 2012-13. The increase in wage gap is observed for tasks that are carried out jointly, such as harvesting (Rs.18.64/- in 2009-10 to Rs.34/- in 2012-13) and in those tasks that are considered exclusively 'female', such as weeding and transplanting (Rs.21.36/- in 2009-10 to Rs.43/- in 2012-12)<sup>27</sup>.

The increasing wage gaps, in the context of feminisation of labour, draws attention to women's status, their bargaining power and post-reform policy issues. The post-reform period witnessed a stagnation of budgetary allocation to agriculture and policies now are working towards an eventual phasing out of subsidies altogether (Balasubramanyam, 2003). For capitalist farmers, the most effective way to cut costs is through decreasing wages. This was made possible through the feminisation of tasks, especially in those that were done jointly by men and women. With fewer men carrying out agricultural tasks, the farmers were able to cut down wage costs (Garikipati and Pfaffenzeller, 2012: p.850). The process of feminisation is an outcome of farmer cost-reduction strategies, male labourers refusing to carry out poorly paid agricultural wage work, carrying out off-farm activities and migrating out for work (see da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999, and Olsen and Ramana Murthy, 2000).

Influences of feminisation of labour are seen in both casual daily wage labour and in tied labour arrangements as well. Garikipati (2009), in her study, surveyed 291 households, and from these households identified 172 male wage labourers and 235 female wage labourers<sup>28</sup>. The study identifies that the seasonality of labor demands has an impact on the migration patterns of labourers, a process predominant among male labourers. From the households surveyed, a substantial number of its members were involved in tied labour

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<sup>27</sup> For a more detailed state wise break up wage differences, please refer to Appendix 1.

<sup>28</sup> The classification scheme used in this study is drawn using 'labour class rank', where the class position is identified based on the laboring status. This system was developed by Bardhan (1984) and da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) (Garikipati, 2009: p. 521). Interestingly, women who work on their husband's farm are classified as farmers in this study. Being classified as a farmer does not indicate that women have control over the land. However, the study uses this classificatory scheme to do away with any form of 'downward bias vis-à-vis female labour' (Garikipati, 2009: 522).

or tied harvest arrangements. These arrangements were prevalent especially during the dry season when there is a dearth of work and labourers pledge their labour to a particular employer in return for loans. These arrangements often result in extremely low wage payments, recurring debt traps and the inability to commoditise labour freely (Srivastava, 1989; da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999; Garikipati, 2009). There is no legal coercion in these relationships, rather the continuing external pressures of poverty (see Ramachandra, 1990). From this study, with the majority of male labourers migrating out for work, labourers who stay behind in the villages (predominantly female labour) are very often left with limited choice between choosing not to work, irregular casual daily wage employment or more 'regular' tied labour arrangements.

Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu's (1999) study of Chittoor (from 1970 to 1995) shows clearly how this process of feminisation is visible among tied labour arrangements. The findings in the 1970s reveal that there were more men tied (83.3 percent) than women (77.5 percent). During this period, male labourers who were tied automatically resulted in their wives getting tied as well. For permanently bonded labourers during this period, their wives (apart from those who had to carry out domestic services) were not permanently attached. The employers appropriated their labour, where these women were expected to come and carry out all female-related tasks for them, but were paid low wages similar to those of tied labourers (p. 108-109). In subsequent years, with the introduction of state-granted assets, such as provision of land and subsidized rice to name a few<sup>29</sup>, men were able to shift their attention to non-agricultural employment and break free from tied labour arrangements. Even though a decline was registered among female tied labourers

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<sup>29</sup> Andhra Pradesh, under the rule of the Telegu Desam Party (TDP), made government wastelands available to the landless. This policy benefitted male labourers in Chittoor. In 1969, with wasteland distribution, landless labourers in Chittoor were able to acquire housing sites which gave them opportunity to move out of their employer's land. They received 1.7 acres of land on average in 1969 and in 2001 an additional 0.4 acres of land under the land ceiling act (Garikipati, 2009; p. 526). In addition, the government also introduced non-agricultural employment in the area, such as the construction of government offices, building of roads, dams etc. However, as mentioned, the benefits of these state provisions and assets were rarely received by female labourers (da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999; p. 83-84). The state also provided families with rice at subsidised rates. This reduced the labourer's dependence on the employer for work and the employer's ability to claim their labour (da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999).

this was much less than male tied labourers. Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) in 1995, observe that that male labourers who were tied still resulted in their wives being tied. A change from the 1970s is the presence of female tied labourers from households where the male labourer is free.

Labour tying in this study was identified through credit transactions and lease, i.e. tied labour for credit and tied labour for harvest. In tied for harvest contracts, it is generally men who enter such relations (in the case of Andhra Pradesh), but the burden to repay loans falls disproportionately on women (Garikipati, 2009). In households where the men and their wives were tied, women were tied to either pay off their husband's loans (tied labour for credit) or were expected to carry out daily wage work for the landowner/creditor and perform unpaid tasks. In households where the woman is tied, it is usually an outcome of small and frequently required consumption loans taken by them, or at times larger loans taken for the purpose of ceremonies, or medical expenses. Women began taking on the responsibility of larger loans because their husbands, who had moved out of tied labour relations, alienated the landowners. Employers preferred lending money to women as it was considered a safe investment and a means to secure their labour power (see Bardhan, 1983, 2000). Women, compared to male labourers, were also considered to be pliant, hardworking and disciplined, who unlike their husbands, would carry out unpaid tasks<sup>30</sup> (Kapadia, 1993; da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999; see also Lerche et al, 2012). The feminisation of tied labour relations in Chitoor can be understood as a mechanism, used by the capitalists to reduce costs (Garikipati and Pfaffenzeller, 2012).

The entry of women into tied labour arrangements was accompanied with their male counterparts opting out of such relations. Any form of dissent expressed by the male labourers was done standing on the shoulders of these female tied labourers (see also Garikipati, 2009). Male labourers, in order to hold onto their freedom, refused to take up low paying agricultural wage work, however, at no point did they stop their wives from

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<sup>30</sup> Women in Chitoor carried out a range of unpaid domestic activities for the employer and in return received a '*saddi*' breakfast (left over food from the previous day).

carrying out such work or enter tied labour relations. The men would prefer to remain unemployed than take up agricultural wage work and their ability to maintain this struggle stemmed from the shifting of responsibility to women (da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999; Olsen and Ramana Murthy, 2000). With men not contributing to the household income, the women are then forced to take up exploitative low-paid work, a process further accentuated by their lack of access to off-farm work and caste norms (Duvvury, 1989; Lerche, 1999; Krishnaraj, 2004; Vepa, 2007).

The shifting of responsibility to women, in Chittoor, is also an outcome of the mode of payment. Male labourers, especially in tied relations were paid twice a year. The free male labourers now receive higher wages on a daily basis, and this is often spent on alcohol and tobacco. This further adds to the withdrawal of male earnings towards household provisioning. A withdrawal of men from agricultural labour did not witness an increase in sharing of domestic responsibilities. In fact, women labourers, especially tied labourers, were seen to carry out agricultural wage work, unpaid domestic work for the employer and had the growing burden of household chores (da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999). The domestic relations diminish the ability of women to search and negotiate for higher paid or better jobs (Kapadia, 1992, 1993; Garikipati, 2008).

Struggles that improve the status of male labourers have broadly been generated out of government programmes, providing them with assets that allow them to take on higher paid work. Women, on the other hand, tend to be excluded from such work. Even when migrating with their husbands for non-farm work, they are not the ones who negotiate the terms and conditions of work, but work as a *fait accompli* (Vepa, 2007; Garikipati, 2009). The stark gender division is an outcome of cultural differences, but also a lack of ownership rights (da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999; Garikipati, 2009). The ownership of assets and the accompanied benefits that go to male labourers places them in a different class of workers than women (for further details see da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999). Such differences and divisions make it difficult for women to negotiate their work conditions, wages and even freely commoditise their labour (Garikipati, 2009). The feminisation of

labour, under such conditions, has not altered women's domestic position for the better, nor has it improved control over assets. Garikipati (2009) shows the limited control women have over household decisions, where, despite working as farmers, sale of crops are managed by male members of the household, an activity which is considered to be in the male domain. Moreover, women have limited control over farm incomes, wages from agricultural wage work, and even migration wages (see also Krishnaraj and Shah, 2003). Women labourers have much less spending money for personal use, as a larger portion of the money goes towards meeting household payments, especially on children. Women's lack of control on incomes and assets, and the burdens placed on them by patriarchal expectations<sup>31</sup>, has negative effects on their welfare status (Garikipati, 2008). A suggested policy-level change, which can alter power relations, is land ownership for women, which automatically adds to security and better negotiating capacities (Agarwal, 1994, da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999).

Garikipati (2009, 2012) and da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) highlight a change in the nature of labour relations, from permanently attached to non-permanently attached labour, and more women entering such relations. Bhalla (1976) and Jodhka (1994, 1996, 2013) observe similar patterns of increase in non-permanent tied labour relations. However, the nature of such labour relations and the control of assets and commodities vary between communities and regions (Krishnaraj and Shah, 2003).

Along with gender divisions in the workforce, domestic relations, cultural perceptions and caste and kinship relations play an important role in organising the rural female workforce (Athreya et al, 1990; Ramachandran, 1990; Kapadia, 1995, 1996). Kapadia's (1995) work on Arulloor, in Tamil Nadu describes the role of caste and kinship relations, in determining women's access to work and associated struggles. These relations extend certain privileges to certain workers that create what Hart (1986a, 1986b) identifies as exclusionary labour arrangements. Exclusionary labor arrangements, within the Indian

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<sup>31</sup> The term patriarchal expectation refers to the division of domestic chores that are carried out.

context, has emerged amidst growing unemployment, casualisation of labour, declining obligations of the employer (the process of depatronisation as underlined by Breman, 1974, 2007), and irregularity of work, decreasing rights of labourers (Kapadia, 1992, 1995, 1996), which has resulted in a hardworking and docile female labour force (Hart, 1986b, 1992).

Kapadia's (1995) work focuses on female Dalit workers (those who belong to the ex-untouchable caste), and observes a change in labour relations in the region. There is a shift from 'fixed' daily wage rates to 'negotiable' piece-rates. Piece rate work is identified as contract work, a fixed period of work that ensures job security, especially for those who are at the lower end of the caste hierarchy (Harriss-White and Gooptu, 2001; Ramachandran, 1990; Kapadia, 1996; Olsen and Ramana Murthy, 2000). Piece-rate wages are used as an exclusionary device that controls the labour force and keeps it fragmented (Kapadia, 1996). Employers prefer piece rate wages as this reduces the time and cost of supervision and the agreed payment is made upon satisfactory completion of work. For workers, piece-rate work is coveted as it pays more than daily-wage work, despite it being harder and more work. Women labourers in Aruloor work in gangs/groups, membership to which is not constant, but is controlled through kinship and caste ties. Since the recruiters for this group are from the same street, family, caste, etc., one expects greater equality within such groups, however, Kapadia (1996) noted that this was far from true and the main labour recruiter had certain patronage powers. The power of recruitment, has therefore, shifted from the employer to the labour recruiter (for further discussion see Breman and Guerin, 2009). The labour recruiter has the power to include or exclude workers from the labour group, and through this process creates exclusionary labour arrangements as described by Hart (1986b) (Athreya et al, 1990 cited in Kapadia, 1996). In Hart's study of Java, exclusionary labour arrangements were organised by the employer (1986b), however, in this particular case as noted by Kapadia (1995,1996), the exclusionary labour arrangements are practiced by one group of labourers over another. Despite a considerable amount of power resting in the hands on the recruiter, the labourers within

this group feel that they are all equals and decisions to bring in new members is taken jointly by the group<sup>32</sup>. Kapadia (1996) notes that this is merely an ideology, which makes the recruitment process seem just and conceals the fact that labour recruitment is based fundamentally on kinship.

Working in all female work groups, within piece rate contracts, internalises a process of self-discipline and control within the workforce (Kapadia, 1995). Within the environment of scarcity of work, piece-rate contracts are seen as a boon, where small all-female groups, work for longer hours and harder work to get higher pay. In addition, the employers only agree on payment if the job is done satisfactorily. The threat of non-payment under conditions of poverty creates a regime of self-supervision, i.e. the labourers are disciplining one another. The internalisation of discipline is an extension of the employer's control over the labour force. This is a change from traditional labour relations, where labourers faced brutal punishment (see Gough 1981), to a more subtle and menacing form of social control, which keeps the labour force fragmented and exploited (Kapadia, 1995, 1996).

#### **1.5.1 Labour relations and Labour Resistance:**

The effects of labour fragmentation are seen in the diverse manner in which labour struggles are carried out in different regions. It is important to mention that collective action, militant resistance and non-violent resistance, against the landowning class in the country, can be traced back to the British rule (Gough, 1968, 1974). Gough (1981), in her work on Thanjavur, emphasises the role of the Communist party of India in leading such peasant revolts. The scale of peasant uprisings was varied but continuous in this region in the post-independence phase. When larger strikes were clamped down by the state and police, labourers carried out smaller uprisings at intervals, especially during the harvest

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<sup>32</sup> The exclusionary arrangement practices of female labourers, described by Kapdia (1993, 1995), is a break away from Rudra's (1984) model, which highlights the pervasive presence of unequal patron-client relations, that determines village life and labour relations (see Kapadia, 1993 for further explanations).



season, when the demand for labour was the highest (Gough, 1981)<sup>33</sup>. Gough (1974) makes an important observation that those who are lower down in the social hierarchy succumb to different forms of oppression, poverty, famine, etc., all of which indicate the continuing importance of labour struggles that finds resonance in today's neo-liberal economy.

An important aspect about labor struggles is that it is a continuous process, which at times manifests itself in the form of revolts. James Scott's (1985, 1986) work highlights the everyday labour struggles and resistance that the labour/ peasantry engage with in order to reduce their oppression. He identifies these through everyday processes of foot dragging, ignorance, pretension, slander, etc. These forms of resistance do not require collective action and can be applied in diverse ways across different geographical regions, and in diverse socio-political contexts. Scott's idea of everyday resistance is faced with the criticism of not taking into consideration the gendered nature of such relationships (Hart, 1991). Hart's (1991) fieldwork in Malaysia shows a distinct difference in male and female actions that are conditioned by patron-client relationships. Compared to men, the political marginalization of women allowed them to openly challenge oppressive structures. Hart's observation in Malaysia highlights women's agency and the space across which it is negotiated. These are conditioned through political dynamics, social class structure and power relations that can result in covert and overt ways of resistance (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996).

Kapadia (1993) observes labour resistance along the lines of mutuality among the Pallar, female labour gangs, which are based on caste and kinship ties. While there is competition for work between female members of the group, they are aware of their collective interest, which helps them push for higher wages. An earlier example of the Shahada movement in Maharashtra shows how peasant organisation and militant action have strengthened the resistance of the Adivasis (Mies, 1976). The organisation comprised of different categories of workers where a total of 40 percent of the workers were women. The mass organisation

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<sup>33</sup> Gough (1974) underlines the dominating presence of peasant revolts taking place across the country at the time, such as the *Naxalbari* movement in 1969 in West Bengal and the Santhal movement in Bihar in 1971.

and growth of political consciousness among the landless labourers resulted in a successful revolt in the country which forced the government to grant them more relief packages (Mies, 1976; p. 478). The effects of the Shahada movement were not felt across all regions, and this is indicative of the fragmented and varied nature of labour resistance and struggle.

Da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) observe that male labourers are pulling out of agricultural wage work and especially tied harvest and credit relations. Male labourers struggle against the higher caste employers are a move towards freedom and better wages. Male labourers refused to take on agricultural wage work as they wanted to move away from the exploitative work conditions of traditional bondage. They consider this work demeaning for themselves because of the way they are treated in the fields by the Reddy employers. While male labourers consider this work demeaning, they do not have a problem with the women from their households doing the same work. The withdrawal of men from tied labour relations is understood to be important to their status, even if this takes place at the cost of women. In fact, men chose not to take up agricultural wage work, even if they did not have any prospect for work. In such situations, they rely on the earnings of their wives. Women on the other hand, are not passive receptors in this process. They are aware of the exploitative work conditions and the low wages but need to work in order to meet household expenses. Male labourers are not shirking family responsibility, but are in an 'acute form of class struggle with their current employers, a struggle sustained at the expense of women's own struggles' (p.106). Men do not include the women in their struggles, so as to enhance their own struggle, but this is done at the cost of women who receive lower wages and increased unfreedom (da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999).

Labour struggles encouraged by men, in the particular case of Andhra Pradesh, are taking place at the cost of women labourers. For transformation to take place, work availability and increased income are not sufficient for female labourers. Instead a 'conscious political struggle within the domestic arena' is necessary (Harriss-White, 2004, cited in Garikipati, 2009: p. 537). Changes in the domestic arena can come about with increased bargaining

capacity associated with asset ownership for women (da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999; Garikipati, 2009).

There are numerous ways in which political agitations and labour resistance are carried out. This section discussed a few labour resistance experienced within the country. The ability or success of labour resistance is conditioned through structures of power and the degree to which the labour is fragmented. Exclusionary mechanisms/tactics (as seen in the case of tied labour relations) keep the labour force fractured, which places limits on agrarian mobilisation and organisation.

### **1.6 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the debates regarding the question of tied labour relations. First and foremost, the labour class to be studied is identified, using Bernstein's category of classes of labour. This category breaks away from ideas of the peasantry and proletariat, outlining a fluid class category that secures its survival through oppressive and exploitative employment. Using Bernstein's classes of labour proves useful for the purpose of this research, as it helps identify the empirical class categories. The classificatory scheme of agricultural labour as a class is not sufficient to understand the multiple ways in which commodification of labour takes place, within a capitalist system of production. Bernstein's classes of labour identifies the fluid class locations, which fluctuate due to social, economic and political relations.

Second, the chapter moves onto more specific debates surrounding capitalist and pre-capitalist relations to explain unfree labour relations. This section identifies tied labour as a particular unfree relation, which is the focus of this research. These debates highlight the inherent problem in understanding the presence of tied labour relations through the semi-feudal thesis, as an outcome of imperfect markets, or even understanding these relations as problems of capitalism. In order to resolve the problems created by these debates, I use Hart's analytical framework to explain the presence of tied labour relations. Hart (1986b) recognises that diversity of labour arrangements needs to be understood through power relations at number of levels. These power relations are identified at the local level and

through interactions of the rural power structure with local bureaucrats that influence labour arrangements within different political settings. Moreover, these relations break away from the rigid dichotomy of free and unfree labour and urges one to understand unfree labour relations more broadly as a continuum of labour relations that produce varying degrees of unfreedom (Lerche, 2011). Understanding tied labour arrangements as an outcome of power relations incorporates within this analysis non-class identities, such as gender and caste, asset ownerships, etc. (all of which affect class positions and dynamics), which is particularly useful in the context of India.

Using Hart's framework of analysis, the study will try to uncover how unfreedom is institutionalized through different exclusionary practices and strategies. Within the context of neo-liberalism and feminization of the labour force, the research will try to identify how tied labour relations emerges as a mechanism of survival for female labour-relations that are diverse in nature.

## Chapter 2: An Account of Methods

*"We first need the courage of our conviction, then courage to challenge our convictions and finally the imagination to sustain our courage with theoretical reconstruction"- Burawoy (1998: p. 20)*

This chapter outlines the objectives of the study, fieldwork plan, methods employed to obtain data and an account of experiences and limitations I faced as a researcher.

The objective of the research is to study labour tying arrangements among rural female labour in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. The research traces these labour arrangements through the relationship between micro-level processes (such as interlinked factor markets and power relations at the village level) and the effect of macro-level policies.

The focus on Tamil Nadu and West Bengal in the previous chapter highlights the presence of tied labour in agriculture and the transformations they have undergone. Do these transformations necessarily indicate a decline in exploitative labour relations and unfreedom experienced, particularly among rural female labourers?

In this thesis, I address issues of unfreedom and oppressive work conditions within agriculture, through the nature and occurrence of labour tying arrangements. My research focuses on the persistence of tied labour arrangements in agriculture, and uncovers the mechanisms through which they continue to take place. I identify these mechanisms through interlocked factor markets, gendered/familial relations and the relationships of the rural elite with the local bureaucracy. Within this context, labour tying arrangements are examined as a contemporary phenomenon that has adapted and transformed itself under agrarian capitalism. Through an extended case method, I carry out a comparative study to investigate this persistence of labour tying under two politically distinct regimes. This comparison is to examine the persistence of labour tying as a phenomenon, and to locate whether it is an outcome of land, labour and credit relations, and of state complicity with the agrarian capitalist class.

The respondents I interviewed for the purpose of this study are agricultural labourers (particularly female labourers), small farmers, medium and large landowners. The emphasis on female agricultural wage workers in this research highlights the negotiation of gendered politics, class and caste positionalities within labour tying arrangements, shedding light on the ways in which women enter and exit such work contracts. The research is a comparative study carried out across four villages in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, using survey methods and ethnography

In Section 3.1 of this chapter I provide a description of the social, economic and political structures present in the field sites of Aranthangi (Tamil Nadu) and Chinsurah (West Bengal). This description emphasises the need for a gendered analysis in understanding the ways in which labour tying arrangements continue to persist. Observations of this in the field are best understood through the concept of relational comparison. This concept does not view the existence of labour tying arrangements merely as a particular instance but as a product of multiple and interconnected sites of interaction between land, labour, credit and the state. Section 3.2 and 3.3 discuss how I chose the field sites, the methods of data collection, the politics of location that shaped the research process, and the limitations I faced as a researcher. Section 3.4 addresses the ethical dilemmas I tackled as a researcher in the process of carrying out this work, and Section 3.5 concludes the research.

As I mention in Chapter 2, following from the works of Guerin (2013) and Lerche (2007), I identify unfreedom in tied labour as a continuum, with contracts experiencing mild to harsh forms of unfreedom. In order to identify these different labour arrangements and the conditions under which labourers enter such arrangements, the study identifies multiple trajectories of labour tying; not as an outcome of production relations alone, but relations of the state, and of the market. I use a comparative method to highlight this multi-layered process. The purpose of a comparison is not to highlight different instances but the multiple scales along which political and economic forces operate to reinforce labour tying arrangements. The micro-study areas identified for the purpose of this thesis

are not viewed as isolated cases. Instead, connections and relations are drawn from land, labour, credit and state to identify the persistence of labour tying in agriculture in India. This research shows how labour tying arrangements are driven through a diverse set of interactions between the local, state and national government. This helps me link my cases to the larger question - In what ways, if any, do the state and the dominant classes contribute to the persistence of labour tying -the very same 'democratic' state that called for land reforms, rural credit banks and daily minimum wage?

### **2.1 The Area of Enquiry**

Studies on rural labour relations in India identify the complexity and diversity of labour arrangements within capitalist development in agriculture. In order to understand such multi-stranded labour arrangements, I use Gillian Hart's (1986b) framework of analysis. Though set in rural Java, Hart shows how the differentiated agendas of employers and employees, and different rural labour arrangements are influenced by the rural power structure and interactions with the macro-political and economic factors within different national political systems. Hart (1986b) illustrates how the rural power structure and local bureaucrats have the ability to influence labour relations and labour segmentation, very often perpetuating the economic vulnerability of workers (see Rogaly, 1996).

This multi-tiered framework of analysis brings forth the questions I address in my research-

- How and through what mechanisms do labour tying arrangements persist?
- How, if at all, do these labour tying arrangements produce various kinds of gendered unfreedom?
- To what extent are women in particular able to negotiate such labour tying arrangements?
- To what extent do state interventions, such as PDS (Public Distribution System) and MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), affect labour tying arrangements and the degree of unfreedom experienced by rural female labour?

As discussed in Chapter 2, interlocked markets of land, labour and credit alone do not determine labour relations. Hart's (1986b) work on Java highlights how labour management is driven through relations of power and social control (Hart, 1986, 1991). Therefore, to understand labour relations, it is necessary to not only look at the ground level but its effects and interactions with wider macro-political and economic forces. This is carried out through a comparative study between two Indian states- Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. This comparison is to highlight the influence of different social and political systems on labour tying arrangements.

Aranthangi *tehsil* (Tamil Nadu) and Chinsurah *tehsil* (West Bengal) were chosen as they are predominantly paddy producing regions, with a high proportion of female agricultural labourers, who are the main subjects of my research. I focus on female agricultural labour to identify labour tying processes in these two regions. The reason for this is to understand the 'politics of tied labour' differentiated along lines of gender, caste and class. Agrarian scholars who have worked on India have focussed heavily on these two states, particularly with emphasis on the Green Revolution transforming labour arrangements (Bardhan and Rudra, 1979; 1983; Heyer, 2000; Kapadia, 1996; Ramachandran, 1990). While these studies do discuss the existence of tied labour, they generally talk of a decline of this phenomenon, particularly when they relate it to older forms of bondage prevalent in the regions, such as *pannaiyals* in Tamil Nadu (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Heyer, 2000). The aim of this study is not to identify neo-bondage as Bremen (1997, 2009) has done, or to focus on types of labour bondage and unfreedom experienced by workers (as indicated by Guerin, 2013). It is to observe transformations of labour arrangements and conditions that drive female labourers in particular towards labour tying within agriculture.

In order to answer the research questions, I use the extended case method, in which the aim is to reconstruct theory through empirical observations (Burawoy, 1998, 2009). The extended case method tries to understand the implications of larger processes that operate at the micro level. I approach the question with the understanding that labour tying in agriculture in India is an outcome of socio-political processes operational at the



ground level, and at the same time conditioned and reinforced through larger macro political-economic forces exerted by political parties and agrarian reforms. This is not to say that the specific labour tying arrangements identified in this study are representative of India as a whole. Rather, the purpose behind this study is to see if these labour tying arrangements are an inherent outcome of agrarian reformism that emerges out of populist party politics. This is the underlying principle of the extended case method that links micro and macro processes; where the interactions and interconnectedness between the two results in the persistence of labour tying. In this study, I link four villages in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal to the larger social and political forces of agrarian capitalism in India. There are multiple levels of interactions that highlight how labour tying persists through relations with land, credit, labour struggles and state interventions. The comparison is not just to identify differences but also to trace whether socio-political structures and forces result in the pauperization and tying of labour. In the end, this multi-layered analysis shows how macro processes of capitalist accumulation in agriculture take place through the landed capitalist class being coupled with state complicity, deepening conditions of economic vulnerability within the rural labour force.

## 2.2 Making Field Choices

I chose two geographically and agro-ecologically distinct regions, Aranthangi in Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu (Figure 1) and Chinsurah in Hooghly district of West Bengal (Figure 2) to study the different ways in which labour tying arrangements operate within the larger dynamics of agrarian capitalism. For the purpose of this research, the names of the villages have been changed in order to maintain anonymity.

Aranthangi lies in the hot, semi-arid eco-region with red loamy soils. The crops grown here are *kharif*<sup>34</sup> season rice, millets, groundnuts and sugarcane. Chinsurah lies in the sub-humid to humid eco-region with alluvial soils. The crops grown here are *kharif* season rice,

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<sup>34</sup>*Kharif* crops are sown from June till September, during the monsoon months, and harvested in January. Crops grown after this period are referred to as *Rabi*, the winter crop that is harvested in April and May.

potatoes, and some jute. Karaimeadu and Thirasu villages were chosen in Aranthangi<sup>35</sup>. Karaimeadu and Thirasu are both revenue villages<sup>36</sup>. Karaimeadu is not a contiguous village but comprises of six different villages (Kariamedu, Valathoor, Vallimalai Nagar, Jawahar Nagar, Kalvai Nagar and Chenguttai). It has a total area of 1666.7 hectares, a population of 3907 and a total of 794 households according to the 2001 Census. Thirasu consists of two villages (North Thirasu and South Thirasu) within an area of 854.45 hectares, and with a total population of 4285 and 876 households. For the purpose of this survey, only four out of the six villages were selected in Karaimeadu where I surveyed a total of 326 households. North Thirasu was selected for the second village, where I surveyed a total of 359 households. In Chinsurah, Madhabpur is one of the nine villages that belong to the Dadpur *gram panchayat*. For the purpose of this survey, five out of the nine villages were surveyed and I refer to all these villages as Madhabpur. In Madhabpur, a total of 269 households were surveyed. Bardhanagar is one of the eight villages in Pandua block I chose, and a total of 193 households were surveyed<sup>37</sup>. The reason for choosing these four villages was because of caste composition and occupation.

Of the entire population in Karaimeadu, only 6.99 percent (Census of India, 2001) belong to the Scheduled Caste (SC). The focus of this research is on the agricultural labour class and therefore emphasis was given to collecting information about SCs who resided in Jawahar Nagar and Chenguttai villages<sup>38</sup>. In addition to this, at the time of survey a majority of the residents from Valathoor and Vallimalai Nagar had out-migrated for work as construction workers and domestic maids, both within Tamil Nadu and to Dubai. It is for this reason that these two villages were omitted from the survey. Thirasu revenue village consists of North

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<sup>35</sup> These villages were chosen after completion of an initial pilot survey across six villages in this region.

<sup>36</sup> A revenue village in India is one with a definite surveyed boundary. A revenue village may have one or more than one hamlet but the entire revenue village is treated as one unit (Census of India, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Data on individual hamlets in West Bengal are not available for which reason I have not provided any data on total population and area of village.

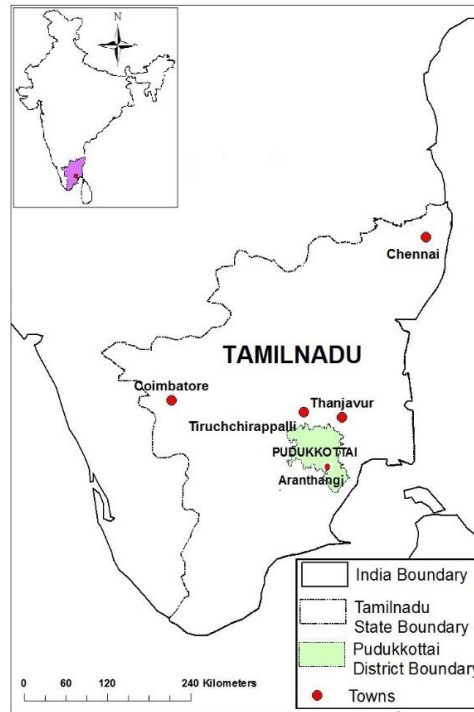
<sup>38</sup> Details of the villages, caste and occupational composition are explained further in Chapter 4.

and South Thirasu, where the total SC population is 2.53 per cent (Census of India 2001). The SC households are located in North Thirasu, which also houses some of the largest landowners, which ensured a great degree of diversity in data collection. According to the Census of India village profile (2001), Karaimesdu recorded a total of 794 households, and I surveyed a total of 326 households. In Thirasu, the census records showed a total 874 households and my survey covered 359.

For Madhabpur in Chinsurah, five villages were surveyed out of a total of nine. According to the Census of India (2001) data, in Madhabpur 84.07 per cent of the population are SCs and 0.5 per cent of the population belong to the Scheduled Tribe category. Madhabpur, which lies in the Polba-Dadpur block, has a total of 364 households. A total of 269 households were covered in the village survey. The four villages in Madhabpur were excluded as they were SC villages, and having surveyed two SC villages I wanted to ensure that I capture other caste groups within this region. Bardhanagar is a small village in the Pandua block and according to the Census of India (2001) it has a total of 225 households, where 45.05 per cent of the population are SCs and 20.03 per cent are STs. The village survey conducted (10. 07. 2012 to 16. 07. 2012), recorded a total of 193 households. At the time of survey, many families particularly among the STs had migrated out for work to neighbouring districts of Bardhaman and Howrah since this was the paddy-sowing period.

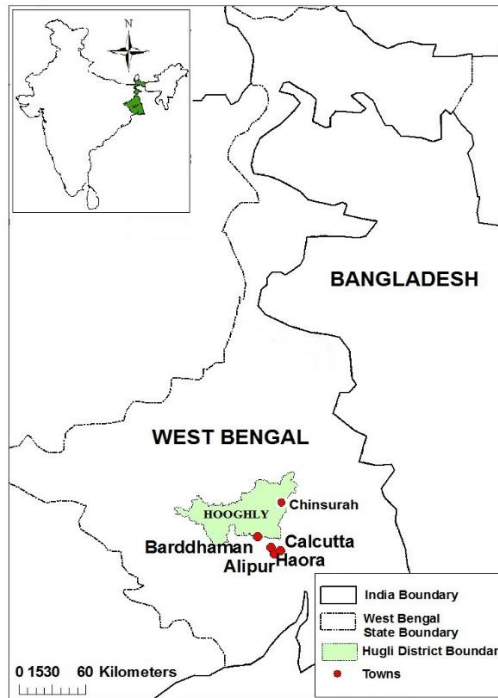
The diversity in caste was captured through the permutations and combinations mentioned above. Apart from caste diversity, there were three important reasons for choosing the much larger regions of West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. First, for both these regions the most important crop is paddy, and the Green Revolution played an important role in increasing paddy yields. With paddy as the predominant crop, the percentage of female agricultural labourers is high as they play an important role in the paddy production process. Census (2011) records show that in Tamil Nadu, 55.5 per cent of total workers were female agricultural labourers, and in West Bengal, 45.5 per cent of total workers were female agricultural labourers. I chose these two states where the percentage of female labour is high, as this group of workers are central to the research. Understanding the

cropping patterns is important as these are based on a gendered political economy, where female labourers continue to be an integral part of the production process.



**Figure 1: Location Map of Aranthangi, Pudukkottai**

*Source: Tamil Nadu Primary Census Abstract, Census of India, 2001*



**Figure 2: Location Map of Chinsurah, Hooghly**

*Source: West Bengal, Primary Census Abstract, Census of India, 2001*

Second, these states have recorded evidence of 'bonded labour', which was made illegal in 1976. According to the National Survey on Bonded Labour published in 1981 (Marla, 1981), Tiruchirapalli, Tanjore and Pudukkottai had recorded the highest incidence of bonded labourers in Tamil Nadu. Of the 2, 50,000 reported bonded labourers in the state, 6 percent were agricultural labourers. However, there is no mention of whether these bonded labourers were men or women.

Historically, male labourers entered bonded labour arrangements in the region (Tamil Nadu) with their wives and children working along to assist in subsidiary tasks. In the context of growing male outmigration in the post-liberalisation era, and reducing importance of agricultural wage work, this division of labour within the system of labour bondage has disintegrated (see Heyer, 2000). However, other empirical studies have shown (such as in Andhra Pradesh) that instead of the practice being done away with, women have now replaced their male counterparts (Olsen and Murthy, 2000). In the

context of Tamil Nadu, does the declining importance of agriculture then necessarily mean that practices of labour bondage have been done away with? This research will highlight how such tied labour practices are taking place in both Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, and the extent to which they are prevalent.

Third, Hooghly is considered to be one of the most industrialized districts in West Bengal. The climate is conducive for jute production and a majority of the jute mills of the country are located along the Hooghly River. However, with a decline in demand for jute, these industries are gradually shutting down and most farmers in the region have shifted from production of jute to paddy, with a reliance on the next big cash crop in the region- potato. Despite the government's claim that this is a fast growing region of small and large scale industries, the region continues to rely on agriculture, particularly for employment (India Net Zone, 2013). For female labourers in this region, who have restrictions placed upon their movement, agriculture is now a safety net. These situations have called for female agricultural labourers to secure their jobs and this research shows that a possible way of doing this is through labour tying.

There are two key events that shaped the uniqueness of the agrarian economy in these regions. In the 1960s, Tamil Nadu was one of the first states to introduce High Yield Variety Seeds (HYV), which made it a rice exporting state. In 1977, the Left Front came to power in West Bengal and introduced one of its most effective land reforms 'Operation *Barga*'<sup>39</sup>. The two regions have followed distinct economic and political trajectories. However, in both regions, this research identifies practices that result in labour tying, especially among female labourers.

### **2.3 Getting down to Fieldwork**

I grew up in Chennai and Kolkata, and a part of my family traces its lineage back to a village called Vandawasi in North Arcot, Tamil Nadu. For both the chosen field sites, my background and Indian nationality were helpful as I had knowledge about the language

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<sup>39</sup> Operation *Barga* is a land reform movement carried out in west Bengal, where there was a recording of sharecropper, so that they could obtain legal protections against eviction from landlords.

and the socio-cultural practices in the region. Moreover, my background placed me as a local within the field, albeit in a privileged position. However, not having lived in this region, I was placed in a paradoxical situation, where my associations could place me as a local and simultaneously as an outsider in the field area, as noted by Ergun and Erdemir (2010). I have previously been a part of projects<sup>40</sup> where I worked closely with female labourers in rural and urban India. Therefore, working in rural areas of Aranthangi and Chinsurah was not alien to me. In November 2011, I commenced fieldwork with a basic knowledge of the tasks and duties of agricultural labourers. Whether my efforts would find any tied labourers, or if I could link the existence of labour tying arrangements to social practices and the role of the state, would emerge during the course of my work. In the following section I discuss how I entered the field site, negotiated with the villagers and collected data for my research.

### **2.3.1 Accessing the field**

I had decided to work in Aranthangi and Chinsurah tehsils but had not decided to work on these villages yet. Access to the field site is negotiated through a gatekeeper (Garfinkel, 1967; Lewis-Beck, et al, 2004), who legitimises my position as a researcher, granting me access and mobility. That said, in both Aranthangi and Chinsurah, there were not one but many gatekeepers, as it is difficult to find one person who has access to goods and information, is recognised and respected by everybody. In order to gain access into the field sites, I had to first touch base in Delhi, the place where I had a few contacts (especially in CWDS and JNU). For Tamil Nadu, an obvious solution presented to me was to use the contacts I had in my maternal village (Vandawasi). However, more often than not, the contacts I had (pradhan and MLA) would ask me to study my own village. This was something I did not want to get into as I felt that my position of privilege in the village would be difficult to negotiate with, and would not yield proper results.

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<sup>40</sup> The project I worked on was headed by the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi. This was a project on Gender and Migration, conducted at an All-India level.

Having decided that I would work in Aranthangi, I got in touch with the President of the Student Federation of India (SFI) in Jawaharlal Nehru University<sup>41</sup> who introduced me to two members of the Democratic Youth Federation of India<sup>42</sup> (DYFI), who were residents of Karaimedu and Thirasu. The DYFI members, while very intrigued with my project, informed me that I would not find any tied labourers or what is referred to as *pannaiyals* in this area. "It's been thirty years since labourers have worked as *pannaiyals*"; this was what I was told every time I entered a village. No one in the area openly spoke of *pannaiyals* as it was a social taboo. Despite this, I decided to explore the area with them. I ignored what the locals had to say because they spoke of traditional *pannaiyal* relations, often understood as bonded labour relations. I was not looking for traditional *pannaiyal* labour in the villages as numerous studies have documented its decline. I was interested in identifying forms of labour tying arrangements that persist in the region, which can have varying periods of attachment. Moreover, I wanted to examine how rural labour (particularly female labour) identify with and enter such relations. I travelled with them to six different villages, using state buses, auto rickshaws, cycle vans and a moped (which I ended up pushing for the last leg of my journey through paddy fields). After interacting with people from these villages, I decided to work in Thirasu and Karaimedu, as they had a high percentage of female agricultural labourers, the villagers were engaged in a range of occupations, and these villages had a diverse caste structure. In order to understand the capital labour relations on the basis of caste, I interviewed and engaged with different caste groups, at no point confining myself only to Dalits. I looked for a combination of occupation and caste groups in the villages to see whether labour tying arrangements are an inherent part of the agrarian structure, or if their presence is determined by the lack or presence of alternate jobs.

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<sup>41</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) was where I completed my Masters and M.Phil.

<sup>42</sup>The Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) is a Left-wing organisation. It is one of the largest youth organisations in the country.



In Karaimesu, I met a schoolteacher who taught English, and was friends with the DYFI members. He introduced me to the *pradhan* (village headman) of the village. Through my association with the *pradhan*, who was Thevar and a large landowner, I was able to interact with the landed class and local elites who accepted and welcomed me. I decided to live in Karaimesu and travelled to Thirasu, located at a distance of 8 kms. This was done due to Karaimesu's proximity to different transport options compared to Thirasu. Vehicles that I hired in Karaimesu could be taken to Thirasu with ease, which granted greater mobility. Furthermore, the family I lived with was friends with the MLA of Pudukkottai<sup>43</sup>. My personal acquaintance with the MLA's family made the host family all the more protective of me. While convenient, it did create restrictions when interacting with other class and caste members of the village. When engaging with female respondents in particular, in order to break the ice, I did not use any of the host family's connections. However, it was difficult to hide where I was living, as news about my host family connections did travel fast. I received help from a woman in the village who runs a self-help group; her presence helped women trust me and open up to me.

The host family would not let me go unaccompanied to any Pallar or Paraiyar locality after 4 pm, as the men there would be drinking. They would constantly tell me that these men are "uncultured" and it was not safe for me to go alone, even if it was just to talk to the women. This was clearly an outcome of upper caste-class perceptions of drunkenness and culture or the lack thereof. As an ethnographer, the politics of location, power hierarchies and relations are a constant process of negotiation (Wolf, 1996). In this situation I conceded to their demands, as it was a matter of building trust and securing my relationship with members of the village who were important gatekeepers. In fact, for the first five days, I was chaperoned by a Paraiyar<sup>44</sup> (SC) male labourer, Sreedhar, who worked for my host family. Sreedhar was my facilitator in the field and my 'designated' protector. After a few days, he stopped accompanying me on the pretext of work, which in turn

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<sup>43</sup>His son was an acquaintance of mine through my university connections.

<sup>44</sup> Paraiyars are lower caste groups that are under the Schedule Caste category.

hampered my mobility. Sreedhar accompanied me because the host family had instructed him to do so, he did not want to travel with me the entire day. On one of the days when Sreedhar came along with me, I met a female self-help group member, Tara. Sreedhar used this meeting as an opportunity to walk out of the arrangement, telling me that I would get more work done with Tara and that she was a very helpful and respectable woman. In a way this was beneficial as Sreedhar's presence limited my access to female agricultural labourers, which was overcome by Tara's presence. Tara introduced me to other self-help group members who helped me with my fieldwork. Moving around the village with her, I was able to interact with a larger section of female labourers, across castes. The snowballing method, with the information provided by Tara, help build trust with the respondents faster (Lewis-Beck, et al. 2004).

In Aranthangi, I was careful not to disclose my connections with SFI. In no way did I want my political leanings to affect my position vis-à-vis the villagers. The common complaint villagers had against Left organisations in this region is that they are disruptive and keep shouting slogans but do not work<sup>45</sup>. This was interesting to note because not far away in Pudukkottai town, the elected MLA was a CPI (Communist Party of India) member. Despite the presence of the Left, there is limited percolation of its politics and ideology in both Karaimedu and Thirasu. Not disclosing my political leanings was an attempt to try and hold onto positions of neutrality that are necessary for the integrity of the research. Despite efforts at neutrality one is never removed from the 'politics of location'- whether as a woman, as an outsider, or living with an elite family in the village.

In Aranthangi, political contradictions and alliances surfaced in numerous ways. Although I was careful not to disclose my connection to SFI, electoral politics at the ground level did create hostile situations for me. During one of my visits in Karaimedu to a landed Ambalakar (Backward Caste), I was treated in a hostile manner. The male head of

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<sup>45</sup> This might seem as a common lament that villagers and people in general have about political parties. However, the inactivity of CPI in this region is measured against the DMK and AIADMK, who are extremely active throughout this region through their populist strategy politics.

household stopped the interview and constantly kept asking me where I had come from. I tried to explain to him who I was and what I was doing there. However, no explanation seemed to pacify him, until another farmer, who I had interviewed previously, was passing by, and greeted me. He verified my story with the Ambalakar landholder, after which his demeanour changed. He told me that he was wary of me because of my attire. During my fieldwork in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, I would wear a *salwaar kameez*<sup>46</sup>. On that particular day I was wearing a black and red *salwaar kameez*, which was the same colour combination as that of Dravida Munettra Kazhagam (DMK). He thought that I was from the DMK party and was trying to get information about the All India Anna Dravida Munettra Kazhagam (AIADMK) party members and supporters. His perception about me led him to disbelieve anything I told him. At this point it became important to assert my identity of being a researcher from London, so as to remove myself from this particular space and time. This instance shed light on his political loyalties to AIADMK, and as he was an important party member, he was wary of my intentions and me. The animosity coupled with fear towards the opposition party was interesting to note, especially in a village that unanimously elected a *pradhan* who belongs to DMK.

Chinsurah, however, was a different story. In 2011, after 34 years of rule in West Bengal, the Left Front government was defeated by the Trinamool Congress Party. The time I was carrying out my fieldwork was a period where cadres were shifting party allegiance, and those who remained with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI (M) went into hiding<sup>47</sup>. The villages I chose to work on, Madhabpur and Bardhanagar, were 40 kms away from Singur<sup>48</sup> and the people resented the Left Front and particularly the CPI (M). None of

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<sup>46</sup>*Salwaar kameez* is traditional attire that consists of a pair of loose pants, which is the *salwaar* and a tunic/shirt known as the *kameez*.

<sup>47</sup> The reason I use the word hiding is because the villagers who, during the course of my fieldwork, revealed to me that they still supported the CPI (M) did so in a hushed and secretive manner.

<sup>48</sup> Singur is a sub district of Hooghly that gained prominence with the riots that ensued from unlawful acquisition of land for the Tata Nano project in 2007. A total of 997 acres of land was acquired to build the car factory, in the face of tremendous opposition. The current Chief Minister, who was then a part of the opposition, led a movement called “Save the Farmland” movement. This led to clashes with the state,

the Communist Party connections I had in West Bengal could be used, as the particular time did not favour such connections, and in turn would have adversely affected my research and conflicted with my attempts at maintaining neutrality. In my efforts to maintain neutrality, I gained entry into Chinsurah through the Krishi Vigyan Centre (KVC)<sup>49</sup>. Using a personal contact who was the director of the KVC, I gained access to this institution. A field consultant from the Centre took me to four different villages, which were 30 kms from Chinsurah town. With his help, I was able to meet with large, medium, small, and marginal landholders. My presence in the village, especially amongst the larger landholders, was not questioned since I had come from KVC. I decided to work in two villages- Bardhanagar and Madhabpur, which had both caste and religious diversity. In this region, especially in Madhabpur, the large landholders were Muslims. None of the upper caste Hindus (Brahmins in particular) owned land in similar proportions- they were primarily medium landowners. It was interesting to study the significance of caste hierarchies and religion in determining land and labour relations, in such a situation. This made me think about whether these Muslims, who have acquired land over time, operate as capitalist farmers, who provide loans, hire labour, lease out land, and have an important role to play in both social and administrative dealings of the village.

In Chinsurah, I lived with one such Muslim landholder. He had the largest landholding in the village with approximately 147 acres, and living with him granted me access to other classes of farmers. Gaining access to the labourers, however, was not an easy process. Since labourers in the village knew where, and with whom I lived, initial meetings with them were brief, with controlled responses. I struggled to uncover any information about the presence of labour tying arrangements in the village. In the initial phase of getting to know the village area, unlike in Aranthangi, I did not ask direct questions regarding the

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resulting in riots, state killings and the Tatas pulling out of the state. It is considered to be one of reasons for the downfall of the Left Government.

<sup>49</sup> The KrishiVigyan Kendra (KVK) was sanctioned by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research. With centres spread across West Bengal, this KVK in Chinsurah focuses on need-based and skill-oriented vocational training to farmers. This organization aims to improve agriculture in the region via rural development.

presence of tied labour. Despite this I still stumbled across numerous road blocks, where labourers were not willing to give me time and employers vehemently denied the presence of tied labour relations. This got me to a point where I believed that I would not find any tied labour in this region.

However, one interview with a particular medium landowner Najam revealed that he had tied labourers working for him- this is referred to as *bandha kishen* in Bengali. Najam provided me with a point of reference. He identified that the *bandha kishen* he had employed had taken a loan to pay for her husband's medical expenses and was now repaying the loan by working for him. Through these labourers, using the snowballing method, I got to meet other *bandha kishens* in the villages and was also informed that this was a common practice especially found among female agricultural wage workers. The *bandha kishen* relation was identified through relations of debt, where female labourers also carried out housework for the landowners- indicators that helped me identify *bandha kishens* in this region.

During my stay in Madhabpur, I was given fixed times when I could work. This placed restriction on my mobility and affected class relations. My position was assessed through associations to my host family. For female labourers, especially those who worked for my host family, it was a particularly tricky situation, as they felt obligated to comply with the wishes of their employer to talk to me. This furthered the unequal power relations that existed between the respondents and me. The unequal power relations were not just restricted to the respondents but extended to my host family too. The host family did not want me venturing out in the village after sundown. Like Aranthangi, they had similar concerns about my safety. They did not want me to go and talk to male labourers and farmers alone in their homes<sup>50</sup>. In fact, the first few interviews- of medium landowners and female agricultural labourers were done in the host family's house. The host family would

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<sup>50</sup> Even though my focus is on female agricultural labourers, I thought it necessary to expand the field of inquiry to male labourers to obtain a clearer understanding of how work is negotiated along the lines of gender politics.

tell me that “we want you to work for your studies, and understand it is important but not at the cost of your safety”. Fear for women’s safety had emerged as a major concern in the last six to eight months from the time of fieldwork because of an increase in the number of rape cases in the region. In addition to this, they were particularly wary of Bardhanagar as it was said to be a village notorious for sexual violence. The larger landholders from Madhabpur mentioned that the “TMC should not have had representatives from the Santhals (ST) and Bauris (SC), they do not understand how to run a village, and it has become unsafe for everyone there, because we do not know when they (if they feel like it) might attack us”. The mistrust associated with the Santhals and Bauris played on the consciousness of the employers and their understanding of the place. They could not accept the change in power relations, with the ex-untouchables securing administrative power.

The power hierarchies and structures in the village affected my positionality as a researcher. As a woman it was easier to interact with other women labourers, especially when I was alone with them, away from the gaze of any member of the host family or even fellow male labourers. Women opened up to me, disclosing information such as instances of sexual harassment at the hands of particular employers and domestic violence. In other instances, female respondents would introduce their daughters to me and present me as a role model, where they would tell them that because I studied, I have reached this position where I can go to London, and that they should learn something from me. This sentiment stemmed from villagers treating me as a local of the village, even though I was not a part of it. Interviews with male respondents were a lot more business-like, where the questions had to be specific; otherwise they did not see any reason to sit through the interview. Age also played a role in the interviews with men. Older men could sit with me and talk for long periods of time, compared to younger men. The dynamics were constantly changing where my positionality as a researcher was not ‘fixed’ but ‘relational to the values that were interpreted and constructed’ (Geiger, 1970 in Wolf, 1996: 14).

### 2.3.2 Data Collection

This research relies on the use of both Primary and Secondary sources of data. Before describing my field data and collection methods, I will briefly talk about the secondary sources of data used. The secondary sources of data include tabulations from the Primary Census Abstract for Pudukkottai and Hooghly in 2001 and 2011. I used the economic tables to obtain information on main and marginal workers, and farm and non-farm workers at the village level. In addition, I gathered information on the types of crops grown and land use patterns from the Primary Census Abstract (2001). For the purpose of carrying out my fieldwork, I used data from the 2001 abstract, as this was the latest data that was provided by the Census of India at the time of my survey. Later on, in the course of writing up, I used data from 2011, as and when it was made available<sup>51</sup>. There were not drastic differences in the trends depicted in the 2001 and 2011 data. However, I did use it, as it is the most recent data available on workers and cultivators in the regions.

The Census does not provide a detailed account of information on debt or landholding. For information on debt, I used the data provided by the National Sample Survey organization (NSSO). The 59<sup>th</sup> round (January – December 2003) Report on the Indebtedness of Farmer Households provides information on the sources of debt, based on activity and landholding capacity for the two states. Even though the data is obtained at the state level, it provides a basic understanding on the kind of loans taken and reason behind taking such loans. For data on landholding, I used the data available in the Agricultural Census (2001- to 2011), obtained at the sub-district level. With the help of secondary data, I had information on three key aspects of the study- number of female cultivators and agricultural labourers (important in identifying the subjects I wanted to study) in the villages, the different sources of debt available, and the distribution of land in both West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. The secondary data provided me with basic socio-economic information on the region, data and trends that were later corroborated through village surveys and interviews.

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<sup>51</sup> The trends of workers and non-workers in the village sites did not show any significant variation and it is for this reason that I used the more recent 2011 data to describe trends.

Primary data collection from the field sites was carried out in two phases. In the first phase I carried out a household level village census and in the second phase, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews. For the second phase of this fieldwork I used a random sampling method. I used a snowball method for sampling due to the nature of the questions asked; this method provided me with a potential set of contacts in trying to locate and identify tied labour. After I decided to work in Karaimesu and Thirasu in Aranthangi, and Madhabpur and Bardhanagar in Chinsurah, I embarked upon my fieldwork. My fieldwork is ethnographic and the data collection methods used include fieldwork interviews, observations and focus group discussions. Detailed accounts of the fieldwork are provided in the section below.

### **2.3.2.1 Primary sources- Household Level Village Survey**

Census data is useful to identify general trends in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. However, in order to capture and understand the more recent changes at the village level, I carried out a household level village survey (Appendix 1). I surveyed a total of 986 households in Karaimesu and Thirasu (10.11.2011-26.11.2011) and 463 households in Bardhanagar and Madhabpur (11.04.2012-30.04.2012). These surveys included only those villagers who were present in the village at the time of the survey. The number of locked houses constituted a small percentage of the total village, as depicted in Table 2.1 below, and would not lead to any systematic biases.

Village	Total number of households	Households surveyed	Households locked/unavailable
Karaimesu (Aranthangi)	397	326 (82.11%)	71 (17.88%)
Thirasu (Aranthangi)	469	359 (76.54%)	106 (22.60%)
Madhabpur (Chinsurah)	289	269 (93.07%)	20 (6.92%)
Bardhanagar (Chinsurah)	225	193 (85.77%)	27 (12.00%)

**Table 2.1: Number of households in selected villages/ hamlets in Aranthangi and Chinsurah**

*Source: Household Level Village Survey Conducted in November 2011 and April 2012*



The average percentage of households not covered is 20.24 per cent in Aranthangi and 9.46 per cent for Chinsurah. In Aranthangi, the locked households were because the families had migrated out for work, mostly to the construction industry. In Chinsurah, a majority of the villagers who had migrated out of the village had done so for agricultural wage work in the neighbouring districts. This information was provided to me by their neighbours. The village survey covered basic questions on caste, the income category the respondents belonged to, different kinds of jobs they were employed in during a year, access to MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme), migration patterns and the amount of land owned, leased in and leased out. This first round of survey did not collect information on debt, as I was concerned more with occupations and land transactions. Debt is an integral part of the agrarian economy, and it required me to deal with it in a more nuanced manner, which I did through detailed interviews. Apart from obtaining data on the villages, I used this household survey to familiarize myself with the villages and the residents, and to identify possible respondents. As I walked around the village with a survey sheet, the respondents assumed that I had come from the Census Office. An outsider walking around the village with sheets of paper to fill up, this was their first point of association, as this was what they were most familiar with. However, in the course of conducting the survey I became a familiar face in the village, which helped, improve my mobility and accessibility. For the larger landholders I could fill out survey sheets only when a male member of the household was around. I was turned down in their absence, as the women, across castes, would tell me that they did not know how much land they owned or the amount that they leased out, as these were transactions that were handled either by their husbands or their fathers. It was only in single women-headed households, where women were at the forefront of all dealings, that they provided me with information.

My study focuses on female labourers and cultivators, especially those who belong to the small and marginal farmer category. These female subjects constitute a majority of my interviews. During the course of these interviews, there were occasions when the male

members of the family insisted on staying, as they would tell me that the women did not have *mūlai* (Tamil) or *buddhi* (Bengali), to answer my questions.<sup>52</sup> I saw this as an opportunity to gain some trust among the female labourers, where I insisted that I wanted them to answer the questions. I informed these men and the female labourers that as a woman I could understand their plight. A method I learnt on my previous field experiences (M.Phil and research projects) to counter such situations was to pose very general questions to my female respondents. These often included questions about their daily chores and routines, marriage experiences, education, their children, etc. During the course of these questions the male members would get bored and leave, allowing both my respondents and myself to engage more freely with each other, and to bridge the gap between them and me as the 'outsider'. Such interactions brought to light sensitive issues of violence and harassment.

As mentioned previously, my position in the villages was a dynamic one that fluctuated between being perceived as an insider and as an outsider, depending on the associations that were linked to me, my identity, my gender and my class (Rake, 2003). I was familiar with the caste structure and social norms of these regions, and I believed that this knowledge would allow me to navigate easily among the various caste groups in the villages. Despite this knowledge, my identity in the villages was carved out from my alliance with the landlords who were hosting me. This created a barrier with other caste and class groups in the villages. They were initially suspicious of me and my intentions, especially in Aranthangi as they knew that I maintained daily contact with the *pradhan* of the village. Despite various efforts to maintain my neutral position, I remained 'trapped in networks of power' (Burawoy, 1998: p. 22). This made negotiating with respondents of different class and gender difficult. However, to minimise the effect of such networks of power, I used different strategies that diversified the data collected- such as the household survey, and during fieldwork, by purposely choosing my clothing, by choosing specific ways of approaching different members of the household or for example, in Aranthangi,

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<sup>52</sup>Both these terms *mulai* and *buddhi* mean brains, or grey matter, the usage depends on the context.

by interacting with female agricultural labourers with the assistance of the female self-help group member. These not only granted me access but also assisted me in carrying out detailed interviews, which is an important aspect of this ethnographic fieldwork.

#### **2.3.2.2 Primary Sources- Interviews**

In the second phase of my fieldwork I conducted detailed interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation, the last to study people in their daily lives (Burawoy, et al. 1991). The respondents selected for interviews were drawn out from the village level household survey. As mentioned previously, the respondents were interviewed through a snowballing method. However, the number of respondents interviewed was conditioned through a quota sampling method. Through quota sampling, the sample size for each of the categories of labourers and farmers selected (see Table 2.2), had similar distribution characteristics of the total population of the villages. The interviews in Aranthangi were carried out between December 2011 and April 2012, and in Chinsurah between May 2012 and September 2012.

There are varying degrees of involvement under the method of participant observation (Jorgensen, 1989), and I sought to gather data through my daily interactions with respondents, as well as through in-depth interviews. Participant observation required me to be in the field for long periods of time, which simultaneously allowed for a process of periodic self-reflection (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998). I documented data by maintaining detailed field notes alongside interviews, which allowed for a close understanding of the fieldwork process. In the process of justifying my choice of place and subject each day, I sought to place my research within the larger theoretical frameworks. Participant observation became both an analytical and data collection tool (Dewalt and Dewalt, 1998).

Though my focus was on agricultural labourers, I saw them in relation to other caste and class groups, so as to understand the complexity of interlocking transactions between land, labour and credit.

NAME OF VILLAGE	LARGE LANDOWNER		MEDIUM LANDOWNER		SMALL AND MARGINAL FARMERS		LANDLESS LABOURERS	
	Employer				Classes of Labour*			
Kariamedu and Thirasu	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	14	1	4		1	3	6	32
Caste	Thevars, Ambalakars, Christian		Ambalakars Thevars, Vannars		Ambalakars Paraiyars		Amabalakars, Paraiyars Pallars	
Madhabpur and Bardhanagar	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	14		5		4	1	3	36
Caste	Muslim (Sheikhs)		Muslim, Brahmins		Mahisya, Sadgop, Santhal, Bauri		Khoira Santhal, Bauri, Handi	

**Table 2.2: Respondents selected from each caste and class group**

\* The 'classes of labour' is a fluid category, which includes landless labourers, marginal, and even small farmers.

I interviewed large landowners, medium landowners, small and marginal farmers, and agricultural labourers. As shown in Table 2.2, the classes of labour category comprise of landless labourers and small and marginal farmers. The focus of this study is on the classes of labour and the tied labour relations they enter into. The focus is not on the landed class, and hence are not differentiated as big farmers and medium farmers. Instead, I identify them as landowners who share certain common characteristics across the two regions. The landowners are employers of agricultural labour, they carry out multi-cropping, commercial agriculture and are money lenders. In the case of Chinsurah theses landowners are also act traders. The landowners own anywhere between 3 to almost 35 acres of land.

In order to differentiate between this broad range, I refer to those landowners who have 3-9 acres as medium landowners, and those with more than 9 acres as large landowners.

I recorded the interviews with the respondents' (oral) consent. While recording, I simultaneously took notes of what I observed in the field. This process helps frame better questions for subsequent interviews and to a certain extent gave some control over the direction of the interview. However, at the same time, I kept in mind that I did not want this to become a structured interview process. Keeping the interview unstructured, open ended and flexible was necessary for me to understand the wide range of multi-scalar processes operating, which gave me an insight into the ways in which labour tying arrangements persist in agriculture.

Interviewing the larger landowners, particularly the older generation gave me a sense of the multiple ways in which land and labour transactions took place in both regions over generations. The older generation of farmers reminisced about the past and spoke of their wealth and the respect they had in the village. In the process of conducting interviews, relationships of various kinds were established. Among the larger landowners, the older generation, always saw me as their daughter who would come and listen to their stories and complaints. They provided me with as much information as they could, explaining that they were forthright with me as they wanted to make my stay in the village as comfortable as possible and did not want me travelling through the village every day, especially in the heat and during the monsoons. Here is an instance of interpersonal dynamics of my everyday negotiations, with both place and patriarchal relations, which were in a constant state of flux.

Interviews with younger farmers were always short and crisp. They provided me with details of landholding, the process that goes in to cultivating rice and other crops, the number of labour days required to cultivate different crops, etc. The conciseness of their replies was suggestive of the fact that they were more sceptical of my presence in the field. Even though I did establish myself as a researcher from the London School of Economics, they could not understand why I would want to know more about their livelihoods and daily

lives than the hard-core numbers and facts that they provided me with. Though the group of people interviewed belong to the land owning class, each of them is placed within a particular social, economic and political context that shapes their answers (Burawoy, 1998).

My age and gender infused kinship bonds with the landowners in both regions. The experiences were very different when I interviewed agricultural labourers. As an interviewer, I knew I was intervening in their lives, their space and their time. In this context the timing of the interview was very important. The only time the women respondents were free was after 2:30 in the afternoon. This was when they would return from the agricultural fields and begin cooking food for the family.

In Aranthangi, I was given more time to talk to these women since it was a slow period in agriculture (February to April). In Chinsurah, the interviews were carried out during the paddy sowing and weeding period, which placed greater constraints on time and movement. This was partially resolved by revisiting the participants. This made them feel that I was concerned about them and not just another surveyor, like those sent by the government to conduct the census.

As mentioned, in Aranthangi, I was able to access female labourers with the help of Tara, a 33-year-old Pallar self-help group worker. She introduced me to women workers, and through her everyday interactions and relations with women in the villages, I was granted access to their lives and histories. Discussions with these women revealed that labour tying arrangements were despised but were an omnipresent part of their lives. The labour tying arrangements were of short duration and terminated the moment the debt was repaid. An interesting aspect that emerged from these conversations was that labour tying was not completely debt driven; some labour arrangements were an outcome of obligations to the landowners, especially to access land for cultivation. The interconnected factor markets and domestic politics are seen to push women into exploitive work contracts, and at the same time constantly negotiated.

In Chinsurah, I lived with the largest landholder in Madhabpur. The first set of female *kishens* (agricultural labourers) I interviewed were labourers that worked on his land, and all they would want to tell me was that their employer was a good and kind man. However, these responses were not enough. I was able to break the stream of such responses after I met a female agricultural labourer, who was a staunch CPI (M) supporter and wanted me to know all the problems labourers have faced with the onset of the new government. This provided me with the much needed space to interact with other women workers, understand how they entered relations of debt, how these debts were repaid, the limited control over their earnings, and their survival strategies.

However, towards the end of my fieldwork, the host family told me that I should not go back to her, as this particular female labourer came to them and demanded money on the pretext of providing me with all this information. When this demand was made, the host family informed her that I was like their daughter and that she would never take money from their own daughter so she could not do the same with me. Without providing me with the space for verifying or intervening, my host family had made the decision for me. Through ties of kinship, their stand on this situation contained my negotiation capacity and jeopardized my position as an independent researcher, and my capacity to make my own decisions.

On the one hand kinship ties placed restrictions on my movement, on the other they drew benefits. In Aranthangi, when working with female agricultural labourers, they were very excited to know that I was part-Tamil. They would try and draw out possible kinship connections (Wolf, 1996). The Paraiyar labourers were particularly happy to know that I was not a Chettiyar (who the Paraiyars saw as their oppressors). Since I did not adhere to their caste sensibilities of dominance, they readily accepted me. I am fluent in Bengali but I am not as fluent in Tamil and required a field assistant. When I informed the respondents that I could not speak Tamil fluently, they would constantly try to interpret the questions and assist me in translating, especially in the absence of a field assistant. This meant that very often the meaning of what was said would be changed, providing multiple

explanations of what was being asked. Though this might be distracting, it did give an insight into the consciousness of the people and what they understood when the terms *pannaiyal*, *bandha kishen* or *coolie* and *majdoor*<sup>53</sup> were used. Particularly in the case of *pannaiyals*, this gave me information about a practice that is shunned and looked down upon in the villages in Aranthangi. In Chinsurah, however, despite all attempts I was always seen as the “*bodo shohorer meye*” (big city girl). In order to counter this stereotype that was associated with someone from a big city, conversations were lengthened and made interesting over a cup of tea<sup>54</sup>.

The entire process of carrying out interviews required me, as a researcher, to situate the respondents in a particular place and time. The fieldwork required a certain amount of planning. Moreover, the research question to be examined in the field deals with political issues that the participants were always trying to avoid. This unfolded in different ways during fieldwork in the different villages. For example, as mentioned, the animosity I faced from the large landholder in Aranthangi, who thought I belonged to the opposition party. In Chinsurah, the supporters of CPI (M) were very careful about what they said and how they behaved and interacted with other members of the village. This meant that more often than not, questions of political understanding and affiliations were evaded. On the other hand, those who are now TMC supporters were vocal about their disgust with CPI (M), and were hopeful of change and benefits to come from the current ruling party. This is where I feel that as a researcher of Indian nationality, I had an understanding of the social and political processes at play. This is important in order to understand the multiple knowledges that are continuously produced in the field (Burawoy, 1998).

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<sup>53</sup>*Panniyal* and *bandha kishen* are terms used in Aranthangi and Chinsurah respectively to identify tied labourers and *coolie* and *majdoor* refer to daily wage work in Aranthangi and Chinsurah respectively.

<sup>54</sup> The practice of everyday conversations over a cup of tea is something that is culturally specific to West Bengal, even though it does take place in other regions as well.



### 2.3.2.3 Focus Group Discussions

As the name suggests, certain specific issues were discussed with a targeted set of participants (Hennink, 2013). This was conducted in groups of four to six women labourers. I did not extend the group to male labourers because they tend to mute the voices of the women. In addition to this the larger landlords did not agree to participate in focus group discussions as they took time out for me for the interviews, and they believed that the focus group discussion would generate similar results. This is another instance of both power hierarchies and kinship ties placing restrictions on me as a researcher, and making the negotiation process difficult. For female labourers, the idea of the group was to create a comfortable environment for the women to participate and share their views (Hennink, 2013: p. 2).



**Figure 3: Focus Group Discussion with female agricultural labourers in Chinsurah**

*Source: Author's own image, Chinsurah, (2012)*

What I observed was that within these groups, no one disagreed with the more vocal women. Some women even remained quiet through many of the questions that they had answered in great detail during their personal interviews. The purpose of creating a 'collective narrative' instead of a 'personal narrative' (Hennink, 2013: p. 3) did not come through, especially when questions on labour tying were asked. However, the women did

engage more with discussion on wage rates, government benefits and their husbands who controlled their wages (this was a point of particular angst for women, especially in Chinsurah).

The methods used to obtain information from the four village sites differed primarily along lines of gender and class. This resulted in varied responses, with women shying away, or the landowners trying to constantly negotiate with the interview process. There were constant negotiations with my gender and class but not caste, as I was often referred to as the big city girl. However, my position in the field raised ethical issues of conducting fieldwork; for example, I was often mistaken for a government official. This took place in the initial phase of fieldwork.

#### **2.4 Ethical dilemmas**

Ethics in social science research focuses on aspects of informed consent, maintaining anonymity and confidentiality of the data, and not exploiting unequal class positions (Bryman, 2012; Simpson, 2008).

I obtained oral consent before recording any of the interviews. I explained to all the interviewees that these recordings were being used for my convenience, so that I could listen to the interviews at a later time, and at no point would they be broadcasted or given to anyone else.

One of the main ethical dilemmas that arose from the field was how my entry from the “outside” into the villages and lives of women labourers raised their hopes and expectations that I would be able to offer them some respite and upliftment. A handful of women shared their stories of sexual exploitation at the hands of the landlords and wanted to leave the village with me, for they were sure that I would be able to get jobs for them as domestic maids in the city. In my efforts of downplaying the ‘power hierarchies in our inherent positionalities’ (Wolf, 1996: p. 19), I was placed in a situation where their hopes were pinned on my ability to actively bring about some change. Here, I was placed in an exploitative dilemma- I could not play upon their vulnerable positions and obtain the

information I wanted. Despite wanting to help them, as a researcher, I could not remove them from their setting. I have still, however, maintained contact with two women, who I do speak to occasionally to find out how they are but at no point creating any kind of false hope that I am here to reform their lives. To maintain the ethical neutrality of my research, at no point was the trust and hope of these women raised or adversely affected by me. In addition to this, I did not discuss these issues with my host family. This was done so as not to jeopardise the lives of these women who decided to confide in me, irrespective of how helpless I felt in the wake of such knowledge.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the how the research was conducted following an ethnographic approach- conducting fieldwork in two districts and four villages. Data collection methodology includes participant observation, interviews, surveys and focus groups with female agricultural labours, tenants, large and medium landowners. As I have outlined here, one of the main challenges of fieldwork was to manage the different networks of power, and different identities and positionalities that I held or were attributed to me at the village sites. The complications faced as a researcher along gender, caste and class politics, are indicative of the same issues that I am researching to highlight the persistence of labour tying arrangements.

The research, although a comparative study of two places, is not a comparative case study, nor is it a study to be seen in isolation. As the opening quotation suggests, the main aim of the extended case method is to reconstruct theory. Burawoy (1998: p. 24) calls this a process of double fitting, where at one end, complex situations and anomalies are moulded in order to fit a theory and at the other end, theory is then tailored to the case, recomposed to digest the anomaly. Female labour is identified through the category of classes of labour and their entry into labour tying arrangements is understood through Hart's (1986b) analytical framework. Using this framework, I explore how labour tying arrangements are constantly reinforced in the daily lives of women workers in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. The empirical analysis of data collected is explained in the following

chapters, identifying labour tying through relations with land, credit and state policies such as national rural employment, food subsidies and minimum support prices.

### Chapter 3: An Overview of Aranthangi and Chinsurah

This chapter provides an overview of the two field sites- Aranthangi and Chinsurah. Sections 3.1 and 3.2 provide a socio-economic snapshot of the villages surveyed. Drawing on data from secondary sources, such as census records and information gathered during my survey, section 3.1 and 3.2 look at Aranthangi and Chinsurah respectively. In section 3.3 I identify the different labour relations found in the two regions, with particular reference to female tied labour. The labour relations discussed highlight the differences in type of payment, mode of payment, duration of labour contract.

#### 3.1 Aranthangi: A Description

Aranthangi is a tehsil of the Pudukkottai district in Tamil Nadu. The district of Pudukkottai is surrounded in the north and west by Tiruchirappalli, in the east by Thanjavur and in the south by Madurai (Map 1). In 1948, Pudukkottai became a part of Tiruchirappalli district. In 1974, the boundaries were redrawn and Pudukkottai was declared a district, with *tehsils* from both Tiruchirappalli and Tanjore. At present there are eleven *tehsils* in Pudukkottai- Alangudi, Gandarvakottai, Kulathur, Illuppur, Pudukkottai, Thirumayam, Ponnamaravathi, Karambakudi, Aranthangi, Avudaiyarkoil and Manamelkudi (Pudukkottai and Aranthangi are the revenue divisions).

The two villages selected for field work are Karaimeadu and Thirasu in Aranthangi *tehsil*. Karaimeadu is 25 kms and Thirasu is 33 kms from the Pudukkottai town. Karaimeadu is broadly a linear settlement, lying adjacent to State Highway 26 (Map 3). Karaimeadu is not a geographically continuous village. It is a revenue village<sup>55</sup> with the *panchayat* headquarters located in Karaimeadu. It consists of six different hamlets<sup>56</sup>: Karaimeadu, Valathoor, Vallimalai Nagar, Jawahar Nagar, Kalvai Nagar and Chenguttai. Each of these

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<sup>55</sup> A revenue village is an administrative region with a defined border. The Census of India uses this as unit for data collection (Nagaraj, 2008). One administrative unit can consist of numerous hamlets.

<sup>56</sup> A hamlet, according to the Census of India (1961) is a habitation of persons, belonging to one caste, living separately from others. Hamlets are small in size, and have similar socio-economic characteristics, however, there is no official data available on these different hamlets. (in Nagaraj, 2008: p. 34)

hamlets have a clear distinct geographical boundary that adheres to a clear caste division. Thirasu, which is located 8 kms from the State Highway, is adjacent to the reserve forest in the region and comprises two hamlets- North Thirasu and South Thirasu (Map 4). The *panchayat* headquarters are located in North Thirasu. The maps are devised from my travels in the villages and is based on information from the locals of the area. The physical layout of the villages clearly shows a clustering of caste groups, which reflect work groups and labour arrangements found in the villages. In Aranthangi, there is a distinct gender divide between agricultural and non-agricultural work, with more women carrying out agricultural tasks. Male non-agricultural wage workers find work in the Sugar Factory (this is the only factory in the Aranthangi sub-district which employs people from the neighbouring villages). They also find work as woodcutters, vendors, waiters (both within the village and in Pudukkottai town, some even travel to Chennai for this work), construction workers and drivers to name a few. Migration for non-agricultural work is not confined to state boundaries. A few male residents in two villages travel to the Gulf region for construction. Before delving further into a socio-economic discussion of the villages, the following section provides a brief description of the physiology of the villages and agricultural production- a layout of the field sites.

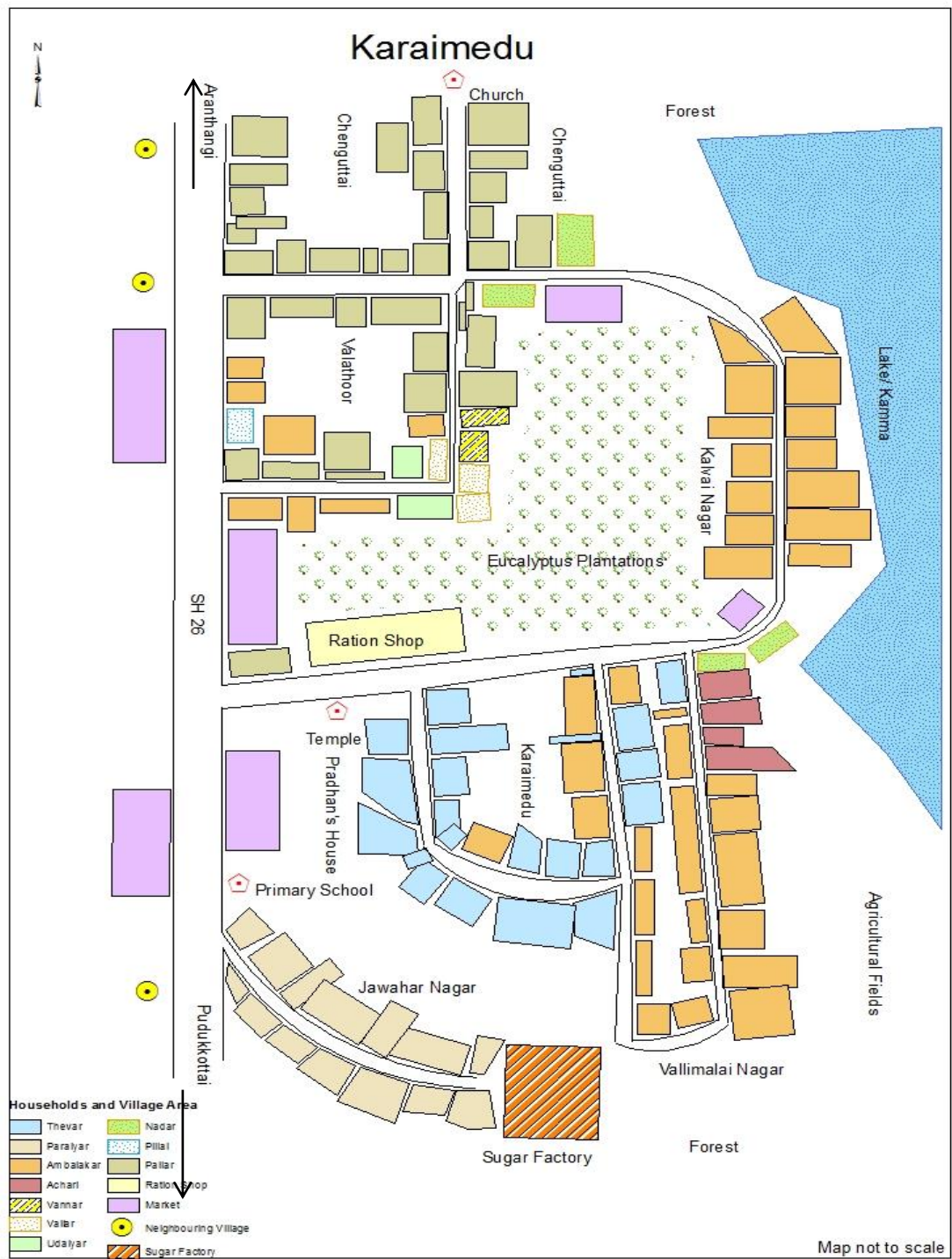
### **3.1.1 Physiology and Agriculture**

The Imperial Gazetteer of India (1909: 231) describes the region as an 'undulating plain of barren or sparsely cultivated land interspersed with small but picturesque rocky hills some of which are crowned by ancient forts and temples'. Tamil Nadu is divided into seven agro-climatic zones and Aranthangi, comes under the Cauvery Delta Zone. The soil type in the district is red loam. The land use pattern of the district shows that the majority of the land is still used by both wet and dry cultivation followed by land used for non-agricultural purposes.

Sl. No.	Land Use Pattern	Extent in Percentages
1.	Wet Fields ( <i>Nanjei</i> )	21.83
2.	Dry Fields ( <i>Punjei</i> )	38.86
3.	Forest	5.07
4.	Barren and Uncultivable	2.07
5.	Land Use for Non-Agriculture Purpose	26.53
6.	Cultivable Waste	3.09
7.	Pasture Lands	1.15
8.	Trees and Tope	1.38

**Table 3.1: Land Use Pattern of Pudukkottai District**

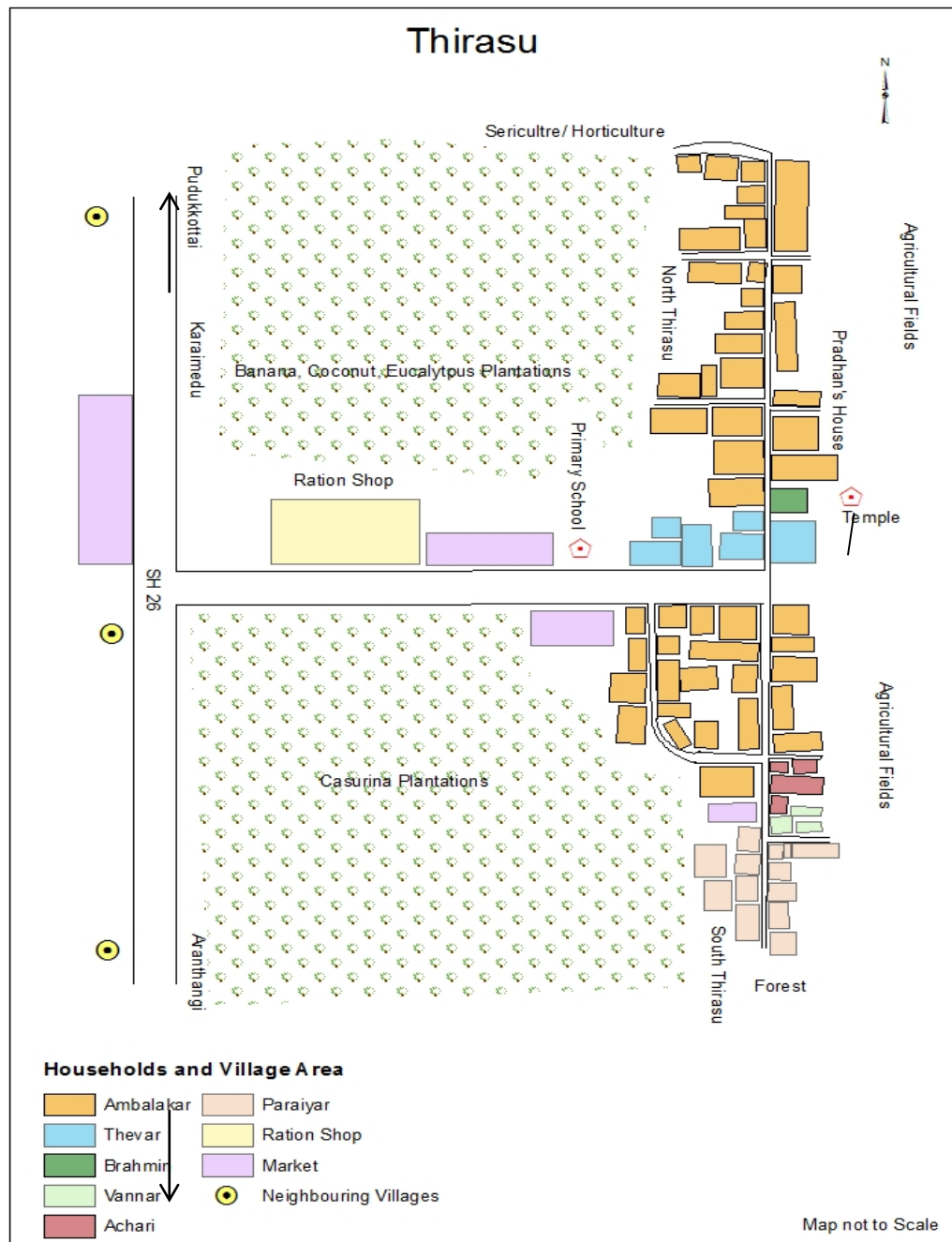
*Source: Pudukkottai District Manual: 2010-11, Government of India*



**Figure 4: Layout of Village Karaimedu- Aranthangi**

\*Residential blocks in the map are not representative of actual number of households in the village.



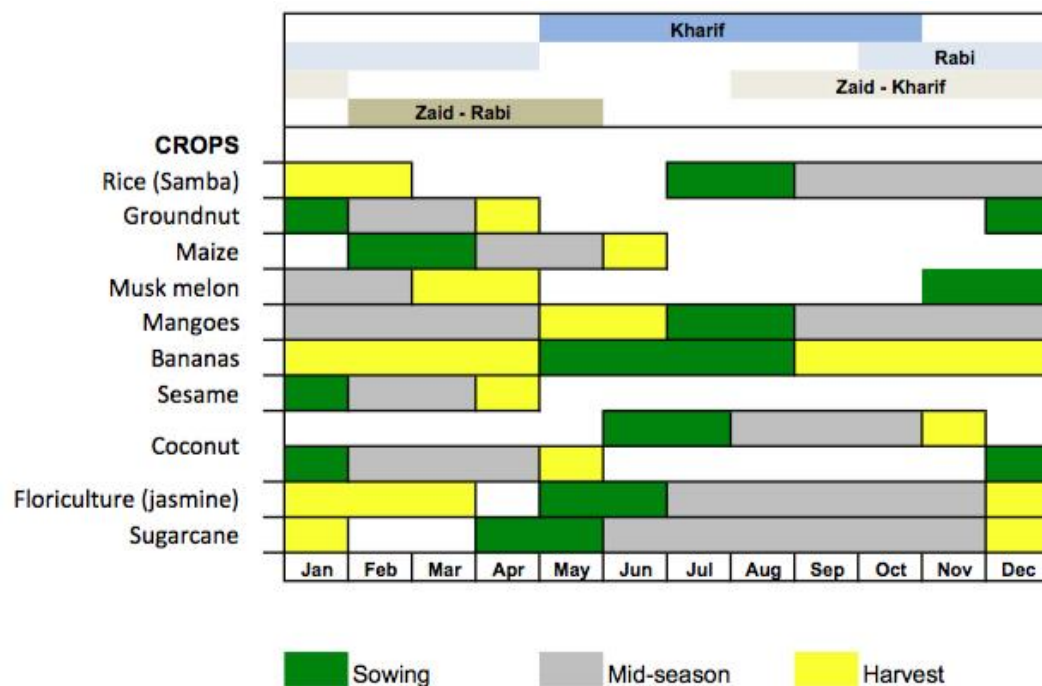


**Figure 5: Layout of Village Thirasu- Aranthangi**

\*Residential blocks in the map are not representative of actual number of households in the village.

The district is characterized by hot and dry climate where it receives an average of 919.4 mm of rainfall in a year. Most of the rains are between October and November, during the retreating monsoons. This is also a period when the region experiences heavy cyclonic showers that originate in the Bay of Bengal (Ayyar, 2004). The main river that flows through this district is Vallar but the ones that sustain the population are numerous jungle streams that are replenished with the monsoon and cyclonic showers.

The effects of the good monsoon and irrigation are observed in agricultural production in the two field village sites of Karaimesu and Thirasu in Aranthangi. The following is a crop calendar for a single *fasli* year in both Karaimesu and Thirasu.



**Figure 6: Crop Calendar for Karaimesu and Thirasu**

*Source: Field Survey in Aranthangi, November 2011*

The two predominant crops in the region are rice (of the Samba variety) and sugarcane. The peak labour seasons, particularly for female labour, are during sowing and harvesting of rice, sugarcane, groundnut and maize. There are a few banana plantations in the villages which employ female labour during harvest time. However, as the image below shows,

there are no large plantation fields. Banana, coconut and even mangoes line the main paddy fields. This is indicative of landowners diversifying cultivation, and cultivating those crops that are less labour intensive. The move is to counter any labour shortage experienced in the region, especially with male outmigration.



**Figure 7: Making use of every square inch: Paddy fields in Aranthangi that are lined by coconut and banana plantations.**

*Source: Author's own image, Thirasu, Aranthangi, 2011.*

The labour shortages are primarily observed among male labourers. As discussed above this has introduced a change in the crops cultivated in the region. Sesame and groundnut are grown by female cultivators, who are either tenant farmers or are small and marginal landholders. The presence of female cultivators does not result in these women taking up male activities in farming. Certain activities such as ploughing are still considered a male activity. The shortage of male labourers is covered through floriculture, horticulture and eucalyptus plantations.

Larger landowners have converted their *punjei* landholdings into eucalyptus plantations in both Karaimesu and Thirasu. The landowners require labour for sowing and felling the trees. Sowing of eucalyptus is carried out by female labour (see Figure 8). The felling of trees

takes place once every 3-5 years on an average. There is little or no maintenance of this land that is required. In addition, eucalyptus fetches farmers decent amounts where one ton of eucalyptus is sold at the rate of Rs.20, 000/-.



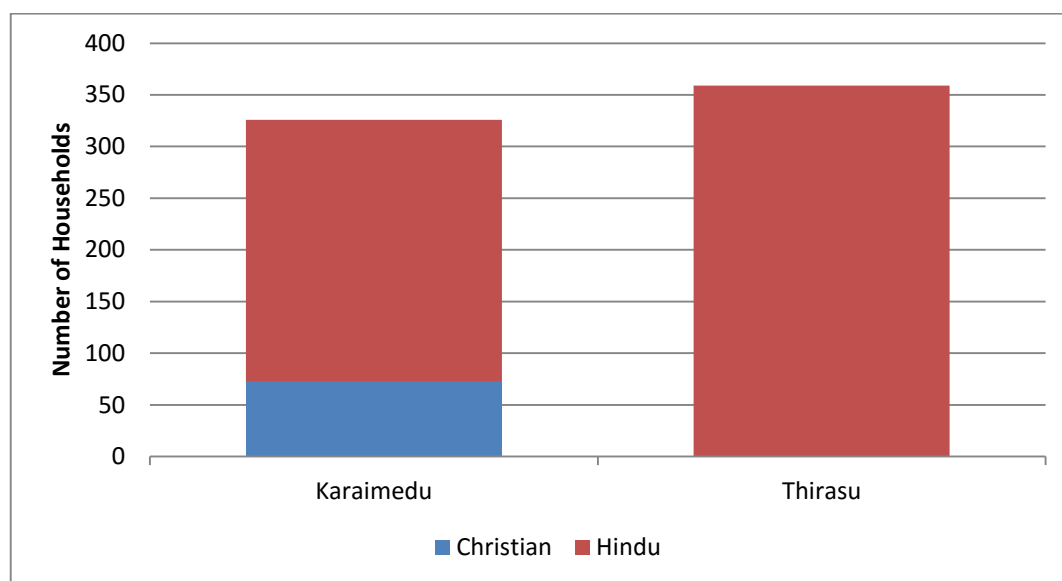
**Figure 8: Displacing Paddy: Large fields taken over by eucalyptus plantations.**

*Source: Author's own image, Karaimesu, Aranthangi, 2011.*

The organisation of space and agricultural production in the villages determines activities carried out in the region, and more specifically what the classes of labour in the villages do.

### **3.1.2 Socio-economic descriptions of Aranthangi**

In this section I provide a description of the socioeconomic characteristics of the villages. The villages of Karaimesu and Thirasu, selected for this study, are predominantly Hindu villages. Thirasu is an all-Hindu village, whereas in Karaimesu 11 per cent of the population is Christian.



**Figure 9: Distribution of Households based on Religion in Aranthangi.**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Aranthangi, 2011-2012*

The Pallars (Scheduled Caste) in Karaimedu are all Christians. The conversion to Christianity among the Pallars of Karaimedu is recent, dating back to approximately 30 years. Some of the most recent records of such conversions took place in 2000-2001. Thirasu does not have any Pallars, and hence does not have a Christian population. Religious conversion is a means to escape oppressive realities faced by the lower caste groups within Hinduism. However, caste identities pervade religious identities. This is not to belittle the process of religious conversions that promise social upliftment. Instead, it is important to recognise that caste as an institution continues to operate irrespective of religion (Kannabiran and Kannabiran, 1991).

The caste positions in the village have an overlap with class positions. Table 3.2 identifies the different caste groups found in the two village sites.

SL. No.	Caste	Number of Households			
		General	BC	MBC	SC
1.	Achari	8			
2.	Ambalakar			487	
3.	Brahmin	1			
4.	Nadar		2		
5.	Paraiyar				64
6.	Pillai	1			
7.	Thevar		40		
8.	Udaiyar		2		
9.	Vallar		8		
	<b>Christian</b>				
11.	Pallar				72
	<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>487</b>	<b>136</b>

**Table 3.2: Distribution of Caste Groups in Aranthangi**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Aranthangi, 2011-2012*

The numerically dominant class groups in both villages are the Ambalakars, who belong to the Most Backward Caste (MBC) category. The Ambalakars are the traditional landowners of the region. However, a majority do not continue to occupy this position in both Karaimesu and Aranthangi. The Ambalakars over time have had to sell their land. In the two villages 70.89 per cent of the total Ambalakar population are marginal landholders, owning one acre of land or less. Only 10.59 per cent of this population own more than three acres of land. Approximately 19 per cent of the total Ambalakar population are landless labourers.

The Ambalakars sold their lands to the Thevars, who are now the ruling elites in both the villages. The Thevars belong to the Backward Caste (BC) category. They came into this position of power not only through acquiring land but also with the Chettiyars (Brahmins) migrating out of the region. In Karaimesu and Thirasu, 57.57 per cent of Thevars are

marginal landholders, owning one acre of land or less. Around 40 per cent of the Thevar population own more than three acres of land.

The Scheduled Caste (SC) group, Paraiyars and Pallars, own land but are predominantly labourers. As observed in Table 3.3, a majority of the Pallars and Paraiyars are marginal landholders. Owning such small quantities of land is insufficient for their survival, for which reason they turn to alternate occupations both within and outside of agriculture.

Acharis in the villages belong to the traditional artisan caste. Like the Pallars and Paraiyars, the Acharis are marginal landholders but also look for alternate occupation outside of agriculture. The same holds true for the Nadars and Vallars. The single Brahmin household in the region belongs to a priest. He lives in Thirasu and performs his service in a temple that caters to both Thirasu and Karaimesu.

Caste	Landholding Size in Acres			
	0	<1	1-3	>3
Achari	0	1.17	0	0
Ambalakar	0.44	58.39	9.64	1.46
Brahmin	0.15	0	0	0
Nadar	0.15	0.15	0	0
Pallar	0	10.07	0.29	0.15
Paraiyar	0.58	7.30	1.46	0
Pillai	0	0	0.15	0
Thevar	0.15	2.04	1.75	1.90
Udaiyar	0	0.29	0	0
Vallar	0.15	1.02	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.61</b>	<b>80.44</b>	<b>13.28</b>	<b>3.50</b>

**Table 3.3: Percentage Distribution of Landholdings According to Caste in Aranthangi.**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Aranthangi, 2011-2012*

Table 3.3 shows the distribution of land across the two villages. A look at the total highlights that a majority of the population are marginal and small landholders (80.44 per cent), distributed predominantly among the Ambalakars, Paraiyars and Pallars<sup>57</sup>. Only 3.5 per

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<sup>57</sup> The small, medium and large landholder categories I use in this thesis do not adhere to the categories used by the agricultural census. The census identifies five classes of farmers based on landholding- marginal (less than 1 hectare), small (1-2 hectares), semi-medium (2-4 hectares), medium (4-10 hectares) and large (above 10 hectares). Landholding (ownership of means of production) is an important criterion to identify the



cent of the total population owns more than three acres of land, where a majority is owned by the Thevars. There is one Pallar family (who identify themselves as Roman Catholics) who owns over 10 acres of land. This Pallar family owns the maximum quantity of cultivable land in the two villages. The one large landowner (Mannikam) who is a Pallar is an important employer in the village and occupies a position in the village council<sup>58</sup>.

Ownership of land is an important indicator of determining class positions in the villages. As observed from the data collected, there is a broad overlap between caste and class positions in this region. In the absence of the upper caste, the Thevars, are the ruling elites of the region followed by the Ambalakars. The Ambalakars occupy socially dominant positions in the village and take up casual daily wage work to secure their livelihood.

The overlap of caste and class in the region is further observed in the following table which identifies economic status in the village.

	<b>Economic Status<sup>59</sup></b>
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different agrarian classes. However, in the present context, landholding is not sufficient to determine class status, and therefore, this has not been used in the thesis. In Aranthangi and Chinsurah, the respondents reported holding very small quantities of land. However, what sets the farmers apart are the different activities they carry out, the labour hiring process, the level of mechanisation and the intensity of cultivation (Patnaik, 1976). For example, farmers with around 3-4 acres of land are categorised as large landholders because they carry out sericulture and horticulture. There are others who carry out multi-cropping which often includes a cash crop like sugarcane. There are those who own small quantities of land but generate income through non-agricultural work, such as the Brahmins in Chinsurah, who are employed as doctors and engineers. For these larger landholders, the land is cultivated by hired labourers. The marginal and small landholders cultivate very small quantities of land, they usually cultivate basic crops such as rice and or vegetables (as observed in Aranthangi and Chinsurah), the land is cultivated using family labour and they hire out their labour. The difference in the number of days of labour hired in and out, along with the ability to rent out land places farmers in different class categories. This is the basic premise of Patnaik's (1976) labour exploitation criteria, where the difference between hired labour and rent help identify the exploited and exploiting class.

<sup>58</sup> Mannikam is able to generate multiple jobs in an agricultural year not only due to the large amount of cultivable land but also due to the diverse range of agricultural activities he engages with. These include rice, sugarcane, maize, banana, mango, musk melon and jasmine horticulture. He is also one of the milk distributors of the region.

<sup>59</sup> People in the village identified themselves as belonging to four categories of rich, middle, poor and poorest, based on the kind of house they lived in, whether this was a mud house, a concrete house, with concrete flooring or tiles or marble. Ownership of agricultural land, and dependence on agricultural work also determined which category they would place themselves in. Differences were also observed in the type of non-agricultural activity carried out. Those who were employed in government jobs placed themselves in the



<b>Caste</b>	<b>Rich</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Poorest</b>
Achari	0	0	0.44	0.73
Ambalakar	1.17	18.98	33.14	17.81
Brahmin	0.15	0	0	0
Nadar	0	0	0.29	0
Pallar	0.15	0.29	4.96	4.96
Paraiyar	0	1.17	5.99	2.04
Pillai	0	0.15	0	0
Thevar	0.15	3.50	1.75	0.44
Udaiyar	0	0	0.15	0.15
Vallar	0.15	0	0.44	0.88
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.75</b>	<b>24.09</b>	<b>47.15</b>	<b>27.01</b>

**Table 3.4: Caste-Wise distribution of Households according to Economic Status in Aranthangi**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Aranthangi, 2011-2012*

*\*Percentages calculated on total population of Karaiedu and Thirasu.*

A majority of the Pallar and Paraiyar households, belonging to the classes of labour are in the poor or poorest categories. Ambalakars are distributed across all four categories- they are identified as the landowning class, and those who are marginal landholders and landless labourers. The Thevars identify themselves as middle income in the village, despite owning large amounts of land.

Apart from the broad overlap of caste, the layout of the village shows how the caste divisions are manifested in the spatial division of the villages (Maps 3 and 4). In Karaiedu, the Paraiyars live in Jawahar Nagar and the Pallars live in Chenguttai. These are at the outskirts of Karaiedu's boundary. Jawahar Nagar is located beside the Sugar Factory<sup>60</sup> and Chenguttai near a reserve forest. Both these villages are located at two ends of the main Karaiedu village. The Karaiedu village church is located in Chenguttai and it makes this village an important point of reference.

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middle income category, whereas those who carried out casual daily wage employment referred to themselves as the poorest in the village.

<sup>60</sup> The Sugar Factory is a private limited company and is the only sugar factory in Aranthangi *tehsil*. This sugar factory has an important bearing upon the lives of the *coolie* workers as it provides them with alternate means of employment.



**Figure 10: A typical tiled roof with straw walls of a Pallar house and a thatched roof and mud house of an Ambalakar in Aranthangi.**

*Source: Author's own image, Karaimeedu, Aranthangi, 2011-2012*

The numerically dominant Ambalakars are located in Kalvai Nagar, along a *kamma* (lake). Valathoor, like Jawahar Nagar is the newest part of Karaimeedu. Valathoor housed Pallar households<sup>61</sup>. Vallimalai Nagar and Karaimeedu have a mixed population of Ambalakars and the dominant Thevars. Karaimeedu village is the most prosperous of all other villages within the larger Karaimeedu *panchayat*. The larger landowner, including the *pradhan* of the village, lives here.

### **3.1.2.1 Employment**

Marginal, small farmers and landless labourers comprise a majority of the population in the two villages (82.05 per cent). I identify these classes as the classes of labour. The classes of labour no longer depend on agriculture for survival. Instead, they take on multiple, often insecure and exploitative work, which can be both agricultural and non-agricultural wage work. I observed the declining importance, primarily among male labourers, within the village. This is reflected in the census data, especially in the case of

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<sup>61</sup> Valathoor consists primarily of single women households and the elderly. This village came into being because of the philanthropist Gyanaprakasam, who identified the worse off population such as divorced women, women separated from their husbands, the elderly population who were abandoned, etc. These people were given 5 cents of land each on what is now Valathoor. The people with the help of the government were able to transfer the deeds to their name. The government had to buy the land from Gyanaprakasam and then give it to the villagers. In this land transaction, the villagers however, ended up with 3 cents of land instead of 5 cents of land. They do not know what happened to the other 2 cents of land but they do blame the government for this.

Thirasu. The following tables in Box 3.1 highlight the changes experienced by the labour force across the region. Thirasu witnessed a decline in the number of main cultivators and agricultural labourers (both male and female) from 2001 to 2011. In Karaimesu, the number of main cultivators more than doubled in the region for both men and women. However, at the same time, the number of male agricultural labourers dropped at a considerable rate. Female agricultural labourers witnessed a marginal drop for the same category.

A close look at the data set provides information about the status of the worker. In Thirasu the decline in main workers from 2001 – 11 witnessed a simultaneous increase in the number of marginal cultivators and agricultural labourers. This is evident particularly for female marginal agricultural labourers, whose numbers increased from 3.03 per cent to 12 per cent. In Karaimesu, with the number of main cultivators more than doubling, a smaller percentage of workers remain as marginal cultivators and agricultural labourers.

The census data highlights broad trends observed in the region. The data collected from the field sites provide further information on the kind of work the people of the village are engaged in. This is shown below, in Table 3.5 and Table 3.6 for female and male respondents respectively in both Karaimesu and Aranhang.

**Box 3.1: Percentage of Different Categories of Workers to Total Workforce**

**Pudukkottai (District), Tamil Nadu**

	<b>Male 2001</b>	<b>Female 2001</b>	<b>Male 2011</b>	<b>Female 2011</b>
<b>Total Workers</b>	59.98	41.02	59.18	40.82
<b>Main Workers</b>	49.98	26.41	51.77	31.36
<b>Main Cultivators</b>	23.99	12.08	18.79	10.18
<b>Main Agricultural Labourers</b>	10.94	10.26	18.03	16.93
<b>Main Household Workers</b>	0.99	0.77	0.69	0.47
<b>Marginal Workers</b>	9.00	14.61	7.40	9.46
<b>Marginal Cultivators</b>	2.03	2.91	1.31	1.22
<b>Marginal Agricultural Labourers</b>	5.51	10.57	4.12	6.50
<b>Marginal Household Workers</b>	0.17	0.47	0.15	0.28

**Aranthangi (Sub-District)**

	<b>Male 2001</b>	<b>Female 2001</b>	<b>Male 2011</b>	<b>Female 2011</b>
<b>Total Workers</b>	60.04	39.96	59.64	40.36
<b>Main Workers</b>	49.52	24.28	52.91	30.60
<b>Main Cultivators</b>	23.40	10.09	20.37	9.71
<b>Main Agricultural Labourers</b>	14.34	11.37	20.02	17.30
<b>Main Household Workers</b>	0.70	0.41	0.73	0.29
<b>Marginal Workers</b>	10.52	15.68	6.73	9.83
<b>Marginal Cultivators</b>	2.44	2.64	1.21	0.89
<b>Marginal Agricultural Labourers</b>	6.98	11.83	4.10	7.89
<b>Marginal Household Workers</b>	0.15	0.50	0.09	0.21

**Thirasu (Village)**

	<b>Male 2001</b>	<b>Female 2001</b>	<b>Male 2011</b>	<b>Female 2011</b>
<b>Total Workers</b>	54.62	45.38	50.45	49.55
<b>Main Workers</b>	52.51	41.86	42.42	36.39
<b>Main Cultivators</b>	32.37	22.67	26.40	20.52
<b>Main Agricultural Labourers</b>	16.70	18.19	9.85	13.44
<b>Main Household Workers</b>	0.17	0.17	0.33	0.19
<b>Marginal Workers</b>	2.11	3.52	7.56	13.15
<b>Marginal Cultivators</b>	0.17	0.33	0.14	0.19
<b>Marginal Agricultural Labourers</b>	1.49	3.03	6.31	12.10
<b>Marginal Household Workers</b>	0.21	0.08	0.19	0.10

**Karaimedu (Village)**

	<b>Male 2001</b>	<b>Female 2001</b>	<b>Male 2011</b>	<b>Female 2011</b>
<b>Total Workers</b>	55.16	44.84	47.14	52.86
<b>Main Workers</b>	40.82	26.68	45.67	48.75
<b>Main Cultivators</b>	17.00	11.48	35.18	33.29
<b>Main Agricultural Labourers</b>	16.37	13.12	7.96	14.03
<b>Main Household Workers</b>	0.29	0.10	0.15	0.15
<b>Marginal Workers</b>	14.33	18.16	1.46	4.11
<b>Marginal Cultivators</b>	1.79	1.84	0.15	0.31
<b>Marginal Agricultural Labourers</b>	10.41	16.03	1.15	3.61
<b>Marginal Household Workers</b>	0.10	0.05	0.08	0.04

Source: Census of India. Primary Census Abstract. Tamil Nadu. 2001. 2011

	Agricultural Wage Labour	Casual Daily Wage Labour	Agricultural Wage and Casual Daily Wage	Cultivator and Casual Daily Wage	Cultivator	Housewife	Vendor	Aanganwadi Worker	Shopkeeper	Construction	Remittance	Landowner
Achari	0.44	0.15	0	0	0	0.58	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ambalakar	23.21	4.96	6.72	10.51	11.97	12.85	0	0.29	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.15
Brahmin	0	0	0	0	0	0.15	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nadar	0	0	0	0	0	0.29	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pallar	1.75	0.15	3.07	0.15	0.15	4.96	0.15	0	0	0	0.15	0
Paraiyar	4.38	0.15	0.44	0.29	0.88	3.21	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pillai	0.00	0	0	0	0.15	0.00	0	0	0	0	0	0
Thevar	0.29	0.29	0.15	0	1.02	4.09	0	0	0	0	0	0
Udaiyar	0.15	0	0	0	0	0.15	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vallar	0.44	0	0.29	0	0	0.29	0	0	0	0.15	0	0
Total	30.66	5.69	10.66	10.95	14.16	26.57	0.15	0.29	0.15	0.29	0.29	0.15

**Table 3.5: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Different Occupations Taken up by Women in Aranthangi.**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Aranthangi, 2011-2012*

*\*Percentages calculated on total population of Karaiedu and Thirasu.*

The data in Table 3.5 highlights the primary occupation female respondents identified with at the time of survey. The table shows that for women agricultural wage work emerges as their predominant occupation. This is the case particularly for Ambalakar and Paraiyar workers. Pallar women rely on a combination of agricultural and casual daily wage work. The casual daily wage work these women were employed in was Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) work. A large percentage of women (26.57 percent) across all caste groups identified themselves as housewives. For Paraiyar, Pallar and Ambalakar women, the reason they provide for not taking up any work is that their husbands send them money regularly. These women therefore, do not have to

worry out looking for jobs and can look after their families. Thevar women belonged to medium or large landowner households and did not participate in the labour force.

The employment structure for men in both the villages, as seen in Table 3.6 below, has a few variations.

Caste	Agricultural Wage Labour	Casual Daily Wage Labour	Cultivator and Casual Daily Wage	Cultivator	Retired and Farmer	Woodcutter	White Collar Jobs	Shopkeeper	Construction	Government Jobs	Other
Achari	0.15	0.29	0	0	0	0	0	0.29	0	0	0.44
Ambalakar	3.65	17.37	21.31	12.12	0.73	0.44	0.58	0.88	3.21	0.58	10.22
Brahmin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.15
Nadar	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.29
Pallar	0.44	7.30	0	0.15	0.00	0.29	0.29	0.29	0.29	0	1.46
Paraiyar	1.31	3.07	2.77	0	0	0	0	0	0.29	0	1.90
Pillai	0	0	0	0.15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Thevar	0.29	1.02	0.15	3.21	0.15	0	0.15	0	0	0	0.88
Udaiyar	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.29
Vallar	0.15	0.29	0.15	0.00	0	0	0.15	0	0	0	0.44
Total	5.99	29.34	24.38	15.62	0.88	0.73	1.17	1.46	3.80	0.58	16.06

**Table 3.6: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Different Occupations Taken up by Men in Aranthangi.**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Aranthangi, 2011-2012*  
*\*Percentages calculated on total population of Karaiedu and Thirasu.*

Table 3.6 clearly shows that the number of male labourers in agricultural wage work is less, engaging only 5.99 per cent of the total population. Men are involved in cultivation and casual daily wage which is separate from agricultural wage work. These figures indicate the movement of male labourers away from agricultural wage work. The category marked as others, accounts for 16.08 per cent of the population. This category includes jobs such

as working as a security guard, electrician, driver, bus conductor, cook, waiter, etc. to name a few. Another sector that employs male labourers is construction. Men who work in construction are Ambalakars, Pallars and Paraiyars. Though not large in number (3.8 per cent), the numbers are nonetheless significant.

Male labourers place a tremendous amount of importance on moving away from agricultural wage work. Male heads of households were asked to rank the kind of work, according to preference. This is shown in Table 3.7 below.

	<b>Agricultural Wage Work</b>	<b>Non-Agricultural Work</b>	<b>Cultivation</b>
<b>Achari</b>	0.15	1.02	0
<b>Ambalakar</b>	7.15	48.91	15.04
<b>Brahmin</b>	0	0.15	0
<b>Nadar</b>	0	0.29	0
<b>Pallar</b>	1.75	8.18	0.58
<b>Paraiyar</b>	2.19	6.42	0.73
<b>Pillai</b>	0	0	0.15
<b>Thevar</b>	0.44	1.90	3.50
<b>Udaiyar</b>	0	0.29	0
<b>Vallar</b>	0.15	1.02	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>11.82</b>	<b>68.18</b>	<b>20.00</b>

**Table 3.7: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Work Most Preferred in Aranthangi.**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Aranthangi, 2011-2012*

*\*Percentages calculated on total population of Karaiedu and Thirasu.*

Table 3.7 highlights the work most preferred by household heads (usually men). Across all caste groups, men preferred non-agricultural work and cultivation to agricultural wage work. The inter-caste differences highlight that the majority of Thevars, who are the landowning caste in the region, prefer cultivation. A majority of Ambalakars, Paraiyars and Pallars in the region, who belong to the classes of labour prefer non-agricultural work to agricultural wage employment.

A look back at Table 3.5 and Table 3.6 reveal that women take up a large portion of agricultural wage work in the region compared to men. Men are on the lookout for non-agricultural jobs. At the same time, men who remain in agriculture are cultivators. With

more women involved in agricultural wage work than men, understanding the process of labour tying among the female labour force becomes all the more important.

### 3.2 Hooghly: A Description

The district of Hooghly is surrounded in the south by Howrah, in the west by Midnapore, in the north by Bankura and Burdwan, and in the east by Nadia and South 24- Parganas (Map 4). The main river flowing through this region is the Hooghly. The headquarters of the district is in Chinsurah. The two blocks selected for the field sites are Polba-Dadpur and Pandua<sup>62</sup>. The district has four administrative sub-divisions- Chinsurah, Chandannagore, Srirampore and Arambagh. Polba-Dadpur and Pandua come under the Chinsurah subdivision (Hooghly District Profile, 2010-11).

The two villages selected for field work are Madhabpur in Polba-Dadpur and Bardhanagar in Pandua. Bardhanagar is 23 kms from Chinsurah railway station and the village is located along State Highway 13 (Map 5). Madhabpur is 19 kms from Chinsurah and is off the Durgapur expressway, part of National Highway 2 (Map 6). Both these villages are census villages which are located next to their respective Block Development Offices.

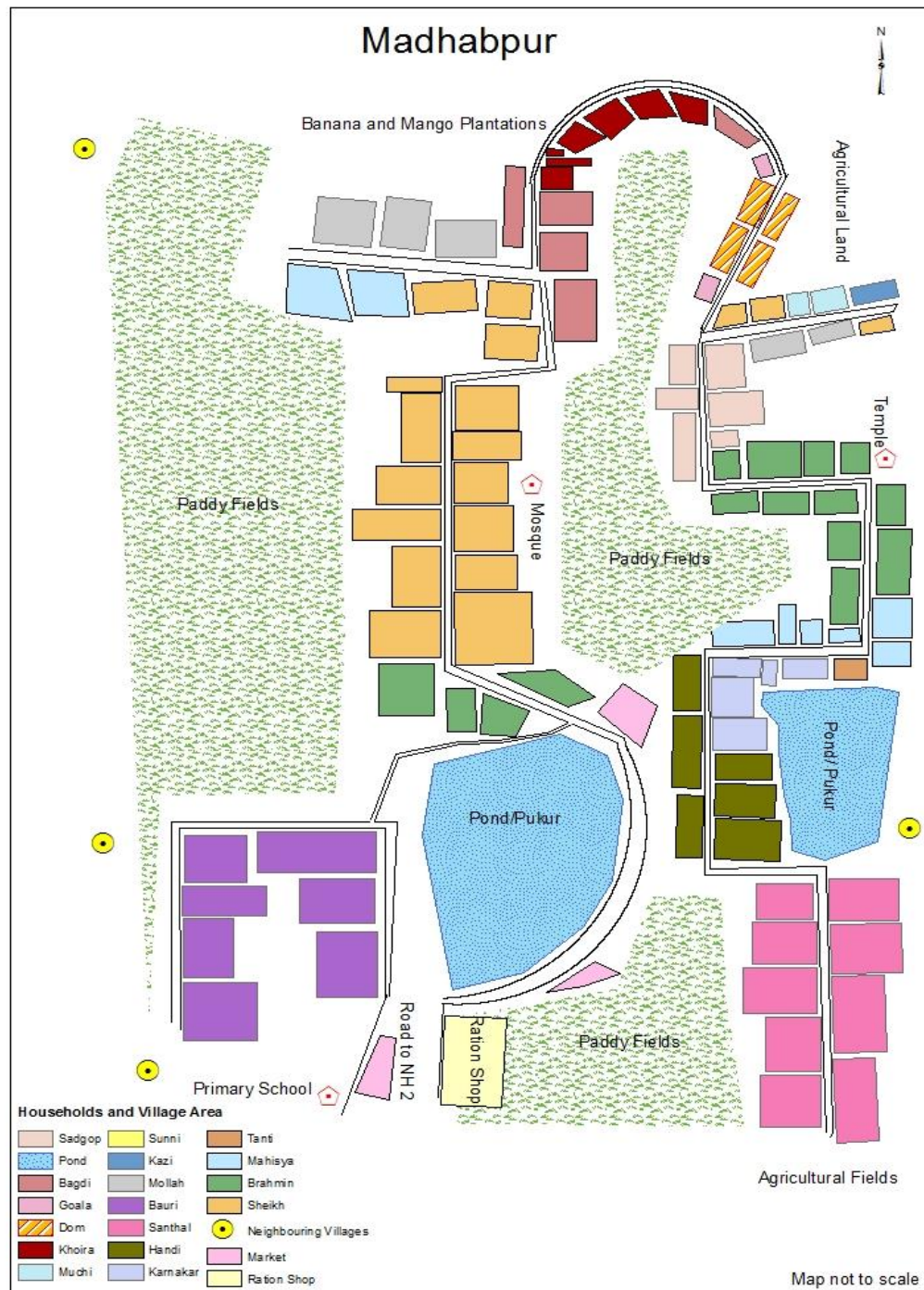
As observed in Karaimedu and Thirasu, the physical layout of the villages in Chinsurah shows a clustering of caste groups. There are specific pockets which house the upper and lower caste groups, with very limited areas of interactions. If landowners need to find workers, they have to go to the Santhal (Scheduled Tribe) or Bauri (Scheduled Caste) *basti* (locality). In Chinsurah, in both villages, men are usually involved in non-agricultural work whereas women remain confined to agricultural tasks. Non-agricultural work in these villages is further segregated based on caste groups. The Barhmins are the most educated in the villages and usually work as doctors, engineers and lawyers (either in Chinsurah Town or in Kolkata). The Bagdi and Santhal men usually work as loaders, fruit vendors in local trains and busses, some find employment in neighbourhood retail stores, drivers, and many of them carry out MGNREGA work. Unlike in Aranthangi where it was predominantly

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<sup>62</sup> The region has numerous low lying tracts and rivers and the first group of people to inhabit the area was tribes belonging to the fishing caste, such as the Bagdis (Bengal District Gazetteer Hooghly, 1912).

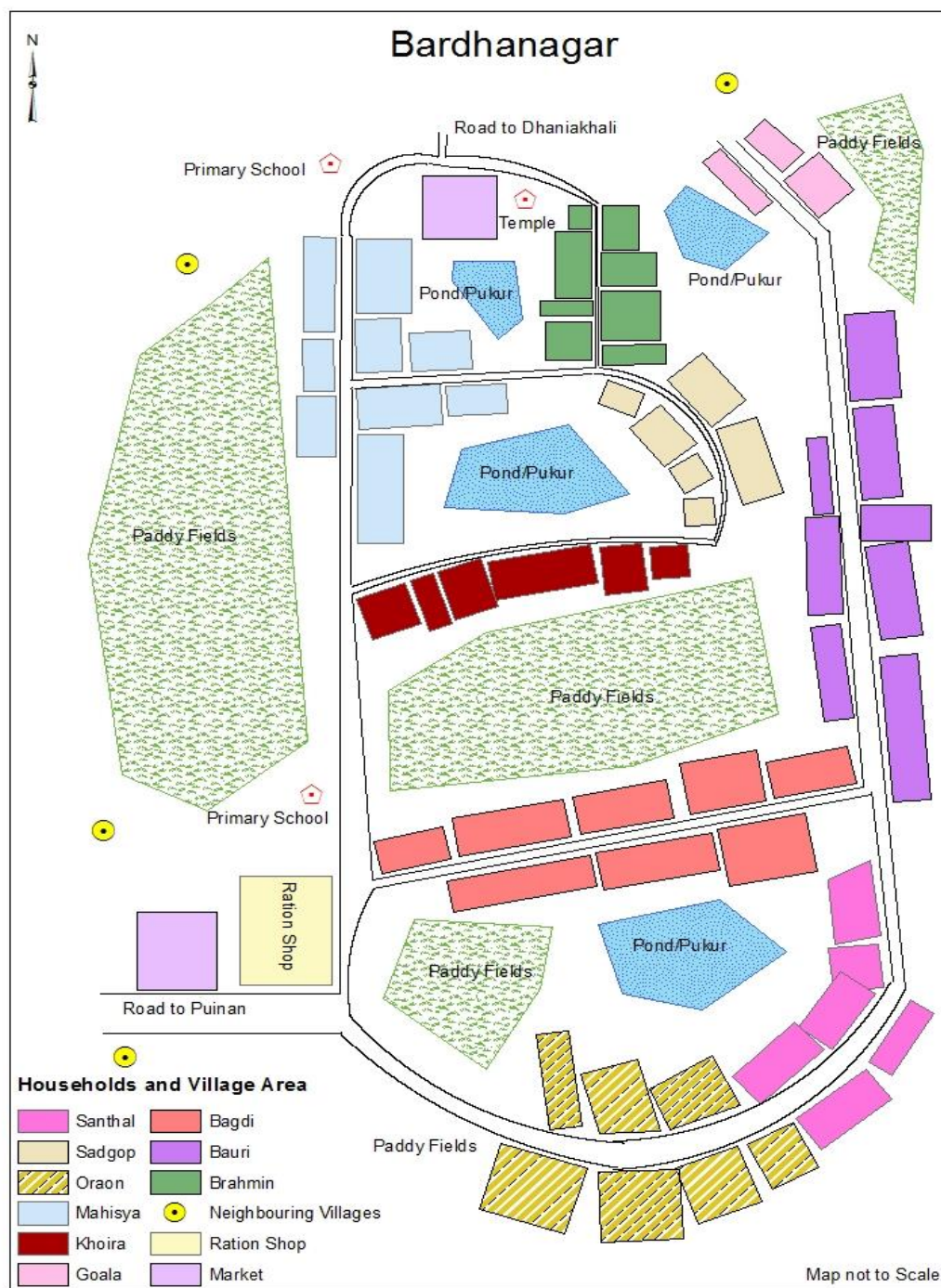


women who took up MGNREGA work, in Chinsurah it is the men. A reason for this is that casual daily wage labourers in Chinsurah succumb to the seasonality and dearth of non-agricultural employment available to them. Male labourers also do not want to carry out agricultural work, therefore in such instances they rely on MGNREGA work. Before examining the socio-economic characteristics of the two villages further, I first provide an introductory discussion on the physiology and agricultural production.



**Figure 11: Layout of Village Madhabpur- Chinsurah**

\*Residential blocks in the map are not representative of actual number of households in the village.



**Figure 12: Layout of Village Bardhanagar- Chinsurah**

\*Residential blocks in the map are not representative of actual number of households in the village.

### 3.2.1 Physiology

Hooghly falls under the sub-humid to humid soil agro climatic region, with temperatures ranging from 16°C to 36°C. The climate of the region is largely influenced by the monsoons. The district receives an average rainfall of 1374 mm (Hooghly District Profile, 2011). The maximum amount of rainfall occurs during the monsoons in August through till September. While Hooghly is the main river of this region, the Damodar River has an important bearing on the agrarian economy of the region with the Damodar Valley Corporation which was set up in 1948. The main soil of the region is alluvium (referred to as the Ganga riverine alluvium). The water logging conditions of the soil are conducive for cultivating paddy and jute.

Land in this region, unlike in Pudukkottai, is intensively cropped. This is observed in the land use pattern for the district as a whole where a majority (64.9 per cent) of the land is

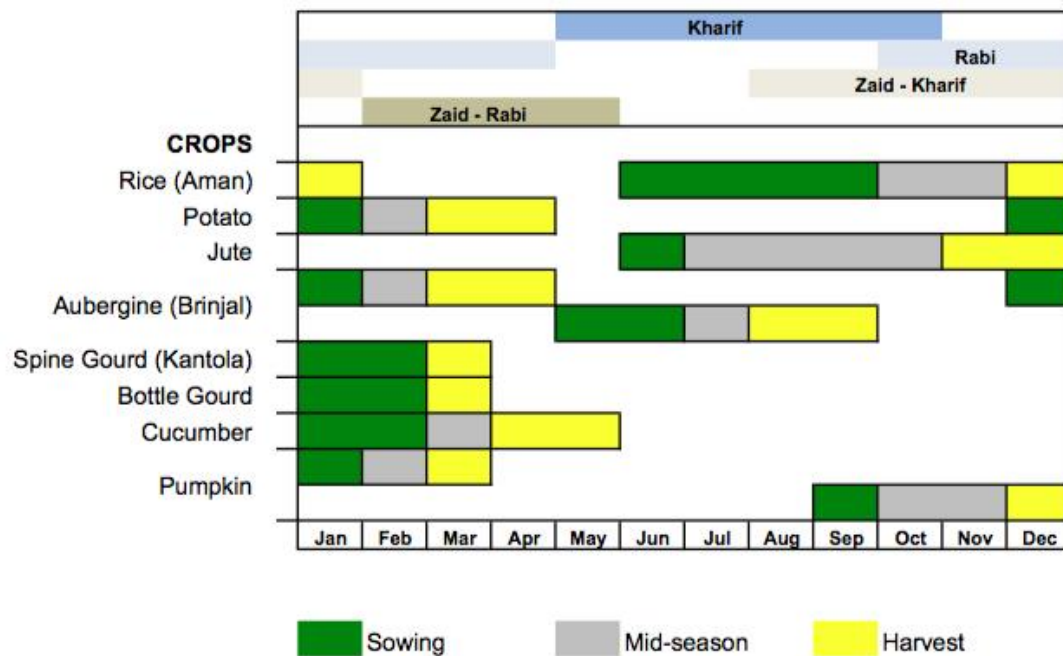
Sl. No.	Land Use Pattern	Extent in Percentages
1.	Cultivable Area	69.49
2.	Forest	0.16
3.	Land Use for Non-Agriculture Purpose	28.10
4.	Permanent Pastures	0.015
5.	Cultivable Waste	0.42
6.	Land under Misc. Trees, Crops and Groves	0.59
7.	Barren and Uncultivable	0.03
8.	Current Fallows	0.11
9.	Other Fallows	0.031

**Table 3.8: Land Use Pattern of Hooghly District**

*Source: Agriculture contingency plan for District: Hooghly, Department of Agriculture and Co-operation (2011).*

The growing periods of the crops are *kharif*, *rabi* and an interim period of *zaid-kharif* and *zaid-rabi*. Irrigation in the district is used for *rabi* crops. Government irrigation is provided by the Damodar Valley Corporation dam. There is groundwater irrigation referred to as 'private mini' and privately owned tanks and *pukurs* (pond). The main crops cultivated in this region are paddy (*dhaan*), potato (*aloo*) and jute (*pāt*). The agricultural calendar for

Chinsurah given below highlights the different kinds of crops grown in the region and their growing seasons.



**Figure 13: Agricultural Calendar of Chinsurah**

*Source: Field Survey in Chinsurah, April, 2011*

Paddy sown in this region is referred to as *aman dhaan* (also known as *himantik*). The sowing period for paddy, which extends from mid-May to mid-September refers to the sowing and transplanting periods. Paddy can be sown by a broadcast method, but farmers in the region prefer sowing it in a nursery and then transplanting it in the fields. It is during this period that most work is available in the region, particularly for female agricultural labourers. Each *bigha*<sup>63</sup> of land goes through four ploughing prior to transplanting. Ploughing in the village is carried out exclusively by men using power tillers.

<sup>63</sup> A unit of land measurement used in West Bengal, where 3 *bighas* of land equals 1 acre.





**Figure 14: Transplanting Paddy in Chinsurah: Female dominated task with a male labourer to oversee the group.**

*Source: Author's own image, Madhabpur, Chinsurah, 2012.*

Potato has a much shorter sowing and harvesting period. Women only take part in the harvesting or weeding (mid-season) period for potato. This is a crop that predominantly employs men. Jute, which is an important crop across the district, is cultivated in very small pockets in both the villages. The sowing and harvesting of jute are carried out only by male labourers. Female labourers usually help with tying of the jute stalks together, and with weeding, which is carried out two to three times in the growing period. The participation of women in jute is limited as it is considered to require a specific skill. As seen in the agricultural calendar, seeds are sown in May. Once grown, the stalks are cleaned, bundled up and steeped in a stagnant body of water (a process referred to as retting). After this the stalks are taken out, beaten, the fibre extracted, which is then sold. The very nature of the tasks excludes female labourers from this crop.

Apart from rice, female participation is observed in vegetable farming. The vegetables are grown in the three months between harvesting of the *rabi* crop and sowing of the *kharif* crop, however with certain periods of overlap. Landowners in Chinsurah do not tend to engage in vegetable farming themselves, unless there is a large plantation. Vegetable farming in Chinsurah is carried out by female labourers, who sow, maintain and harvest the vegetable. The agricultural calendar shows an overlap with potato. However, with limited participation of women in potato, there is very little overlap of work for female labourers.

While women cultivate vegetables in this region, they do not sell them in the market. This process is carried out either by their husbands or the landowners.

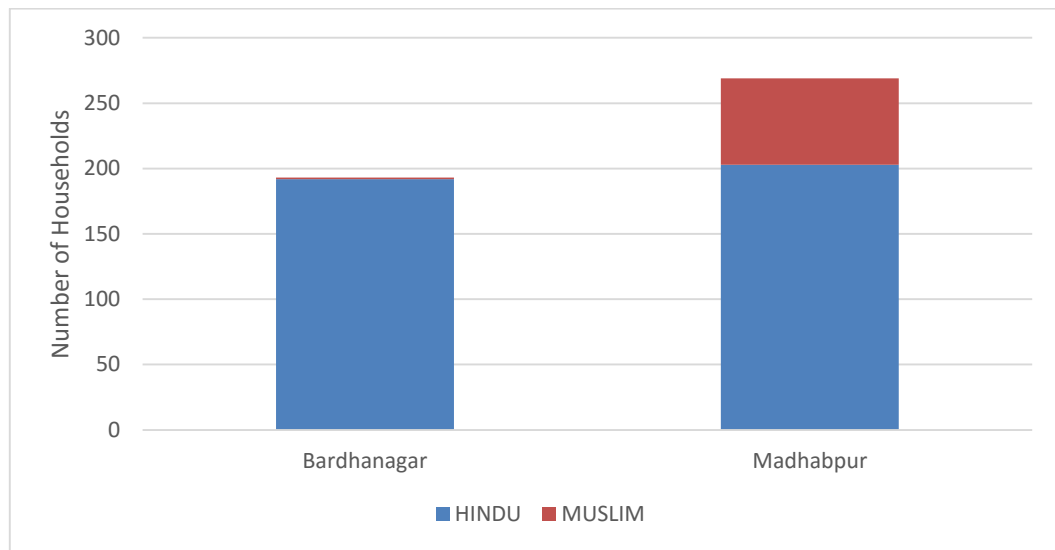
A comparison of the agricultural calendars in the two regions gives an indication of the amount of work available to agricultural labourers. Agricultural wage work in Chinsurah, especially for female labourers, is not only limited by lesser number of crops cultivated in the region, but also by the crop itself. Moreover, the caste positionalities also affect access to work, where women who belong to higher caste groups are socially constrained from carrying out any form of manual labour.

The following section provides a detailed discussion of socio-economic background of the two villages, identifying the ways in which caste and class intersect, and the effects of these on employment.

### **3.2.2 Socio-economic Background of Chinsurah**

The religious composition of the two villages are distinctly different. The predominant religious group in Madhabpur and Bardhanagar are Hindus. Bardhanagar has a negligible Muslim population, where 99.48 percent of the population are Hindus. In Madhabpur, 24.54 percent of the population is Muslim and 75.46 percent are Hindus. Despite constituting a minority religion in this region, the Muslims are the landowning group in both the villages.

Among the Hindus, landownership adheres to the caste structure, where the upper caste Brahmins are the landowners, with a few large landholders and a majority of them as medium landowners.



**Figure 15: Number of Hindu and Muslim Households in Chinsurah**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Chinsurah, 2012*

Table 3.9 shows the different caste groups present in both villages. Though the Muslims do not adhere to a caste system, they do identify themselves with the different sects that have hierarchical underpinnings. For ease of understanding, I refer to them by their sect rather than clubbing them together as Muslims. The caste groups mentioned are how the respondents identified themselves.



Sl. No.	Caste Groups	Number of Households			
		General	OBC	SC	ST
1.	Bagdi			72	
2.	Bauri			84	
3.	Brahmin	42			
4.	Dom			12	
5.	Goala	7	5		
6.	Handi			11	
7.	Karmakar	9			
8.	Khoira				45
9.	Mahisya	20		2	
10.	Moiria	1			
11.	Muchi			2	
12.	Oraon				6
13.	Sadgop	14		5	
14.	Santhal				57
15.	Tanti	1			
	<b>Muslims</b>				
16.	Kazi	6			
17.	Mollah	1	2		
18.	Sheikh	44	4		
19.	Sunni	10			
20.	<b>Total</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>108</b>

**Table 3.9: Distribution of Caste Groups in Chinsurah**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Chinsurah, 2011-2012*

The largest group of people in both the villages belong to the Scheduled Caste category (40.69 per cent), followed by the Scheduled Tribe (ST) (23.37 per cent) and the General caste (33.54 per cent). Some of the Goala, Mollah and Sheikhs recorded themselves as Other Backwards Castes (OBCs), and five Sadgop households recorded themselves as Scheduled Castes at the time of survey. These Sadgops were small landholders and did not work as agricultural labourers. The agricultural labourers in this village came from the SC and ST category.

The overlapping of caste and class categories is observed with land ownership.

Caste	Landholding Size in Acres			
	0	<1	1 - 3	>3
Bagdi	11.69	1.08	2.60	0.22
Bauri	17.32	0.87	0	0
Brahmin	0.43	4.11	5.63	1.08
Dom	0.22	1.30	0.43	0.65
Goala	0.43	0.00	1.08	1.08
Handi	1.52	0.87	0	0
Karmakar	0.22	0.65	0.43	0.65
Kazi	0.22	1.08	0	0
Khoira	9.52	0.22	0	0
Mahisya	0.65	0.65	1.30	1.73
Moiri	0	0	0.22	0
Mollah	0.43	0	0.22	0
Muchi	0.43	0	0	0
Sadgop	0	0.65	1.30	0.65
Santhals	9.31	2.38	1.52	0.22
Sheikh	0.87	3.25	4.11	2.16
Sunni	0	0.43	1.30	0.43
Tanti	0.22	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>53.46</b>	<b>17.53</b>	<b>20.13</b>	<b>8.87</b>

**Table 3.10: Percentage Distribution of Landholdings According to Caste, Chinsurah**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Chinsurah, 2012*

Table 3.10 reveals that a majority of the population surveyed are landless (53.46 percent). The caste composition shows that a majority of the landless are Santhals (ST), Bauris (SC) and Bagdis (SC). The SCs and STs who own small plots of land, are also *bargadars* (sharecroppers). For a majority of these households, the land was given as gifts by the larger landowners (a more detailed discussion of is in Chapter 4).

The medium landholders are primarily Brahmins. The large landholders which comprise the smallest section of the population are predominantly Sheikhs. Other caste groups such as Brahmins, and Mahisya, though smaller in number, also own such large quantities of land. One particular Mahisya family reported owning 17 acres of land. These figures

highlight the shift in power from the upper caste Brahmins, as the ruling elites to the Sheikhs among the Muslims and the Mahisyas among the Hindus.

The overlapping of caste and class identities in the village become clear in the following Table 3.11 which describes the economic status of households surveyed.

Caste	Economic Status <sup>64</sup>			
	Rich	Middle	Poor	Poorest
Bagdi	0	2.16	4.11	9.31
Bauri	0	0	4.76	13.42
Brahmin	2.81	4.33	1.73	0.22
Dom	0.22	0.87	1.08	0.43
Goala	1.08	1.08	0	0.43
Handi	0	0	1.30	1.08
Karmakar	0	1.08	0.87	0
Kazi	0	0.65	0.65	0
Khoira	0	0	2.81	6.93
Mahisya	0.65	2.81	1.30	0
Moiri	0.22	0	0	0
Mollah	0	0.43	0.22	0
Muchi	0	0	0	0.43
Sadgop	0	2.60	1.52	0
Santhals	0.22	1.08	3.68	8.66
Sheikh	0.65	6.93	2.60	0.22
Sunni	0	1.30	0.43	0.43
Tanti	0.00	0.00	0.22	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>5.84</b>	<b>25.32</b>	<b>27.27</b>	<b>41.56</b>

**Table 3.11: Caste-Wise distribution of Households according to Economic Status in Chinsurah**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Chinsurah, 2012*

*\*Percentages calculated on total population surveyed in Madhabpur and Bardhanagar*

A majority of the population identify themselves as belonging to the poorest category. As with landholding, the Santhals (ST), Bauris (SC) and Bagdis (SC) belong to this category. Although the Brahmins are primarily medium farmers, a majority of them are identified as rich, possibly due to the diversification of occupation. The Brahmins, who are the most

<sup>64</sup> Refer to footnote 59 for explanation on the different categories used.

educated in the villages, have now moved out of agriculture and are employed in high paying occupations, such as doctors, engineers and even government civil servants.

The spatial manifestation of this class and caste divide is observed in the layout of the village (Map 5 & 6), with the Bagdis, Bauris and the Santhals living at the outskirts of the village. The only source of drinking water for these communities is a communal water tap. The Sheikh, Mahisya and Sadgop localities are surrounded by ponds, which is used for fish farming. Many of these ponds in the villages are private owned.



**Figure 16: A Santhal basti (locality) in Bardhanagar with mud floors and walls.**

*Source: Author's own image, Bardhanagar, Chinsurah, 2012.*

The caste positions and class positions determine access to certain economic activities in the villages. I discuss the different employment opportunities available in Chinsurah in the following section.

#### **3.2.2.1 Employment**

Marginal, small farmers and landless labourers constitute a majority of the population in Chinsurah (70.99 per cent). However, unlike in Aranthangi, where the diversity of occupations drew (particularly) male labourers out of agriculture, Chinsurah does not show the same.

### Box 3.2: Percentage of Different Categories of Workers to Total Workforce

#### Hooghly (District), West Bengal

	Male 2001	Female 2001	Male 2011	Female 2011
<b>Total Workers</b>	75.84	24.16	78.41	21.59
<b>Main Workers</b>	66.34	11.83	64.11	10.86
<b>Main Cultivators</b>	17.12	0.88	15.55	0.68
<b>Main Agricultural Labourers</b>	17.46	5.35	19.94	5.80
<b>Main Household Workers</b>	2.65	1.36	2.81	0.96
<b>Marginal Workers</b>	9.49	12.33	14.29	10.74
<b>Marginal Cultivators</b>	1.16	1.96	1.23	0.64
<b>Marginal Agricultural Labourers</b>	5.82	5.52	9.02	6.01
<b>Marginal Household Workers</b>	0.28	1.78	0.65	1.44

#### Chinsurah (Sub-district)

	Male 2001	Female 2001	Male 2011	Female 2011
<b>Total Workers</b>	80.13	19.87	71.35	28.65
<b>Main Workers</b>	69.02	13.42	59.54	15.68
<b>Main Cultivators</b>	4.94	0.41	15.39	0.76
<b>Main Agricultural Labourers</b>	8.40	4.03	26.79	11.51
<b>Main Household Workers</b>	1.16	0.70	1.40	0.90
<b>Marginal Workers</b>	11.11	6.44	11.84	12.97
<b>Marginal Cultivators</b>	0.49	0.16	0.97	0.65
<b>Marginal Agricultural Labourers</b>	5.45	4.14	8.33	8.26
<b>Marginal Household Workers</b>	0.23	0.33	0.28	1.66

#### Bardhanagar (Village)

	Male 2001	Female 2001	Male 2011	Female 2011
<b>Total Workers</b>	64.16	35.84	71.48	28.52
<b>Main Workers</b>	63.76	35.35	67.41	18.33
<b>Main Cultivators</b>	10.30	4.75	22.59	1.11
<b>Main Agricultural Labourers</b>	39.60	28.91	25.37	15.56
<b>Main Household Workers</b>	3.76	0.40	0.00	0.37
<b>Marginal Workers</b>	0.40	0.59	4.07	10.19
<b>Marginal Cultivators</b>	0.40	0.00	0.19	0.56
<b>Marginal Agricultural Labourers</b>	0.00	0.59	3.52	9.26
<b>Marginal Household Workers</b>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.37

#### Madhabpur (Village)

	Male 2001	Female 2001	Male 2011	Female 2011
<b>Total Workers</b>	56.96	43.04	62.27	37.73
<b>Main Workers</b>	46.09	1.30	62.27	28.94
<b>Main Cultivators</b>	16.96	0.43	21.25	0.00
<b>Main Agricultural Labourers</b>	26.06	0.87	34.80	28.57
<b>Main Household Workers</b>	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
<b>Marginal Workers</b>	10.87	41.74	0.00	8.79
<b>Marginal Cultivators</b>	6.52	7.39	0.00	0.00
<b>Marginal Agricultural Labourers</b>	3.91	22.17	0.00	0.37
<b>Marginal Household Workers</b>	0.00	12.71	0.00	6.59

Source: Census of India, Primary Census Abstract, West Bengal, 2001, 2011

The predominant occupation for men and women in Chinsurah is agricultural wage work, followed by cultivation for men and housework for women. These agricultural labourers/cultivators, identified as the classes of labour, are dependent on agriculture (whether wage work or cultivation). While male labourers do branch out and look for non-agricultural work, this is almost absent for female labourers, as evident in the census data shown in Box 3.2.

The changes observed over the ten-year period across the district, sub-district and villages show an overall increase in female agricultural labourers in region. The jump is particularly steep in the case of female (main) agricultural wage workers in Madhabpur. Bardhanagar witnessed a decline in the number of female (main) agricultural wage workers. The number of female cultivators in the two villages registered a decline. In comparison, male workers recorded an increase in both agricultural wage work and in cultivation. These trends are explained with fewer female activities available in agriculture in the region, and with increased competition for agricultural jobs with men. Table 3.12 below highlights this dependence on agricultural wage work particularly among the classes of labour.

	Agricultural Wage Labour	Casual Daily Wage Labour	Cultivator and Casual Daily Wage	Cultivator	Retired and Farmer	Vendor	Shopkeeper	White Collar Jobs	Government Jobs	Other <sup>65</sup>
<b>Bagdi</b>	10.33	0.44	0	2.64	0	0.22	0.22	0.22	0.44	1.32
<b>Bauri</b>	14.51	0	0	0	0	0.22	0.44	0	0.88	2.42
<b>Brahmin</b>	0	0	0	2.42	0.44	0.22	1.10	1.32	0.66	3.08
<b>Dom</b>	0.22	0	0.44	0.22	0	0	0	0.66	0.22	0.22
<b>Goala</b>	0	0	0	0.44	0	0	0	0	0.22	1.10
<b>Handi</b>	1.54	0	0.22	0.22	0	0	0	0	0	0.44
<b>Karmakar</b>	0	0	0	0.22	0	0.22	0.22	0	0.22	1.54
<b>Kazi</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0.66	0.22	0	0	0.44
<b>Khoira</b>	7.47	0	0	0	0	0.22	0	0	0.22	1.76
<b>Mahisya</b>	0.22	0	0	2.64	0	0.66	0	0.44	0	0.88
<b>Moirā</b>	0	0	0.22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Mollah</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.22	0.44
<b>Muchi</b>	0.44	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Sadgop</b>	0	0	0	2.86	0	0	0	0.66	0	0.66
<b>Santhals</b>	7.91	0	1.54	1.32	0	0	1.54	0.22	0.22	1.10
<b>Sheikh</b>	0	0	0	3.52	0	0	0	0.66	0.22	5.93
<b>Sunni</b>	0	0	0	1.32	0	0	0	0	0	0.88
<b>Tanti</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.22
<b>Total</b>	<b>42.64</b>	<b>0.44</b>	<b>2.42</b>	<b>17.80</b>	<b>0.44</b>	<b>2.42</b>	<b>3.74</b>	<b>4.18</b>	<b>3.52</b>	<b>22.42</b>

**Table 3.12: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Male Occupations in Chinsurah**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Chinsurah, 2012*

*\*Percentages calculated on total population of Madhabpur and Bardhanagar.*

<sup>65</sup> Respondents categorised as Others are much higher in Chinsurah (22.42 per cent) compared to Aranthangi (16.06 percent). A closer look at Table 3.12 reveals that a high percentage of Brahmins and Sheikhs occupy this category, whereas those from the laboring class are much less. The Brahmins are employed as railways attendants, electricians and school teachers. A large number of the Sheikhs migrate to Gujarat and Maharashtra for embroidery work. The Bauris and Bagdis usually find seasonal employment as loaders in retail markets and mills. However, this work is available for short periods of time and the labourers in Chinsurah continue to complain of a dearth of non-agricultural jobs in the region. In order to combat this problem, male labourers often carry out MGNREGA work.

The male agricultural labourers constitute a majority of the workforce. This category comprises of labourers from the Santhal, Bauri, Bagdi and Khoira (ST) community. Unlike in Aranthangi, construction does not feature as a prominent employment sector for male labourers. Moreover, very few male labourers are engaged in casual daily wage employment (0.44 percent), which indicates the dependence on agricultural wage work. Shopkeeping and vendoring are alternate occupations for male labourers in the region. As observed in Table 3.12, a majority of male cultivators are Sheikhs, Mahisyas and Brahmins. Female occupations in Chinsurah show results similar to those calculated from the Census data (Box 3.2).



	Agricultural Wage Labour	Casual Daily Wage Labour	Cultivator and Casual Daily Wage	Cultivator	Housewife	Vendor	Aanganwadi Worker	Shopkeeper	Artisan/Embroidery	Begging	Maid
Bagdi	10.39	0.43	0	0.43	4.33	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bauri	15.15	0.22	0	0	2.38	0	0	0	0	0.22	0.22
Brahmin	0	0	0	0.22	8.87	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dom	0.65	0	0	0	1.52	0	0	0	0.43	0	0
Goala	0	0.43	0	0	2.16	0	0	0	0	0	0
Handi	1.73	0	0	0	0.65	0	0	0	0	0	0
Karmakar	0	0	0	0	1.73	0	0	0	0.22	0	0
Kazi	0	0	0	0	0.65	0	0	0	0.65	0	0
Khoira	6.49	0.22	0	0	2.60	0.22	0	0	0	0	0
Mahisya	0	0	0	0	4.55	0	0.22	0	0	0	0
Moiri	0	0	0	0	0.22	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mollah	0	0	0	0	0.43	0	0	0	0.22	0	0
Muchi	0.43	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sadgop	0	0	0	0	4.11	0	0	0	0	0	0
Santhals	10.82	0	0.65	1.08	1.08	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sheikh	0	0	0	0.43	9.09	0	0	0.43	0.65	0	0
Sunni	0	0	0	0.22	0.65	0	0	0	1.30	0	0
Tanti	0	0	0	0	0.22	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	45.67	1.30	0.65	2.38	45.24	0.22	0.22	0.43	3.46	0.22	0.22

**Table 3.13: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Female Occupations in Chinsurah.**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Chinsurah, 2012*

*\*Percentages calculated on total population of Madhabpur and Bardhanagar.*

The percentage of women engaged in agricultural wage work is marginally higher than men. In addition, though small in number, 1.30 percent of female labourers are engaged in casual daily wage employment. The casual daily wage employment identified by these women are MGNREGA work. This indicates that women in Chinsurah have limited access to MGNREGA work (discussed in Chapter 6).

The number of cultivators recorded in this region is very small (2.38 percent). This is primarily because cultivation is not considered to be a female activity. Women who do participate do so in the capacity of unpaid farmers. This figure is higher than those involved in casual daily wage work. The reason for this is that even though it is not socially accepted, at the time of survey, female respondents identified themselves as cultivators.

A significant proportion of women are engaged in embroidery. Though spread across different caste groups, these women predominantly belong to Muslim households. This income generating activity does not require women to leave the premises of the household (a restriction of mobility put in place by the religion, and social position of the household). The local Self-Help Group Bandhan (discussed in Chapter 5) promotes embroidery among these women. Despite these multiple economic activities taking place in the villages, a majority of women identify with their gender ascribed roles of being a housewife. This is in lesser percentage among the classes of labour in comparison to the landed classes.

As the data tabulated shows, a significant proportion of the classes of labour rely on agricultural wage work. This is reflected in Table 3.14 which identifies the work most preferred by the respondents in the village.

	Agricultural Wage Work	Non-Agricultural Work	Cultivation
<b>Bagdi</b>	6.93	6.06	2.81
<b>Bauri</b>	11.69	6.49	0
<b>Brahmin</b>	0	3.90	5.19
<b>Dom</b>	0.22	1.30	1.08
<b>Goala</b>	0	1.08	1.52
<b>Handi</b>	0.87	1.08	0.43
<b>Karmakar</b>	0	1.30	1.08
<b>Kazi</b>	0	1.30	0.00
<b>Khoira</b>	6.49	2.81	0.22
<b>Mahisya</b>	0.22	1.08	3.46
<b>Moiri</b>	0	0	0.22
<b>Mollah</b>	0	0.43	0.22
<b>Muchi</b>	0.43	0	0
<b>Sadgop</b>	0	0.87	3.25
<b>Santhals</b>	7.58	3.46	2.60
<b>Sheikh</b>	0.22	3.46	6.49
<b>Sunni</b>	0	0.65	1.30
<b>Tanti</b>	0	0.22	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>34.63</b>	<b>35.50</b>	<b>29.87</b>

**Table 3.14: Caste-Wise Percentage Distribution of Work Most Preferred in Chinsurah**

*Source: Household Level Village Census in Chinsurah, 2012*

*\*Percentages calculated on total population of Madhabpur and Bardhanagar.*

The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes preferred agricultural wage work as this was work that brought in household earnings. Those who preferred cultivation belonged to the landowning classes. A significant number of respondents across all caste groups prefer non-agricultural work, as this work was associated with higher pay. Brahmins and Sheikhs constitute part of the skilled/ professional workforce and therefore, entry into non-agricultural work results in higher pay and higher status within the village community.

This section discussed the socio-economic characteristics of the two regions. The different occupations can be placed within the hierarchy of wage labour proposed by Lerche (2010), who uses Bernstein's concept of classes of labour. Formal occupations higher up in the hierarchy, are occupied by the upper castes/ ruling castes. Casual agricultural labourers are lower down in the hierarchy, and these are occupied by the lower caste groups within the

village society. These occupations are associated with low incomes which maintains the class and caste positions of the classes of labour. As observed in the data sets provided, and by Chen (2008, cited in Lerche, 2010), women are found at the bottom of this hierarchy, employed in low waged work.

Within this labour hierarchy, there are differences observed in the two regions. Unlike in Chinsurah, Aranthangi does not show such a strong inclination to agricultural wage work. There is greater movement of men to non-farm activities. This vacuum created by men is filled by women who take up agricultural wage work and cultivation. The effects of these processes condition the nature of work available, the form of payment received, and the labour relation itself.

The following section provides an account of the different agricultural wage labour relations observed in the region that vary with season and with crop.

### **3.3 Labour Relations in Aranthangi and Chinsurah**

The primary focus of this thesis is on female labour, and this section delineates rural female labour relations in Aranthangi and Chinsurah. The discussion in the previous section on agricultural crop cycles and economic activities of the region, provides an indication to the nature of work made available in the two regions, and how this is differentiated along lines of gender.

Agricultural wage labour has specific tasks assigned to men and women, with certain periods of overlap. The wage rates obtained in each of these activities varies. The wage gap in agriculture is also found in other activities. Table 3.15 below provides information on the different activities and associated wage rates for men and women in the region.

Village	Occupation/Task	Female Wages	Male Wages
Aranthangi	Paddy i. Sowing ii. Weeding	Rs.80/- to Rs.100/-per day	Rs.80/- to Rs.100/- per day
Chinsurah	Similar wages are observed for groundnut in Aranthangi and potato in Chinsurah	Rs.60/- plus two kilos of rice in kind	Rs.120/- per day, <i>bidi</i> as payment in kind
Aranthangi	Harvesting (paddy)	Rs.110/- per day	Rs.300/- per day Men have to carry/transport bundles of rice to the granary
Chinsurah		Rs.60/- per day plus two kilos of rice	Rs.150/- per day (no payment taken in kind)
Aranthangi	Sugarcane cutting leaves and stalks	Rs.110/- per day	Rs.180/- per day
Chinsurah	Potato sowing and harvesting	-	Rs.150/-per day with payment in kind tobacco, or bath oils
Chinsurah	Potato weeding	Rs.60/- per day plus two kilos of rice	
Aranthangi	Horticulture	Rs.80/- per day	-
Aranthangi	Ploughing – 1. Tractors 2. Ox plough		Rs.350 /- per day Rs.300/- per day
Chinsurah	3. Power tillers		Rs.150/- per day
Aranthangi	Fertilisers	Rs.100/- per day	Rs.150/- per day
Chinsurah			Rs.120/- per day
Aranthangi	Loading	Rs.100/- per day	Rs.250/- per day
Chinsurah		Rs.90/- per day	Rs.200/- per day
Aranthangi	Construction	Rs.250/- per day	Rs.350/- per day
Chinsurah	MGNREGA work	Rs.100/- per day	Rs.100/-per day
Aranthangi		Rs.130/- per day	Rs.130/- per day
Chinsurah	Shopkeeper (General Stores)	Rs.7000/- per month	Rs.7000/- per month
Aranthangi		Rs.9000/- per month	Rs.9000/- per month
Aranthangi	Driver 1. Auto rickshaw 2. Bus		Rs. 10,000/- per month Rs.7000/- per month
Aranthangi	Aaganwadi Worker	Rs.2500/- per month	-
Chinsurah	Domestic maid 1. As <i>bandha kishen</i> 2. Only working as maid	One meal per day Rs.1500/- per month	-

**Table 3.15: Wage structure and Wage Gaps in Aranthangi and Chinsurah.**

*Source: Field Work in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, 2011-2012*

Table 3.15 provides a description of some of the common occupations found in the two regions. Distinct wage gaps between women and men exist in occupations such as loading. The male wages are more than double in both the regions. The reason provided by

employers is that this work is tedious and hard, and women cannot put in similar amounts of physical effort as male labourers.

A look at agricultural activities in the two regions reveal that there are certain activities that continue to remain male-specific tasks, such as ploughing. The wage rates were the same for male and female labourers in Aranthangi for sowing and weeding activities. However, with such low pay, men rarely participated in these activities – referred to as female activities. For similar activities in Chinsurah, there were differences in male and female wages. An explanation provided by male labourers and employers in the region is that female labourers take part of their wages in rice, as payment in kind. While this might seem a plausible justification, the total amount does not equal male wages. The price of 2 kilos of rice, at the time of survey, came to a total of Rs.40/- which brings the total wages to Rs.100/-, still less than the male wages.

During harvest season, male wages in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, is almost double that of female wages. The employers provide these high wages because the men have to carry bundles of grains to certain collection points. This is considered loading work; which men are more capable of doing than female labourers. Landowners feel that paying this amount to male labourers is profitable, as they do not have to pay extra for labourers to carry out exclusively loading tasks. Female labourers, in both the regions, were seen to carry out similar loading activities, but they do not receive any recognition as it is predominantly a male activity. Female participation in these activities is often understood as help that they provide to male labourers, who are members of their household. Consequently, female work participation is hidden due to their domestic relations.

The wage payments received in the different occupations highlight how women continue to remain lower down in the wage hierarchy. The positions of female labourers in this hierarchy is further emboldened through the nature of work and the work contract, an aspect which I examine in the following section.

### 3.3.1 Tied labour relations

The type of work described above can be broadly divided into agricultural and non-agricultural categories. This section focusses specifically on agricultural tasks, the nature of the work contract, and the ways in which I identify female tied labourers in Aranthangi and Chinsurah.

The labour relations identified in the two field sites within female agricultural wage work are- a) casual daily wage labour engaged in agricultural work and b) permanent labour contracts- who have annual contracts with a particular employer. In Aranthangi, these annual contracts are not akin to the *pannaiyal* labour relations. The labourer in the annual contract works for the landowner and receives monthly wages. The respondents in Aranthangi reported that this form of labour relation was on a decline as they can make more money if they work for multiple employers/landowners. Though not a common labour practice, there are a few employers who still maintain these annual labour contracts. Permanent/annual contracts in Chinsurah, are determined through the nature of loan taken from the employer. Usually female labourers enter such relations often becoming *bandha kishens*. The different labour relations experience different degrees of unfreedom and labour tying.

The wage structure in both the regions is more or less fixed. However, this is subject to change depending on the individual labourer relation or even on the work location. Those who work as tied labourers are paid less than the general wage rate.

I identify tied labour as a labour arrangement where cash (or at times payment in kind) is lent out to a labourer. The determining factor is the repayment of the loan, which is done either through the extraction of labour service (see Ramachandran, 1990) or through labour time. Labour service can include both waged and unpaid activities. In labour time, the labourer works for a particular employer/landowner and repays the loan through reduced wages. The distinction between labour time and labour service is fluid, in that, labour time can include unpaid activities. While male labourers in both regions resist

carrying out any unpaid activity, the same is not true for female labourers. For female labourers, carrying out unpaid activities seems a natural extension of their gendered roles, activities that male labourers would never take up (Kapadia, 1995; Garikipati, 2009).

In Aranthangi, I interviewed 35 women from the classes of labour (32 landless labourers and 3 marginal/small farmers). From these 12 female labourers had taken short-term loans from landowners that they were repaying at the time of survey. There were 21 female respondents who had taken loans from private money lenders, and were repaying this money through agricultural wage work. Two respondents reported that they were not working at the time. Three female labourers reported that they had taken much larger loans from private money lenders and landowners that they were trying to repay. At no point did any of the female labourers refer to themselves as tied labour, nor did they want to associate their current position to that of the traditional *pannaiyal* relation<sup>66</sup>.

The *pannaiyal* is a fully attached labourer, who carries out both agricultural wage work and housework. This labour arrangement is an outcome of debt bondage. In Aranthangi, as recent as 2001, only men entered such labour relations. This gender composition has changed with male labourers moving out of exploitative agricultural wage labour. As a result, these positions are filled by female labourers (see da Corta and Venkatesharlu, 1999; Garikipati, 2009). The traditional *pannaiyal*, tied to a landowner for long periods of time (sometimes over twelve years), is fast declining (see Heyer, 2000). This is evident from the data set where only 3 female labourers were caught up with long-term loan repayment. The more prominent tied labour relation identified in Aranthangi is an outcome of short-term cash advances (see De Neve and Carswell, 2011). These cash advances result in more

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<sup>66</sup> *Pannaiyal* relations bring along with it a social stigma. This stigma is particularly strong among the Paraiyars, who fought hard to move out this particular labour relation some 40 years back.



monetised forms of debt that exist in casual daily *coolie* wage labour and in permanent labour<sup>67</sup> relations.

During the period in which female labourers are tied to the landowners, they receive reduced pay. The amount deducted from their daily earnings determined how quickly they could repay the loan. However, this reduced wage was not a fixed amount and varies according to the needs of the labourers. Female labourers in Aranthangi reported receiving wages as low as Rs.40/- per day and at times as high as Rs.80/- per day. There are times when the labourer does not take any reduced wage, which then prolongs the period of indebtedness. In Aranthangi, despite the loans, female labourers are not tied down to a single landowner. If no work is available with the current landowner, they have the freedom to go and work for other landowners. The female labourers also have the freedom to change their landowners by transferring their debt onto a new landowner<sup>68</sup>.

The short-term loans reduce the period of tying for these female labourers. They only remain tied to the landowner until the loan is repaid. However, the very nature of the loan (short-term) results in these female labourers taking numerous loans during a single year. This keeps them tied for multiple periods of time in a year. In addition to short-term loans, the purpose of the loan also affects the labour relations. In Aranthangi, female labourers spoke of how they worked to repay loans taken by male members in their family. In addition, female labourers who are also tenant farmers borrow money for cultivation. Even though they borrow from multiple informal sources, the landowners still emerge as an

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<sup>67</sup> Only Pallars worked as permanent labourers in Aranthangi. This labour relation provided the Pallars with job security all the year round. Within this labour relation, the female labourers often took short-term loans that they repaid through their labour time.

<sup>68</sup> Male labourers in Chinsurah, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, restrict themselves to working in high paid jobs, and more importantly, do not want to engage in agricultural wage work. Moreover, the male labourers would prefer sitting at home rather than carrying out any low paid agricultural task. Male labourers in Aranthangi rarely ever take part in activities such as weeding (see Table 3.14), as they receive very low wages. When they do take part in such activities, it is because they have not obtained any work for a long period of time.

important option for these labourers. Dependency on the landowner is created and/or maintained through credit and land relations (discussed in Chapter 4).

In Chinsurah, the nature of the tied labour relation was different from that observed in Aranthangi. Out of the 36 female labourers interviewed, 19 identified themselves as *bandha kishens*, and the remaining 17 female labourers were indebted to the landowner (as an outcome of short-term loans). I interviewed one female marginal farmer who was indebted to a landowner. Unlike in Aranthangi, the female labourers relied on landowners for loans. In fact, the landowners were their first point of contact. Like the wage payments for these female labourers, loan payments were also taken in cash, kind or cash and kind. Female labourers took short-term loans to overcome any shortages they were experiencing at the time. These usually pertained to food shortages. Due to the fluctuating price of food commodities, female labourers take a large part of their loans in kind (this was usually rice).

The repayment of the short-term loans came with the promise of obtaining work for a few days. These loans were repaid through labour time, and very rarely is any unpaid service drawn out from these women. For these casual daily wage labourers, repayment was confined to agricultural wage work. Like in Aranthangi, the short-term loans in Chinsurah results in the female labourer entering tied labour contracts multiple times in a year.

In addition to these short-term labour tying processes, long term tied labour processes were also observed in Chinsurah. These tied labourers are identified as *bandha kishens*. *Bandha Kishens* in Chinsurah are women who are either SC or ST. The initial point of entry into such tied labour relations is the large loans. The *bandha kishens* work for reduced wages to repay the loan. Despite having taken a larger single loan, the *bandha kishens* continue to take smaller loans throughout the year which keeps them indebted for longer periods of time. This labour relation shows the overlap between labour service and labour time. The female labourers carry out agricultural wage work and household chores for the landowner. The household chores are an extension of labour service, where these activities

remain unpaid. *Bandha Kishens* identify payments to these domestic chores with the one meal they are provided.

Female labourers preferred the *bandha kishen* system as it provides them with work the entire year, at least at the landowner's house if not on the agricultural field. This is particularly important as female labourers have to compete with male labourers for agricultural jobs in the region. The security of a job, coupled with easy access to loans for these labourers comes at the cost of reduced wages and reduced freedom. Recognising oneself as a *bandha kishen* is not accompanied by shame, unlike in Aranthangi. In Chinsurah, to be a *bandha kishen* is the easiest way for female agricultural labourers to secure work.

A *bandha kishen* need not necessarily remain a labourer. Over a period of time, the landowner might lease land to the labourer. This process results in the *bandha kishen* working as both labourer and cultivator. This process is particularly important in the context of Chinsurah, where due to cultural/social constraints women do not generally cultivate land. The *bandha kishen* relation increases the dependency of the labourer upon the landowner through access of loans and land. However, while the labourer might recognise that they want to remain a *bandha kishen*, this takes place in the absence of any other feasible choice, particularly for female labourers.

This section discussed the tied labour relations observed in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, among female labourers. A majority of the female labourers interviewed in Aranthangi were tied for short periods of time. In Chinsurah, there were female labourers who remain tied for both short and long periods of time. The nature of the labour tying arrangement is determined through credit, labour and land relations. In addition, the socio-political backdrop of the region further shapes the labour relations.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter provided a brief outline of the socio-economic structures of the field sites. Tied labour arrangements in both regions emerge through a relation of debt. These labour

arrangements are generated out of indebtedness but the relation is not so simple or straightforward. Credit is one way to generate indebtedness. Credit and debt might ensure a pliant workforce but this labour relation needs to be understood through the social and political conditions that give rise to an indebted labourer. I identify these conditions through interlocking transactions of land, labour and credit and the effect of large state policies on labour relations.

The following four chapters highlight the interlocking transactions between land, labour and credit and how each relation gives rise to indebted labour. The body of this dissertation explores the conditions through which tied labour is produced politically through a set of forces including state involvement, or its lack thereof. As a consequence, I show how in two different rice growing regions gender differentiated production politics and labour relations reproduces labour tying through state and social complicity.

## Chapter 4: Tenancy as a Route to Tied Labour?

Gayathri, Prema and Indira, three Pallar agricultural labourers from Karaimedu were returning from the fields after sowing groundnuts. They went and sat in the church courtyard near their homes, discussing the day's work with each other. This is an everyday practice of these women, where they take a break after work and share their stories before immersing themselves into household chores for the rest of the day. On this day, the women complained that the weather was becoming hot with each passing day, making their work all the more difficult. In the middle of their conversation, one of the women, Indira, jumped up and began shouting out to the younger girls to "*go and catch the thieves*". We noticed a group of women in the forest adjacent to the church that Indira and other villagers were trying to chase away. "*This is our forest land!*" exclaimed Indira upon her return. "*The women from the neighbouring village were trying to steal our firewood. This is all the land we are left with, we need to protect it and its resources. We were all marginal landholders once but with time we have had to sell our land to the urimaiyalar (large landowners). Today we work for them as coolie labourers and lease land from them. We are completely dependent on them. This is what the land reforms have done for us*".

Pallar women in Chenguttai have not received any benefit from land reforms, apart from the *panchayat* allocating 2 acres of forest land to their village. The Pallars used to be marginal landholders but now do not own any cultivable land. Pallar women in Chenguttai and the Aranthangi region cultivate land through tenancy arrangements. They believe that land reforms on its own are not sufficient and they need more benefits from the state.

In Madhabpur and Bardhanagar villages in Chinsurah a majority of the tenant farmers are men, usually working as *bhaag chaasis* (share cropper). Female labourers cultivate land as unpaid family labour. In instances where I came across female cultivators, they had taken land on short-term lease to grow vegetable. Access to this land is determined through their labour relation with the landowners, as women in Chinsurah do not directly enter into a tenancy contracts.

The two regions have different routes to tenancy that are conditioned through socio-political and cultural practices. However, in both instances, there is an interlocking of land and labour relations, where the access of one factor market affects the other. This chapter discusses how tenancy arrangements affect labour relations, and the multiple ways in which female labour is drawn into labour tying arrangements. I examine the various tenancy arrangements that exist in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, differentiated along line of gender, caste and class positions. The comparison highlights the extent to which female labourers can be understood as independent cultivators, or as labourers who cultivate land.

As Indira mentions, all that land reforms have done for them is to generate the simultaneous growth of dependence and indebtedness. Such a situation cannot be understood only along the effects of unequal assets (de Janvery, 1981) but needs to be understood as asymmetrical relations of power and dominance that continue to lie in the hands of larger landowners/rural elite, reinforced through interlocking transactions between land, labour and credit.

Tenancy arrangements emerge as a choice available to women in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, who belong to the classes of labour (and are looking for other means to secure their survival). A total of 35 female agricultural labourers and marginal landholders were interviewed in Aranthangi, out of which 32 (91.42 percent) were engaged in tenancy arrangements. Chinsurah does not have a high number of female cultivators, as this is not considered a female task in the region. However, women do cultivate land along with their husbands.

The high number of female tenants, especially in Aranthangi, is indicative of increasing polarisation of land holding within the backdrop of 'progressive' land reforms. The polarisation of land implies that relations of power and dominance continue to be maintained by the larger landowners. To what extent then do these processes place restrictions on the ways and means of survival of the classes of labour, and how does this affect the move to become independent female cultivators?

This chapter, in answering these questions discusses the interlocking transactions of land, labour and credit generated within the tenancy arrangements, and the extent of labour tying experienced by these female cultivators in particular.

Sections 4.1 and 4.3 of this chapter explain the land and tenancy reforms that took place in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Sections 4.2 and 4.4 explain the tenancy patterns that existed prior to the introduction of land reforms, those that are still in operation in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, and how these arrangements result in attachment to land and in turn to the landowner. Chinsurah witnessed movement out of the *bargadar* relationship (by men) but this was not substituted by female *bargadars*. For women to cultivate land there was little or no option but to become *bandha kishens*. In Aranthangi, I observed that a large number of rural female labourers are tenant farmers, and are now indebted to landowners and moneylenders, where payment is extracted through labour time. This aspect is highlighted in Section 4.5, which uncovers how attachment, driven by tenancy arrangements, is a mechanism used by the capitalists to appropriate surplus.

#### **4.1 Land Reforms and Land Ceilings in Tamil Nadu**

In Tamil Nadu, land reforms began in 1961, when the first land ceiling legislation allowed a family of 5 to own a maximum of 30 acres and for larger families to own up to 60 acres. However, a large quantity of land was exempted under this law: land under plantations, orchards, coconut gardens, fuel trees, sugarcane cultivation, land donated under the *bhoodan* movement<sup>69</sup> and up to 50 acres of land that was used exclusively for grazing. This meant that in reality there was very little land that could be recorded as surplus (Sonachalam, 1970). The 1972 revised law cut the land ceilings to 15 and 30 acres for small and large families respectively. Exemptions under the 1972 law included land that was converted into orchards or areca nut gardens before the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1959, land used for fuel

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<sup>69</sup> *Bhoodan* refers to the Land gift movement started by Vinoba Bhave in 1951. A Gandhian, Vinoba convinced the village *zamindar* (*landlord*) (in Poochampally, Andhra Pradesh) to donate part of their land to the landless Dalit villagers who were agitating at that point of time. This is considered as one of the first land reform movements. However, it is criticised on the grounds of merely housing the landless since the rights of the land were not given up and this land could not be sold.

trees, sugarcane cultivation, dairy farming and lands owned by religious or educational institutions (Thangaraj, 2003: p. 15). Under the amended law, every son in the family could have a separate unit, which was one of the ways in which large landholders worked around the land ceiling<sup>70</sup>.

At present, under the revised land ceiling act, the division of land based on yield and irrigation is as follows: 4.86 acres per individual for irrigated land with two crops (standard acre), 12.41 acres for irrigated land with one crop and 24.48 acres for dry land (www.indiaagronet.com). In both Karaiedu and Thirasu the landholders did not mention 4.86 but 5 acres. They may have been rounding up figures for ease. However, this raises a question on whether or not landlords and the government officials are colluding in determining land ceilings.

#### **4.1.1 Tenancy Reforms in Tamil Nadu**

Tenancy reform legislations were important to secure tenancy rights. The first Act to be passed was the Tamil Nadu Cultivating Tenants Protection Act in 1955. This law set in place a platform upon which complaints about eviction, resumption of owners, continuance of leases and the restoration of land to evicted tenants could be addressed (Thangaraj, 2003). Sonachalam (1970) reports that despite this provision, twelve years after the enforcement of this Act, only 24, 555 complaints were filed in court. Protests were rare, as not much was done to disrupt the social order. Insufficient knowledge about the procedure of filing complaints in court and reluctance to get embroiled in such matters meant that tenants were evicted without much resistance (Singh, 2003).

The first attempt to incorporate tenants into the land reform legislation was made in 1956 under the Tamil Nadu Agricultural Lands (Record of Tenancy Rights) Act. This Act demanded the documentation of all tenancy arrangements and the maintenance of

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<sup>70</sup> The amount of land that could be owned varied with the different types of land, whether it was standard or ordinary. This meant that the quantity of land owned was determined through land usage. For those plots of land irrigated with two crops the ceiling was 15 standard acres. For ordinary acres the land ceiling was within a range of 12 to 60 acres. Within these limits set by the State Government of Tamil Nadu, farmers could own land under any permutation or combination.



reliable and complete records for the same. This was done in the hope of minimising the exploitative effects of oral leases (State Planning Commission 2005-06). Following this, the Tamil Nadu Cultivating Tenants (payment of fair rent) Act was enforced in 1956, which puts forward a fair rent payable to the landowner by the tenant/cultivator. The cultivator has to pay 40 per cent of the normal gross produce or its equivalent for wet land cultivation. For wet land using lift irrigation, the stipulated rent is 35 per cent of the normal gross produce or its value in money. For any other type of land, the rent was  $33\frac{1}{3}$  per cent of the normal gross value or its value in money (State Planning Commission 2005-06). The Tamil Nadu Cultivating Tenants Act was amended in 1980 and the rent was reduced from  $33\frac{1}{3}$  to 25 per cent.

In 1972, the Tamil Nadu Cultivating Tenants Arrears of Rent (Relief) Act was passed. This Act provided security to the tenants who were facing eviction on the grounds of non-payment of the arrears to their rent. Under section 3 of this Act, if the rent for the current *fasli*<sup>71</sup> year (from 1<sup>st</sup> July 1971 to 30<sup>th</sup> June 1972) was paid, all arrears of the rent would have to be discharged (Singh, 2009). Despite these provisions and amendments, I observed that in Aranthangi, tenants still paid around 50 per cent of their yield to the landowners (who were often the larger landowners), a rate for both wet lands and rain-fed lands. In fields irrigated with pump sets, the landowners received two thirds of the total produce. None of the tenants I spoke to had heard of the Act. A common explanation provided by some of the DYFI members in this area was that landlords did not want to lose out on the land that they owned and therefore withheld such information. However, when this was brought up with the small farmers, they had not heard of such a law. The landowners said they did not know about it well enough since this was not something that pertained to them directly. This is an example of how information that is provided by the state percolates down only to the large landowners, who pass on this information only if they think it necessary.

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<sup>71</sup> *Fasli* year refers to the harvest year.

Control over information further increases power in the hands of the landowners (who are also the ruling elite), securing their position within this village society.

#### **4.2 Tenancy Arrangements and Land Transactions in Aranthangi**

The threat of land reforms and the extension of rights to tenants resulted in many of the landowners taking their land back from their tenants and cultivating it themselves with the help of *coolie* workers (Mencher, 1978). This move does not mean that tenancy arrangements have been done away with. In Aranthangi, 36 of the 42 respondents, who are agricultural labourers and marginal landholders, lease land. However, these do not adhere to the traditional tenancy patterns.

Tenancy has an important role to play, as not all land owned by landowners can be cultivated (this is either due size of the landholding or the distance of the land from the village). Under such conditions the landowners operate as rentiers and lease out land for cultivation, without the threat of losing ownership of land and simultaneously increasing the accumulation of capital. At the other end, the landless labourers and marginal farmers who enter into various tenancy agreements view this as a way of eking out a living and not being completely dependent on the landlord (Mencher, 1978). This view is contentious because, as we shall see, the degree of dependency varies with the kind of tenancy agreement one enters into. The villages of Karaimesu and Thirasu both showed a high incidence of tenancy arrangements. The following table shows the number of respondents who lease in and lease out land in Aranthangi.

Class Category	Total Number of Respondents		Lease in Land		Lease out Land	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Large Landowners	22.95%	1.63%	16.93%	0%	22.95%	1.63%
Medium Landowners	6.55%	0%	4.91%	0%	6.55%	0%
Classes of labour	11.44%	57.37%	6.55%	52.45%	3.27%	0%

**Table 4.1: Class Wise Distribution of Number of Persons Engaged in Tenancy in Aranthangi**

*Source: Interviews carried out in Karaiedu and Thirasu from November 2011- March 2012.*

*\*Percentages calculated based on total number of respondents interviewed.*

A majority of the respondents belonging to the classes of labour (85.71 percent), lease land for cultivation. The large and medium landowners lease in as well as lease out land. How do we explain this movement towards tenancy, where on the one hand they act as “instruments of agrarian capitalism” (Hart 1986), and on the other, are mechanisms for tenants to escape usury? A closer look at field observations of tenancy patterns might be able to point to the divergent rationale in the study area.

#### **4.2.1 Ensuring Production and Controlling Land through Tenancy Arrangements**

Different tenancy patterns were observed in Karaiedu and Thirasu. Table 4.2 identifies these tenancy arrangements. Sharecropping is one such tenancy pattern, locally referred to as *vāram*. In a *vāram* contract the share of the produce is 50:50 for irrigation either by tank, channel or spring canal. For ground water or ‘pump-set’ irrigated land, the landowners receive one third of the produce and one third goes to the owner of the pump-set. The landowner is almost always the owner of the pump-set, which means that he receives two thirds of the produce. The break-up of the share of production is however, not so straightforward. This is because tenants often cover their production cost from loans borrowed from the landowner, generating relations of indebtedness and obligations towards the landowner/ rentier/ lender.

Tenancy Pattern in Aranthangi	Share of produce to tenant	Investment	Caste Groups	Class Categories
<i>Vāram</i>	50:50 for tank irrigation  1/3 <sup>rd</sup> for ground water irrigation (for groundwater)  1/3 <sup>rd</sup> goes to the landlord,  1/3 <sup>rd</sup> to the owner of the tube well. (As they are generally the same people the landlord ends up with 2/3 <sup>rd</sup> of the produce)	Input cost borne by the landlord.	Thevar  Wealthy Ambalakar  Roman Catholic (in the village there was only one Roman Catholic family who were large landowner).	Large landowners and medium landowners
<i>Al-vāram</i>	After deduction of input cost profits are shared 50:50.  Places with irrigation 3/4 <sup>th</sup> goes to the landlord and 1/4 <sup>th</sup> to the tenant	Input cost borne by landlord.  Labour provided by tenant	Ambalakar Pallar	Small and marginal farmers  Agricultural labourers
<i>Kuthagai</i>	Land rent paid to the landlord. For paddy- 3 sacks of rice for 100 <i>kulis</i> of land.  For other crops- Rs. 2000/- for 100 <i>kulis</i> of land	Input cost borne by the tenant and the only payment that is made to the landlord is land rent.	Ambalakar Paraiyar Pallar	Small, and marginal farmers  Agricultural labourers
<i>Otti</i>	Land mortgage - monthly payments made till repayment of the loan amount	Big landlords are also the ones who provide the loans and if the loan amount cannot be repaid, the land goes to them.	Ambalakar Pallar	Marginal farmers

**Table 4.2: Land Tenancy Arrangements in Aranthangi**

*Source: Fieldwork in Aranthangi, November 2011- March 2012*

Very few landholders were involved in *vāram* tenancy arrangements, often being restricted to middle and larger landowners - Thevars, wealthy Ambalakars and one Pallar Christian who has over 50 acres of land in his and his family's name. Leasing land under a *vāram* contract is one way to build on their existing landed capital. This land is usually rented from

absentee landowners, who are the Chettiyars in this village, and from those Thevar families, whose landowners are too old to work; or where there is insufficient manpower within the household to control and maintain the land. Chettiyar-owned land receives payment in the form of land rent. Thevars and Ambalakars receive land rent and a portion of the produce as money. These farmers have much greater control over what was to be produced as well as the quality of grain grown.

The classes of labour had much less control over what to produce. The small farmers in Aranthangi complained about not being able to experiment with crops which could possibly get them higher yields and more money. Apart from reducing yields, another reason for a decline in *vāram* contracts in the villages is to do with a decline in labour availability.<sup>72</sup> This has resulted in landowners shifting to *al- vāram* or *kuthagai* contracts.

In *al- vāram* tenancy arrangements, the tenant provides only his or her labour power and maybe even the bullocks (this is rarely done as all farmers now use power tillers and tractors). All other production costs are borne by the landowner. The payment received for cultivating land varies from place to place. After the initial cost incurred by the landlord is deducted, the profits are divided between the tenant and the landlord. As Mencher (1978) observed in Chinglepet, in lands with no or poor irrigation, one-quarter of the produce goes to the tenant and the remaining three-quarters to the landowner. The share of profit that the tenant receives is reduced if there is tube well irrigation. The large and medium landowners prefer *al- vāram*, as they believe that the tenants have an incentive to work better since they receive a portion of the produce. Moreover, the tenants would make use of the good fertilisers and seeds that are being provided by the landowners (Mencher, 1978). In Aranthangi, it is usually marginal and small landholders who enter this

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<sup>72</sup> Labour is required for threshing, cleaning and boiling of rice. Threshing and cleaning can be done by harvesters, but only the large landowners have access to it and it is profitable for them to use. The larger population still uses family and hired labour to do these tasks. This is primarily carried out by women. However, with the gradual movement of women to work in the sugar factory, or with their husbands in the construction industry this has become a very tedious process for the farmers having to rely solely on family labour.

arrangement (primarily the Ambalakars and some Paraiyar households). In this contract the labour power is not restricted to cultivation alone but is utilised for threshing and cleaning of grains. Women are the key labourers who carry out this work, where it is treated as part of their *coolie* work and do not receive any extra payment for this labour time. This is usually the case when male tenant farmers are the cultivators, and their wives who accompany them, are unpaid workers. For women tenant farmers, threshing and cleaning of grains is a part of their tenancy contract. The amount of unpaid work is not challenged or taken up with the landlords as it ensures these labourers work for the next *fasli* year. The Paraiyars, in particular, prefer working for the landlords through such tenancy arrangements rather than working as agricultural labourers, as it provides them a sense of having moved out of the *pannaiyal* relationship.

In both the tenancy patterns mentioned above, payment is dependent on yield. With agriculture becoming a far less sustainable occupation to remain in, a majority of landowners are turning towards *kuthagai*. From a total of 32 female respondents who lease land, 28 were involved in a *kuthagai* contract. Under this system there is a fixed amount of land rent that needs to be paid to the landlords. This amount is paid irrespective of whether there is sufficient agricultural output or not. This system ensures fixed revenue from the land for landowners, irrespective of output and without any supervision of the tenant and crops (Mencher, 1978). In Karaimesu and Thirasu, women (Pallar and Paraiyar) entered such tenancy arrangements. Historically, women and landless labourers in the region engaged in this land tenancy due to the simplicity of calculation (Mencher, 1978). The notion prevails, and now *kuthagai* is synonymous with women's tenancy arrangements.

Another important land transaction that underscores the process of polarisation of land, alongside the miniaturization of land, is *otti* (mortgage). When a landowner (usually a small or marginal farmer) requires money for any pressing issue (as observed in the field), such as marriage expenses or medical expenses, the land is mortgaged to a larger landowner. The inability to repay the loan results in the landholders forfeiting rights to their land. *Otti* transactions were observed among Pallars and Ambalakars. At times when

the loan amount cannot be repaid, the borrowers continue to pay an interest on the loan amount to ensure continued ownership of land. These are very high interest rates with an average of around 10 percent per month.

Entry into tenancy arrangements are differentiated along caste hierarchies and positions of privilege occupied within the rural society. During fieldwork, it was difficult to ascertain the landownership within these two villages (Karaimedu and Thirasu) on two counts. One that, the census records at the village level do not have a comprehensive caste-wise break up of landownership. Second, although this data can be found in the Block Development Office, or the *patwari's*<sup>73</sup> office, I was denied access to this data on three different counts<sup>74</sup>, having used three different sources to obtain this information. They provided me with the overall land usage within the village but did not give me information regarding individual land use. The concealing of information highlights the interlocking power relations between the landowners and local political structures; a mechanisms used by the rural elite to hold onto power.

The importance of the different tenancy arrangements has changed over time. The most predominant tenancy arrangement in Karaimedu and Thirasu is the *kuthagai* contract. The Thevars' control over land within the different tenancy arrangements has made them the economically and socially dominant community within this region. They are able to retain control over land not through one, but multiple tenancy patterns. Altering the traditional tenancy patterns (*vāram* and *al- vāram*) and withholding information to suit their needs

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<sup>73</sup> *Patwari* or *Adhikari* refers to the village accountant and is an administrative government position. The *patwari* keeps land use records at the household level for the villages under his/her jurisdiction

<sup>74</sup> The first time, I was denied access on the grounds of not having any permission to access these records. I then went to the village Pradhan and asked for permission. When I went back I was told that the information was too large and it was impossible to provide it on the same day, I tried to follow this up but was turned down. On my third attempt, I went with Sunderaj, a local headmaster of the village. However, this time I was told that they could not disclose such data to me as it was meant just for keeping a record for official purposes. It is here where the *pradhan* of the village stopped meeting with me personally, and would direct me to other local members in the village who did not have ability to persuade the Block Development Officer.

helps maintain the asymmetrical power relations. In doing so they ensure continuous production and surplus generation from their land.

#### **4.2.2 Capitalist Farmers and Multiple Tenancy patterns**

This section looks at the different tenancy arrangements identified among the landowning class.

One of the largest landowners and capitalist farmers I interviewed in the village was Mannikam, a Roman Catholic who initially belonged to the Pallar caste. Mannikam is a retired Computer Engineering Professor from Arangthangi College of Engineering. He claims to individually own only 10 acres in the village. However, numerous villagers both within Karaimedu (where he resides) and outside had informed me that Mannikam owns over 50 acres of land, which he had purchased. This information could not be verified in the interview with Mannikam so the following information gathered is based on the 10 acres in his name. Mannikam reported having both ancestral property and recently acquired property. He has a large family of nine siblings, and his father divided the property equally amongst the sons and daughters. His sisters got married and migrated to different regions, selling their share of the property to him. He cultivates around 6 acres of *punjei* land (dry land) and 4 acres of *nanjei* land (wet land), with around 2 acres kept aside for paddy cultivation. Initially he kept the rice for family consumption, where it would be threshed and boiled at home. Now with the dearth of labour, this has become a cumbersome process so he sells it immediately after harvest.

In addition to paddy, Mannikam cultivates a diverse range of crops including maize, vegetables, fruits, and sugarcane, and has invested in horticulture. In 2010-2011, he received profits from the sale of both watermelons and muskmelons, and therefore decided to grow more in this current year (2011-2012) by leasing 5 acres of land from one of his brothers. This land is generally dry and barren and Mannikam brings in water for irrigation. More importantly because it belongs to his brother, he is not concerned with splitting the profits. Even though land rent is paid because it is a transaction within the



family, leasing of land does not strictly fall into the four categories of tenancy patterns (but adheres more to a *kuthagai* system). Since retirement, he has been leasing land from other landlords, such as the Chettiyars and Thevars. While this is complete speculation from Sunderaj, who is an English teacher at the Aranthangi Local Matriculation School (which caters to Thirasu and Karaimesu), he insists "*Mannikam has now bought most of the land that belonged to the Chettiyars, and is cultivating it as his own*".

Prior to his retirement, Mannikam leased out land as his sons were studying at the time and it was difficult to manage the land with his work. This was an *al- vāram* tenancy arrangement that was given out to the permanent labourers<sup>75</sup> who worked for his family. Mannikam claimed that the profits were split equally between them after the production cost and land rent were subtracted. This, however, seems to contradict the traditional *al- vāram* contract where the landlord receives three quarters of the yield produced. Splitting the cost equally under what seems to be an *al- vāram* contract is not profitable for Mannikam. The labourers never challenged this figure. Mannikam carried out all calculations and the labourers never questioned it as they did not want to lose access to land and their status as permanent labourers. The image of a benevolent master who 'apparently' divides the produce equally, dissolves any contradictions or protests from the labourers.

Among medium landowners, Senthil, a 40-year-old Thevar landowner, leases out most of land instead of cultivating it himself. He owns 3.5 acres and leases out 2.5 acres on *kuthagai* to two Ambalakar families. Senthil leases out land because

*"The agricultural land is very far from the village, it is becoming difficult for me to maintain it. The only crop that I grow is paddy but this is not sufficient to sustain my family. It is better that I give my land on lease when it is not being used. Over here we do not leave our land fallow. If there is anyone who can cultivate the land then we give it to them and get payment in the form of cash or kind."*

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<sup>75</sup> These are labourers who have been working for the same landlord's family for generations. Their entry into this relation is not bound by debt. These labourers receive monthly payments and are expected to carry out agricultural wage work. The female permanent labourers carry out household chores as well.

The *kuthagai* land transaction places Senthil in a position of power and control compared to the Ambalakar families who take the land on rent. Without any investment from his side, he generates income from his land through land rent. Control by the Thevar caste does not stem from land ownership alone but is a result of dominant class accumulation (Pattenden, 2011). This might be reproduced in numerous ways but it creates relations of servitude and patronage over 'classes of labour'.

Thiruvan, a 29-year-old Thevar landlord, was introduced to me as the *pradhan* of the village. The officially elected *pradhan* for Karaimedu was his wife Sreelatha<sup>76</sup>. Sreelatha remains a mere figurehead, with her husband Thiruvan attending all meetings and even signing documents on her behalf. The family of three (Thiruvan, his mother and his wife) have a total of 15 acres of land- 4 acres of *nanjei*, 10 acres of *punjei* and 1 acre of *tottam*. Of these, 5 acres is used for paddy cultivation alone. From the 10 acres of *punjei* land, 3 acres is leased out (approximately one acre to a Pallar family and 2 acres are shared between 5 Ambalakar families). On the remaining 7 acres of *punjei* land, he grows eucalyptus and casuarina trees. Thiruvan was finding it difficult to maintain large plots of land due to the growing costs of production and labour shortage, prompting his decision to shift to fuelwood. He prefers the *kuthagai* contract as it is more profitable.

Leasing 100 *kulis* of land for paddy cultivation gets Thiruvan 3 sacks of rice; for any other crop he gets a land rent of Rs. 2000/- per 100 *kulis*. He leases land only to those labourers who work for him (predominantly Pallars and Ambalakars). Thiruvan believes that his land will be well looked after because he leases it to families that he knows. For Thiruvan, it ensures a constant flow of income from the land. For the Ambalakars, the extension of privileged access to land extorts obligations. The relation of privilege and associated obligation is reinforced when the tenants are unable to pay the land rent. The land rent is

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<sup>76</sup> This is not a situation that is unheard of. During my numerous travels while working for the Centre for Women's Development Studies this was a common phenomenon. The husbands of these wives would tell us that they are actually being good Samaritans, since their wives and women in general do not understand the political machinery and with the government forcing women to be elected, the best thing to do is to help them out in such a situation.

usually carried forward to the next year or collected through labour time, but does not withdraw the privilege of access to land. There is however, an implicit threat of withdrawal that commands discipline and control over the tenants and their labour.

To the tenant, this practice of flexibility portrays Thiruvan as a kind and benevolent employer. However, the practice keeps the labourer indebted to the landowner for longer periods of time. The landowners ensure that the labourers continue to take land on *kuthagai* and that there is a constant flow of capital generated from land and labour.

If tenancy is not possible, the rich farmers devise ways and means to extract surplus hold on to ownership. Kumar (Thevar and 32 years of age), from Thirasu, mentioned that 5 acres of land was in his name but his family owned 30 acres of land in total. For legal reasons the land was divided equally between his father and three brothers. He does not do any farming; instead it is his father and his elder brother who look after the land. They have around 15 acres of *nanjei* land, 10 acres of *punjei* land and 5 acres of wasteland on which they are currently growing eucalyptus. Over the last ten years there has been a sudden demand for eucalyptus. Farmers (larger landowners), find this profitable as they do not incur high costs apart from the initial investment of buying and sowing seeds. After four to six years, they get an average of 20 tonnes of wood from one acre of land, for which they get paid around Rs. 20,000/-. If they are able to keep the tress for a longer period of time they receive higher prices. This also means that they do not have to continuously monitor the lands given on lease, as Mannikam had to<sup>77</sup>. Growing plants like eucalyptus on land which would have otherwise been barren, generates further land rent for the landowners. Large landowners use various mechanisms to extract surplus from land. Within a system of continuous agrarian change, the rentier- tenant and employer-labour relationship is

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<sup>77</sup> Both Thiruvan and Kumar had one common complaint about growing eucalyptus- over time it was destroying the land it was grown in as well as the land adjacent to it. The government, in trying to preserve the forest in this region, has planted eucalyptus all around but they do not realize that they have created a "barren forest". The villagers in general do not have a problem with eucalyptus plantations but many believe these plantations to be the cause of the sudden increase of monkeys in the region. The labourers did however say that with more people opting for such plantations the agricultural wage work available to them was dwindling.

affected by the way the tenancy arrangement operates. As seen in the case of Thiruvan's workforce, there is an overlap of these two categories, where profits from production relations are further extracted through relations of hierarchy, dominance, and interlocking transactions of land, labour and capital. The following section, focusing on tenants and labourers, highlights various mechanisms through which tenants get embroiled in labour tying arrangements.

#### **4.2.3 Tenants and Labourers**

The previous section showed that landowners operate under numerous tenancy arrangements. Similarly, tenants do not confine themselves to tenancy arrangements; instead they shift between being tenants and labourers, very often for the same landowner. On Thiruvan's land, a Pallar family operated in what seemed to be both an *al-vāram* and *kuthagai* contract. An oral contract was made out to Philomena (49 years old, Roman Catholic). The contract was handed to her and not her husband, despite his family having worked for two generations for Thiruvan's family. Philomena's husband is a woodcutter and does not do any agricultural wage work. The irregularity associated with woodcutting places the entire responsibility of bringing money home on Philomena. Philomena cultivates the land with the help of her two sons and works as an agricultural labourer on Thiruvan's land because her husband could not repay a loan (due to lack of work and his constant state of inebriation). This situation extracted a scathing comment from Philomena about her husband, how- "*he does not do any work, he is useless, and all he does is drink with the money I bring home*". The responsibility of repayment of the loan has fallen on Philomena. She is bound not just by her marital ties alone to repay this loan - failure to do so means that she might lose out on any daily wage work she gets by working on Thiruvan's land. Philomena's labour process and the struggles she undergoes is a result of an intersection between the domestic arena and 'political patronage' (Hart, 1991) that ties her husband to Thiruvan. This is a similar pattern observed by de Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) in Andhra Pradesh where the men were moving out of low-paying

exploitative wage work only for these positions to be filled by their wives, whose wages they subsequently relied on.

Philomena cultivates crops grown after *thaiye maas* (the period between January to February in the Tamil calendar). Thiruvan provides inputs such as seeds and fertilisers<sup>78</sup>, and she needs to cover the cost of land rent and labour from the total produce. Philomena tries to rely mainly on family labour in order to reduce her costs. Additional labour is required during sowing and harvesting, which is recruited from her locality. The labour hired is not paid any wages; instead they operate under a system of 'obligation of reciprocity'<sup>79</sup> (Guerin, et.al. 2012), where Philomena is obligated to work as a labourer on their fields when required. Philomena pays her land rent in kind; for every 100 *kulis* she pays Thiruvan's family 3 sacks of rice, where each sack of rice weighs around 55-60 kilos. Therefore, for every acre of land that she cultivates, she pays 9 sacks of rice (approximately 540 kilos of rice). Philomena does not want to be employed as a cultivator and *coolie* worker for Thiruvan. She finds the idea of working for a single employer restrictive. However, she does not have a choice in this matter as she has to pay off her husband's debt.

*"If I do daily coolie work, I have the option of taking up a particular landowner's work or not. There is a choice in this matter. In addition, this daily coolie work means that I can work for three different landowners and earn up to Rs.300/- in one day. Here I barely manage to make Rs.60-80/- in a day. In the situation I am in currently, I have to work on their [Thiruvan] land to pay off my husband's debt. I have to grow what he tells me to and what he gives to me. After putting in all this effort I hardly make enough money to sustain my family."*

Philomena's decisions are conditioned and restricted by domestic household politics and work politics. Entering the tenancy arrangement enables her to repay her husband's loan faster as it cannot be covered through *coolie* work alone. At the same time, the

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<sup>78</sup> Since Thiruvan is a member of the *Panchayat Samiti* (Block Development Office) he knows when the subsidised rates for the seeds and fertilisers are distributed at the Aranthangi Block Office.

<sup>79</sup> Guerin et al. (2012) refer to the term 'obligation of reciprocity' in the context of giving loans. I use this term to explain the system of payments made in labour time among people who belong to the same social class and caste group.

exclusionary labour arrangement with Thiruvan ensures job security. Philomena tries to meet her loan payments from the yield produced, but on occasions when this cannot be done, Thiruvan, extracts payment through Philomena's labour time. For Philomena, labour time is not restricted to agricultural wage work but extends to cleaning and boiling rice, for which she is not paid extra as it is considered to be a part of the daily wage work. The inability to meet land rent and loan payments is covered through her labour time, which exacerbates the exploitative work conditions. The interlocking of land, labour and credit binds Philomena to a particular work relation, with the employer placing restrictions on her movement and decision making capacity. Philomena's access to land is dependent upon the labour relation and vice-versa, which often results in short-term/ long-term labour tying contracts. Labourers and tenants who belong to the Pallar and Paraiyar caste identify such exclusionary arrangements as re-enactment of the *pannaiyal* work relation. This is why Philomena prefers multiple coolie work contracts rather than only working for Thiruvan.

Philomena and others like her complain about such labour tying arrangements but it is seen as the most convenient way for them to pay off debts. Their social positions have not allowed them to challenge and break away from these arrangements unlike the Paraiyars in Karaimedu. The Paraiyars broke away from the exploitive *pannaiyal* relationship almost forty years ago in Karaimedu and Thirasu, and now try and restrict their interactions with the Thevars to basic *coolie* work.

A more distinct *kuthagai* system is observed with the Ambalakar family that leases land from Thiruvan. Kamlaveni is a 45-year-old Ambalakar widow. She has one son who works with her on the agricultural fields, and one daughter. Her family used to own one acre of land that they had to sell that off to meet her daughter's wedding expenses. She currently takes 200 *kulis* of land (0.67 acres) on *kuthagai*. From this land she gets approximately 20-25 sacks of rice when there is good rainfall, and 15-16 sacks of rice otherwise. The land rent that she pays varies with every crop that she grows. The payment is in kind for rice, where

she has to pay Thiruvan 6 sacks of rice. For sesame, she leases the land for three months and has to pay Rs.3000/-. According to Kamlaveni, she takes land on *kuthagai* because-

*"The Thevars and Chettiyars do not want to do any agricultural wage work, which is why they give their land on lease. All they do is while away their time and get income from our efforts and from lending money".*

Kamlaveni displays a great sense of angst and distrust when she talks about the landowners. A reason for this is that the Ambalakars were historically the land owning caste in this region. Many of the Ambalakars in both villages have lost their land to the Thevars through unserviced loans or mortgages. This has altered their class positions vis-à-vis the Thevars. A manifestation of this animosity is witnessed in the reluctance to enter into monetary contracts with Thevar landowners. In order to meet cultivation expenses, Kamlaveni has borrowed approximately Rs.12000/- from one of her neighbours. She did not want to borrow this amount from the landowner, as this would mean fewer grains for her. Money borrowed from a neighbour can be paid back gradually either through payments in cash or kind. At no point is she under any obligation to work for her neighbour. If her neighbour does require extra labourers to work on their field, she does the work and the amount is deducted accordingly. Borrowing from the same member of the caste group means, *"money is being exchanged amongst equals"*.

In Kamlaveni's contract, the landowner gives the land and tractor (in both the villages there are 5 people who own tractors) on rent. The cost of pesticides, seeds and labour are borne by Kamlaveni. She is derisive about the change in the relationship between the landowner and the tenant-

*"Previously, I remember that the landlords would work alongside with us and help us out with work. Now they are only interested in getting the money from us, that is all."*

Kamlaveni describes a *vāram* contract that was previously more prominent in this region. While she prefers the *kuthagai* system, as she believes it grants a greater amount of freedom, she would like the landlord to be more involved. In wanting the landowners/rentiers to help with cultivation, Kamlaveni suggests a change in the power relations that has now been established between the landowner and the tenant. This

clearly highlights the social construction of meaning associated with certain acts- especially between the Ambalakars and the Thevars as they used to be landowners and would like to be treated with the same respect.

Where Kamlaveni prefers greater involvement of the landlord, Rajathi (Thiruvan's mother) puts forward a conflicting image of the landowner-tenant relationship. According to Rajathi, the landowners cannot ask the tenants what they are doing with the land once it is leased out, *"they grow whatever they want to grow but the first crop is always rice."* Rajathi presents a skewed representation of power and control over land. The landowners maintain control through inspection and generating consent with the promise of land and work. The threat of withdrawing land from the tenant, instils a sense of fear, where displeasing the employer would result in loss of agricultural wage work as well.

The landowners keep the labour force controlled and disciplined through the extension of privileges and compulsory payments towards land rent. According to Kamlaveni, if the landowners are entitled to approximately 6 sacks of rice, this amount has to be paid even during periods of poor yield.

*"If the promised amount is 6 sacks then we have to pay them this even if we get only 6 -7 sacks of rice from the land. There is no negotiation on this matter. If there is no produce, we still get the land in the next season but we have to now make two sets of payments. The landlords always find a way of getting their money. They come and check to see that we are doing our job properly. When we can't make the payments they tell us things like- we should have added more fertilisers, or that we delayed the sowing of the seeds and the fault lies with us for not starting the process on time and not on the adverse weather conditions. On the other hand, if the entire village suffers from crop failures then we are not told anything".*

Similar conditions of compulsory payment operate for both large and medium landowners. While Thiruvan, as a large landowner, extracts land rent payment through labour time, this was not the case for Bhoomi, (32-year-old, Pallar labourer) who works for an Ambalakar medium landowner. At the time of survey, Bhoomi could grow only 13 sacks of rice out of which 6 sacks had to be paid towards land rent. She did not have the option of substituting her labour for payment as the medium landowner did not require her labour time. Bhoomi might find the terms of contract harsh; however, the landowner's inability



to recruit labour prevents Bhoomi from becoming a tied labourer. Though Bhoomi does not get embroiled in a labour tying arrangement, at no point does her dependence upon the landowner decline; she remains at his beck and call in order to have access to cultivable land.

The terms and conditions upon which different tenancy arrangements are reached determine the degree of freedom experienced by the tenants. Where Philomena entered the tenancy relationship due to heavy indebtedness, for Kamlaveni, it is an alternate occupation to daily *coolie* work. The ability to lease in land operates on the premise on a previously existing relationship with the landowner. For Philomena, the relationship was established through labour ties, and for Kamlaveni and Bhoomi, it was established through cultivation.

#### **4.2.3.1 *Otti Contracts and Labour Tying:***

*Al- vāram* and *kuthagai* are two common tenancy patterns observed in both Karaimedu and Thirasu, where the terms and conditions often tend to overlap due to the interlocking transactions of land, labour and capital. Another form of land transactions prevalent in Aranthangi is *otti*. *Otti* is a system of mortgaging the land and has repercussions on labour relations. The following are examples of how *otti* shapes the relationship between the landowner and the tenant.

Vasanthi, a 37-year-old Malayalee woman, is married to Kannan (Ambalakar), who works as a waiter in Chennai<sup>80</sup>. Just before the birth of her first daughter, her father-in-law had to give one acre of the land they owned on *otti* in order to relieve some of the pressures of debt. After 6 years of paying interest on the land they sold it off to Vassan (Thevar landowner) who had taken it on *otti*. Three to four years after this transaction, Vasanthi

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<sup>80</sup> There is the only case of a love marriage in this village of a man to an upper caste woman from a different region. Kannan met Vasanthi in her hometown near Thiruvananthapuram, where he works in a highway restaurant. Vasanthi is ten years younger than him and they eloped to get married. She has not met her parents since her marriage because she knows they will not approve of their marriage, as she is an upper caste Nair who has married a backward caste Ambalakar.

found out that the land was sold due to her father-in-law's gambling problem. Nobody in the village wants to give their family any land on lease due to this reputation, forcing Vasanthi to go for daily *coolie* work despite her poor health. She works for two landowners and is at their beck and call just so that she can meet the loan payment. Her ill health and infrequent remittances from her husband do not help her state of indebtedness. An outsider to the village and family, Vasanthi is coerced into exploitative, low paid coolie work so that she can repay any current loans and the loan taken by her father-in-law. Vasanthi's entry into an exploitative (short term) tied labour arrangement is similar to Philomina's case, where the entry is conditioned by familial relations- loans generated by male members of the family. In both cases the responsibility of repayment is thrust on the women of the household. Garikipati (2009) and da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) observed instances of women's decisions, mobility and freedom being constrained due to family relations in Andhra Pradesh.

Vasanthi's is not the only case where land on *otti* was eventually sold off to the landowner. Small and marginal farmers in Aranthangi spoke of having to eventually sell their land on *otti*, so that they could meet family wedding expenses.

Yet, not all small and marginal farmers sell off their land. Some like Rajalakhshmi (52-year-old Ambalakar) mortgaged her land for Rs.15000/-, so that she could get her daughter married. For the past fifteen years she has continued to pay the mortgage on her land. Her daughter-in-law wants her to sell it off but she refuses to do so because-

*"This is our land; this is the only form of monetary security left for me and my family. If I give this away, then I will be left with nothing."*

Rajalakhshmi and her husband gave their land to a Thevar landlord family (Murugan who owns 10 acres of cultivable land) at an interest rate of 3% per month. Rajalakhshmi was unable to gather the principal amount of the loan, and she continues to pay a very high interest rate on the land. Retaining ownership of land is extremely crucial for Rajalakhshmi

as it provides her with a sense of security. In order to meet mortgage payments, she leases 200 *kulis* of land from the same Thevar landlord<sup>81</sup>.

Throughout her interview, Rajalakshmi kept referring to the leased land as her own land, since all effort to cultivate it is made by her and not the landowner. However, the extent to which she has control and access to her land is restricted. Her husband had taken loans from Muragan's family and lost the land to them, as he was not able to pay back the loan. This is why she believes that the land that she currently cultivates on *kuthagai* is land that belongs to her family. She believes that by repaying the loan, the land can come back to her. However, the negotiations for this process will take place between her husband and the landowner, excluding Rajalakshmi and her toil.

Rajalakshmi's daughter-in-law is completely against holding onto this land and upon further enquiry revealed that when Rajalakshmi is unable to meet her interest payments, she substitutes money for her labour time (receiving reduced wages). Due to her age, Rajalakshmi is unable to go and work for Murugan at times, which is when her daughter-in-law goes in her place. This is another case of female labour being substituted for loan payments. However, here the daughter-in-law is forced to take up low paying agricultural wage work because of her mother-in-law, and not due to a male member in the family.

Both Rajalakshmi and Vasanthi are in exploitative work contracts due to debt. This is not debt that was generated by them, but that that they married into. The case of Rajalakshmi's daughter-in-law shows how the debt Rajalakshmi was married into has been transferred on to her daughter-in-law. These instances are a clear example of how marriage in itself is an indebted relation where female labour is exchanged and

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<sup>81</sup> Along with paddy she grows sesame and *urad daal* (pulses), which are referred to as *kodai kaalam velachal* (summer crops), and are sown only if they receive a good amount of rainfall. For the landlords, income from the land is not restricted to land rent alone. In most cases, water for irrigation is taken from the same landlords as they are the ones who own the pump sets. Rajalakshmi pays Rs.100/- for every hour of water that is used on her land. For the *kodai kaalam velachal*, she requires around two to three hours of water and for paddy this goes up to four to six hours. Along with paying for water the tenants need to pay for diesel, which is also used for fixed number of hours.

appropriates through obligations, such as Vasanthi carrying out *coolie* work to repay her father's-in-law debt or Rajakshmi paying off her husband's debt. The labour of these women is used to sustain the livelihood of the household, beyond which they are not allowed to participate (for example, Rajalakshmi is not allowed to negotiate the terms of the *otti* contract). Restrictions placed on these women in the domestic sphere are mirrored in the work sphere, generating exploitative work contracts.

The need to not feel bound and dependant on one landlord is very strong amongst the Ambalakars. In order to move away from Murugan's household, Rajalakshmi, does *coolie* work for other landlords. She tries to finish the work on "her" land as quickly as possible, especially during peak season (October to December), and then does *coolie* work on others' land. This is done to earn extra money so there is some, though limited, form of savings, since work is available to them only for six months in a year.

Taking up tenancy arrangements comes with the prospect of higher incomes and escape from exploitative labour relations. However, this is underlined with the implicit threat of withdrawal of land and work. According to Rajalakshmi-

*"The larger landowners do not want to do any agricultural wage work. They do not have it in them to stand in the sun and work for eight hours every day. These larger landowners come to us and tell us it is beneficial for both parties if we cultivate the land for them. I do not see how that is possible since they take away most of what we produce; we cultivate their land and earn their living. We do not have a choice in the matter. We have to involve ourselves in such work otherwise we will not have any work and no means of survival. If we do not cultivate their lands properly, we will not get their land for the next year"*

Like Rajalakshmi, there are several others who oscillate between being a wage labourer and a cultivator. While these positions vary seasonally, these are positions they occupy for their entire lifetime (Lerche 2010). Being able to cultivate land, or having some form of property rights, is considered as upward class mobility. On the other hand, the degree of oppression and exploitation that is faced by the tenants, whether they are landless labourers, marginal and small landowners, affects their overall position in both social and economic terms. The landowners ensure the continued efficiency and productivity of the land, not with the establishment of the tenancy reforms but through coercive methods and

the fear of eviction, which pushes the tenant to work harder (Banerjee et al. 2002). Through Rajalakshmi's account, the reduced bargaining power between the tenant and landlord is a result of unavailability of work and an indebted relation between the two<sup>82</sup>. This pushes the 'classes of labour' into a state of continued and increased dependency upon the landowning class.

#### 4.2.4 Survival and Exploitation

The different tenancy arrangements and land transactions observed in Aranthangi are conditioned by hierarchical power relations (whether in the market or social structure), and hence cannot be explained away as vestiges of traditional patron-client relations. Over time, in Aranthangi, *kuthagai* has replaced *vāram* contracts- a move understood to generate greater control over land and the surplus generated from it. However, be it *kuthagai* or *vāram*, the assurance of obtaining land and access to loans depends on whether or not tenants maintain "good relations" with the landowners. The "good relations" create conditions for labourers to be tied down to a particular employer, where it can be long-term as in Philomena's case, or short-term like Rajalakshmi's daughter-in-law. Whether short-or long term, tied labour in Aranthangi is treated as synonymous to *pannaiyal* labour. Older forms of *pannaiyal* labour in Aranthangi have disappeared. No longer is a *pannaiyal* labourer a male labourer, where he and his family work under conditions of indebtedness and slavery. The 'new' tied labour relations are short-term in nature, predominantly carried out by female labourers, whose husbands or family are not tied along with them merely by association. However, it is important to mention, that while they might not necessarily call it *pannaiyal* in the villages, there is still a sense of shame that is attached to this labour relation.

In Aranthangi, the presence of *pannaiyal* labour is not discussed freely as this labour relation is said to bring shame upon the family- a point made vocal among the Paraiyar

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<sup>82</sup> The dearth of jobs is a result of numerous factors, one being that the medium landowner leasing out the lands are not being able to obtain sufficient returns. This is very similar to Newbery's (1977) arguments that since rural labour markets fail to guarantee jobs at a consistently fixed rate, these sharecropping contracts are used to mitigate such labour uncertainties.

households. In Aranthangi, the younger generation only knew of the *pannaiyal* relation as a taboo and older generation expressed great pleasure in being able to move away from such oppressive work conditions. As one of Rajlakhshmi's neighbours Kumari mentioned:

*"We will not work for only one landlord, even if that means having to sacrifice getting work all year round. Working for just one person makes us feel like slaves. There is a much greater sense of freedom if we can move out and work for multiple landlords because here we are choosing the work available to us."*

So deep seated are the scars of exploitation faced by the older generation of agricultural wage workers that they are constantly looking for ways to prevent themselves from entering similar situations of exploitative control. However, the labourers recognise that there is no guarantee that any alternate occupation they look for will be devoid of exploitation.

Sreelatha, a 49-year-old Christian Pallar worker, has been a tenant farmer for a Thevar medium landowner for over 12 years. She takes 1 acre of land on lease, on which she grows rice, *ragi* (finger millet), groundnuts and *tuar daal* (lentil). In the previous *fasli* year the total output from the land was only fifteen sacks. Out of this amount, her total payment as land rent to the landlord was nine sacks of rice, leaving her with only six sacks of rice that she sold to a private buyer at the rate of Rs.750/- per sack. This amount was not sufficient to cover the cost of inputs and the labour that she employed. She had borrowed money to buy fertilisers, seeds and pesticides. Sreelatha is now in debt since she cannot repay the local moneylender from whom she had borrowed money. Her total borrowings were for a sum of Rs. 10,000/-, and she has to pay Rs.250/- per month for every Rs.1000/- borrowed. Her son and her husband who works in Chennai as a construction worker are helping her pay off the debt. When she cannot make her payments, she borrows money from her neighbours and landowner. Conditions of indebtedness push her towards working under highly exploitative conditions. However, this alone is insufficient to cover costs, as work is available only six months in a year. Sreelatha is under severe debt due to her dependence on rice alone. It is unthinkable for her to take up maize cultivation under such conditions.

She blames this on the fact that none of them have their own land and are working as tenants.

*"If we had our own land we could experiment but on leased in land we have to be very careful as our main concern is meeting all the payments. We are the ones who are cultivating the land and we are the ones who cannot experiment. This is why the region has not been able to prosper in the past ten to twelve years."*

Sreelatha's main concern is with survival, which is tied to the ability to meet all payments. The high land rent which is not proportionate to the output, adds to the total payments she needs to make. The fact that having to pay a large land rent that is not proportionate to the output highlights the importance of ownership of land. Sreelatha is caught in a cycle, where tenancy was a move away from *pannaiyal* (or similar) work, but indebtedness draws her back to the landowner and exploitative work. Turning down the work would result in rising debt coupled with the threat of withdrawal of land.

The dynamic and interlocking transactions between land and labour present themselves as a means of survival for female labourers and cultivators. The *kuthagai* contract in Aranthangi operates more as an al- *vāram* contract, which results in taking multiple loans from the landowner. The loans can be paid off through labour time, which subjects the female tenants/labourers to the employer's beck and call. The terms and conditions of work are further conditioned through caste and familial relations, leaving the female tenant/labourer with limited scope for negotiation. The traditional patron-client ties, where the labourer was the employer's responsibility, do not exist (Breman (1974) identifies this as the process of depatronisation) clearly identifies in his process of depatronization). However, both the labourer and employer utilise pre-existing relations to obtain work and land, which draws attention to the transformation and continuation of social and political structures of patronage, tying the tenant and labourer to land.

#### **4.3 West Bengal Land and Tenancy Reforms**

Land and tenancy reforms had different areas of focus in West Bengal, with greater emphasis on re-distribution of land and cultivators. One of the first land reform acts to be passed in West Bengal was the West Bengal Estates Acquisition Act in 1953, under which

the state took away all the rights of the intermediaries (Kumar De, 1994: p. 9-10). This Act tried to dilute the concentration of power that lay with the *zamindars* and the intermediaries, but it did not address the redistribution of land. The large landowners were able to retain their land through the process of *benami* - transferring land in the names of their relatives or even in religious and charitable trusts that were run by them (Kumar De, 1994).

Alongside the redistribution of land, the rights of *bargadars* were safeguarded with the West Bengal Bargadars Act of 1950. Under this Act there was a limit to the amount of produce that was payable to the landlords. The *bargadars* could only be evicted if they could not cultivate the land or used the land for non-agricultural and personal purposes; when the land is not cultivated by the *bargadar*, if the *bargadar* fails to tender a share to the landowner; and if the landowner evicts the *bargadar* from the land for personal cultivation. If, however, within the next two years of eviction, the landlord is unable to use the land for personal cultivation then under the prescribed authority (in this case the Junior Land Revenue Officer) the landowner has to sell it first to the *bargadar* and if the *bargadar* does not want to purchase it then it can be sold to someone else (Kumar De, 1994).

The West Bengal Land Reforms Act of 1955 was designed to prevent concentration of land, especially under the practice of *benami*. A ceiling of 25 acres was imposed on land ownership. This excluded homesteads, that is, orchards, and land held by religious and charitable institutions (Bhaumik, 1993). The Land Reforms Act went through numerous amendments from 1955 and 1969, especially with regards to *bargadars* (sharecroppers). The following amendments were made- a) the landowner shall receive half of the gross produce if he supplied the plough, manure, cattle and seed. In other cases, the proportion of output shall be 40 per cent; b) the place of threshing shall be decided mutually by the *bargadar* and the landowner; c) if the produce of any land cultivated by a *bargadar* is harvested and taken away forcibly by a landowner, the *bargadar* shall be entitled to recover from such owner the share of the produce due to him or its money value; d) the landowner shall be entitled to terminate the *barga* if the land cultivated under his personal cultivation



does not exceed two-thirds of the total land (excluding homestead) owned by him' (Bhaumik, 1993: 43). Despite these amendments, concentration of land could not be checked and the 1955 Act brought along with it the eviction of *bargadars*. Records show that the highest number of *bargadars* was evicted during 1958-67 (Bhaumik, 1993). The major defect in the Act was the landowner's right to cultivate the land if it was within the stipulated ceiling limit. The *bargadars* who were evicted were then re-employed as agricultural labourers, thereby finding loopholes that helped the landowners evade the land reform Act (Bhaumik, 1993).

The proper re-distribution of land was addressed with the West Bengal Land Reforms Amendment Act of 1975 which 'provided for the rights and obligations of *ryots*, prevention of accumulation of landholdings by non-agriculturalists, control and regulation of the produce sharing system of cultivation, and introduction of a rational system of assessment of land' (Kumar De, 1994: p. 10)<sup>83</sup>. According to this amended Act, a ceiling on land was set between 6-17 standard acres, where a standard acre refers to 1 acre of irrigated land and 1.4 acres of other areas.

There are always loopholes to any Act and the landowners used this to their advantage. The *zamindars* and the moneylenders exploited the economic dependence of the landless labourers and *bargadars* through a system of loans referred to as *dadān*, where they were charged very high interest rates. In order to repay the loan, they entered tied labour arrangements, where the labourers are referred to as *dadān* workers. This left the labourers indebted and dependent upon the landlords without much scope of coming out of this relation (Kumar De, 1994).

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<sup>83</sup> If a *ryot* was an unmarried adult person there was a ceiling of 6 acres, if the *ryot* had a family of more than 2 and less than 5 members then they were allowed a maximum of 5 standard acres, if the *ryots* family consisted of more than five members then along with the 12.3 standard acres each additional member of the family was allotted an excess of 1.23 acres but at no point could it cross a total of 17 acres irrespective of the size of the family (Kumar de 1994: 10).

#### 4.3.1 Left Rule and Land Distribution

The win of an electoral majority by the Left Front Government in West Bengal heralded the onset of a new outlook towards rural development. Where Tamil Nadu was focussing on technological advancement, West Bengal looked towards structural changes in the form of land distribution and security of tenure. The Left Front Government in West Bengal came to power in 1977, and addressed the loopholes in the various land reform and tenancy Acts. The government shifted focus from landowners to sharecroppers, where they attempted to safeguard their claims. One of the major amendments to the tenancy reform in 1977 was the way 'personal cultivation' was defined. Previously, *bargadars* were evicted on the grounds that landowners were reclaiming their land for personal cultivation. With the amendments made in 1977, the only way a *bargadar* could be evicted was: if he or his family members resided near the land, if the principal source of income for his household was from the land, and if he or his family members cultivated the land. If a *bargadar* was evicted, the landlord would have to provide a receipt of the transaction, otherwise they were liable to a fine of Rs.1000/- or imprisonment of up to 6 months (Bhaumik, 1993: p. 47).

The Left Front Government worked towards giving 'land back to the tiller' through Operation *Barga*. This remains one of the most effective and successful land reform measures undertaken by the government in West Bengal.<sup>84</sup> It is unmatched by any other land reform that took place in the country, as it worked to restructure the hierarchical power base within society, that is, give more power to the poorer sections of society (Kumar De, 1994).

Operation *Barga* introduced an effective process of safeguarding the rights of *bargadars* by recording and registering their names. The land reforms sought to distribute land that

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<sup>84</sup> The reason for this success was the ability of the Left Front government to create a strong and effective cadre base. The Left Front government brought together *bargadars*, agricultural labourers and small farmers under one group that constituted around 75 per cent of the total agricultural population in the state. This group comprised of their political support base as well. The Left simultaneously tried to build a friendly relationship with the middle and big landlords (Kumar De, 1994), though they were not as effective in this attempt.

was held in excess of the ceilings, to the landless labourers. The reforms looked at the setting up of financial institutions such as banks for the *bargadars* and *pattadars* so that they could have easy access to agricultural implements and inputs (Kumar De, 1994). The land reform package under the Left Front government sought to provide homesteads to landless cultivators, village artisans and fishermen, impose stricter ceiling provisions, and establish a cohesive machinery to ensure the proper functioning of land reforms all the way down to the *Gram Panchayat* level (Kumar De, 1994: p. 22).

Operation *Barga* brought with it a shift in insecurities from tenancy of the *bargadar* to tenure of the landlord. Operation *Barga* was introduced with the objective of removing inequality in landholdings, allowing for rural class mobility by doing so (Rawal 2001). Operation *Barga* recorded a total of 1.2 million sharecroppers from 1978-81 and gave them their hereditary right to cultivation, and procuring a fair deal in their crop share. In addition to this, around one million acres of vested land was distributed amongst 2.5 million landless labourers and marginal peasants; and homestead plots were distributed amongst half a million households (Bandyopadhyay, 2003).

The programme is not without its flaws however, as the recording of *bargadars* has not led to a change in their economic condition or their access to modern agricultural inputs (Rudra, 1981: A 65). The post-recording phase witnessed a trend of non-participation, where Operation *Barga* did not demolish but further perpetuated tenancy patterns (Rudra, 1981). While the programme allows for user rights on the land being cultivated, there are no ownership rights, making its sale difficult (Majumdar, 2003). The criticisms levelled against Operation *Barga* find resonance with the movement out of *bargadar* arrangements into land rent tenancy arrangements (*theke*), in both Bardhanagar and Madhabpur.

#### **4.4 Tenancy patterns in Chinsurah - Controlling Ownership of Land**

The landowners in Madhabpur and Bardhanagar in Hooghly are Muslims and Brahmins<sup>85</sup>. The Muslims have larger landholdings than the Brahmins, and in addition to farming, many

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<sup>85</sup> The Brahmins are identified by their surname Haldar.

are artisans, doing embroidery work. However, the mainstay of their income comes from agriculture. The livelihood of Brahmins is not dependent on agriculture as they are employed in high-end government jobs such as doctors, teachers, and electrical engineers. The agricultural labourers who belong to SC/ST category rely on agricultural wage work, tenancy and casual daily wage employment.

Caste Category	Total Number of Respondents	0 Acres	1-2 Acres	>3 Acres
General	155	129 (27.92%)	17 (3.67 %)	9 (1.94%)
OBC	11	9 (1.94%)	2 (0.43 %)	0 (0%)
SC	191	181 (39.17%)	10 (2.16%)	0 (0%)
ST	105	83 (17.90%)	22 (4.76%)	0 (0%)

**Table 4.3: Caste-Wise distribution of Land Leased**

*Source: Village Survey, Bardhanagar and Madhabpur, May 2012.*

*\*Percentages calculated from total number of respondents*

The regions have different tenancy arrangements, however, it is not a dominant land transaction among the classes of labour. Table 4.3 shows the number of households who lease land for cultivation across different caste groups. This table shows that across all caste groups a majority of the population does not lease land. The ST population that leases land is 4.76 percent and SC is 2.16 percent. Those who belong to the General category, in particular to the large landowning class, lease large quantities of land (above 3 acres), of which the highest amount is 7 acres, leased by a Muslim landowner from Madhabpur. Irrespective of the type of tenancy arrangement, only a small proportion of the population engages with it. The distribution pattern is indicative of agricultural labourers wanting to move out of sharecropping. Despite this movement, landowners are constantly looking for various means to secure their land. As cited by Hanstead and Brown (in Majumdar, 2003), and as observed in the course of my fieldwork, the Brahmin landowners (medium landowners) sold a portion of their land to the *bargadar* (this was usually 25 percent of the land), so that the *bargadar* relinquishes rights to the rest of the

land. It should be noted here that unlike in Aranthangi, women are not at the forefront of tenancy arrangements.

Ratan, a 55-year-old Brahmin landowner owns 8 acres in Bardhanagar. He has sold approximately 2 acres of his land to Amol (45-year-old Santhal agricultural labourer) whose family has worked for Ratan's family for over three generations, and continues to do so. This transaction is not seen as a move to secure Ratan's land, but is instead regarded as a benevolent gesture.

*"We have given him this land for his own use. He has been working for our family for such a long time and we know he will look after the land well. It has become all the more important for him to have this land after he met with a terrible accident which damaged his left leg completely. He needs some security and in addition to this he needs to keep working otherwise his leg will never heal completely...He is a very good worker and comes when we call him. However, we do feel that after giving him this land he does not listen to us as much, and does not come when expected."*

Ratan, despite selling the land, views it as a gift that he has given to Amol. Deals such as these are viewed as being 'mutual and voluntary' (Majumdar, 2003: p. 5147). However, the extent to which they are actually voluntary and the matter of choice involved is debatable. Proclaiming this land transaction as a gift creates an obligation for Amol. Amol, who now owns land, is still at the beck and call of Ratan, in lieu of obtaining agricultural wage work, and being called first for service. Can this process then be viewed as a reinforcement of interlocking transactions? The labourer-employer relationship is not done away with by the sale of land. Amol relies on Ratan to cover cost of production to cultivate his land, and for any immediate loan that is required.

Since the sale of the land, Amol cultivates the land for himself and continues to work as an agricultural labourer for Ratan. He has ceased to operate as a *bargadar* but he continues to perform his duties for Ratan. Ratan comes across as a benevolent landlord making it all the more difficult for Amol and his family to turn down the work, which many a times is not restricted to agricultural wage work. In addition to this, the fact that Ratan paid for Amol's medical expenses has left him and his family indebted to Ratan. Amol's wife, apart from working as an agricultural labourer for Ratan's, carries out both threshing of rice and

household chores for him. Moreover, in order to purchase the land Amol had to borrow the money from Ratan, further adding to his debt. This is why Amol, despite having land of his own, continues to work on Ratan's land in order to pay off the debt. The interlocking nature of obligation and debt has resulted in continued allegiance and servitude towards Ratan by not only Amol but also his entire family. The landowners, under such circumstances, retain a much larger share of the land and do away with *bargadars* without losing control of the labour force. The table below highlights the different tenancy patterns prevalent in both Aranthangi and Chinsurah, where a single landowner or tenant can be engaged in multiple tenancies.

Tenancy Pattern in Chinsurah	Share of produce to tenant	Investment	Caste Groups	Class Categories
<i>Bhaag Chaas</i>	Share of produce is 50:50 after deducting the cost of production.  This can range from year-long land lease to 3 months.  Year-long leases are entered into by bargadars  Short-term leases are carried out by <i>bhaag chaasis</i> .	Landlords provide input costs and have greater control over what is produced.  The tenants behave like the <i>utbandi</i> <sup>86</sup> and <i>gulo</i> <sup>87</sup> tenants who existed in pre-independence Bengal	Mahiya, Sadgop, Bauri, Khoira	Medium, small and marginal farmers
<i>Theeke</i>	Land rent paid to the landlord Land on <i>theke</i> is generally given for vegetable ( <i>katra fasal</i> ) and potato.  Land rent is Rs.3000/- per <i>bigha</i>	Input cost is borne by the tenant and landlord only receives payment in land rent. This replicates the traditional <i>Sanja</i> <sup>88</sup> tenant	Bauri, Sadgop, Khoira, Santhal, Handi, Bagdi	Marginal Farmers Agricultural labourers
<i>Bandha Kishen</i>	Tied labourer, payment is received in cash and kind. Though not a tenancy pattern, it is important because women rarely become <i>bhaag chaasis</i> with movement of their male counterparts out of agriculture. Instead they become <i>bandha kishens</i> . <i>Bandha kishens</i> are similar to the <i>krishani</i> <sup>89</sup> system that existed in this region.		Santhal, Handi, Bagdi Bauri	Agricultural Labourers

**Table 4.4: Land Tenancy Arrangements in Chinsurah**

Source: Field Work in Chinsurah, May 2012 to September 2012

<sup>86</sup> *Utbandi* tenant are referred to as tenants-at-will, due to which they were always at the mercy of their landlord

<sup>87</sup> *Gulo* tenants did not have any security and they paid land rent, which was a portion of their produce that was not in cash.

<sup>88</sup> A *sanja* tenant is one who is required to pay a fixed rent to the landlord in kind.

<sup>89</sup> *Krishani* system was one where the landlord provided everything except the labour and the *krishani* was heavily indebted and not in a position to repay the loans in his entire lifetime, leaving him in a state of 'semi-feudal bondage' (Dasgupta, 1984a:A4). The *krishani* was attached to a single cultivator and was a *bargadar* because he received a share of the produce and not a fixed amount for the produce (Newaj and Rudra, 1975: A 23). *krishani* is not identified by this name any longer. With similar patterns of indebtedness, they are now referred to as *bandha kishen* and most of them are female agricultural labourers.

#### 4.4.1 Tenancy patterns in Chinsurah

The landowners and labourers in Chinsurah both spoke of a decline in the number of *bargadars*. Tenancy patterns observed in Chinsurah were short term sharecropping called *bhaag chaas* (sharecropping) and *theeke* (receiving land rent). In *bhaag chaas*, the cost of production<sup>90</sup> is deducted, and the produce is divided equally, even though as per the tenancy amendments, three quarters of the produce is supposed to go to the tenant. In *theeke*, the landlord does not make any payments towards the initial cost of cultivating the land. The entire cost of production is borne by the lessee. Unlike in Aranthangi, where land was leased out for an entire year, in Chinsurah, the crops determine when land can be leased out and under what tenancy pattern. In Chinsurah, land is almost never given on *bhaage* or *theeke* for rice. The landowner cultivates such land. During the potato-growing season, land is leased out on *bhaage* and on *theeke* for vegetables. Chinsurah observed multiple tenancies within a *fasli* year.

Shankar Haldar, a 40-year-old Brahmin medium landowner, owns approximately 7 *bighas* (unit of land measurement) of land. He gives 3 *bighas* of land on *bhaage* for cultivating sesame. The *bhaag chaasi* only provides the labour, and Shankar provides all other input costs. After deducting the input cost, the total produce is divided in half between him and the *bhaag chaasi*. By providing the input cost, Shankar has much greater control on the crops and the fertilisers that are used on his land. By leasing his land on *bhaage*, Shankar ensures that the tenant is looking after the land. Shankar is vigilant about his land and keeps a constant check on it. This is important to not only ensure maximum yield but to be recorded as a cultivator as well. The *bhaag chaas* arrangement, apart from being yield productive, is a mechanism through which the *chaasi's* labour is also brought under control. The *bhaag chaasi* cultivates the rented land and any other land that belongs to the landowner. The *bhaag chaasis* in the two villages in Chinsurah were men. However, unlike

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<sup>90</sup> This at times might be completely or partially borne by the landlord, depending upon whether the tenant is able to contribute towards cultivation or not.



in Aranthangi, control over labour is not restricted to the *chaasi* but extends to other members of their family, usually female labour. There is no long-term tying in this arrangement but the dependence on the landowner (generated through access to land for cultivation and agricultural wage work) makes it difficult to pull away from such tenancy arrangements. For women, even though they cultivate land and are tied to their husband's obligations and debts, their primary identity remains that of a labourer.

Azhar, a Muslim landlord (Sheikh and 48 years old) with a total of 28 *bighas* of land (9.3 acres<sup>91</sup>), leases out 12-14 *bighas* of land for potato and vegetables in the *rabi* period. Paddy, the *aman* variety is grown in the *kharif* months and during this period no land is leased out. For potatoes (January to March) approximately 12 *bighas* is leased out on *bhaage*. Azhar provides seeds and fertilisers, and the labour is provided by the *bhaag chaasi*. The bargadars cultivate the land all year round, with similar payment schemes as that of the *bhaag chaasi*. The payment made is in kind. For every *bigha* of land, he gets 12 sacks of potatoes (each sack of rice is 60 kgs), totalling to 720 kilos of potatoes. He does give out a small portion of land on *bhaage* for the entire *fasli* year. On 5 *bighas* of land, Azhar has 4 registered *bargadars* working for him. Vegetables are cultivated on *theeke* contracts. In *theeke* contracts, payments are made towards land rent, and therefore are not taken in kind. For 1 *bigha* of land he gets around Rs.3000/-. He has been leasing his land out for the past five years.

*"The leasing out of land started four to five years back because of the lack of labour. Previously, I had plenty of labourers to work on the fields with me. But now there is a shortage of labour, I do not get sufficient labourers to work on my land... How can I work on my land on my own? It is not possible. It is for this reason that I lease out the land to 4 or 5 different people. I will not leave the land fallow and run at a loss. I do not have to take responsibility for the crop and they have to make their payments to me. I cannot demand more if they make a profit and similarly, if they make a loss it is of no concern to me. I will get my pay either way."*

Despite multiple tenancy patterns, especially with *bargadars*, Azhar's statement highlights the decline in relations of patronage. The relationship is now more profit seeking, where

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<sup>91</sup> In Chinsurah 3 *bighas* equals 1 acre of land and 7.5 *bighas* equals 1 hectare

he does not take on any liabilities or responsibilities of the *bargadars*. No longer are such relations of patronage important to maintain social hierarchy (see Breman, 2009); instead, employers/landowners are concerned with accumulation of capital.

Interested in profit making, Azhar and other landowners like him believe that it is more profitable to lease land on *theeke* rather than on *bhaage* contracts. A *theeke* arrangement means that the landowner receives land rent, an assured payment, without having to incur any cost of cultivation. Moreover, in a *theeke* contract, Azhar is under no compulsion to lease out land to the same family if they are unable to generate profit. *Theeke* tenants, in comparison to *bargadars*, have greater choice and independence as in principle they do not have to borrow from the landowner. *Bargadars* on the other hand, rely on the landowners for input costs, their connections with government mills and wholesale retailers, for cultivation and sale of their produce. The dependence upon the landowner is a mechanism through which control over land and resources is maintained.

The *theeke* and *bhaage* tenancy patterns are short-term in nature. This is encouraged by landowners so as to protect their landownership. On the other hand, agricultural labourers and cultivators want to move away from the long-term *bargadar* system as they find it exploitative. Asok, a 45-year-old Santhal, does not have any land of his own, leases land from Shafiq (a 47-year-old Muslim landlord who is also the largest landlord in the entire village with a total of 142 *bighas* of land). He says:

*"I do not want to become a bhaag chaasi. I prefer taking the jamin (land) on theeke. At least here we get the profits of the produce and only need to make payments towards the cost of the land. If I was a bhaag chaasi, I would have to give half of what I produce to the landowner. It is my effort but someone else is reaping the benefits just because they have the land. Moreover, as a bhaag chaasi I would become like a slave to the landowner, the work never stops in the fields and I would be compelled to do their bidding. I do not want that for myself or for my family."*

Asok's statement highlights the asymmetry in cost sharing, contrary to the equal cost sharing depicted by the landowners. While the landlords account for the cost that is incurred by them, there is no equivalent payment made towards the effort of the labourer. The landlord deals with tangible input costs and an increase in them will ensure a greater

share of the produce. Here is a situation where the landlord and the *bargadar* both prefer *theeke* over *bhaage*, but for very different reasons. The landlord prefers *theeke* to ensure the constant, fixed flow of income. The *bargadar* on the other hand, wants to be in a situation where he has greater control over the produce and only has to pay land rent. A reason for this is that the tenant, despite working as a *bargadar* for many years, continues to remain in the same position of indebtedness (Bhaumik, 1993). Asok recalls that in 1985, there were 100 registered *bargadars* from his locality alone but today there are only 15. The decline in the number of *bargadars* over the years is result of increasing indebtedness experienced in farming. In addition, the *bargadar* relation is considered exploitative and men do not want to be a part of this unequal relation.

The decline in *bhaag chaas* in this region can be attributed to women not replacing male cultivators. While men move out of agriculture, a majority of women take up non-agricultural work or continue to work as agricultural labourers as opposed to cultivators. Cultivation and tenancy remains a male domain. Unlike in Aranthangi, women have not become forerunners of such land transactions, and remain confined to work that is socially acceptable to them. In the two villages, out of a total of 16 respondents who leased in land for *bhaag chaas*, only one of them was a woman.

Jharna, a 50-year-old Bauri woman, carries out *bhaag chaas* on approximately 4 *bighas* of land. The tenancy patterns alternate not only with the crop but with every passing year as well. She grows *niranjan* rice (medium quality of rice), sesame and vegetables. For rice, the landlord provides the seeds and fertilisers and in return, she gives half of the produce after deducting the cost of the inputs. For vegetables and sesame, she needs to pay a land rent of Rs.2000/- per *bigha*. This value is lower than the village rate of Rs.3000/- per *bigha* because she leases in land from the same landowner that her family has worked with for over two generations. The relation suggests continuity in paternalistic relations.

Jharna cultivates land on *bhaage* and *theeke*, but has to borrow money from the very same landowner. The loan amount is repaid through labour time. The frequency of loans required for everyday expenses and cultivation keep Jharna indebted to the landowner.

The best way she sees fit to repay the landlord is by becoming a *bandha kishen*. Jharna is both cultivator and agricultural labourer but the primary identity she ascribes to herself is that which is most socially acceptable- a *bandha kishen*. Working as a *bandha kishen* provides Jharna with security of tenure and agricultural wage work. If a comparison is drawn between Aranthangi and Chinsurah, female cultivators and labourers work under exploitative conditions in both regions. However, in the former, it is indebtedness generated through land that drags women into *pannaiyal* work. In Chinsurah, as it is not socially acceptable for women to be forerunners of land transactions and cultivation, they become *bandha kishens* so that they can lease land, a process which increases their dependence and indebtedness towards the landowners.

Jharna was identified as the only female respondent who was cultivating land on her own. Other female respondents reported cultivating land on tenancy that was passed on to them by male members of their family. Sabita, a 39-year-old Khoira (ST) agricultural labourer cultivates land on *theeke* and on *bhaag chaas*. Her husband had taken land 1 *bigha* of land on *bhaag chaas*. His failure to meet his payments for one *fasli* year left him indebted to the landowner. In order to pay off the loan, he works as a fruit vendor on the local trains. Sabita on the other hand, now works as a *bhaag chaas* on this leased land. In order to meet payments, she has taken land on *theeke*, in the hope that vegetables can give her higher revenue and help her pay off her husband's loan. Cultivating land on *bhaage* and *theeke* requires investment, which Sabita cannot make with her earnings from agricultural wage work, or from her husband's income. In order to cultivate land on both *bhaage* and *theeke* she relies on money from the landowner. She considers this as her loan, which she pays off through labour time as a *bandha kishen*. Sabita, cannot opt out of the *bhaage* contract, as she is bound by familial relations- her husband. This relation, because of the loan taken by her husband, reinforces her decision to become a *bandha kishen*.

Sashti, a 25-year-old Bagdi labourer, had a similar story to narrate. Jharna and Sabita cultivate land that belongs to a larger landowner. Sashti on the other hand, helps her husband cultivate land that belonged to a medium landowner. Sashti's husband is a *bhaag*

*chaasi* and did not migrate in search of non-agricultural work. However, he has taken loans from the medium landowner, and from a large landowner, in order to meet production costs. Sashti's husband had to borrow from two different sources because he could not rely on the medium landowner for money. The transaction was more business-like with proper interest rates. Her husband was unable to pay the loan amount borrowed from both landowners. Payments to the medium landowner were negotiated, often delayed, but paid. In order to escape high interest rates, payments to the large landowner were made through labour time- Sashti's labour. Sashti has now worked as a *bandha kishen* for two years (at the time of survey). Apart from paying off the loan amount, working as a *bandha kishen* has granted access to future short-term loans and grains. The *bandha kishen* relation is an exclusionary labour arrangement, which grants privileges at the cost of reduced wages and longer working hours, often including unpaid work.

Sashti and Sabita are cases where female agricultural labourers become *bandha kishens* to pay off their husbands' loans. The female agricultural labourers enter exploitative work contracts and take on the burden of repaying loans. The ability to substitute female labour with such great ease places limited restrictions on the male cultivators and labourers, where they continue to have greater freedom to shift to non-agricultural work and pass on their debt to their wives.

#### **4.5 Conclusion:**

This chapter discussed how tenancy arrangements are a profitable option for large and medium landowners, where they can maintain control and generate surplus from land. For the classes of labour, tenancy is another mechanisms of survival. The ability to enter a tenancy arrangement, for the classes of labour, depends on existing relations of indebtedness, obligation, and at times, the unquestioning loyalty of the labourer that is passed on through generations of servitude. Traditional patron client relations have given to way to transactions of rent and profit, notwithstanding that this takes place alongside relations of power determined through social hierarchy and social obligations. In both

Aranthangi and Chinsurah, the transaction was not restricted to the exchange of land but shaped labour relations as well, one ending up being dependent upon the other.

Labour relations are exclusionary in nature where certain privileges are extended in order to secure labour. These privileges can be in the form of credit, land and even the privilege of first call for agricultural wage work. In Aranthangi, tenants reported that they were not compelled or coerced in any way to meet payments. This never instilled any fear of them losing land, as the defaulted amount could be carried forward in the next *fasli* year. There is no explicit threat of withdrawal of land. The assurance of land increased both dependence and indebtedness towards the landowners. Among female tenants in Aranthangi, the loan was often paid through labour time, where they remained tied for a short period of time to a particular landowner. The moment they paid off the loan they were free to work for another employer.

In Chinsurah, loans or defaulted land rent payments were paid through female labour time. As shown in the case of Sashti and Sabita, their entry into tenancy arrangements was to repay their husband's loans. While these women are drawn into these exploitative relations, their husbands move out in search for better paying non-agricultural jobs. In order to manage the debts, these women become *bandha kishens*, which provides them access to further loans, agricultural wage work and land. Along with their labour time, tenancy emerges another avenue to repay loans. For the *bandha kishens*, repayment of the loan extracted through labour time is not confined to agricultural wage work but extends to unpaid domestic work that they carry out for the landowner.

Rudra (1982) identifies tenants under such a system as being farm servants in disguise, where they get paid in kind as a share of the crop, instead of being paid fixed wages. However, apart from the difference in mode of payment, after the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976, labourers in general recognise that doing non-farm work for the landlord indicates bondage of some form and particularly in Aranthangi, have tried to step away from this. This was expressed in a forceful manner especially amongst the Paraiyars. Even the Pallar and Ambalakar agricultural wage workers did not want to be associated

with *pannaiyal* work. Despite the resistance, conditions of indebtedness determine the severity of labour tying experienced by the classes of labour.

In Chinsurah, female labourers became *bandha kishen* in order repay loans. There was no shame attached to being a *bandha kishen* unlike in Aranthangi with *pannaiyals*. In Chinsurah, where as a rule women do not partake in tenancy arrangements, the *bandha kishen* relation provides them access to cultivable land.

The labourers in Aranthangi and Chinsurah are not devoid of choice. They have the choice to enter or refrain from tied labour arrangements; however, they are not free from the obligations and privileges that are extended to them by the landowners and their husbands. Coupled with their caste position, this keeps them in a situation of indebtedness.

Indebtedness, and the determination of who enters labour tying arrangements is generated through asymmetrical power relations between the employer and labour, and gendered positions within the household and wider family/ kinship group. Respondents like Jharna who came from female-headed households entered tenancy contracts and became *bandha kishens* to support their dependents. Others like Sabita, Sashti, Rajalakshmi and Kamlaveni, often became tied labourers to pay off debts that were not theirs but that of a male family member. Female labour is readily and easily substituted for male labour when it comes to repayment of loans. Female labourers in Aranthangi and Chinsurah enter exploitative working conditions. *Kuthagai* contracts and the resulting indebtedness lead to labour tying arrangements. The access of land to female labourers in Chinsurah through *theeke* or *bhaag chaas* is made possible through labour tying arrangements. The persistence of such exploitative tenancy patterns and labour tying arrangements is because these female labourers are bound by their duties and obligations, not only to the landowner but also to their family. These relations impinge on the ability of female cultivators to operate independently.

In an environment riddled with insecurities for the smaller and marginal landowners, and the agricultural labourers, tenancy emerges as a thin veil of protection to secure livelihoods- an apparent move to help people improve their lives. However, labourers, tenants and farmers are operating in a system where power relations are skewed in favour of larger landowners, binding the labourers into relations of privilege, obligation and ever-increasing debt.

This chapter discussed how relations with the land generate debts that result in labour tying arrangements among the female classes of labour. These debts are an outcome of interlocking transaction of land, labour and credit. In the following chapter I examine the different credit relations that result in female tied labour.



## Chapter 5: Labour Tying and Credit Relations: Interlinkages of Land Labour and Credit

Parvati, a 35-year-old Ambalakar woman in Thirasu (Aranthangi, Tamil Nadu), had returned home after cutting sugarcane and was cooking food for her family. She is one of the few labourers who work in sugarcane fields. She does this because her husband had taken a loan from a Thevar landowner, and is now working to pay off the amount, and at the time sugarcane paid more than rice. She complained of insufficient wages and that she had no savings to invest in her own land (200 *kulis*). *"I always have to look out for other sources of money. First, I go to my neighbours, then to informal money lenders, and finally, if all else fails, I go to my employer."* Formal credit institutions do not figure in her list of credit sources. Going to a bank requires her to produce collateral, and the only asset she owns is her land which she does not want to lose. She prefers borrowing money from informal credit sources so that she can retain ownership of the land. As mentioned in Chapter Four, 91.42 per cent of female respondents who belong to the classes of labour are tenants. Parvati's concerns and complaints are typical responses among female labourers and cultivators.

Sampa a 29-year-old Bauri agricultural labourer, in Bardhanagar (Chinsurah, West Bengal), is in debt because her husband does not contribute regularly to household expenditures. According to her: *"My husband does not work. Where do I get money from when I need it? I have to go to my employer, and if that means I have to work as a bandha kishen, so be it. How many times can I ask my father or neighbours for money? We are all in the same position; there is only so much that they can give."* Sampa does not consider going to a formal credit institution or an informal money lender. She prefers working as a *bandha kishen* so that she has access to work and loans from her employer.

Described above are two very different instances of credit, used for very different purposes. Parvati relies on other sources of credit in order to meet daily expenses and cost of production in cultivation. Sampa's husband who is a casual daily wage labourer, cannot get regular work and therefore, rarely contributes towards any household expenses.

Sampa considers herself to be the only working member of the family, and would prefer to work as a *bandha kishen* than rely on her husband's earnings or on irregular casual work, so that she can provide food for her family. Even though both these women require loans for very different reasons, the conditions that push them to the landowner and into labour tying are dominated by patriarchal/gendered familial relations, and their class positions that draw them into exploitative low paying work. The financial conditions of the family affect the severity of the tied labour relation. This draws attention to the different ways in which female labourers get into parallel situations of tied labour.

This chapter examines different credit relations- a necessity that emerges in order to cover income and expenditure gaps that arise out of seasonal fluctuations within a *fasli* year (Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2001; 2002; 2006). Credit relations are important for landowners/employers as it generates a stable and servile labour, which are strengthened through relations of deceit, compulsion and obligations (Srivastava, 2005: p.8). Labourers, under situations of dwindling agricultural wage work, are constantly trying to find ways to secure their livelihood, which pulls them into exclusionary labour arrangements. Credit is one such way of ensuring survival for the classes of labour. In the period of neoliberal development, the sources of credit accessible to the classes of labour has changed. Access to formal credit institutions are limited in number in rural areas and access is determined through class positions (Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2001). For poor households, credit is accessible through informal sources, which is often usurious in nature.

This chapter asks how accessibility to different sources of credit generates indebtedness among the classes of labour. Indebtedness does not automatically imply the creation of tied labour; these are influenced by relations of privilege, obligation and gender/familial power relations. This chapter uncovers how interlocked markets of land, credit and labour, and asymmetrical power relations within the domestic and work space compels the female classes of labour to take up usurious credit and exploitative work conditions that can lead to labour tying arrangements. I show these relations in the chapter, in the following manner.

Section 5.1 in this chapter highlights the fragmented nature of formal rural credit institutions in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Despite credit reforms, inaccessibility to formal credit institutions raises questions about how access to credit is produced politically. The access to banks in Aranthangi and Chinsurah is limited primarily to large and medium landowners. The marginal farmers and agricultural labourers depend on informal sources of credit. The changing geography of banking has affected access to formal credit sources and intensified class inequalities. Section 5.2 discusses land-credit and labour-credit interlinkages, and the various ways in which they generate indebtedness among the classes of labour. Credit is an important survival tool in rural society and therefore, there are multiple reasons for taking loans which generates indebtedness towards the borrower. The inability of banks to extend loans to the classes of labour is compensated by informal lending sources.

Section 5.3 examines the presence of multiple sources of credit in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, the pattern of borrowing, and how the classes of labour are drawn into relations of debt- through interlocking transactions of land, labour credit, and domestic politics. Despite the presence of multiple sources of credit in Aranthangi, female labourers enter tied labour relations primarily through land-credit interlinkages. As observed in Chapter Four, women (especially in Aranthangi) enter tenancy relations. Therefore, apart from everyday consumption loans, women need loans for the purpose of cultivation as well. In Chinsurah, cultivation is not considered the primary occupation of female labourers and are, therefore, drawn into tied labour relations through labour-credit interlinkages. An overarching factor in both regions which pushes women into labour tying arrangements is domestic politics, where they are paying off their husband's debt.

Labourers are constantly on the lookout for cheaper, less usurious sources of credit. Self-help groups (SHGs) in rural India that are micro-finance institutions have provided an easy source of credit, especially for women. Though effective, especially in the case of Aranthangi, these groups remain contained in particular localities and communities, and their effects remain localised. The disparate effects of SHGs are discussed in Section 5.4.

Self-help groups can be used as an instrument to help labourers out of indebted relations. However, the localised nature of SHGs, and the overt emphasis on enterprise, does not allow female labourers to utilise the micro-finance institution to their advantage and relive their debt. This brings in to question many of the debates that surround microfinance and empowerment of poor women. The scanty benefits of SHGs places limits on the extent to which dependence on informal sources of credit are reduced. The limited effects of SHGs, in turn has repercussions on the burden of loans and their repayment, of which a disproportionate share falls on the female classes of labour.

### **5.1 Credit Institutions forging Credit relations**

Indebtedness is considered one of the reasons why labourers enter tied labour arrangements. According to the National Sample Survey Organisation report on 'Indebtedness of Farmer Households' (59<sup>th</sup> Round 2003-2004), of 89.35 million Farmer Households 43.42 million (48.6 per cent) are indebted. In Tamil Nadu 74.5 per cent of the farmer households are indebted compared with West Bengal where the level is 50.1 per cent. There are numerous ways in which labourers and cultivators enter relations of debt. The kind of creditor, whether banks, employers or private money lenders, they interact with, is a reflection on how well institutionalised forms of credit operate.

Rural credit societies in India have been around for over 100 years since the enactment of the Co-operative Societies Act in 1904. This Act attempted to address the issues of farmers' indebtedness and poverty (Bansal et al. 2012) by reducing farmers' dependence on informal sources of credit. Initially, the Act only allowed the registrations of banks and credit unions but in 1912 it was amended to include all societies, credit or non-credit, at urban and rural centres (Rayudu 1991). Rural Credit Cooperatives today consist of both long-term and short-term credit institutions. This operates on a three-tiered structure, with the Primary Agricultural Co-operative Banks (PACBs) at the village level, District Cooperative Central Bank (DCCB) and State Apex Cooperative Banks at the state level.

### 5.1.1 Rural credit Societies

In Tamil Nadu, there are 4474 PACBs (TNAU Agritech Portal: Banking and Credit) and 5229 PACBs<sup>92</sup> in West Bengal (Department of Cooperation, Government of West Bengal) that makes credit available to farmers. These institutions provide credit to farmers and make agricultural inputs, such as fertilisers, available to them (see Table 5.1). These banks provide both short term and medium term credit for a period of 12 to 15 months and 3 to 5 years. For the two villages of Karaimesdu and Thirasu, the nearest PACB was 18 kms from the villages in the town of Aranthangi. For Madhabpur and Bardhanagar the nearest PACB was at the town of Puinan which was approximately 8 kms from the village.

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<sup>92</sup> "Out of total 5229 PACBs, 2228 are mobilizing deposit. Although *godowns* are available in more than 3000 PACBs and fund is available in deposit-mobilising PACBs, only 1792 PACS are distributing fertilizer, 504 PACBs are involved in seed business and 371 PACBs are marketing agricultural produces." (Department of Cooperation, Government of West Bengal: <http://coopwb.org/pacs.php> )

Formal Credit Society	Funding Body	Services	Numbers present	
			Tamil Nadu	West Bengal
<b>Primary Agriculture Cooperative Banks</b>	-State Apex Cooperative Bank  -District Cooperative Central Bank	-Providing Short and Long term loans (12 to 15 months) repayable within 3 to 5 years	4474	5229
<b>District Cooperative Central Bank</b>	-Loans from State Apex Cooperative Bank  -Own share of Capital and Reserves  -Deposits from the public	-Lending to Primary credit society  -Commercial Banking Business- includes deposits from public and lending to the poor against proper securities  -Branches serve PACBs  -Lending to public for non-agricultural purposes	23  717 branches in rural areas	17  361 branches in rural areas
<b>State Apex Cooperative Bank</b>	National Bank of Agriculture and Rural Development	Loans for agriculture and allied sectors to DCCBs	1	1

**Table 5.1: Cooperative Banks and Rural Credit Services in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal**

*Source: TNAU Agritech Portal Banking and Department of Cooperation, Government of West Bengal*

The DCCB is located at the district headquarters, which is at Pudukkottai and Hooghly townships. Along with undertaking normal commercial banking services, the main function of these banks is to provide loans to primary credit societies (see Table 5.1). Tamil Nadu has 23 DCCBs and around 717 branches in the rural areas to serve the PACBs (TNAU Agritech Portal: Banking and Credit). West Bengal has 17 Central Co-operative banks across the 14 districts and they have a total of 361 branches (Department of Cooperation, Government of West Bengal). The State Apex Cooperative Banks channelize resources to the DCCB and PACBs where funds can be used for both agricultural and non-agricultural

purposes (TNAU Agritech Portal: Banking and Credit)<sup>93</sup>. Table 5.2 below provides a synopsis of the rural credit providing bodies in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.

Despite this tiered credit structure, most institutions continue to perform poorly. The percentage share of crop loans fell from 74.9 per cent in 1975-76 to 33.2 per cent in 2005-2006 in short term credit. For long term credit the drop was much steeper from 61.2 per cent to 6 per cent (Radhakrishna, 2007). Reduced access to formal credit institutions coupled with the change in policy on expansion, allowed banks to shift their loss-making branches to more viable areas (from 51.2 per cent of the total in 1996 to 45.7 per cent in 2005), in the 1990s (Satyasai, 2008). This was realised with banks shifting to urban areas, and marked with the entry of foreign banks, which increased competition (Satyasai, 2008). Post 1990, banks had to show profitability. In doing so the targets, they set for the 'weaker sections' were rarely met, which furthered dependence on landowners and informal money lenders (Satyasai, 2008: 391). The uneven distribution of the credit cooperatives further aggravates the problems faced with access to and utilisation of credit cooperatives<sup>94</sup>. The next section looks at the fragmented terrain of banking and the way it affects farmers in Aranthangi and Chinsurah.

### **5.1.2 Accessibility to Banks**

Unequal access to formal credit institutions is evident not only between different agrarian classes but amongst the landed class as well. In Aranthangi and Chinsurah, the dominant

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<sup>93</sup> Under the Cooperative Credit structures there are 15 schemes that have been implemented. One of the schemes pertaining to agriculture includes the waiver of agricultural loans. As of 31.3.2006, the Tamil Nadu government was to waive the crop loans of farmers in order to get them out of the debt trap (TNAU Agritech Portal: Banking and Credit). Drawing from this initiative of the Tamil Nadu Government, the Government of India, under the Agricultural Minister Sharad Pawar, implemented the Agricultural Debt Waiver and Debt Relief Scheme (ADWDRS), in 2008. Under this scheme, a debt waiver/debt relief of Rs. 65,318.33/- crore was granted to 3.69 crore farmers. Along with this Rs. 51,340.47/- crore was released to lending institutions as reimbursement.

<sup>94</sup> Seven states -Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab and Tamil Nadu- account for 78 per cent of the total short term credit of cooperatives (Report of the Expert Group on Agricultural Indebtedness 2007). This explains why the average loan per household in 2003 was much higher in Tamil Nadu at Rs. 23,963/- compared to West Bengal which was Rs. 10,931/- (NSSO, Situation Assessment of Survey of Farmers, 2003)

(Thevars and Muslims) landowning class has easy access to bank loans and got timely information about receiving subsidised goods. This information helped them register their names with government stores and obtain these goods at the earliest. In 1998-99, the Government of India introduced *Kisan* Credit Cards to make borrowing easier for farmers; there is a fixed amount determined by landholding size and the farmer can use it towards production needs (Ministry of Finance 2007)<sup>95</sup>. Despite this, very few farmers spoke of having owned a card. In Aranthangi, the medium landowner only knew of the government providing some form of compensation when there was any crop failure.

In Chinsurah, Anwar, a medium landowner said that the only benefit a *chaasi* could get is if they had a *Kisan* Credit Card, and not everyone had one. Agricultural loans were provided based on the crop; for one *bigha* of land for potato Rs.1000/- was provided and for rice Rs.2000/-. He did not have a *Kisan* Credit Card and had only recently heard of it. He was under debt as his loans would not be waived, which meant that he had to borrow money from private money lenders and from large landowners to try and make his payments. The indebtedness of the farmer further pushes them into trying to secure cheap labour that results in exploitative work conditions.

Shafiq, who is the largest landlord in Madhabpur, applied for a *Kisan* Credit Card, which he obtained from a national bank at the town headquarters. This card as it works as an insurance cover against any unforeseen problems. However, out of the 25 farmers interviewed only 4 owned a *Kisan* Credit Card, none of the others knew whether they were eligible for it and where to get it from. Moreover, Shafiq was the only landlord who was well informed about the benefits of the *Kisan* Credit Card.

All farmers in Madhabpur and Bardhanagar spoke of how in order to access the service of the bank, it was very important to know "someone". Shafiq knew the bank manager because of his ties with the Krishi Vigyan Centre. Shafiq passed the information that he

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<sup>95</sup> The scheme was implemented throughout the country by the public sector commercial banks, apex banks district banks and regional rural banks. At the all-India Level, the government bodies had been able to distribute only 642 lakh cards (Ministry of Finance 2007).



had to Anwar, as they are friends. For a majority of the medium, small and marginal farmers, information almost never percolates down. Unless accessibility to formal institutions is altered, efforts made by the Agricultural Ministry (such as the Rs.52,000 Crore Farm Debt Waiver Scheme) or even by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Developm

ent (reduced the **interest rate** on direct refinance to **cooperative banks** by up to 0.60 per cent in 2014) will remain confined to certain areas and certain sections of the people (The Economic Times, 2013a; see Chavan, 2007).

### 5.1.3 Informal Rural Credit

Non-institutional sources of credit accounts for a large section of loans taken within agriculture. The table below shows the different sources of credit that farmers and rural labour have access to.

Credit Source	Tamil Nadu	West Bengal
Institutional Credit	53.4 %	58 %
Non-Institutional Credit	46.5 %	42.1 %
1. Money Lenders	39.7%	13.0 %
2. Traders	0.4 %	10.74 %
3. Other Sources	6.4 %	18.4 %

**Table 5.2: Sources of Credit in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal**

*Source: NSSO Situation Assessment of Survey of Farmers, 2003,*

*Note- the sources of non-institutional credit mentioned in the table are based on relative importance of the source in both regions.*

It is interesting to note from the table, that in Tamil Nadu private money lenders form an important source of credit. Whereas in West Bengal, there is a far more equitable distribution among the three categories. The NSS report highlights that credit from money lenders or other informal sources was accessed by small and marginal farmers, whereas

institutional credit was for medium and large farmers (NSSO Situation Assessment of Survey of Farmers, 2003).

The importance of non-institutionalized credit sources varies with different land holding classes. NSSO Situation Assessment Survey of Farmers 2003 report shows that in Tamil Nadu, 80.9 per cent of those who own less than 0.01 hectares of land have access to non-institutional credit, whereas only 25.7 per cent of those who own between 4-10 hectares of land are under non-institutional forms of debt. West Bengal projects a different picture, where 76.6 per cent of households who own less than 0.01 hectares of land have access to non-institutional credit, at the same time 78.7 per cent of households who own between 4-10 hectares of land are under non-institutional debt. These figures suggest that it is not the diversification of crops or the mechanisation of farming that result in the indebtedness of farmers but rather the ease of access to institutional and non-institutional sources of credit. This can be explained by the changing geography of banking with public sector banks moving out of the region. In West Bengal, despite capital input made by the state<sup>96</sup>, banks have failed to perform properly, and lending to the small farmer has not improved (Ray, 2013). In Chinsurah, medium landowners were not aware of the state benefits available to them. This flow of information and access to credit operates along class lines with medium, small and marginal farmers having reduced access to formal credit sources, which perpetuates the existence of multiple credit sources and indebtedness.

The shift in the geography of banks witnessed a change in the composition of those who could access loans from banks. The importance of informal sources of credit, at the state level was observed in the two field sites as well. Table 5.3 identifies the respondents in Aranthangi and Chinsurah who tried accessing banks for the purpose of loans and received them.

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<sup>96</sup> The Bangiya Gramin Vikash Bank received Rs.265 crores and the Paschim Banga Gramin Bank received Rs.255 crores (Ray, 2013).

Class Categories	Large Landowner		Medium Landowner		Classes of Labour	
	Total No. of Respondents	Access to Banks	Total No. of Respondents	Access to Banks	Total No. of Respondents	Access to Banks
Aranthangi	15	15 <u>24.19%</u>	4	1 <u>1.61%</u>	42	6 <u>9.67%</u>
Chinsurah	14	14 <u>22.21%</u>	5	0 <u>0%</u>	44	3 <u>4.67%</u>

**Table 5.3: Respondents who Accessed Banks for the purpose of Cultivation**

Source: Field Work in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, November 2011 to September 2012.

\*Percentage values are relative to total number of respondents surveyed across all classes.

In Aranthangi and Chinsurah, of the total classes of labour, only 9.67 per cent and 4.67 per cent respectively, of the total population had access to banks. Some of the respondents reported that they had received loans from the bank but had to provide securities in the form of land or jewellery. Receiving these bank loans reduce the borrower's dependence on informal credit sources marginally, but it does not necessarily do away with them. Loans from informal sources are taken along with bank loans. However, the majority of those who belong to the classes of labour, not having access to banks, highlights the continued dependence of the classes of labour on informal sources of credit. Table 5.4 shows the different sources of informal credit accessed by the classes of labour.

	Total No. of Respondents among Classes of Labour (landless labourers only)	Landowners	Private Money Lenders	Others
Aranthangi	38	8 <u>21.05%</u>	20 <u>52.63%</u>	10 <u>26.31%</u>
Chinsurah	39	15 <u>38.36%</u>	13 <u>33.33%</u>	11 <u>28.20%</u>

**Table 5.4: Sources of Informal Credit among Classes of Labour**

Source: Field Work in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, November 2011 to September 2012.

In Aranthangi, private money lenders emerge as an important source of credit, a trend similar to the state level data shown in Table 5.2. In Chinsurah, landowners, emerge as an important source of credit for the classes of labour. Traders are also an important source

of credit, however, as studies in West Bengal have highlighted, most of the traders are landowners themselves (for further details see Harriss-White, 2008), a trend witnessed during my research as well.

A reason for the different credit sources in Aranthangi is because the classes of labour do not want to borrow from the landowner and get tied down to them, and therefore go to them as their last resort. The same is not true for Chinsurah, where limited access to credit sources for women draws them to the landowners. Labourers in both regions rely on informal sources of credit and in doing so have multiple credit relations with landowners, money lenders, traders, neighbours etc. The following section discusses the different credit interlinkages in the two regions and how it generates indebtedness among the classes of labour.

## **5.2 Credit Interlinkage and Indebtedness**

Indebtedness experienced by the classes of labour, through relations with informal sources of credit, adds to the growing asymmetry of power between the lender and the borrower. This asymmetry highlights that these market exchanges are not impersonal, rather they are conditioned by relations between the borrower and lender (Acharya, 2000).

There are credit interlinkages with the market, land and with labour. Within the land-credit relation, “input cash” is a dominant form of interlinkage (Bhaumik and Rahim, 1999). The landowner provides input in the form of seeds or fertilizers, or even tractors, and the borrower cultivates crops and returns the lender (in this case the landowner) a payment in cash or kind after the harvest. The interlinkage borne out of the input-cash relation, expresses itself differently in different tenancy arrangements, whether on *bhaage* in Chinsurah or on *vāram* or *al- vāram* in Aranthangi. The tenancy patterns, as discussed in the previous chapter, operate through certain privileges that are extended to the tenant by the landowner. The privileges determine access and availability to land and credit.

Bhaumik and Rahim (1999) argue that indebtedness generated through “input cash” is more prominent in agriculturally developed villages. Relations of indebtedness cannot be

explained through economic deterministic arguments of agriculture being advanced or backward. There is a ubiquity about indebtedness, i.e. they can occur in agriculturally advanced or backward regions. What is important about indebtedness is the unfreedom it generates and these need to be understood through relations of selectivity and exclusion. The privileged access to loans generates relations of obligation which can coerce female labourers into labour tying arrangements (see section 5.3 for a detailed discussion). Based on these relations of power, an input-cash interlinkage can be more exploitative in a *theeke* or *kuthagai* contract compared to sharecropping. As I have identified in the previous chapter, the loan amount in a *theeke* and *kuthagai* contract is often extracted through labour time, especially on the part of female agricultural labourers. Labour tying arrangements are more visible when the landowners/lenders, have a monopoly power over the terms and conditions of work and loan contracts, which renders the tenant/labourer as a “passive acceptor” (Bhaduri, 1986 in Acharya, 2000). Such conditions were observed in Chinsurah, where the landowner becomes the first point of contact for loans, and female agricultural labourers become *bandha kishens*, in order to access these loans.

The second type of interlinkage is “cash-labour” (Bhaumik and Rahim, 1999) - the landowner/lender offers cash that is paid off through labour service. Labour service generally pertains to agricultural wage work; however, there might be a crossover to other kinds of work as well. This is a common occurrence among female agricultural labourers who are not in a position to turn down work out of fear of future unemployment. The fundamental reason behind this occurrence is the shortages in income created with male migration to non-farm work and coercions that women undergo due to familial/gendered relations<sup>97</sup>. Such everyday exploitative contracts did not face severe resistance from female agricultural labourers in Aranthangi, as this was a move to secure land and work, and to do so they had to maintain “good work relations”. In Chinsurah, the female agricultural labourers reported that they do not want to antagonise the landowners, as

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<sup>97</sup> As described in Chapter 5, women tenants and labourers entered periods of short term tying not only due to personal loans, but were repaying loans taken by male members of their family.

they feel obliged that landowners have shown them preference and given them work. Whether working on the assumption of security or privilege, two very different realities culminate in indebtedness.

The cash-labour-credit contract is short term in nature, and as observed in both Aranthangi and Chinsurah, these loans are taken when agricultural labourers do not have any work and cannot afford to buy food for a particular period in time. The loan amounts vary from Rs.300/- to Rs.1500/-. In Aranthangi, the labourers believed, that unless it was used for cultivation, borrowing large sums of money was seen as a process that would tie them to the employer/landlord for longer periods of time. In Chinsurah, out of a total of 36 female labourers interviewed, 19 (52.77%) were *bandha kishen* (a significant number from my sample). These 19 women had voluntarily become *bandha kishens* in order to have greater job security and freer access to loans from the landowner. The reason they gave for the increased dependence on the landlord was the lack of access to banks and that the relationship with the landowner provided other benefits. The landowner extends privileges and through obligations ensures a constant supply of a docile and disciplined workforce- a process which is self-reinforcing particularly in the case of Chinsurah.

#### **5.2.1 Loans and Rising Indebtedness**

This section looks more specifically at the different reasons for taking loans that result in different interlinkages. The reasons for taking loans are manifold and range from health, to ceremonies and functions (among which one of the most important are marriages), food and cultivation, to identify a few. Table 5.5 highlights the different reason for borrowing money as identified by the respondents in Aranthangi and Chinsurah. As the table shows, the reasons for taking loans can range from everyday consumption, for which loans are required two to three times a year, to one off expenses of health or marriage.

Reasons for Loans	Large Landowner		Medium Landowner		Classes of Labour	
	Aranthangi	Chinsurah	Aranthangi	Chinsurah	Aranthangi	Chinsurah
<b>Total respondents interviewed</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Marriages/Ceremonies</b>	15 <u>100%</u>	14 <u>100%</u>	4 <u>100%</u>	5 <u>100%</u>	42 <u>100%</u>	44 <u>100%</u>
<b>Everyday expenditure</b>	0 <u>0%</u>	0 <u>0%</u>	0 <u>0%</u>	0 <u>0%</u>	40 <u>95.23%</u>	42 <u>95.45%</u>
<b>Health</b>	6 <u>40%</u>	9 <u>64.28%</u>	3 <u>75%</u>	2 <u>40%</u>	25 <u>59.25%</u>	22 <u>50%</u>
<b>House Upkeep/construction</b>	4 <u>26.67%</u>	8 <u>57.14%</u>	4 <u>100%</u>	5 <u>100%</u>	28 <u>66.67%</u>	19 <u>43.18%</u>
<b>Cultivation</b>	15 <u>100%</u>	14 <u>100%</u>	4 <u>100%</u>	5 <u>100%</u>	38 <u>90.47%</u>	25 <u>59.52%</u>

**Table 5.5: Class-Wise Distribution of Reasons for Taking Loans in Aranthangi and Chinsurah**

Source: Field Work in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, November 2011 to September 2012.

\*Percentages

calculated according to total respondents in each class category.

Across all classes, marriage, ceremonies and functions were identified as one of the most important reasons to borrow money<sup>98</sup>. However, in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, the classes of labour borrowed money from private money lender and landowners, along with pledging their gold in order to meet marriage expenses. For the classes of labour (over 95 per cent), a large portion of their debt was generated through everyday expenses. The importance of certain factors for taking loans, identified in the field areas, find resonance in State-level data as well. According to the NSSO report (2003), consumption expenditure is reported as one of the most important factors for taking loans (34 per cent and 25 per cent respectively for Tamil Nadu and West Bengal).

Bhaumik and Rahim (1999) argue that everyday consumption loans is an interlinkage found in the backward villages. However, consumption loans taken in the form of cash or kind is an important survival strategy (Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2006). Therefore, these consumption loans cannot be understood and explained in the context of existing in “pre-capitalist societies”. As observed in the field sites, consumption loans are taken at much greater frequency as the period of repayment is short-term. The frequency

<sup>98</sup> While marriages take place occasionally, ceremonies and functions are a yearly affair and incurs high expenses. For the purpose of representation, the two categories are clubbed together.

of loans and ease of access make landowners and private money lenders important and reliable sources of credit. In Aranthangi and Chinsurah, borrowing from landowners presents itself as a mechanism to secure cheap labour and to discipline the workforce; therefore, by controlling credit they control the labour force (Bardhan, 1983).

Credit transactions are not restricted to monetary transactions alone but can be in kind, such as in grains or labour time. Guishyam, a 65-year-old Brahmin landlord, from Bardhanagar, who owns 12 *bighas* of land, says,

*"I do not sell all the rice that I grow. It is stored in the dhaner gola (granary). This rice is for the consumption of my family. Since the wage payments are partly made in rice, I pay the labourers with this rice. There are times when labourers come to me and ask me for rice directly instead of cash because they might not have sufficient money to buy rice. It is mainly the women who come and ask for rice and pay it off by working in the farms for me. This is why it is necessary to keep large quantities of rice stored at home."*

For Guishyam, storing rice is very important, as this is used not only for self-consumption and wage payments but as credit transactions as well. Taking loans in the form of grains, is treated as an advance payment by female agricultural labourers. Female labourers take advance payments in kind to overcome any current food shortage that they might be undergoing. Moreover, female agricultural labourers prefer payments in kind as they have limited control over their earnings. Receiving payments in kind (as food grains) ensures food in the house; whereas wages in cash are taken by their husbands. Despite being wage earners, female labourers have very little control over their earnings. Taking grains presents itself as a way to overcome weaker negotiating capacities with their husbands, and ensures food in the household.

Supriya, a 45-year-old Santhal female agricultural labourer in Madhabpur, brings home rice from Guishyam, and stores it so that even if there is nothing else to eat at home, there is always some rice. On occasions, when she has brought home money, she was forced to give whatever portion of the money her husband demanded (which he usually used to purchase alcohol), and there was nothing that she could say or do to get out of this situation. Storing rice is as important for labourers like Supriya, as it is for landowners like



Guishyam. Rice is not utilised for self-consumption alone among labourers. Within her locality, Supriya, and other labourers like her, either sell rice to their neighbours or barter it for other goods and services.

Debt generates economic vulnerability which is heightened through domestic politics. This is observed in the case of Supriya who has very little control over her daily earnings, as she has to give a portion, or at times the entire amount to her husband. Availing of interest-free consumption loans in the form of rice grains keeps her indebted to Guishyam. Supriya's husband's demand over her earnings aggravates the economic vulnerability of the household, especially when the money is not used to meet household expenses.

For female agricultural labourers, usurious rates of interest are not extracted in the form of cash but through numerous forms of labour service, for example, Supriya working as a *bandha kishen*. A transaction of this nature places restrictions on the labourer to transact with another employer (Harriss-White, 2008). Landowners look to accumulate capital in various ways (rent, profit, interest), and they increase their profits through indebtedness of the classes of labour, which is often initiated by the limited access to formal credit institutions.

The ease of access to these loans and the resultant dependence (that leads to further social control) on landowners has placed restrictions on the freedom of the classes of labour, and their choice in entering labour tying arrangements. Under the currently existing *pannaiyal* or *bandha kishen* relations, indebtedness inflicts labour management through interlocking transactions and by extracting services<sup>99</sup>. In Chinsurah, among the Bauris and Bagdis, female agricultural labourers would extend their labour service beyond agricultural wage work. They would carry out certain household chores for the landowners and their payment for such tasks would be one meal. Along with reduced wages for agricultural

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<sup>99</sup> This was observed by Ramachandran (1991) in Gokilapuram, where those within bonded relations and out of bonded relations continued to carry out labour services of various kinds, which at times was unpaid as well.

wage work, the female labourers carried out unpaid domestic chores for the landowner, and this was understood as a way to repay loans.

Sarbari, a 65-year-old female Bagdi widow, is an agricultural labourer. Due to her ill health she cannot work in the fields for long hours and finds it difficult getting work, as most of it is taken up by the younger workers. Her husband used to work for Guishyam and now she works for him. She turns to Guishyam for loans due to the lack of work and her inability to work for long hours. She repays this amount by working for Guishyam as a domestic maid in his house. She prefers this set up because she does not have to stand in the “chemical infested water” and in the hot sun the entire day to earn her living. In Sarbari’s case, she is able to negotiate the kind of work she does for Guishyam through labour relations which existed because of her husband. However, even though she can negotiate work, she is unable to negotiate her wages.

Koel, a 42-year-old Bagdi labourer, works for Hussain (a medium landowner). She takes loans, but only in the form of rice grains. These loans are repaid through agricultural and domestic work. Koel receives reduced wages for agricultural wage work but she never reduces the rice component of the wage. She relies on such loans to ensure food in the household because like other female wage labourers in this village, Koel complained about her husband not making sufficient contributions to household expenses. Koel’s access to everyday consumption loans is through Hussain and this leaves her at his beck and call. She carries out domestic work for Hussain and at times has to go and work in Hussain’s brother’s house as well. She cannot refuse to work for Hussain’s brother as it could result in withdrawal of the privileges that Koel receives. Koel knows Hussain’s family and chooses to work for him as a *bandha kishen* to ensure that she has work, the privilege of first call from the landowner, and access to advance payments and loans. Koel does not keep an account of the amount of loan repaid and relies on the calculations provided by the landowner.

Male agricultural labourers repay loans through labour time but this is confined to agricultural wage work. For female agricultural labourers, the extension to non-

agricultural housework seems a natural transition. It is 'natural' because of gendered socialisation and expectations that women will carry out female tasks. Female labourers reported that landowners did not have to give them one meal a day, as they were paid for the agricultural wage work they carried out, and domestic work was seen as payment towards the loan. They were grateful for the meal provided, which is not viewed as payment but as an act of benevolence by the landowner. Moreover, if these women bring their children along, the landowner provides them with food. Under such situations, none of the female agricultural labourers I interviewed, questioned carrying out housework for the landowner, unlike in Aranthangi, where carrying out housework implied becoming "*pannaiyal* labourers". Female agricultural labourers in Aranthangi, who took loans from and were tied to particular landowners, tried to keep the period of tying short-term. The labourers kept a much clearer account of the amount borrowed and returned – a process almost absent among the *bandha kishens* in Chinsurah.

This section discussed the different reasons for taking loans. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the loans are obtained through informal sources of credit for the classes of labour. The following section provides a discussion on the different informal sources of credit, how they generate indebtedness, and result in tied labour arrangements.

### **5.3 Informalisation of Credit and Increasing Indebtedness**

Borrowing from landowners tantamount to exploitative work contracts. This is one of the reasons that female labourers in Aranthangi took loans from private money lenders. As seen in Table 5.4 and according to the NSSO (2003), apart from friends, relatives and landowners, informal money lenders are an important source of credit. More often than not the informal money lenders are landowners themselves. The reason for this dependence on informal credit lies not with access but with the frequency of loans required and the collateral that can be provided (Swaminathan, 2012). The varying rates of interest from different sources affect the degree to which borrowers rely on them. Moreover, the caste and class of the borrower determines their access to the type of credit source (Ramachandran and Swaminathan 2006). The terms and conditions of the loan are

determined by the informal money lender. In turn much higher rates of interest are charged and these interest rates vary across individual and households (Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2001). In Aranthangi, borrowing from landowners was considered the last resort by agricultural labourers. Pallar and Paraiyar labourers believe that relying on the landowner for credit entails exploitative work conditions that could push them into becoming *pannaiyals*. Borrowing money from landowners is always the last resort for the classes of labour in Aranthangi as is reflected in Table 5.6 below:

Source of Credit	Aranthangi	Chinsurah
Money Lender	20 <u>47.61%</u>	13 <u>29.54%</u>
Private Trader	8 <u>19.04%</u>	10 <u>22.72%</u>
Employer/ Landowner	2 <u>4.76%</u>	12 <u>27.27%</u>
Neighbour	7 <u>16.67%</u>	9 <u>20.45%</u>
Self-Help Group (SHG)	5 <u>11.90%</u>	0 <u>0%</u>

**Table 5.6: Number of Respondents from the Classes of Labour (including Small and Marginal farmers) accessing different Sources of Informal Credit Aranthangi and Chinsurah**

*Source: Field work in Aranthangi and Chinsurah from November 2011 to September 2012*

Respondents were asked to identify their primary source of credit. In Aranthangi, the majority of the respondents belonging to the classes of labour rely on informal money lenders followed by private traders. In Chinsurah, most of the respondents chose to go a landowner, followed by a money lender and private trader. Unlike in Aranthangi, none of the respondents in Chinsurah borrowed money from SHGs.

Cultivators, especially those who have leased in land, borrow money from traders to cover input costs. During harvest time, irrespective of the price of grains offered in government mills or in the market, borrowers have to sell their produce at the rates set by the trader. The loan amount is then deducted from the money that the cultivator receives. This is a system where the petty traders indirectly coerce procurement from female cultivators through credit relations (Harriss-White, 2008). These petty traders are able to extort money, control the borrower, and generate marketable surplus. The existence of such “polarised exchange relations” ensures greater power in the hands of the trader (Harriss-

White, 2008: 292). In Aranthangi, these petty traders are Thevars, and the female agricultural labourers are Pallars, Paraiyars and Ambalakars. *Kuthagai* tenants prefer engaging with petty traders, especially since the tenants do not want to become indebted to landowners by borrowing money from them.

The traders work in wholesale retail markets, and work with the aim of securing sizeable quantities of produce to trade in the market. Female tenants have limited mobility when it comes to transporting grains to the market. These traders buy the produce directly from the fields, relieving the female tenants of additional transportation costs. The female tenants consider direct sale to the trader an easy and profitable method, as they do not have to deal with the market directly, nor do they have to worry about storage.

Arunitha, a 40-year-old Ambalakar woman from Karaimeedu, cultivates her land (100 *kulis* of her own and 300 *kulis* of leased in land), and sells her produce:

*"The rice that is harvested is collected by a private trader. I do not go and sell it in the market nor do I go and sell it in the government mills. I have to sell it at the rate set by him; currently, he is buying rice at the rate of Rs.750/- per sack. I get a loan amount from this trader to cultivate the land and in order to repay the loan I have to sell it to him; I cannot sell it to the government. I do not have to pay any interest on this amount... These businessmen do not mind giving us large sums of money. The previous time I received Rs. 10,000/-. They do not mind waiting for three months [the growing period for paddy] to get their money back. I do not have to pay any vaddi (interest) on this amount. Getting loans like this is actually very easy for me, and if the need arises I can always ask for more. If I take only half of the amount then the remaining amount can be added to the following year, or the next crop that I will cultivate. There is a great deal of flexibility to this loan."*

The loans, described by Arunitha, are packaged as flexible, easily repayable and with no interest. While this loan package might be more desirable for Arunitha, than borrowing from a large landowner, she and others like her are not free from relations of indebtedness. The fact that petty traders carry forward the defaulted loan amount, places limits on the freedom of the cultivator to shift occupation or even traders, and sets the space for accumulation of loans. In order to repay the amount, cultivators need to rely on other sources of credit- if they are money lenders then they succumb to high rates of interests and if they are landowners, then the female tenants end up working as tied labourers till

the loan is repaid. Such was the case with Preetha, a 28-year-old Pallar cultivator, from Thirasu, who leased in 200 *kulis* land from an Ambalakar landowner. Preetha is indebted to both the private trader and the landowner. She therefore, only cultivates those crops that the trader wants her to cultivate leaving very little scope for experimenting with crops that could fetch her higher yield and income. In addition, she works on the landowner's horticultural fields as well as sugarcane plantations to reduce and eventually repay her loans. Indebtedness propagates relations of dominance and obligation between the borrower and the lender with the subsequent polarization of power in the hands of petty traders and landowners (Harriss-White, 2008).

The need to cultivate land brought cultivators like Arunitha and Preetha to the petty trader, and becoming indebted to the petty trader does not allow them to move out of their tenancy arrangement with the landowner. To ensure that land is available for cultivation every year, the classes of labour are entwined in interlocking transactions between landowner and tenant. Arunitha, despite working as agricultural labourer to pay off her loan, does not consider herself tied to the landowner, as there was no direct monetary transaction between the two to bind them. At the same time, it is not easy for her to break ties with the rentier/employer. Preetha, like Arunitha is drawn into an elaborate land-labour-credit nexus with the landowner and private trader. She is tied to the landowner, however, as this is short-term, which ends once the loan is repaid, she does consider herself a *pannaiyal* labourer. In the cases mentioned above, whether the classes of labour consider themselves tied or not, indebtedness and dependence (direct or indirect) upon the landowner continues, which affects labour relations and the terms and conditions of work.

In Chinsurah, there is less clear distinction between landowners and traders. The larger landowners in the two villages work as *aratdars* (traders). The intersecting roles of rentier, employer and trader, places restrictions on the ability of the classes of labour to negotiate tenancy and work contracts. Those who lease in land, sell their produce to the same landowner. *Bargadars* in Madhabpur find this arrangement to be exploitative, where they

do not have the freedom to sell the produce in the market. This is one of the reasons why *bargadars* in this region want to move out and take up either non-farm employment or work as agricultural labourers.

Very few female labourers in Chinsurah take up cultivation but many reported that they were either directly or indirectly indebted to the landowner for the purpose of cultivation. Sudeep, a 40-year-old Santhal from Madhabpur, is a *bhaag chaasi* who cultivates potatoes and sesame. He has borrowed money to meet his production costs from Sanjay, a Brahmin medium landowner, who along with being a source of credit for Sudeep, leases out land to him. Sudeep looks after all aspects of cultivation and trade. His wife, Ruma, apart from helping him cultivate, is paying off his loans by working as an agricultural labour for Sanjay. There is no direct restriction placed upon Ruma's labour, however, due to the time constraint, she remains tied to Sanjay for a fixed period of time. Ruma is not directly involved in the tenancy arrangement drawn out by Sanjay but she still remains indebted and tied to him. The fact that Ruma is paying off her husband's loans, places restrictions on her ability to negotiate work contracts, which leads to labour tying arrangements. Here is a case where female labour is easily substituted to pay off loans taken by the male labour. This is similar to cases of tied harvest and tied labour relations identified in Andhra Pradesh (da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999). The familial relations and power relations create barriers, which makes it difficult for female labourers like Ruma to exit the work contract.

This section focussed on the role of traders and how they generate indebtedness among the female labourers and tenants. In Aranthangi, with the female traders remaining indebted to the private traders, their dependence on landowners (while diminishing marginally) is not done away with, as they still require access to land, which often draws them back into a relation of debt. In Chinsurah, with landowners also working as traders, the requirement of the classes of labour for loans and access to land and the market, solidifies their dependence on the landowners.

### 5.3.1 Money Lenders, Credit and Indebtedness

This section will look at indebtedness generated from private money lenders. The private money lenders provide high rates of interest and at the same time reduces dependence on landowners. However, this section argues that a lot (primarily landowner dependence) is conditioned on the local availability of money lenders and the extent to which their interest rates are easily payable.

Private money lenders constitute an important source of credit (see Table 5.6), however, they deliver loans with high interest rates and a collateral. In Aranthangi, the collateral was gold. Pledging of gold is the most sought after way to obtain credit.

Manasi, a 33-year-old Ambalakar female agricultural labourer from Karaaimedu, has three children (5, 7 and 12 years old). Her husband works in Chennai and cannot send money regularly to the family. She fell sick in 2010 and needed Rs.5000/- for her treatment. She pledged some of her gold jewellery at a local pawn shop, at an interest rate of 3 per cent per month. Although remittances from her husband did help in repaying the loans, they were irregular. Thus it was her earnings from the Sugar Factory, where she received Rs.100/- per day as a casual daily wage labourer that was her primary source of income. Although this seemed an easy and simple transaction, she could not always pledge her gold for money, as this is the only savings she has. The Sugar Factory work and remittances are both irregular sources of income, and while she used these to pay off a large loan, she still had to turn to the landowner for smaller everyday loans. The high rates of interest on the loan amount placed restrictions on Manasi's ability to borrow smaller sums of money from a private money lender. Under these conditions she turned to the landowner to access everyday consumption loans in exchange for labour time. Despite the presence of multiple sources of credit, the dependence on the landowner persists, particularly for female agricultural labourers. A reason for this is the ease of accessibility and no or negligible rates of interest. For female agricultural labourers in Aranthangi, an easily accessible credit source is of primary importance. Private money lenders in this region are working to make their services more accessible, but with this come higher interest rates.



Sumathi, a Paraiyar marginal landholder and agricultural labourer from Thirasu, borrows money from a local money lender who is from Aranthangi.

*"This person comes from Aranthangi on a motorbike almost every week, and asks everyone around the village if they need money. For every Rs.100/- that is borrowed we have to give Rs.25/-. This is a 25 per cent interest rate. I recently borrowed Rs. 500/- and now have to pay Rs. 125 per week in order to repay the loan. There is a receipt we get for proof of having taken the loan. This small piece of paper costs Rs. 15/-, which we have to pay...I had to take this loan because at that time when I needed the money I was not working for anyone."*

These informal money lenders are called "motorbike *vaddikkaran* (money lenders)". They are known for their timely payment of money and very high interest rates. They travel through the villages every week to collect and lend money. These money lenders are highly accessible and go door to door. Despite their high rates of interests these money lenders did not become less preferable. The money lenders provide a choice/ alternate credit source for the female labourers, particularly for Paraiyar women who do not want to become *pannaiyal* labourers by borrowing money from landowners. Paraiyar and Pallar agricultural labourers prefer borrowing money from these motorbike *vaddikkarans*, but the loans granted can be highly extractive. In such situations, the need to repay the loan pushes labourers to take up any kind of work for any kind of pay. For female labourers, agricultural wage work is the most easily accessible. To maintain this accessibility, the labourers need to maintain "good relations" with the landowners.

Sumathi belongs to the Paraiyar community and does not want to enter into exploitive labour relations. She told me how the Paraiyars fought to get out of the *pannaiyal* relation 40 years ago, and under no circumstances would she want to get back into such a relation. She works her way around this situation by borrowing money from the landowner but treats it as an advance. She receives reduced wages as the borrowed amount is deducted from her wages. Sumathi believes that if she does not treat the borrowed sum as an advance payment then she would have to be at the beck and call of the landowner.

Clearing an advance with a landowner does not mean that the labourer can operate independently of the interlocking transactions between land, labour and credit. Debt

reinforces relations of exclusivity that places restriction on the labourers but allows landlords to improve capital accumulation. For labourers, not accepting the terms and conditions could result in removal from the job. Hence these loans, taken by labourers, like Sumathi, where they believe they have the capacity to choose, operates simultaneously along with the fear of not wanting to jeopardize their relationship with the landowner, so as to ensure a continuous flow of agricultural wage work and income. On the one hand, she does not want to give into an exploitative relation that would affect her freedom as a labourer and as a Paraiyar woman. On the other, her decision to take a loan maintains exploitative relations with the landowner. Indebtedness generated from multiple sources of credit creates conditions that tie the labour into exclusionary arrangements, where, depending on the degree of indebtedness they might become *pannaiyals* or *bandha kishens*- the extreme end of the labour tying continuum.

This section highlighted how in Aranthangi, the availability of private moneylenders does not necessarily ensure movement away from tied labour relations. This aspect is dealt with in greater detail in the following sections that focus on *pannaiyal* labour and *bandha kishens*, the role interlocked markets and gendered relations play in enforcing tied labour relations.

### 5.3.2 Credit relations and *Pannaiyals*

As recently as 2008, men were employed as *pannaiyals* in Aranthangi, where they carried out both agricultural and housework. As *pannaiyals*, the men had to stay on landowner's premises. This scenario has now changed. These erstwhile *pannaiyal* men have repaid their loans and moved out, or they have replaced their labour with that of any other female labour within their household. Women who are *pannaiyals*, work the entire day and come back to their own homes. Women's entry into this work is a result of increasing amount of debt taken primarily by their husbands, coupled with their husbands' withdrawal from the *pannaiyal* arrangement. This is prevalent amongst Pallars and Ambalakars in Aranthangi. This process is indicative of how asymmetrical power within gendered/ familial relations, has the woman exploited domestically as well by landowners.

The respondents in both the villages in Aranthangi were not very vocal about the presence of *pannaiyal* labour. They preferred talking about it as an occurrence in other villages especially in Thanjavur. Revathi's (Ambalakar labourer) father-in-law (Ramesh), until recently (in 2010) worked as a *pannaiyal* for a Thevar landowner. Ramesh cannot work due to his old age and health, for which reason his son (Revathi's brother-in-law) is working in his place. Ramesh entered this relationship fifteen years back because he needed a loan to build a house his family currently live in. He works as a farm servant restricting himself to agricultural wage work alone. He does run a few errands for the landowner but never carries out household chores. Revathi's brother-in-law received a short term construction contract in Pudukkottai in 2010. Revathi has taken the place of her brother-in-law. She does not identify herself as a *pannaiyal* even though she works in that contract. She sees this arrangement as short term, which will be terminated once the loan has been repaid or if her brother-in-law returns. The *pannaiyal* relationship itself has undergone transformation, where it is binding till the loan amount is paid, and at no point does it tie down one particular individual. However, familial obligations push women to accept exploitative work contracts, where they have limited negotiating capacity.

Revathi mentioned instances of women also being employed under similar situations. Along with agricultural wage work, they carry out household chores. Unlike, the men, none of the female *pannaiyal* labourers stay in the landowner's house; they work the entire day but return to their own homes. Women cannot stay back in the landlord's place as they have their own familial obligations and staying back at the landlord's house will have repercussion on their character and integrity as women. Women who generally enter these *pannaiyal* relations tend to be Pallars. Revathi did show me some Ambalakar households that had female *pannaiyal* workers but they were not willing to talk about this. For these women, debt (often familial) is the primary reason they enter such contracts, which pushes them into relations of servitude. The time period for the *pannaiyal* contract is debatable, as it depends on when the loan is repaid. The wages received by a *pannaiyal* is much lower than the wages received by a casual daily wage labourer; Rs.55/- compared to Rs.100/- for

daily wage labourer. These reduced wages mean that the period of repayment is longer. The landowner decides how much work is to be done and how much is to be deducted.

Kanan, an Ambalakar marginal farmer, who had worked as a *pannaiyal* in a Mudaliyar household for 12 years says:

*"I never knew how much was being deducted every month from the amount that had to be repaid. The landlord would tell me the amount...that is all I knew. If I would have done the calculations myself, I would not have had to work for so many years... It is very difficult work. I used to work from five in the morning, clean their cowshed, clean and check the tractor, supervise the labour and work in the field along with them. I had to do whatever work they asked of me. In return for one day's work I would get three meals. If this is what I was paid daily, it was next to impossible to repay the landlord. My wife helped me out here by working as a coolie worker and she saved money to help me repay my debts...Now that I am out, I know that I would never get into it again."*

Kanan recalls being tied down to one landlord and, therefore, had no other source of revenue. Kanan was the *pannaiyal* labourer and the debt was not repaid by him but by his wife. His wife, despite being a daily *coolie* wage labourer did not have any control over her earnings. Instead, her earnings were controlled by the Thevar landowner. Kanan's wife was indirectly tied to a loan, which was taken by her husband. The landowner was able to control both Kanan and his wife's labour by providing a loan and by remunerating the debt by food.

Presented here are two conditions of *pannaiyal* work relations. The labour arrangement itself has undergone transformations, where it directly does not tie an individual labour and his entire family. In the two cases women are drawn into *pannaiyal* work since they have taken on the burden of repayment of loans taken by their husband's or other male members in the family. For both the women, the debts are transferred onto them. Revathi worked in a *pannaiyal* labour contract and Kanan's wife worked multiple labour contracts to repay the loan. The two cases highlight the unfreedom experienced by female labourers, where both are repaying loans taken from a landowner but this results in limited control over their earnings. Whether direct or indirect, a combination of economic

vulnerability and domestic politics, draws these female labourers into labour tying arrangements.

### 5.3.3 *Dadan and the Bandha Kishen*

Chinsurah displays an unconcealed reliance on landowners for money. All female agricultural labourers, whether, they are Santhals, Bauris or Bagdis, cannot survive without borrowing from landowners. Female agricultural labourers borrow from the same landowners they work for. A reason they stated for this dependence, was that it was very difficult for them to get loans from banks, especially for the small amounts that they frequently required<sup>100</sup>. There are private money lenders but they are few and far between, and do not have a proper network like that observed in Aranthangi. Moreover, the high interest rates deterred people from taking loans. Instead of getting subsumed under usurious rates of interest, the labourers preferred taking interest free consumption loans from landowners. The increasing dependence on landowners is one of the reasons why labourers in Chinsurah 'voluntarily' become *bandha kishens*. The interest free loans coupled with job security, makes it an easier way to 'channel' female agricultural labourers into such labour tying arrangements.

The loans that are taken from landowners are interest-free and are primarily for the purpose of self-consumption. Money is returned through a payment system referred to as *dadan*, where repayment is done as an imputed wage rate. In Chinsurah working as a *bandha kishen* emerges as an easily accessible option for female agricultural labourers, particularly in a situation where their husbands do not regularly contribute to household expenses.

Minoti, a 23-year-old Santhal woman works as a *bandha kishen* where her current economic and social standing (that of being a Santhal widow) has compelled her to take

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<sup>100</sup> The accessibility to bank loans and schemes did not restrict itself to agricultural labourers but extended to other classes of farmers. Medium landowners know very little of the schemes provided to farmers. In both the villages there were only 4 large landowners who had access to the *Kisan* Credit Card.

on this role. She has two children aged 5 and 3 (she got married when she was 15 years old) and says:

*"Such a relationship [bandha kishen] is beneficial for me, otherwise who will give me work, who will feed my children. There is no compassion for women like me. Men just think that because I am alone they can do whatever they want with me. I feel safe to know that whenever I have any problems I have someone to go to- a roof over my head."*

The underlying situation has created conditions which have reduced her negotiation capabilities generating unfreedom. The daily wage is Rs.60/- with 2 kgs of rice, and Minoti receives Rs.20/- with one kg of rice and one meal a day. Her task on the agricultural field includes transplanting, weeding, maintaining the bunds and harvesting where she carries out both *dhaan kata* and *dhaan tola*. Along with agricultural wage work she has to do housework at the landowner's house, where she gets paid one meal. The assurance of the job restricts her ability to challenge the terms of the contract. However, she benefits from this relation where in time of need, particularly for medical expenses, she can avail of interest free loans which she pays off by working for the landowner. The landowner's paternalistic relation to Minoti penetrates the social life of the village community (Rudra, 1982: 254). Minoti believes that she is better off working as a *bandha kishen* because she is provided both economic and physical security. As she is a widow, the landowner provides her with the necessary security. While Minoti's case might present itself as a specific case of a young widow, hers is not the only *bandha kishen* relation.

Aarati, a 29-year-old Bagdi agricultural labourer, works as a *bandha kishen* for a Muslim medium landowner. Along with agricultural wage work, as a *bandha kishen*, she cleans the landowner's house, looks after his vegetable garden, and tends to his goats and hens. Aarati's husband works as a loader in Chinsurah town and is one of the few labourers who work on jute fields; the declining importance of jute in the region has increased his reliance on non-farm work. Due to her husband's irregular income, Aarati decided to become a *bandha kishen* to access loans, grains and work all year around. She does not find working as a *bandha kishen* exploitative as she receives work, food, clothes and other gifts from her employer. Aarati has enrolled her son in a private school and has taken a loan from the

landowner to pay the fees. The labour relation has allowed her to access the loan and not be dependent on her husband's income. Easier access to certain benefits and terms of payment of loans presents the *bandha kishen* relation as an obvious choice for Aarati. Here, borrowing is associated with aspects of patronage, and with it the female labourer is drawn into multiple costs that are both financial and social (Guerin et al. 2012). For the female labourers in Chinsurah, a way to pay these costs is to become a *bandha kishen*.

In both Aranthangi and Chinsurah, the borrowers who took loans from the landowner preferred receiving stunted wage instead of repaying the amount borrowed. Labourers find payments made through labour time exploitative but is considered to be the surest way to make the payment. The labourers in Chinsurah and Aranthangi might borrow the money but the calculations of the loan were maintained by the landowner, with there being no fixed amount for deduction. For example, in Aarati's case, she borrowed a total of Rs.3000/-. She receives Rs.100/- as daily wage. Her loan cannot be repaid in thirty days because the amount deducted depends on what she needs and how much she needs on a particular day. These calculations are maintained by the landlord, a similar aspect observed in Kanan's case. The landowner, by controlling wages controls the labour contract, and therefore, what might begin as a simple labour time transaction, transforms itself in a labour tying arrangement, whether short term or long term- whether it results in *pannaiyal* labour or not.

#### **5.4 Self-Help Groups: An Alternative Livelihood Apparatus**

The previous sections covered aspects of loans and non-institutionalised credit sources and the conditions that create labour tying. Moreover, it looked at how female labourers play an integral role in repayment of loans, whether they are individual loans or loans taken by male members of their family. In light of this added responsibility of debt repayment, institutions (such as microfinance institutions) that focus on women, help with their savings and encourage self-employment, have an important role to play. This section

focuses on the role of Self-Help Groups in the two regions and the extent to which they are able to alleviate women's burden to debt repayment.

Amidst the poorly functioning banking structure within the country, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as one of the methods through which female labourers in particular, can save and have access to loans. SHGs as a financial source too should not go unnoticed, as women are now in the forefront of monetary transactions (Guerin et al. 2012). Women now have access to productive loans even though the use of the loan and control over the loan does not necessarily lie with them (Sengupta, 2013). The extent to which SHGs have developed varies from region to region.

Aranthangi has a well-developed, organised and properly functioning SHG, whereas in Chinsurah, it remains confined to certain pockets and inaccessible to many. The push towards micro-finance in rural areas grew in the 1990s' liberalisation period which introduced credit rationing (Guerin 2012). SHGs created partnerships with banks and NGOs and without much resistance, became widely accepted as an alternate source of income and savings (Guerin et al. 2012).

Aranthangi has a properly functioning SHG- the Pudukkottai Multipurpose Social Service Society (PMSSS), established in 1988. PMSSS is government funded and has numerous branches spread across different villages. In Karaimesdu and Thirasu there are around 8 small SHGs with a total of over 600 participants and they are trying to introduce more women to the group. The SHGs reported to and received their funds from PMSSS. The SHG branch in Karaimesdu 'Vaigai'<sup>101</sup> consists primarily of Christian (Pallar) women. The group began in one of the smaller villages in Karaimesdu that has a dominant Christian Pallar population, and has now spread to other places.

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<sup>101</sup> Every village has an SHG and they all have their individual names but they are all under the PMSSS.



Vaigai receives loans from the bank and the SHG-bank linkage<sup>102</sup> relies on the performance of the SHG. Neetha, a 38-year-old Christian (Pallar) woman, is in charge of the proper functioning of the SHG. She monitors the Aranthangi block and looks after 150 groups. The different groups are formed locally and then demand credit support from PMSSS. Neetha has been working in this position for the past ten years and been a part of the SHG for 17 years.

*"I have to take care of Aranthangi. Where I left you yesterday, there were some problems with the street lights and I had to go and report the problem. I have also dealt with problems related to water availability and with roads in the villages. We have taken out mass rallies in order to resolve the matter. I also deal with problems at the individual level where, I help the people in the village to get work and help in their work as well."*

The SHGs come with the promise of providing work for women and resolving everyday problems. Revathi, an Ambalakar woman who is also an agricultural labourer, is a member of this group. She was taken to PMSSS and taught how to weave baskets, make soap and dye cloth. There are usually 15 women in one training group and once the training is done, PMSSS gets them orders, which they then sell in the market<sup>103</sup>.

Neetha oversees this job and she is the one who goes to get loans sanctioned from the bank<sup>104</sup>. Getting the loan is a very tedious process. Once the loan amount is sanctioned, groups of women are assembled and trained. She trains nine women who then train another set of nine women each.

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<sup>102</sup> The SHG-Bank linkage programme was initiated as an Action Research Project in 1989. The idea behind this linkage is to provide 'thrift linked credit to member of the SHG'. This allowed for greater flexibility in accessing loans and improves the bank outreach to different groups (Report on the Expert Group on Agricultural Indebtedness; Ministry of Finance, 2007).

<sup>103</sup> Currently, due to the "good performance of the group" the State Government via PMSSS has sanctioned a total of Rs.1.5 lakhs for making sanitary napkins. All members in the groups are being trained, and their first order is to make 25,000 sanitary napkins.

<sup>104</sup> Neetha believes that because this entire project is government funded, these groups need to function and be trained properly, and she is in charge of ensuring this. If the group performs well, then they can get some recognition. According to Neetha 'honesty' is the best way to function and that is why despite being offered numerous commissions from people she does not take them. She does not want to get into any trouble when the government audits the records. If, however, food is offered, then that is taken and shared amongst the members of the group. The performance of the SHG and her image is of utmost importance to Neetha.

Members who join the SHG pay Rs.50/- per month, this is a minimum amount and they are free to pay more. The more they put in, the greater is their interest amount that they receive. Currently Vaigai has a savings of Rs.65, 000/- and this helps with the overall ranking of the SHG. For female agricultural labourers, SHGs provides easily accessible and repayable loans and avenues for savings and investment for these women.

Vani, a 39-year-old Paraiyar woman, is one of the few women in the area who has a life insurance policy in her name. The only way she was able to do this was with the savings generated through Vaigai. At the time of survey, Vani had taken a loan of Rs.5000/- at an interest rate of 1 per cent. The problem women face with loans from the SHG is that they are granted loans only on the 15<sup>th</sup> of every month. In order to meet pending payments, Vani borrowed this amount from a private money lender, which she repaid once she could access the money through Vaigai. The lower interest rates make it much easier for her to repay the borrowed sum from the SHG.

Apart from micro-finance, the SHG-bank linkage allows members to set up micro-enterprises. Usually groups of 3-4 people come together to start a business. In such situations, these groups have to provide a detailed account of expenditures and how they are going to repay loans. In the case of Vaigai, Neetha oversees the functioning of these groups and ownership of the business is rotational to avoid any problems that might arise with only one person making all decisions. These groups have to be audited and the bank manager grants loans if the SHG is able to operate properly and generate money. The start-up loans can range anywhere between Rs.20, 000/- to one Lakh. The SHG, apart from this, works with the local *balwadi* (pre-school) to get as many children enrolled, helps in construction of roads and providing water tanks during periods of severe water shortage<sup>105</sup>. The SHG in Aranthangi carries out both financial and infrastructural duties along with operating micro-finance institutions, where they provide loans with reasonable

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<sup>105</sup> Apart from facing water shortage particularly in the summer months, the local reserves of water were contaminated after the Sugar Factory was set up. The SHG worked with the *panchayat* and were able to get the owners of the Sugar Factory to provide tankers for the villagers.

rates of interests that are unencumbered by interlocking transactions and ties of patronage and duty to the landowner.

SHGs emerge as an alternate source of credit for the female labourers. However, the presence of an SHG does not do away with the kaleidoscopic terrain of borrowing present within the rural context. One of the reasons for this is that most loans are taken for the purpose of marriages/ ceremonies household expenses, etc. and they are seldom income generating loans (Guerin et al. 2012, Kalpana, 2008). Neetha's statement about proper functioning NGO revolves around aspects of savings, profits and micro-enterprise, for which reason the SHG controls the loan amount withdrawn, and whether it should be given for a particular purpose or not. This explains why, despite the intricate network of SHGs in Karaimedu and Thirasu, only 5 out of a total of 42 respondents who belong to the classes of labour, would go to a SHG as their primary credit source.

The SHGs' attempts at women's empowerment, does not displace the entrenched power relations in place (Sengupta, 2013). The money from SHGs is used to pay off pre-existing loans (either theirs or their husbands), for house repair works, etc.<sup>106</sup>, with very little being re-invested back to the woman. In such a context, the microfinance institution falls short of its goal to bring about women's empowerment.

SHGs in Madhabpur and Bardhanagar were not a visible financial option for the classes of labour. In the two villages there were no respondents who were members of SHGs. Some of the women (especially amongst the Bagdis) did know that there was a SHG called 'Bandhan' in the village. None of the female labourers interviewed were part of this group. They did not believe that the SHG could generate money and savings for them. A reason for this distrust was that members, who belong to Bandhan, consisted of Muslim women from medium landowner households. The class and religion of the women who ran the SHG, brought along with it, a sense of distrust among the female labourers. The female labourers believed that investing/ saving money in Bandhan would be like placing their

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<sup>106</sup> Sengupta (2013) mentions similar outcomes of SEWA in Gujarat.

savings in the hands of their employers. They would rather have control over their money, on how it is saved, and spent. These female labourers preferred hiding money from their husbands, than save it in Bandhan. The non-participation of female labourers in the SHG places restrictions on their ability to save. However, as noted in the case of Aranthangi, the presence of an SHG does not ensure control over earnings for these female labourers (see Basu, 2006). In Chinsurah, in order to have some form of control over their savings and earnings (especially since male members constantly place demands on their earnings), women labourers take payments in kind.

For Muslim women from medium landowner households, Bandhan proved to be a lucrative enterprise. Bandhan has set up a profitable embroidery micro-enterprise, where a majority of its members carried out *chikan*<sup>107</sup> embroidery work on bed sheets and curtains<sup>108</sup>. Embroidery was their source of income, which allows them to combine employment with childcare responsibilities (Menon et al. 2009). This SHG works both as a micro-credit and as a micro-finance group; however, it caters only to a particular group and class within the village society in Chinsurah. The fragmented nature of this SHG brought along with it alienation and distrust amongst the larger marginalized section of labourers. The lack of access to a properly functioning SHG pushes the female labourers to take loans from landowners, money lenders, shopkeepers, etc.

In both Aranthangi and Chinsurah, the primary role of SHGs is to ensure easy loans to the members. While their micro-finance responsibilities have been successful, they have not been able to bring about any structural change with improvements in the livelihood of households (Guerin et al. 2012, 2013; Sengupta, 2013). In both regions, efforts to build up micro-enterprises, as a move towards non-agricultural self-employment is thwarted by the tight control of banks on SHGs, the degree of competence, which is tied to social constraints, and of people understanding the risk in starting their own business (which is

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<sup>107</sup> This refers to a traditional style of embroidery that originates from Lucknow.

<sup>108</sup> Depending on the kind of embroidery work, bed sheets sold for Rs.10/- to 200/- and curtains for Rs.25- 75/-

why many prefer working as wage labourers) (Guerin et al. 2012). Not all members operate under risk-averting tendencies. SHGs have a group of women (or men) who are creating rotational lending facilities to help pay off debts (see Morgen and Olsen, 2011). The respondents in Aranthangi in particular, view this as a way to pay off their debts and in turn be liberated from any ties resulting from indebtedness generated through the landowner-labour relationship. SHGs and micro-finance in particular have created a platform for female agricultural labourers to take matters of credit in their own hands. SHGs in reality, do promote short term relief of debts but simultaneously puts in place a system that promotes debt dependency by allowing its members to constantly renew their credit (Morgen and Olsen, 2011). Moreover, the focus of SHGs on enterprise to promote business is not widespread and such localised efforts defeat the purpose of transforming and making a more efficient financial borrowing terrain, particularly for the classes of labour.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed different credit sources and relations observed in Aranthangi and Chinsurah. The two regions show a varied and differentiated financial landscape. Formal credit sources that are supposed to provide payable interest rates and flexibility are fragmented and inadequate. The lack of services and rigidity of institutions extends across the labour and landed class, which varies along region, class, caste and gender. For this reason, there continues to exist a vibrant informal sector, where loans are procured through high rates of interest that give rise to an 'elaborate structure of coercion' (Ramachandran and Swaminathan, 2001: p. 2). Coercion, both economic and social, observed among the classes of labour, creates an acute dependence upon the landed class. This dependence creates a credit relation, where the associated social cost, restricts access to and control over land, ties labour down and in certain instances build political allegiance<sup>109</sup> (Guerin et al. 2012).

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<sup>109</sup> Aspects of political allegiance are discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

The relationship of the classes of labour (borrowers) with employers (lenders) in a sense is a transformed patron-client relationship. In the cases mentioned, relations of privileges that accompany credit taken from landowners, keeps the labour 'cheap and manageable' with low paying jobs, and establishing a link which allows for ease of access to family and kin labour<sup>110</sup>. The landed class, extends these benefits to certain groups which keeps the labour fragmented. The female classes of labour understand this process as maintaining good relations with the landowners, which grants them access to land, credit and work. While this process can be understood as being mutually beneficial the underlying asymmetrical power relations generate exploitative terms and conditions of repayment and work for female labour.

The Central Government has put in place a three tiered credit system- the Primary Agricultural Co-operative Banks (PACBs), Central Co-operative Banks at the district level and State Apex Co-operative Banks. These rural cooperatives provide loans for varying durations and supplies farm inputs such as fertilisers. The Central Government introduced the *Kisan* Credit Card scheme to enable farmers to access loans with greater ease. Government documents scream praises for the way in which the state has expanded both banking and rural credit facilities across West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. However, despite these provisions and expansion of banking and credit facilities, the question still remains as to who has access to these provisions. In both Aranthangi and Chinsurah it was large landowners like Mannikam and Shafiq who had access to rural banks and the *Kisan* Credit Card. Despite its implementation in 1999, marginal, small and medium landowners did not know about the *Kisan* Credit Card. Even among the large landowners it was only a handful that had *Kisan* Credit Cards and knew what it was about. Information regarding state benefits such as the *Kisan* Credit Card, which provides flexible loans to farmers, remains confined to a handful who belong to the dominant class, and who know "someone" in banks and government institutions. The fragmented nature and access to

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<sup>110</sup> Brass (1999) refers to this as the 'ruling class ideology', where there is only a transfer from the client to the patron rather than there being any redistribution (see also Breman 1974, 2007).

banks has increased the dependence on the informal sources of credit and with it asymmetrical power relations.

Credit relations discussed in this chapter are not simple loan transactions. Instead, they are differentiated along the lines of gender, caste and class. Labourers and tenants take loans from landowners they have 'good relations' with. Similarly, landowners prefer giving loans to those labourers they know. Good relations with landowners, act as collateral. Landowners in both the regions often spoke of how there were instances when labourers did not return loan amounts. In such situations, because they knew the labourer, landowners can get the money back through another family member's labour- usually women. Similarly, for labourers and tenants, because they knew the landowners, they could negotiate how and when the loan amount could be returned, for example, repayment of loans through labour time.

Dependence on landowners for loans and other subsequent benefits is here to stay even if access to formal credit sources is improved for the rural poor. However, the inaccessibility, observed in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, affects both tenancy and labour relations. Limited access to formal credit facilities means that they get their loans from informal sources. These informal sources include private money lenders such as motorbike *vaddikkaran* or pawnbrokers to whom (mainly women) they pledge gold. Gold loans or mortgaging land is not long term solution to obtaining loans, as these are the only assets that they are left with and which are used to meet marriage expenses in the family. Losing out of these limited assets results in the relative depletion of resources among women, who already own/have so little in their name. Private money lenders have very high rates of interest, which might be a reason not to take these loans. However, for the Paraiyars and Ambalakars, borrowing from a private money lender provides a sense of freedom of choice, and a space away from interlocking credit relations that can tie their labour to a particular landowner. Similarly, borrowing from neighbours, provides respite from the landowners, even if it means having to justify their expenditure or be bound to an obligation of reciprocity (Guerin et al. 2012).

The other side of this reality is that the high rates of interest become increasingly difficult to pay. In order to repay such loans, the borrower turns to the landowner where they enter labour tying arrangements until the loan is repaid. The frequency of loans taken and rate of payment makes it difficult to decipher and specify a particular period of tying. A labourer can be tied to landowner multiple times in a single *fasli* year, or maybe even tied for a period of two to three years. Despite the length of time, female agricultural labourers refer to the labour tying period as 'short term' as it only lasts till repayment of the loan. Landowners, on the other hand, extract labour from a docile and disciplined workforce. Landowners would prefer this arrangement where the labour is compelled to work in order to pay to off the loan. Whether the amount is big or small, extending loans is an employer strategy used to their benefit.

In Chinsurah, there is limited accessibility to formal credit sources but this was not complimented by numerous informal credit sources. The most important relationship that emerged was that with the landowner, the most easily accessible credit source in this region. For female agricultural labourers, landowners do not only provide loans but extend job security, protection for the family, etc. particularly for *bandha kishens*. However, this relationship was predicated on the lines of debt, and once the amount was paid, any benefits that came along with it ceased as well.

One of the most important benefits for female *bandha kishens* in Chinsurah was that they had access to land. Women were not at the forefront of land transactions and becoming *bandha kishens* provided them the opportunity to cultivate land either on *bhaage* or *theeke*. The selective benefits that accrue to *bandha kishens*, increases labour manipulation as well as dependence on the landowner (Hart, 1986b). The dependency on landowners is therefore sealed through the work, credit availability and land.

The story of credit in both these regions highlights an important aspect- that the burden of repayment falls on the shoulders of women. This burden of repayment is also mirrored in the basic principles of microfinance institutions. SHGs focus on the ability of the woman to save, and in the process there is a romanticisation of female-only savings and credit



associations and their 'social capital' solidarity. In this process, little attention is paid to the amount of control women have over loans. Aranthangi had a very vibrant SHG with focus on self-employment and setting up businesses. The SHG was composed of women who primarily belonged to the classes of labour category, and therefore, it operated keeping their interests in mind. In Chinsurah, the experience was quite the opposite. The work Bandhan carried out had localised effects, catering to the needs of a particular class-women who belonged to medium landowner households. This left out the much larger classes of labour, who have very little savings to begin with. For this reason, they continue to borrow from landowners. In addition to this, the overt focus on enterprise by SHGs restricts the extent to which they can actually transform indebtedness experienced by female agricultural labourers.

This chapter engaged with the predominant credit relations that women from the classes of labour engaged with. Women became indebted and tied down due to individual loans or loans taken by a male member of their family. Women took individual loans in order to cover for shortages in household expenses, since their husbands or other male members in the family could not contribute regularly. The familial and gendered relations in the work and domestic spaces manufacture conditions where women face the double burden of work and the burden of debt. The exploitative burdens imposed on women, particularly on those who belong to the classes of labour, solidifies their dependence on landowners (albeit in varying proportions), where female labourers receive low pay and carry out a range of non-remunerative tasks, which places limits on their ability to repay debts.

The different credit relations in both Aranthangi and Chinsurah result in tied labour relations that vary in duration, mode of payment, nature of work, etc. The ability of the female labourer to negotiate these contracts varies with power relations at the village-level. In addition to micro-level processes, the bargaining capacity of female labour is conditioned through macro-level policies as well. This is discussed in the following chapters that explore the effects of social-welfare policies such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural

Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Public Distribution System (PDS), and Minimum Support Price (MSP) policy.

## Chapter 6: National Rural Employment: Transformative Impact on Female Labour Relations

Guishyam, a 65-year-old Brahmin landowner from Bardhanagar, owns 5 acres of land. He showed me how *aman* paddy is cultivated in this village and the amount of labour he requires for each task. On our way back from the fields I come across a large pond being dug right in front of his house. At least 45 labourers, both men and women, were digging and carrying mud. Guishyam informs me with much disdain that all the workers here are doing MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) work. MGNREGA provides a total of 100 days of wage employment to a rural household. Guishyam understands that the government is trying to make provisions for improving the livelihoods of labourers, but he does not consider MGNREGA work as work. He blames MGNREGA work for the labourer's rising demands and growing laziness. Just then Saswati, a 45-year-old Bauri agricultural labourer, calls out to me. "*Kemon aacho maa*<sup>111</sup> (How are you my dear)? I have got MGNREGA work today and so has my daughter-in-law. You seem to have brought us good luck... You must come to our house for tea when you finish your work." Like Saswati, many others eagerly wait to get MGNREGA work. It is an additional source of income sanctioned by the government- a break for the labourers from agricultural wage work. Guishyam tells the labourers, in what he perceives is jest that he wished they would show as much enthusiasm when they come and work in his fields.

The introduction of MGNREGA, often rallied as India's anti-poverty intervention, brought along decent minimum wages and equal pay for women (Jha & Gaiha, 2012). Employers and labourers perceive MGNREGA to be easy work with high pay, and this has provided labourers with the opportunity to demand an increase in wages and the choice to opt out of 'grueling' agricultural wage work if demands are not met (Carswell & De Neve, 2014; Jeyaranjan, 2011). Employers/landowners concede to the labourers' demands because now they face the additional threat of labour shortage, a common complaint made by

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<sup>111</sup> *Maa* is used as a term of endearment and does not necessarily refer to mother, or mother figure alone.

landowners in Aranthangi and Chinsurah (see chapter 4).

MGNREGA work has gradually worked into the everyday lives of labourers and for female labourers in particular (Jeyaranjan, 2011). As a result, growing resistance exists amongst labourers who demand higher wages in agricultural wage work and ask for better work conditions. Despite creating such opportunities, MGNREGA is still seen as the fall-back option by the labourers (Drèze & Oldiges, 2009). This is often due to irregularity of work, the type of work (usually digging and carrying mud) and benefits that labourers receive. The irregularity of MGNREGA work is evident in the all India figures, which shows a decline in the average person days of employment per household from 46.83 in 2009-20 to 32 in 2011-12. At the state level, the numbers fell from 28 to 14 days in West Bengal and from 58 to 34 days in Tamil Nadu (Jha & Gaiha, 2012). Such drawbacks often limit the extent to which programmes such as MGNREGA can serve as effective tools of transformation in rural society.

This chapter shows the extent to which MGNREGA, as a social protection policy, has transformed labour relations in Aranthangi and Chinsurah. MGNREGA, introduced by the state, came with the promise to provide an alternate source of employment, which would relieve labourers from debt (at least partially). The effects of MGNREGA are not experienced uniformly across all regions. In Aranthangi, the proper functioning of MGNREGA has reduced labourers' dependence on landowners for jobs by emerging as an alternate source of income (see Carswell & De Neve, 2014). In Chinsurah, political clientelism governs the disbursal of MGNREGA work, and therefore, dependence on landowners continues. The policy is effective in one region and not in another. This indicates how interactions of MGNREGA policy with local power relations is contingent on the particularities of gendered class power and state politics. This chapter examines how MGNREGA is a part of a set of power relations that help negotiate labour relations, more specifically tied labour arrangements.

Section 6.1 looks at whether, if at all, MGNREGA is altering labour relations in Aranthangi

and Chinsurah, and compares these to state-level and all-India trends. Data collected highlights the magnitude of MGNREGA's success (measured through ownership of cards and female work participation) in the two regions. In this section, I ask whether or not MGNREGA has tipped the [asymmetrical] balance of power in favour of labourers, particularly for women, in light of its success.

Despite the clear advantages of MGNREGA, the programme suffers from problems of corruption, and its operation is encumbered by the rural realities of social hierarchy and asymmetrical power relations (Adhikari & Bhatia, 2010). Local bureaucracy and political clientelism affect how MGNREGA is implemented and work is distributed. Section 6.2, therefore, explores how local elites, using their political power, manipulate the MGNREGA scheme to control labour relations and dissent. The two sections in this chapter highlight how labour relations and wage conditions are an outcome of interactions of the rural elite with the local bureaucracy. This chapter uses MGNREGA to return to the larger argument about how labour tying arrangements among women labourers result from interactions between micro-level process and macro-level policies.

### **6.1 MGNREGA and Labour Relations:**

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), now renamed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), enacted in 2005, under the UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government, is one of its flagship welfare programmes. The first phase of the programme was initiated in 200 of the least-developed districts in the country in 2005, later spreading to other districts (Chakraborty, 2007; Jacob, 2008). This scheme, with its primary focus on the rural population, made provisions for 100 days of employment per rural household in unskilled work. The scheme aimed to ensure year-round employment, as agriculture could only provide a maximum of 250 days of employment (Jacob, 2008; Jha & Gaiha, 2012). The goal of MGNREGA was to extend livelihood security and alleviate poverty by providing employment security to rural populations (Chakraborty, 2007; Jeyaranjan, 2011). The introduction of minimum wages, especially in the absence of work, easy work in terms of both time and energy spent and

the opportunity to step out of agricultural wage work, has altered labour-employer relations, often working to the benefit of the labourer (Carswell & De Neve, 2014).

One of the biggest successes of MGNREGA is the increase in female work participation. The percentage of women working in MGNREGA increased from 47.07 in 2011 to 50.22 in 2014 (MGNREGA website). In 2006-07, Tamil Nadu had the highest participation of women in MGNREGA (Drèze & Oldiges, 2009). In Tamil Nadu, in 2011 female participation in MGNREGA stood at 65.79 percent, which increased to 79.74 percent in 2014. Female participation in West Bengal increased from 35.02 in 2011 to 39.39 percent in 2014 (MGNREGA website). Female participation trends, mirrored at the village level, suggests the extent to which female labourers can negotiate work and tenancy contracts with landowners, an issue to which I return below.

Another transformative aspect of the MGNREGA can be understood by examining the number of jobs cards issued. The number of jobs cards issued increases annually, however, a discrepancy exists in the total work allotted in different states. The total number of job cards issued at the national level in 2011-12 was 1.25 Crores. A total of 83.71 Lakh job cards were issued in Tamil Nadu and 112. 23 Lakhs in West Bengal. The total number of households that worked in 2011-12 in Tamil Nadu was 63.43 Lakhs and in West Bengal it was 55.16 Lakhs. These figures highlight the unevenness of distribution of work, where 75.77 percent of households received MGNREGA work in Tamil Nadu and only 49.14 percent of households with job cards received work in West Bengal. With this preliminary data alone, one can see that Tamil Nadu has experienced a far more successful implementation of MGNREGA than West Bengal. The relative success of MGNREGA in Aranthangi affects the ability of female labourers, in particular, to negotiate agriculture labour contracts, compared to Chinsurah. The following sections explore the relations of class dependency and 'success' of MGNREGA in the two field sites.

#### **6.1.1 MGNREGA, Labour Benefits and Labour Control:**

Locals refer to MGNREGA job cards as '*noor naal valey* cards' in Aranthangi and *eksho diner*

*kaaj* in Chinsurah. Both these terms translate as 100 days' work, the phrase that popularised MGNREGA work. Regional political parties and the *gram panchayat* (village council) work to ensure the proper distribution of job cards. At the time of survey, 52.4 percent of all households had job cards in Karaimesu, 89.9 percent in Thirasu, 70.63 percent in Bardhanagar and 81.86 percent in Madhabpur.

Similar to the state-level trends discussed in the previous section (6.1), the more widespread distribution of MGNREGA in Chinsurah is attributed to the CPI (M) party (Kohli, 2009). The CPI (M) were in power at the time of implementation in West Bengal, and ensured their cadre support through MGNREGA job cards. The difference observed between Karaimesu and Thirasu, at the time of survey, stems from the policy change which required MGNREGA workers to have bank accounts. In Karaimesu, respondents had to hand in their cards to be updated for the purpose of making new bank accounts, as all monetary transactions would now take place through banks. Official records show improvement in MGNREGA distribution and implementation in both regions. The following tables draw on data from official MGNREGA records in the four villages over a time period of 2011 to 2014.

### Box 6.1: Aranthangi

#### MGNREGA work in 2014 in Karaiedu

Total number of Active Job Cards	452
Total number of Active Workers	506
SC workers as a percentage of Total Workers	0.59

#### Progress recorded in Karaiedu

	2013-14	2012-13	2011-12
Total No. of HHs completed 100 days of Wage Employment	7	96	21
Total HHs who Worked	403	378	458
% of Men Worked	5.11	7.19	21.95
% of Women Worked	94.98	93.98	78.05
% of SC Worked	1.11	1.16	0.1

#### MGNREGA work in 2014 in Thirasu

Total number of Active Job Cards	727
Total number of Active Workers	913
SC workers as a percentage of Total Workers	1.31

#### Progress recorded in Thirasu

	2013-14	2012-13	2011-12
Total No. of HHs completed 100 days of Wage Employment	4	13	0
Total HHs who Worked	613	633	803
% of Men Worked	12.34	22.54	34.64
% of Women Worked	87.66	77.45	65.36
% of SC Worked	1	1.06	2.09

Source: MGNREGA Website: <http://www.MGNREGA.nic.in/netMGNREGA/home.aspx> [Date Accessed 12.06.2015] [HHs= Households].



### Box 6.2: Chinsurah

#### MGNREGA work in 2014 in Bardhanagar

Total number of Active Job Cards	3933
Total number of Active Workers	5923
SC Workers as a percentage of Total Workers	23.97
ST Workers as a percentage of Total Workers	24.69

#### Progress recorded in Bardhanagar

	2013-14	2012-13	2011-12
Total No. of HHs completed 100 days of Wage Employment	0	11	0
Total HHs Worked	2372	3638	3910
% of Men Worked	71.9	71.35	69.07
% of Women Worked	28.1	28.65	30.93
% of SC worked	20.6	24.04	19.38
% of ST worked	24.89	25.33	20.19

#### MGNREGA work in 2014 in Madhabpur

Total number of Active Job Cards	3702
Total number of Active Workers	5571
SC Workers as a percentage of Total Workers	40.57
ST Workers as a percentage of Total Workers	23.42

#### Progress recorded in Madhabpur

	2013-14	2012-13	2011-12
Total No. of HHs completed 100 days of Wage Employment	0	38	6
Total HHs Worked	3105	3374	3143
% of Men Worked	58.2	61.98	61.31
% of Women Worked	41.8	38.02	38.69
% of SC Worked	45.63	42.45	41.76
% of ST Worked	24.98	25.16	28.11

Source: MGNREGA Website: <http://www.MGNREGA.nic.in/netMGNREGA/home.aspx> [Date Accessed 12.06.2015] [HHs= Households].

From the data sets above, we see that MGNREGA work has increased female participation. However, when we compare the two regions, we see that a large percentage of men do MGNREGA work in Chinsurah than in Aranthangi. A reason for this lies in the type of work

the population engages with. From the village census survey, in Chinsurah, 42.64 percent of the total male population engages in agricultural wage work alone. In Aranthangi 5.99 percent of the male population performs agricultural wage work, and 31.91 percent engages in both agricultural and casual wage work. The figures suggest greater availability of non-farm work, which is accessed by male workers in Aranthangi. In addition, many male workers in Aranthangi choose not to do MGNREGA work as they receive higher wages in non-farm work (see also Carswell and De Neve, 2014: p.571). For male workers with limited agricultural wage work and non-farm work in Chinsurah, MGNREGA presents itself as an important source of income.

The *gram panchayat* distributed MGNREGA work to reach a majority of the Dalit community. Table 6.1 shows the distribution of job cards among different caste groups in Aranthangi and Chinsurah.

Caste	Job Cards	No Job cards
ASARI	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5 %)
AMBALAKAR	388 (80.16%)	96 (19.83%)
PALLAR	41 (58.57%)	29 (41.42 %)
PARAIYAR	34 (53.96 %)	29 (46.03 %)
THEVAR	17 (42.50 %)	23 (57.5%)
UDAIYAR	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
VALLAR	1 (25%)	3 (75%)
PILLAI	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
NADAR	1 (50%)	1 (50%)

**Table 6.1: Caste Wise Distribution of Job Cards in Aranthangi**

*Source: Village Survey in Aranthangi, November 2011*

*\*Percentage calculation based on total respondents*

Ambalakars, who belong to the Most Backward Caste (MBC) category, is the numerically dominant caste group in Karaimedu and Thirasu. Of the total Ambalakar population, 80.16 percent are registered workers and have job cards. Among the SCs (Pallars and Paraiyars), 50.06 percent of workers are registered workers and have jobs cards. These figures reflect

the official MGNREGA statistics of the two villages (see Box 6.1). While a majority of workers who carry out MGNREGA work are women, 43.94 percent of those who belong to the Dalit community do not have job cards. MGNREGA might have helped increase agricultural wages for female labourers in Aranthangi, however the lower participation rate among Dalit female labourers raises questions on the effective distribution of MGNREGA work and the extent to which it has transformed the bargaining capacity of Dalit female labour.

Chinsurah's distribution of job cards is far more equitable, as highlighted in Table 6.2.

Caste	Job Card	No Job cards	Caste	Job Card	No Job cards
BAURI	69 (95.8%)	3 (4.16%)	KAZI	1 (16.66%)	5 (83.33%)
BAGDI	81 (96.4%)	3 (3.57%)	KHOIRA	42 (93.3%)	3 (11.53%)
BRAHMIN	20 (47.6 %)	22 (52.38%)	MAHISYA	16 (72.72%)	6 (27.27%)
DOM	9 (75%)	3 (25%)	MOIRA	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
GOALA	3 (25%)	9 (75%)	MOLLAH	3 (100%)	0 (0%)
HANDI	8 (72.72%)	3 (27.27%)	MUCHI	2 (100%)	0 (0%)
KARMAKAR	4 (44.44%)	5 (55.55%)	MURMU	4 (100%)	0 (0%)
ORAON	6 (100%)	0 (0%)	SADGOP	10 (52.63%)	9 (47.36%)
SANTHAL	52 (98.1%)	1 (1.88%)	SHEIKH	16 (33.33%)	32 (66.66%)
SUNNI	2 (20%)	8 (80%)	TANTI	0 (0%)	1 (100%)

**Table 6.2: Caste Wise Distribution of Job Cards in Chinsurah**

*Source: Village Survey in Chinsurah, April, 2012*

Of the total SC population (for example, Bauri and Bagdi) 89.5 percent and 96.1 percent of the ST (for example Santhal) population have job cards. Despite the proper distribution of cards and higher minimum wage rates in Chinsurah, one of the biggest problems the region faces are the lack of funds, which affects MGNREGA work availability. Notwithstanding these problems, MGNREGA work made available to caste groups lower down in the social hierarchy, enables the Dalit community to break away from relations of 'subordination, discrimination and exploitation', characteristics of agricultural wage work

(Carswell & De Neve, 2014: p.573).

In Aranthangi, Paraiyar female agricultural wage workers associated MGNREGA work with perceptions of independence, dignity and decent work, which allow them the opportunity to not rely on landowners for work and subsistence (Carswell & De Neve, 2014; see also Khera & Nayak, 2009). Aside from increased agricultural wages in Aranthangi, MGNREGA became a yardstick to place other demands (see Jeyaranjan, 2011). Female labourers demanded for 'tiffin' (a meal). Landowners now provide agricultural labourers with meals even if they deduct the amount from workers' daily wages. Despite the deductions in wages, MGNREGA has provided female labourers a platform upon which they can negotiate their labour contracts.

MGNREGA however, is not without problems. MGNREGA has not fulfilled its claims of providing 100 days of employment per household. When comparing the two regions, Aranthangi performs much better than Chinsurah. During the period of 2011-2014, 2012-13 had the highest number of households who completed 100 days of employment. While the numbers dropped in the following year, no households completed 100 days of employment in Chinsurah (see Box 6.1 & Box 6.2). I obtained similar results from the villages surveyed where only 13 households in Aranthangi reported having worked for 100 days and only one household in Chinsurah had worked for a maximum of 75 days in 2010-11. Therefore, while Chinsurah might have better distribution of MGNREGA job cards among the Dalit community, Aranthangi has more work availability. The effects of work availability observed in the two regions are discussed below.

#### **6.1.1.1 MGNREGA, Wages and Labour Relations:**

MGNREGA introduced decent minimum wages for unskilled work, with MGNREGA wage rates set at Rs.119/- for Tamil Nadu and Rs.136/- for West Bengal (MGNREGA website). Apart from these wages, MGNREGA is attractive work because, apart from being 'easy' work, work is available in the *panchayat*, or labourers are transported to work sites. A key attraction of MGNREGA for female labourers is that it is government work and with this

comes reliability and regularity of work that, does not constrain women by caste and community norms (Khera & Nayak, 2009). Female labourers in Aranthangi do not feel that they will suffer from caste discrimination, as anyone with a job card has equal access to work. However, the most important factor is the provision of equal pay for men and women and decent wages. An impact of the MGNREGA wage structure is the increase in female agricultural wages (Carswell & De Neve, 2014; see Heyer, 2012). Jeyaranjan (2011) shows that in Tamil Nadu female wage rates increased from Rs.40 in 2007 to Rs.80/- in 2010 (p. 69). Aranthangi showed a similar increase in female wages from Rs.65/- in 2009 to Rs.100/- in 2011. The agricultural wages are affected by other factors, such as village-level power relations (Carswell, 2013). This was witnessed in the case of Chinsurah, where wages increased in Madhabpur from Rs.50/- and two kilos to rice in 2010 to Rs.60/- and two kilos of rice in 2012. Bardhanagar did not increase its agricultural wages, which indicates that even though MGNREGA creates pressures on agricultural wages it does not always result in an increase.

Agricultural wages for female workers in Aranthangi experienced simultaneous increase with the increase in MGNREGA wages. The higher MGNREGA wages attract female labourers and this often creates labour shortages, especially during the sowing and harvesting period. When MGNREGA work and agricultural wage work overlap (especially during a period of peak labour demand in agriculture), landowners offer wages equal to or higher than MGNREGA wages. Sumangali, a 45-year-old Ambalakar woman reported:

*"The urimaiyālar are giving us these wages because they have realised that the government is giving us work and so now they call us for work saying that they will pay the same."*

MGNREGA wage in Aranthangi is Rs.100/- and during periods of peak labour demand agricultural wages offered are Rs.110/- , higher than the MGNREGA wage but lower than

the government established rate of Rs.119/-<sup>112</sup>.

Landowners use the mechanism of providing agricultural wages equal to or higher than MGNREGA wages to secure labour, especially during periods of peak demand. The landowners do not approve of the wage hikes. Landowners such as Mannikam (Karaimedu) and Aatmanathan (Thirasu) complain of how workers receive far more pay for the amount of work they do, arguing that labourers are becoming lazy yet, constantly demanding higher wages. Aatmanathan, a 52-year-old Ambalakar medium landowner, owns 2 acres of *nanjei* land and 3 acres of *punjei* land. Along with this, he has leased 2 acres of land<sup>113</sup> where he cultivates sugarcane. According to him, the onset of MGNREGA work has made farming more difficult and labour availability presents one of the biggest problem he faces.

*"I do not want to remain a farmer. There is no future in it. But in the end, what are we to eat? We cannot eat money can we? That is why I still continue with farming. I blame this situation on the Central Government, on their MGNREGA scheme. The 100 days work does affect agricultural work. All the work coincides when we need labourers the most, especially during harvesting time. The government can give them work when there is no agricultural work, these labourers can then go and work, get their wages and come back and work for us."*

As the councillor of Thirasu, Aatmanathan cannot take a direct stand against MGNREGA. However, throughout his interview, while not openly discrediting MGNREGA, he did blame MGNREGA for the crisis farmers face in Thirasu and neighbouring villages<sup>114</sup>. Aatmanathan's fears mirror those articulated by Mannikam (large landowner in Karaimedu), associating arrogant behaviour of labourers with MGNREGA work availability. According to him, labourers will only work if they earn the same wages they

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<sup>112</sup> MGNREGA wage rate offered in Aranthangi is lower than the official rate set by the state government. The lower MGNREGA wage rate is indicative of underlying corruption taking place in Aranthangi, however I could not gather sufficient information regarding this.

<sup>113</sup> Aatmanathan maintained that he had 5 acres of land but later on during the course of his interview he says that the 2 acres of leased in land was land that was brought as dowry by his wife. This highlights the many ways in which farmers try to hide the amount of land that they own.

<sup>114</sup> Aatmanathan's His direct attack on the UPA government that introduced the scheme could not be ignored as he is an elected councillor of AIADMK that belongs to the opposition coalition party (NDA).

receive from MGNREGA work.

*"They come and tell me that if they are getting Rs.100/- with MGNREGA where the work does not require them to stand in the sun and work all day, then why should they do tedious agricultural wage work for less pay. If I want them to come and work on the land then I should give them the same wages. This has not only soured the landowner-labourer relationship but at the same time has made these labourers lazier and more demanding".*

Mannikam reminisces about the labour relationship that used to exist in this village. Labourers did not talk back, they did all the work allocated to them and they did not worry about when they finished work, but rather were more concerned about finishing their work. In the current situation, labourers want to run home the moment the clock hits 2:30 pm. According to him, labourers lack sincerity and have no loyalty towards the land they work on and landowners they work for. Since the demand for wage increases has stemmed from the introduction of MGNREGA work, landowners feel that they are not providing 'appropriate wages' for agricultural wage work. Despite objections, MGNREGA has compelled landowners to pay higher agricultural wages.

The introduction of MGNREGA in Aranthangi has, to a certain extent, challenged the existing order of social control. Pallar, Paraiyar and Ambalakar female agricultural labourers - have used MGNREGA wages as a justification to demand higher wages. They found MGNREGA work less tedious to agricultural wage work and it paid more. For female labourers, MGNREGA emerged as a more viable option, with greater flexibility of work. The choice presented to the female labourers created pressures on landowners, forcing them to increase wages. Landowners interpret such wage demands as 'disobedience'; something they never faced 15-20 years ago. MGNREGA helped give female labourers a platform upon which they could place their demands. Female labourers make such demands not through massive revolt, but through more subtle forms of 'sabotage and evasion' (Scott, 1985:31). Female agricultural labourers made complaints about the kind of work they had to do, or at times they did not complete the task that was fixed for a day, a process referred to as foot dragging by Scott (1985:31). Despite the presence of MGNREGA and the subtle forms of revolts it has allowed women to take, the ever-present threat of

replacing their labour with migrant labour exists. For this reason, female labourers did not want to engage in larger organised movements, as they feared being dismissed. This fear of dismissal among the female labourers indicates the importance that agricultural wage work has in their lives<sup>115</sup>.

The subdued forms of resistance, expressed by female agricultural labourers, paves the way for them to place their demands without sabotaging or breaking off ties with their employers. The systematic implementation of MGNREGA in Aranthangi has provided women with a choice to look beyond agricultural wage work and the ability to negotiate wages. While the gender gap in wages has not decreased (male workers get paid double of female wages), women now get paid more for agricultural wage work because of MGNREGA.

MGNREGA in Chinsurah was introduced in its second phase in 2008. As observed in both state-level and village-level data, job cards were distributed in an organised manner throughout the region. In Madhabpur and Bardhanagar, 98.1 percent of Santhals, 96.42 percent of Bauris and 95.83 percent of Bagdis had job cards. Despite the even distribution of cards, a very small percentage female workers participate in MGNREGA work (see Box 6.2). The poor participation of women makes it difficult for them to negotiate agricultural wages.

A majority of MGNREGA workers in Chinsurah are men, and while MGNREGA did help increase their wages from Rs.100/- to Rs.135/-, female wage rates increased from Rs.50/- to Rs.60/- (along with 2 kilos of rice) in Madhabpur. In Aranthangi, a majority of MGNREGA workers are women, because men are engaged in non-farm activities, where they migrated out for work and received higher wages than MGNREGA wages. This was not the case for male workers in Chinsurah, who had limited job opportunities in non-farm activity

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<sup>115</sup> A solution for the landowners to combat the problems of the demands in wages is to hire migrant labour. However, this labour is not available year-round and keeping migrant labourers in the long run would increase the landowner's expenses, as they have to provide food and shelter to these workers. Moreover, ever-present threat of hostility towards the migrant population by the local population exists.



and relied on MGNREGA as their alternate source of income. Unlike in Aranthangi, where female labourers associate increases in agricultural wage with MGNREGA, the same does not hold true in Chinsurah. The reason for this is the limited participation of women in MGNREGA in Chinsurah, which provides them with limited work options<sup>116</sup>.

Reduced access to MGNREGA and limited choices for work affect the ability of female labourers to negotiate their work contracts. Reena, a 30-year-old agricultural labourer, has gone for MGNREGA work (maybe) two or three times in 2010-2011. Every time MGNREGA work comes to her village, her husband goes for this work, while she continues to work for her landowner who provides her with a stable job. By taking up seasonal agricultural wage work, Reena does not want to jeopardise her stable agricultural employment, when her husband can seemingly do so, and so her actions potentially support the persistence of tied labour.

Saswati, a 38-year-old Bagdi women, only goes for agricultural wage work when her husband does not go. She prefers MGNREGA work because she does not find it as taxing and tiring. However, she complained about the irregularity of work.

*"Last year I received only 30 days of work. How is one supposed to survive with such little work? Which is why, even though I prefer MGNREGA work, I stick to agricultural wage work, because the landowners I work for give me work for longer durations and I am assured wages and grains."*

Reena and Saswati have limited access to MGNREGA work due to gendered positions in the household. They only go for MGNREGA work if their husbands do not take up this work. In addition, Saswati recognises that although the limited number of days of work in MGNREGA does not increase the burdens of debt and survival, it does not help reduce it either. Female labourers in Chinsurah, therefore, remain confined to agricultural wage work. Due to the lack of alternate jobs and savings no decrease is observed in female

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<sup>116</sup> This is not to imply that the region does not experience any wage increases. The wage increase observed at the time of survey was an outcome of a two-day strike called by all labourers during peak paddy sowing season.

labourers' dependence on agricultural wage work and landowners.

Apart from lack of access to MGNREGA work, bargaining for wage increases is particularly difficult for female labourers as part of their wages are in kind. Payments made in kind leave room for much ambiguity when it comes to estimating increases. The payment made in grains is calculated according to the fluctuating price of grains. While the price of rice fluctuates in the market, the portion of rice received in wages remains constant. Landowners often quote higher market prices to justify not increasing wages. Rahim, a Muslim medium landowner from Madhabpur, did not approve of the current wage hike. According to him-

*"If the labourers had not gone on a strike we would have not increased their wages. When the price of rice increases we do not reduce the quantity of rice they receive. Why do they not take this aspect into consideration before making such demands, and stopping work altogether?"*

Rahim, and others like him, expect labourers to accept the wages given. Landowners believe they assign just wages and should not be challenged. Landowners complained that apart from labourers becoming lazy, MGNREGA made it difficult for them to control wages. In Chinsurah, while female labourers had limited bargaining power, landowners feared that labourers would demand higher wages based on MGNREGA wages. The landowner's fears reveal that MGNREGA wages in Chinsurah affect agricultural wages (though MGNREGA was not cited as the cause of wage increase), albeit in a limited manner for female labourers.

The effects of the MGNREGA scheme on female labour relations differ across the two regions. The causes for this difference identified in this section are conditioned through familial and gendered relations at the workspace, the manner in which the scheme is implemented and operated, availability of non-agricultural work, and the ability of the female labourer to access the benefits of MGNREGA. The following section looks more specifically at the problems associated with the implementation of MGNREGA and how this affects labourer and employer strategies.

### 6.1.2 Obstacles to MGNREGA

This section identifies that the implementation of the programme itself differs in the two regions. The way the scheme is implemented has different effects on the nature of work, timing of work, payment of work and so on. All these affect the extent to which female labourers, in particular, can rely on MGNREGA work to free up their labour and move away from exploitative work relations.

While having a relatively positive effect on agricultural wages, MGNREGA is vulnerable to social hierarchies and power relations (Adhikari & Bhatia, 2010). Corruption is one of the biggest problems that plagues MGNREGA. Corruption is witnessed at multiple stages, with bureaucracy, banks and cash transactions (wage payments).

MGNREGA offers unskilled work, often with very little variation in the type of work. Workers in Aranthangi broadly defined MGNREGA as '*mann vettre valey*' (mud digging work). A wide range of jobs were offered in Aranthangi, from building and repairing metalled roads, afforestation of wastelands, expansion and maintenance of lakes and building of new ponds. Different kinds of work were distributed among the different villages in Karaimedu and Thirasu *panchayats*. The availability of different jobs in these two *panchayats* explains the greater number of days workers are employed in MGNREGA. In Chinsurah, MGNREGA work was restricted to widening, maintaining and digging new ponds, with some occasional road construction work (see Figure 17 below).



**Figure 17: MGRENA Work: Digging a Pond in Chinsurah**

*Source: Author's own image, Chinsurah, August, 2012*

Labourers in Chinsurah complained of the dullness of MGNREGA work. The lack of a variety of jobs explains the inability of households to obtain close to 100 days of work. Table 6.3 shows the number of days of work obtained under MGNREGA in Aranthangi and Chinsurah.

No. of Days of Work	Respondents in Aranthangi		No. of Days of Work	Respondents in Chinsurah	
	Number	Percentage		Number	Percentage
<25	46	9.38	<20	94	30.92
25-50	387	78.97	20-40	105	34.53
50-75	37	7.55	40-60	100	32.89
>75	20	4.08	>60	5	1.64

**Table 6.3: Number of Days of MGNREGA Work Received in Aranthangi and Chinsurah**

*Source: Village Survey in Aranthangi and Chinsurah 2011-12*

The table above signals the better implementation of MGNREGA in Aranthangi, with more work availability. The greater availability of work explains why MGNREGA has a greater impact on agricultural wages in Aranthangi than Chinsurah, because not only is more work available, but different kinds of work that help improve the negotiating capacity of female

agricultural labourers. For female labourers in Chinsurah, dependence on landowners for work does not decrease because of their reduced access to MGNREGA.

Despite the positive effects of MGNREGA in Aranthangi, 10 percent of Ambalakar and Paraiyar respondents did not receive job cards, because at the time they were issued, the concerned women either worked in the sugar factory or had migrated out with their husbands for construction work. These women believe that they did not receive MGNREGA cards because they do not keep close ties with the *pradhan*. In addition, Pallars in Thirasu complained about the 'richer people' taking away their MGNREGA job, which they say explains why they got less than 100 days of work. Maryam, a 40-year-old Christian Pallar woman complained:

*"These rich people will always get all the money because now they are taking up most of the MGNREGA work. There should be an age and income/wealth threshold, which limits who comes to work for the MGNREGA. It is not that they do not have money, they just feel that they should not sit idle, it is like time-pass for them- where they come and work and take **our money**...These wealthy people cannot do agricultural wage work, they lease out their land and because they do not know what they want to do with their time, they do MGNREGA work."*

Maryam felt that the government created MGNREGA jobs for people like her and not the rich landowners. Due to lack of proper checks and balances, and because she still had to obtain agricultural wage work from the same landowners, she and others in her position could do nothing about the situation<sup>117</sup>. These sentiments were voiced amongst several Paraiyar households. Conditions of reduced work in MGNREGA reinforces the dependence on landowners for agricultural wage work, even though labourers were able to demand an increase in wages.

Along with access to work, MGNREGA work suffers from issues of non-payment and siphoning off money (Adhikari & Bhatia, 2010, Carswell, 2013, Jha & Gaiha, 2012). In Aranthangi, as mentioned above, the MGNREGA wage rate was set at Rs.119/- at the time

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<sup>117</sup> Maryam blames the rich landowners for taking up MGNREGA work. As observed in the field, it was women from medium landowner households who take up NREGA work. The work is considered easy and dull, for which reason, only female members of the household do this work.

of survey. However, none of the respondents mentioned receiving this amount. 85.89 percent of the total households who received MGNREGA work reported receiving Rs.100/- and 14.11 percent received less than Rs.100/-, where some respondents received amounts as low as Rs.75/-. Respondents attributed the reduced wages to tea and snacks provided by the landowners. Such high deductions of Rs.20-30/- for snacks seem improbable, especially since the labourers receive only one cup of tea and 2 *vadas* (snack). The cost of this within the village is Rs.10/- and in Pudukkottai town is Rs.15/-. The visible person responsible for this is the labour supervisor who monitors the rosters. However, this statement could not be verified as no proof existed of how the labour supervisor, who belongs to the same class as other MGNREGA workers, managed to siphon money.

Chinsurah had a similar story, where the state allocated wages were Rs.136/- and workers received Rs.130/-. A total of 64.14 percent of the household allocated MGNREGA work received Rs.130/-, with two respondents receiving Rs.128/- and Rs.100/-, and 34.53 percent of the population received Rs.136/-. Workers in Chinsurah reported deductions in their MGNREGA wages because of the tea and snacks provided. However, this does not explain how a part of the MGNREGA workforce received wages in full. Compared to Aranthangi, the provision of wages is properly implemented, as none of the respondents in Aranthangi reported receiving the government set wage rate of Rs.119/-. While the provision of tea and snacks might justify reduced wages, the workers did not know that, as per government rules, money exists for tea and snacks, and this amount should not be deducted from their wages. The particular instances of reduced wages in Aranthangi and Chinsurah indicates a continuous process of corruption taking place at the local level.

In order to curb corruption in MGNREGA, the state government introduced a change where all monetary transactions take place through banks. The *gram panchayat* opened bank accounts for MGNREGA workers, but this was not done in a systematic manner (see also Adhikari & Bhatia, 2010). The respondents in both Aranthangi and Chinsurah complained about the time lag in receiving payment. Female labourers, in particular, they cash payments that they could put to use immediately. In Chinsurah, women did not want

their wages sent to the bank, as this meant that they had limited control over their money. Bank accounts were not made in the name of the women, but the card holder, who almost always is the husband. This meant that while it was the woman who worked, her husband reaped the benefits of her earnings. Women in Chinsurah complained that their husbands kept some of the money for their own expenses, which created shortages in household expenses. On occasions when the account was made in the woman's name, she had difficulty taking time out to go to the bank to collect the money. In both Aranthangi and Chinsurah, women complained of the high transportation costs they had to incur in order to get their money. Therefore, the policy moves to reduce corruption within the MGNREGA scheme has in a sense, been short-sighted. The scheme only focuses on issues pertaining to the household level, without taking into consideration familial/gendered relations that can have an effect on female participation in the scheme as well as female earnings.

In Chinsurah, respondents had worked for 30-45 days in 2011-12 and not received payments due to the introduction of banks. The new rule introduced by the Central Government, where money would be transferred directly into the worker's bank accounts had delayed payments. Jharna, a 56-year-old, Bauri agricultural labourer said,

*"We have never received 100 days of work in the last five years. But this year I have worked for 41 days and this is the maximum I have worked in a long time. I have worked but not received the money as yet. Now the next season of work is about to start and I have not been paid for the previous set. What is the point of this work? If I had got the money, then I would have been able to buy some rice for the house. God alone knows when I will receive the money."*

Delay in payments and not knowing when the money will come has pushed female labourers like Jharna to gradually depend on landowners for work and immediate remuneration. In addition, Jharna does not have access to the money, as the bank account is in her husband's name and he will go and collect the money. Not having received payments for MGNREGA work, Jharna has to rely on loans that she accesses through landowners. Even though Jharna did not want to work as a *bandha kishen*, the failings of



MGNREGA have now drawn her into a *bandha kishen* relation, which she finds more feasible.

Respondents in Chinsurah and Aranthangi expressed apprehension about bank transfers if the money was not deposited by them but the *pradhan*, as this resulted in a loss of control over their earnings. In addition, delay in receiving payment is further triggered through the numerous processes these MGNREGA workers have to go through. These include a waiting period for receiving an account payee cheque and a delay in depositing money, which leads to delays in being able to withdraw the money (see Adhikari & Bhatia, 2010; Carswell and De Neve, 2014). Moreover, while the purpose of bank transfers is to prevent intermediaries from siphoning money, workers complained about the lack of proper rural banking facilities and the distances they had to travel to access the local banks. Structural inconsistencies, such as monetary transfers, affect both access to MGNREGA work and its benefits. Therefore, the extent to which workers can actually rely on MGNREGA for livelihood survival is affected.

This section discussed the obstacles that hindered the effectiveness of MGNREGA and the restrictions it placed on female labour in the two regions. The obstacles identified were to do with local level implementation or policy recommendations. The effectiveness of MGNREGA is also controlled through local-level power relations, seen particularly with the relationship of the rural elite with the local bureaucracy. These power relations determine employer strategies that affect labour relations, particularly with respect to tied labour.

## **6.2 Social Protection Measures, Power and Politics**

The successful implementation of MGNREGA is measured through the distribution of job cards and increase in female workers (see Box 6.1 & Box 6.2). The successful implementation of MGNREGA is attributed to an extensive and effective bureaucracy (Jeyaranjan, 2011). The bureaucratic system keeps the programme away from the local elites (Carswell & De Neve, 2014), which explains their derision towards MGNREGA work and workers. However, the local elites are not completely isolated from the entire process. Their



relationship with local bureaucracy affects the way MGNREGA work is distributed throughout the region.

In Thirasu, a majority of the workers only received 30 days of employment. The reason being that in January 2012, farmers in Thirasu marched to the Additional Central Assistance Scheme office (ACA)<sup>118</sup> to resolve the problem of labour shortage arising from MGNREGA work overlapping with agricultural wage work. The ACA, administrative department at the district level, allocates MGNREGA work for a particular village. According to Aatmanathan, the purpose of the scheme (MGNREGA) is to *“help people in the village but what the government does not realise is that it adversely affects farmers”*. Landowners have strongly averse sentiments towards MGNREGA work and consider it detrimental for their growth. Aatmanathan, along with other landowners in the region, approached the District Collector and demanded a re-scheduling of dates for MGNREGA work. The District Collector agreed to their demands and now she does not sanction any MGNREGA work during the monsoons, diverting labour back to the farms. Landowners, with their direct access to state bodies, politically manipulate the distribution of MGNREGA work to the classes of labour.

A repercussion of this move is that the number of days of work available to labourers is altered. The BDO (Block Development Office) needs to spend its required budget. With work being curtailed in Thirasu, MGNREGA work gets diverted to other villages within the block. This move might prove beneficial for labourers in other villages who receive work closer to 100 days. However, for female labourers in Thirasu, the fewer days of MGNREGA work shifts their reliance on to agricultural wage work and their dependence on landowners. Here, labourers lose out on obtaining all or close to 100 days of work, as it gets distributed and diverted to other places.

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<sup>118</sup> This scheme is now named the National Agricultural Development Programme that looks into development issues of agricultural land holding, number of fallows, the soil condition, technology utilised and that which can be used to improve production, and animal husbandry (Reported by the councillor, 2012).

In this case, the District Collector works for and with landowners to change and alter dates for MGNREGA work. The 'farmers movement', as it is referred to in the village, was made possible because the District Collector was within easy reach of these farmers through Aatmanathan's political connections. This move benefitted the landowners in Thirasu who resolved the problem of labour shortage during periods of peak labour demand. For female labourers, on the other hand, the move away from agricultural wage work gets thwarted, affecting any additional benefits they could have received from MGNREGA.

Aranthangi exhibited a tie up of the bureaucracy with the local elites. Maryam, a Pallar from Thirasu, was concerned about how MGNREGA work went to the so-called rich people, instead of coming to her or others like her. In Karaimesdu, a few Paraiyar households complained about not having received job cards because they do not maintain close links with the *pradhan*. Studies show that MGNREGA's overall success in Tamil Nadu is attributed to the bureaucracy acting independently from local elites (Carswell & De Neve, 2014). However, as evidence from the field shows, in Aranthangi MGNREGA does not work independent of the social power relations that exist in rural society. Instead periods of overlap occur where the social protection policy is drawn into the asymmetrical power relations that dominate rural society.

As observed in the case of Aranthangi, manipulations do take numerous forms. In the case of Chinsurah, this was observed through the distribution of job cards and work availability. Purnima, a 32-year-old Bauri agricultural labourer, complained of how, despite providing the *panchayat* with all the necessary details and registering herself in the *panchayat* and *tehsildars* office almost a year back, she has not yet received her card (something all new applicants, both in Madhabpur and Bardhanagar, complained about). A majority of these workers are Bauris who are still CPI (M) supporters. Purnima believes that she is targeted by the administration due to her political allegiance. Chinsurah, as in the rest of West Bengal, experienced political upheaval; the TMC removed the CPI (M) in power for 34 years. The change in political power brought along a change in political allegiance among landowners and labourers. Labourers like Purnima, who continue to be loyal to CPI (M), are

left out, or often receive state benefits last.

Shakuntala from Madhabpur had similar complaints about the *pradhan*, a TMC cadre. She believed that the *pradhan* keeps her away from receiving state benefits because he knows that she staunchly supports CPI (M) supporter. Despite having a job card, she was not allotted any work in 2011 by the labour supervisor or the *panchayat*. Exclusion from MGNREGA work leaves little choice of work for female labourers in Chinsurah. The dependence on agricultural wage work for female labourers results in labour attachment, where labourers become *bandha kishens* in order to secure jobs and avail of credit services from the landowner.

Shakuntala's story sheds light on an important aspect of political clientelism, which the TMC and CPI (M) are accused of. Not all those who demand MGNREGA work obtain it, which means that the distribution of job cards is not a process free from corruption, but dependent on building ties with the local authorities and local elites (see Dutta et al. 2012). Das's (2015) work on Cooch Bihar, West Bengal, highlights how political affiliation and extending support to the local political party resulted in labourers receiving more work. Those who belong to the opposition party, such as Shakuntala, receive less work or none at all. In Bardhanagar, Santhal households who were politically active and TMC supporters reported receiving more work in MGNREGA.

Subroto a, 28-year-old Santhal labourer, recently became a labour supervisor, which fetches him a higher wage. Subroto got this job because he is a TMC party worker. When CPI (M) was the local ruling party he rarely got more than 20 days of work, let alone work as a labour supervisor. As a labour supervisor, he now ensures that all those from his locality get work. Subroto's political alliance with the local ruling party (TMC) provided him with higher paying work where he ensures that other TMC supporters and party workers, especially those in his locality, get work. Political clientelism works in the favour of certain groups (in this case it is the Santhals of Bardhanagar) providing them with greater access to MGNREGA work and wages.

This section identified how relations between the rural elite and local bureaucracy manipulate MGNREGA implementation in Aranthangi and Chinsurah. The scheme itself is subject to relations of political clientelism, as observed in Chinsurah. This relation steers the policy away from its objective of equal welfare to all. Manipulations of the scheme and attributes of political clientelism, impacts the ability of female labourers to negotiate their contracts and the nature of labour resistance. This aspect is addressed in the following section.

#### **6.2.1 MGNREGA, an Aid to Agricultural Labour Movements?**

The instances of manipulation in Aranthangi and Chinsurah affect the implementation of social protection programmes, such as MGNREGA. The purpose behind this programme is to reduce rural labourers' dependence on agricultural wage work, reduce migration to unskilled work and reduce indebtedness that draws labourers into exploitative work. All of this is to be achieved by providing each household with 100 days of employment in a year. The number of days of work available places limits on the transformative capacity of the scheme. The comparison of Aranthangi and Chinsurah, highlights the differentiated way in which MGNREGA can bring about changes in labour relations. However, with over 53.1 percent of the population in Aranthangi relying on agricultural wage work, the dependence on landowners and agricultural wage work remains hard to diminish. In addition to this, the higher wages that accompany agricultural wage work, pushed up positively as a result of MGNREGA work, might affect the ability to repay loans, but this increase in wage does not necessarily imply that fewer loans will be taken. The cost of living and the nature and purpose of the loans are determining factors. Dependence on agricultural wage work and on the landowner maintains relations of debt (as explained in Chapters 4 and 5). Female labourers in Chinsurah faced the problem of poor implementation and men taking up MGNREGA work. To secure work, female labourers relied on debt obtainable from landowners, often drawing them into *bandha kishen* work relations.

Under a more successfully running MGNREGA in Aranthangi, how does this policy affect female agricultural wage workers, their relations of debt and labour tying? Debt is used as

mechanism to control and discipline labour (Brass, 1990; Srivastava, 1998; De Neve, 1999; Kapadia 2001). Within agricultural wage work, labourers enter relations of debt through numerous ways. MGNREGA, as observed in the field, might reduce the debt amount, but it does not do away with debt relation altogether, often due to increase in production costs and household expenses. MGNREGA does however, provide a space for female labourers to negotiate the terms and conditions of work.

Bhanumati, a 45-year-old Ambalakar woman from Thirasu, works as an agricultural labourer for an Ambalakar landowner. She currently works for this landowner to pay off her debt. Bhanumati worked for almost 55 days in 2010-11 on MGNREGA work. She worked for the landowner and carried out MGNREGA work. According to Bhanumati, the landowners remain only concerned with getting their money back and they do not care how she returns it. However, she had to negotiate the days she could do MGNREGA work, in a way striking a balance between the two jobs. Bhanumati considers MGNREGA very valuable and would not want to sacrifice that for agricultural wage work. If the landowner she has taken a loan from does not agree to her doing MGNREGA work, then she can go to another landowner and transfer the debt on to him, and pay off the previous landowner. Bhanumati continues to remain indebted, but she enters a labour tying arrangement with sufficient capacity to negotiate wages and work.

Female wage labourers, like Bhanumati, who entered labour tying arrangements reported being able to negotiate their wages, the amount of MGNREGA work they did and the amount of loan they paid off. The female labourer's ability to negotiate wages and work contracts stems from the MGNREGA policy, which provides female labourers with flexibility to repay loans. For landowners, faster repayment of loans results in a loss of power and control they have over the labour force, which often results in landowners conceding to the demand of the labourer. The relation of debt itself is necessary for landowners to try and maintain control over labour. De Neve's (1999) work on power-loom workers explains a similar debt relation, where employers do not want the labourers to repay loans so that they have some hold over the workers. As described in Bhanumati's

case, relations of debt, and labour tying arrangements are maintained, but MGNREGA has provided female labourers with a choice, which gives them the ability to walk away from agricultural contracts.

The increase of wages and bargaining capacity in Aranthangi are outcomes of MGNREGA but negotiations and transactions take place at a more individual level rather than through a much larger process of labour collectivisation. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, female labourers could negotiate work contracts through practices of everyday resistance such as foot dragging, or refuse to come to work if they did not receive wages comparable to MGNREGA wages. Labourers in the village site mentioned the absence of labour movement in the region for over 20 years. Limited presence exists of the communist party, with the MLA from Pudukkottai, at the time of survey, belonging to CPI (Communist Party of India). None of the labourers belonged to any agricultural labour union in Aranthangi. Aatmanathan<sup>119</sup> (landowner) and his nephew are the only Left party supporters in Aranthangi. However, since Aatmanathan and his nephew belong to the landed class, the issues that they raise and fight for pay very little attention to the needs of the labourers. This observation is contrary to studies carried out in the region (such as Gough, 1981) which highlight the important role played by the Communist Party in Thanjavur, which revived the labour union, extracted decent wages and set proper working hours for labourers (p.419)<sup>120</sup>. Aranthangi, a taluk which belonged to Thanjavur prior to the formation of Pudukkottai, now has no or a little remnant of this past.

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<sup>119</sup> Aatmanathan is a CPI supporter and until recently was the only CPI representative. The people in the village supported him because he was liked by them and not because they were convinced on ideological grounds. The current *pradhan* in the village was an AIADMK candidate, and had not taken any initiative to fix roads or water problems that the villagers complained about. AIADMK was quick to recognise this and approached Aatmanathan to contest elections. The party realised that he would be a good candidate. Aatmanathan was as strong CPI supporter but due to the inactivity of the party. He decided to join AIADMK. Aatmanathan's nephew is currently an active member of DYFI the youth wing of CPI (M).

<sup>120</sup> Gough's study on Thanjavur's agricultural labour union, showed the presence of Pallars and Paraiyars, often excluding poor peasants and labourers who were non- Brahmins. The constitution of the labour union resulted in rifts between different caste group, but despite these flaws, the union was able to bring about change in work contracts and incremental increases in wages (Gough, 1981).

In Chinsurah, as discussed earlier, the positive or transformative effects of MGNREGA on rural female labour is far more restricted. The mean number of days of MGNREGA work received in Chinsurah is 22.59. The village-and state-level data highlights the limited participation of women in MGNREGA. With limited number of days of work and men taking up MGNREGA work, female labourers in Chinsurah have limited choice and little with which they can negotiate with. Moreover, with men being the beneficiaries of MGNREGA work, they make all agricultural wage negotiations. Reduced access to MGNREGA work leaves women workers trying to secure jobs outside the programme. By becoming a *bandha kishen*, women workers secure their job. The ability to negotiate these labour relations rests on individual employer-employee relations. There is limited policy effect of MGNREGA on *bandha kishen* wages and work contracts. However, as a caveat, it is important to mention a process of labour collectivisation I observed in Chinsurah.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2012, agricultural labourers in Chinsurah went on strike. Labourers stopped work during the peak sowing period for paddy. The entire country at this time was reeling under the effects of delayed monsoons. One of the Bagdi female labourers described the land as dry and stiff as a *taant saree*- "*Maati ta shukiye taant hoye jachche*"<sup>121</sup>. The labourers were demanding a wage hike from Rs.50/- and 2 kilos of rice to Rs.65 and 2 kilos of rice. The strike was called at a crucial juncture during paddy transplantation. For landowners in Chinsurah, a delay in transplanting would result in increased costs of production due to extensive use of tube well irrigation or they would suffer from major crop loss. All agricultural labourers (Bagdi, Baduri, Santhal and Sadgop communities) participated in this strike.

The process of labour collectivisation in the region united all caste groups for the singular purpose of wage increase. However, the effects of such collectivisation operates in a sporadic and fragmented manner. In Madhabpur, the strike provided a space for

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<sup>121</sup> This translates as the land had dried up like *taant*. *Taant* refers to the traditional Bengal handloom weave, which when purchased is very stiff because of the starch in it.

negotiation between the landowners and labourers. The labourers wanted to increase wages to Rs.65/- and 2 kilos of rice. The strike resulted in a wage hike to Rs.60/- and 2 kilos of rice. Shakuntala, a 50-year-old Santhal agricultural labourer, reported that this happened because people came together to try and resolve the problem, and they did not concern themselves with which caste or religious group participated. A group of labourers collectively put forward these demands. According to her, the villagers have learnt how to put aside their differences and come and work together, all made possible by the CPI (M). This sentiment was expressed forcefully among Bagdis and Santhals. Shankuntala and others from her community believe that because of the CPI(M) their wages over the last 40 years increased from 50 paisa and one *ser* (950 gms approximately) of rice to Rs.60/- and 2 kilos of rice. According to Shakuntala:

*"CPI (M) has given us food, shelter, clothes and they opened schools for us. They gave us the will to come together and recognise and fight for our rights. That is how we can fight for our wages even now."*

After Shakuntala voiced her opinions about CPI (M), other respondents did the same and did not hesitate to identify themselves as CPI (M) supporters (more so after they realised that I was not a threat to them). Bauri and Santhal labourers believe that they were better off with CPI (M) in power as they had a redressal mechanism. The current *pradhan* belongs to TMC, and they believe, that he neither cares nor does he listen to anything they have to tell him. Female agricultural labourers, especially Bauri women, continue to have strong political allegiance to CPI (M), as had CPI (M) brought them together as labourers, which is why they can fight for their basic rights even in the absence of a party majority.

Labourers in Bardhanagar did not witness similar success in agricultural wage increase. Wage rates of agricultural labourers stayed at Rs.50/- and 2 kilos of rice. According to Shantilal, a 56-year-old Bauri agricultural labourer and *bargadar*, the reason behind the failure of the strike lay with reduced negotiating capacities of the labourers. When labourers demanded increased wages, employers said that they would increase the wages to Rs.75/- and 2 kilos of rice, but on the condition that the labourers could not ask for a



wage hike for the next five years. Shantilal expressed his frustration and anger at the landowners:

*"How is someone supposed to survive with this meagre sum for the next five years? Do they not see the way the prices of things are increasing? Leave aside food costs; the price of one lungi has gone up from Rs.80/- to Rs.140/- in less than six months. How are we to clothe, feed, and educate our children?"*<sup>122</sup>

Under the condition placed by the landowners, the labourers withdrew from the strike, and decided to place their demands at another time. However, no guarantee exists that the same would not happen in the future. Shantilal believes that the reason the strike did not result in a success in Bardhanagar is the shifting of allegiance from CPI (M) to TMC. The lack of backing from CPI (M), with its subsequent removal, has left agricultural labourers in a situation of trying to fight without any support. This represents one aspect of organisation in the village, the other is that TMC representatives have created a strong network of alliances amongst Santhals and Oraons in Bardhanagar but the party plays little emphasis on the working conditions of workers. The lack of emphasis on the rights of agricultural wage workers, especially female workers, is not a problem specific to TMC. The CPI (M) were heavily criticised for their focus on issues of land, which united the sharecroppers, middle and poor peasants, leaving aside agricultural labourers (Omvedt, 1978: p. 392). Moreover, CPI (M) cadres now belong to the opposition party, with no pressure from the parent body to contain strikes and mediations, which TMC cadres have to consider (see Rogaly, 1998). The change in political power in Chinsurah has merely resulted in a swapping of roles between TMC and CPI (M). The workers in Bardhanagar, who belong to TMC, were pacified and the strike was done away with.

Given the varied nature of implementation and functioning of MGNREGA, the purpose of

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<sup>122</sup> Shantilal is an ex-CPM cadre and fears that his association with the party will not let him gain access to jobs in the village. During the course of his interview, one of the landlords came to call on the neighbour. Being within earshot of the landlord, Shantilal changed his story about demanding wages. He said that what the landlords had decided on was right because as labourers demanding a wage increase every year just soured the relationship between the two. This was, when the need was great they knew that the landlords would increase their wages.

this section served to highlight the effects of MGNREGA on female labour resistance. The very nature of resistance varies in the two regions. MGNREGA was more effective in Aranthangi, where it gave female labourers the ability to make demands, something absent in Chinsurah. For women labourers in Chinsurah, labour resistance takes place at a much larger scale, and only when men and women of all caste groups collectivise.

### **6.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined one of the country's biggest social protection policies, MGNREGA, and the extent to which it has transformed labour relations and altered dependence upon agricultural wage work and landowners in Aranthangi and Chinsurah. The evidence indicates that the transformative effects of MGNREGA are varied. In Aranthangi, a majority of workers who access MGNREGA belong to the Most Backward Caste (MBC) category and Dalits, within which a majority of the workers are women.

Availability of MGNREGA work presented female workers with a choice between agricultural wage work and MGNREGA work. This choice created a platform upon which female labourers could negotiate their labour contract. MGNREGA wages, as noted in other studies on Tamil Nadu (Jeyaranjan, 2011; Heyer, 2012), affected an increase in agricultural wages. In addition to wages, benefits that labourers received in MGNREGA were now demanded in agricultural wage work, such as '*tiffin*'. The improved bargaining capacities and wages in Aranthangi, were observed in labour tying arrangements as well. MGNREGA might not have done away with relations of debt and the resulting labour tying arrangements, but it did assist in the process of repayment of loans. This was done as MGNREGA created an additional source of income for female labourers. The ability to repay loans alters power relations between the landowner and labourer (De Neve, 1999). The change in power relations allows female wage labourers who are tied to particular landowners, whether for a short or a long duration, to negotiate for comparatively higher wages, and better working conditions and duration of work. For example, female labourers who enter labour tying arrangements restrict themselves to agriculturally related tasks and work only during the day for the landowners. MGNREGA wages also allowed for

individualised forms of labour resistance to take place, a phenomenon, usually witnessed among women labourers in their labour groups (see Kapadia, 1996).

Chinsurah presented a different picture, with weaker distribution of MGNREGA work in the villages. The distribution of job cards does not match the availability of work in the region. In addition, the dearth of non-farm work and movement of men out of agricultural wage work has resulted in men becoming the primary beneficiaries of MGNREGA work in Chinsurah. With fewer women involved in MGNREGA, the effects on female agricultural wages is limited, affecting their ability to negotiate wages. The dependence on agricultural wage work and relations of debt draw female labourers into *bandha kishen* relations. Unlike in Aranthangi, MGNREGA in Chinsurah did not have any effect on female labour resistance. Despite the drawback in Chinsurah, MGNREGA still presented itself as an alternative to agricultural wage work.

The local elite/landowners in Aranthangi and Chinsurah responded to MGNREGA work as having a negative effect on agricultural growth. In Aranthangi, in particular, landowners complained of labour shortage, labourers 'becoming lazy' and not coming to work if wages are not equal to or higher than MGNREGA wages. The landowners are not however, quiet bystanders to these demands made by the labourers. The landowners, especially in Aranthangi, through relations with the local bureaucracy managed to alter the number of days of work the village received, so that it did not coincide with harvest work. However, in this process MGNREGA work was diverted to other regions and labourers in Aranthangi received fewer days of work. Manipulation of this kind does not help in reducing the dependence of female labourers on agricultural wage work and its associated debts.

Chinsurah witnessed manipulations in MGNREGA with the distribution of job cards. A significant part of this distribution was determined through political allegiance, with TMC supporters receiving first preference. Shakuntala believed that her association with the CPI (M) is the reason for not receiving MGNREGA work.

The two cases highlighted in this chapter show that MGNREGA and its transformative

effects are far more successful in Aranthangi than in Chinsurah. The lower caste female labourers, who were at the beck and call of landowners, can now negotiate work contracts (Carswell & De Neve, 2014), even those in labour tying arrangements.

One reason for the successful implementation of MGNREGA in Aranthangi is the state government's commitment to an effectively running social policy programme. Heyer's (2012), study on Tamil Nadu, shows how policies such as PDS, housing schemes and SHGs have brought about improvements in the lives of especially Dalit women. The two ruling parties, DMK and AIADMK have constantly worked towards improving and increasing provisions to the people, and MGNREGA is one such important other social provision (Carswell & De Neve, 2014).

MGNREGA was implemented with the primary goal of reducing poverty. In its attempts to do so, MGNREGA has moved beyond a 'technical bureaucratic issue', transforming itself into a platform for protests and campaigning (Lerche, 2010; p.75). The result is a number of indirect outcomes of increasing wages and the ability to negotiate work contracts, whether they are casual or tied labour contracts. As discussed through this chapter the intended effects of these are partial in nature. MGNREGA operates in contexts shaped by social power relations that limit its capacities to alter rural dependencies decisively.

While MGNREGA has altered the position of labourers in the rural labour market, it has had little effect on their relationship to the state (Carswell & De Neve, 2014). A closer look at state policies, and how it works for the benefit of the rural elite, highlights how macro-level policies and relations between the rural elite and local bureaucracy affect labour tying arrangements among women.

## Chapter 7: Bureaucracy, the State and the Ruling Classes

Shoumik, a 56-year-old Sadgop *bargadar* from Bardhanagar was worried that he would not get any returns from his aubergine plantations this year. To make up for the loss, both he and his wife would have to take up agricultural wage work. Shoumik does not like working as an agricultural labourer and blamed the *pradhan* of the village for his state. According to Shoumik, *"if the pradhan had ensured that PDS (Public Distribution System) functions properly, my family would not be in this state of hunger, and indebted to the landowner for work, food and loans. He made so many promises during elections but we have received nothing, not even a decent number of days of MGNREGA work!"*

Kannusami, a 38-year-old Ambalakar, labourer from Karaimeedu, did not voice similar complaints about his *pradhan*, Thiruvan. Thiruvan is considered a good *pradhan* because he has effectively distributed MGNREGA cards in the village, keeps the villagers informed about PDS supplies and even informs Kannusami's wife, who had leased in land from him, about the subsidies available in the market. Kannusami's only complaint was that the ration shops should be kept open for longer hours so that labourers do not lose out on a day of work to procure grains.

Presented here are two different cases of how the *panchayat* and *pradhan* operate in the two village sites. In both cases, the efficiency of the *pradhan* was important for the proper implementation of policies and schemes, and the disbursal of benefits. The role of the *pradhan* in permitting access to social welfare schemes places a tremendous amount of power in his hands. Kannusami's wife, a *kuthagai* tenant, was able to get information about available subsidies because Thiruvan had passed it on to her. The *pradhan* in Bardhanagar did not pass on any such information to his tenants. The implementation of rules-based welfare programmes is conditioned by clientelistic/patronage relationships (see McCartney & Roy, 2015). The clientelistic/patronage relations are determined through relations of land, labour and credit. Kannusami's wife relies on the land and information provided by Thiruvan. The lack of access to state benefits makes Shoumik and his wife

dependent on landowners for agricultural wage work. The relation of the classes of labour with agricultural wage work, landowners and local bureaucracy highlight altering labour market relations and at the same time underline unchanging relations of labour and the state (Carswell & De Neve, 2014). Encounters with the state and even access to certain state benefits follow certain channels: local political representatives from similar caste groups or the local elite.

This chapter explores the relationship of the local bureaucracy with the rural elite and labourers in determining labour/employer strategies. With particular emphasis on PDS and MSP (Minimum Support Price), this chapter looks at the extent to which implementation of welfare policies is determined through networks maintained by the local bureaucracy and rural elite. This chapter argues how these networks generate relations of obligation and privilege that draw female labourers in particular, into tied relations, either through labour or tenancy, generating debts and dependency. I address PDS and MSP policies in this chapter as my research showed these as particularly useful ways of engaging local encounters with the state in the field sites.

This chapter addresses the questions raised in the following manner. Section 7.1 explores the ways in which PDS operates in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, the extent to which labourers' dependency on landowners is challenged, and how relations of debt (a reason for tied labour arrangements) are transformed. A comparison of Aranthangi and Chinsurah hints at a reduction in dependence on landowners with a more efficiently running PDS. Section 7.2 examines the state provision of minimum support prices and how different agrarian classes access this state policy. MSP and PDS operate in very different ways in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, not because of the way the policy is formulated but the manner in which it percolates down to the classes of labour. Section 7.3 uncovers the different patterns of encounters that the classes of labour and local elites have with the state. Within the context of pro-poor policies, this section examines the effects these encounters have on the labour-landowner relationship.

### **7.1 Public Distribution System- Ensuring Food Security**

Agricultural Price Policy tried to resolve the drought and famine conditions that hit India in the mid-1960s. There were three primary areas of focus: providing food grains for the Public Distribution System (PDS), ensuring reasonable prices for the consumer and producer both, and the adoption of new technology (Deshpande, 2008). The public distribution system was introduced in India in the 1960s and has been regularly modified since. There are different phases in the history of PDS- a) in the 1960s PDS was first implemented as a selective rationing scheme, catering to particular cities. This phase was marked by import of food grains to support PDS; b) the second phase was marked by the country reeling under the effects of a food crisis. During this period PDS became a universal food distribution programme; c) the third phase is the post-liberalisation period where PDS was distributed in a targeted manner to the income-poor population (Swaminathan, 2008: p. 3). The implementation of Targeted PDS (TPDS) focused only on certain income-poor groups, a categorisation based on the poverty line. This led to a large section of the poor being left out of this scheme, along with a complete downsizing of the amount of grains received by the state (Khera, 2011: p. 10). TPDS identified two income categories: Above Poverty Line (APL) and Below Poverty Line (BPL). In 2001, a third category was introduced called Antodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), which identified the poorest of the poor households. Some states tried to rectify the problem of a large number of the poor being left out, and transformed their TPDS structure to a universal PDS model (Swaminathan, 2008; Khera, 2011). Today, Tamil Nadu is the only state that has a properly functioning universal PDS model while other southern states have a quasi-universal model (Vydhanathan & Radhakrishnan, 2010; Khera, 2011). West Bengal still follows the TPDS structure (PDS website: <http://www.pdsportal.nic.in>).

Khera (2011) in her study on PDS categorises the Indian states according to the performance of a properly functioning PDS. These are functioning states, reforming states and languishing states. Tamil Nadu falls in the category of a functioning state and West Bengal in the category of a languishing state (p. 12). As noticed in the case of MGNREGA

in Chapter 6, implementation of PDS in Tamil Nadu was also far more successful than in West Bengal. By doing away with the APL and BPL categories, the state ensured greater accessibility to benefits, yielding positive effects on the livelihoods of the classes of labour.

#### **7.1.1 PDS within a Functioning State**

In Tamil Nadu, as per the government guidelines, no household is supposed to be more than 2 kms from a shop. This guideline has resulted in numerous fair price shops, where each of the FPSs have an average of 800 card holders (Swaminathan, 2008). The well-structured PDS in Tamil Nadu was spurred by the failure of the rationing facilities laid out by the Congress government (Venkatsubramanian, 2006). After the 1967 elections, when the Congress was defeated by DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), subsequent improvements were made to fair price shops (Venkatsubramanian, 2006).

AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) came to power in 1977, and food policy played a pivotal role<sup>123</sup>. During the two consecutive terms of AIADMK, the number of fair price shops rose from 9,300 in 1977 to 17,536 in 1982 (Venkatsubramanian, 2006). Despite losing the elections in 1996, AIADMK increased the amount of free rice that could be obtained from the ration shops from 12 to 20 kilos, and reduced prices of all commodities sold in FPSs. When DMK came to power, it could not reverse this policy. However, this resulted in rising costs for the state government in procuring food grains under the new PDS scheme (Venkatsubramanian, 2006)<sup>124</sup>.

Tamil Nadu has one of the most well managed Public Distribution Systems (Vydhanathan

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<sup>123</sup> The governor in 1977 addressed the goals of food policy: "The objective of the government will be to ensure a remunerative price for the grower and reasonable price for the consumer by eliminating the scope for exploitation of the middle men. The policy that will be followed by the government will neither be completely producer-oriented nor consumer-oriented, but essentially people oriented and will aim at reconciling the interest of the producer and consumer. It will be my governments endeavour to build up a network of retail points in the public sector including the co-operative sector to ensure equitable distribution of essential commodities at reasonable prices. We propose to extend the scheme of fair price shops so that each of about 16,000 revenue villages will have at least one Fair Price Shop in the village itself" (Venkatsubramanian, 2006: p. 273).

<sup>124</sup> Studies show that political supremacy in this region clearly rests on the ability to successfully implement PDS (Widlund, 2000; Carswell & De Neve, 2014).



& Radhakrishnan, 2010). A look at the NSS data on household consumption of rice (2007) shows that 88.95 percent of the rural population in Tamil Nadu consume rice from FPSs (with 78.90 percent of all households consuming rice from FPS). The consumption of wheat from FPSs is lower at 40.15 percent and 30.17 percent respectively. A well-managed PDS was observed in Karaiedu and Thirasu (Aranthangi) as well. The FPS in both villages were open for 6 hours when stocks would come in. Information about prices of commodities was always updated and put on display outside the shop to ensure that everyone in the village knew when and what products would arrive as well as their prices (Figure 18). In Karaiedu, the day I went to meet the *pradhan* Thiruvan, he was in a meeting with other members of the *panchayat* and the FPS dealer discussing the list of goods that the village was expecting to receive the following month. Thiruvan is extremely proud of the way PDS operates in his village and he puts in his share of the effort to ensure that the FPS operate properly. Thiruvan's involvement in the FPS is because it is managed by the *panchayat*. This is a feature unique to Tamil Nadu, where there are no private run FPSs. Instead, around 96 percent of FPSs are run by the co-operative sector and the remaining FPSs across the state are managed by *panchayats* and SHGs (Swaminathan, 2008).

பொருள்	அளவு	விலை
பச்சரிசி	1 கிலோ	இலவசம்
பழுங்கரிசி அரிசி	"	இலவசம்
த-த-குய்	"	இலவசம்
சர்க்கரை	"	13-50
ஜீரகாது	"	7-50
ஹாண்ட் ஸாப்ப்	1 கிலோ	12-00
உப்பு	1 கிலோ	3-50
பீசு	100 கிராம்	13-00
துவரம் பருப்பு	1 கிலோ	30-00
உளுந்தம் பருப்பு	"	30-00
பாம்பாயில்	1 கிலோ	25-00
பீசு காய்க்காய்	1 கிலோ	11-00

Figure 18: Writing on the wall: The front wall of the ration shop in Karaiedu specifying quantities of item sold and the price of goods.

Source: Author's own image, Karaiedu, Aranthangi, November, 2011.

\*The first three items are three varieties of rice that are free.

Respondents in Karaiedu and Thirasu, across all castes and classes, had no complaints

about the way PDS operated in the villages. Villagers praised the current AIADMK government for providing them with 20 kilos of rice free of cost. Provision of free rice comes as a boon to the classes of labour, since open market price for the same quality of rice is Rs.19/- per kilo (see Heyer, 2012; p. 101). A reduction in household expenses on food, helps the classes of labour with savings or even diversion of money for other purposes such as their children's education. In addition to free rice, card holders can buy 3 kilos of sugar, 5 litres of kerosene, common rice is sold at a rate of Rs.2/- per kilo and Grade A rice is sold at Rs.3.75/- (the market rate for this variety of rice is Rs.40/-). By providing universal PDS and subsidised rates of goods, the Tamil Nadu state government ensures higher consumption of food grains (such as rice), especially among the Dalits (Heyer, 2012; Basu & Das, 2014).

A properly functioning PDS comes with the promise of reducing poverty and along with this, it establishes a network of political allegiance among the poor in the villages. Selvi, a 50-year-old Christian Pallar woman, who has five children, has a ration card and she gets 15 kilos of rice free.

*"Initially, I used to get ten kilos of rice, now because they (panchayat) can see that my children are growing up; they are giving me 15 kilos of rice."*

The 15 kilos of rice allocated to Selvi helped her negotiate the number of days she could work, which helps her to free up her labour and to be less dependent on agricultural wage work, for example, taking work in the sugar factory when available. Selvi is entitled to 20 kilos of free rice, however, she deems this allotment of 15 kilos of rice to her as the *panchayats* attempt of redressal for her daily livelihood struggles.

The involvement of the *panchayat* did affect her party affiliations. Selvi supports the current *pradhan* who is a DMK party member. However, in the 2011 assembly elections she voted for AIADMK, as a vote for change. Selvi, during her interview, kept cursing her decision of choosing AIADMK, because the change in government brought along with it an increase in the prices of commodities, especially transport, which has affected her mobility and increased household expenses. In the next round of elections, she wants to vote for

DMK because she believes that DMK will tend to her needs, just as the *pradhan* who also supports her financially (i.e. the *pradhan* provides Selvi with work) has done.

In providing a well-functioning PDS and wage work, Selvi feels obliged to work for Thiruvan (*pradhan*), especially in light of the fact that she voted for AIADMK. The *pradhan* ensures a properly functioning PDS, and in Selvi's case he provides her with work. The *pradhan* is perceived as someone who is just and benevolent. In addition, the *pradhan's* affiliation to the DMK party affects Selvi's party affiliation. Therefore, Selvi's sense of obligation and duty towards the *pradhan*, coupled with him giving her work, secures not only her vote but her loyalty towards DMK<sup>125</sup>. Moreover, the relations of obligation internalise attributes of loyalty and discipline of her labour.

Despite being considered a taboo, Selvi works for Thiruvan as a tied labour for short periods of time. Selvi does not consider this labour relation exploitative or demeaning, as it was in the case of traditional *pannaiyal* relations. Selvi's case highlights a few aspects, 1) despite not receiving the complete quota of 20 kilos, the increase in rice helped Selvi free up her labour days; 2) the increase in PDS affected her perception of the institution and Thiruvan, who ensures the efficient functioning of this institution; 3) the positive impact of PDS reflects on Selvi's work allegiance, and 4) this determines her political allegiance. Work and political allegiance work hand in hand to secure Selvi's labour, loyalty, and on occasions even ties her labour to the Thiruvan.

Respondents constantly praised the efficiently running PDS in Karaimesu and Thirasu. However, the PDS is not without problems. One of the biggest problems faced by PDS is that of diversion or 'leakage' of crops (Himanshu & Sen, 2011; Khera, 2011). One of the primary reasons for diversion identified by Khera (2011) is the difference in open market and PDS prices; very often dealers are known to sell PDS rice or wheat in the open market. While I did not collect information on the ways leakages to PDS take place, I did ask

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<sup>125</sup> The social relationship with the *pradhan* at the ground level, in a way marks out the entry of particular political parties (Corbridge et al. 2005).

respondents the amount of goods they received from FPSs, and the extent this helped them free up their labour.

PDS card holders in Karaimesu and Thirasu were allocated 20 kilos of free rice, but not all families received this amount. Additionally, despite being allocated 5 litres of kerosene a month, none of the respondents received more than 3 litres. While Selvi registered an increase in the amount of rice she received, others complained of low stock.

Manjula, a 32-year-old Paraiyar agricultural wage worker, borrowed money from a Thevar landowner to make up for shortages in PDS supply and now works for the landowner at reduced wages (Rs.60/- per day). Manjula has three children, and her husband is a *maistry* (builder) in Pudukkottai. She gets 15 kilos of rice instead of 20, 2 litres of kerosene instead of 5 and 1 kg of sugar instead of 2. Manjula did not blame the ration shop for the reduced stock, instead she put the blame on herself. The time constraints she faced due to work and familial responsibilities did not allow her to collect the ration goods on time.

*"It is not the fault of the ration shop; they can only give what they have. If they have the stocks they are willing to give the right amount. The grains arrive anytime from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of every month, if we want an entire quota then we have to get there early. On most occasions, this is not possible with work and time constraints."*

As Manjula mentioned, most of the food grains and other commodities such as kerosene, *tuar daal* and *urad daal* (pulses) are sold out by the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month. The shortage of food grains and oil from FPSs results in Manjula relying on food purchased in the open market. The higher cost of food increases her debt, and its repayment draws her into debt relations. Manjula's loan from the landowner is short-term, where she is not tied for long periods of time. She reported borrowing money approximately 6 times in a year (due to shortages in food), from a private moneylender and a landowner. Money borrowed from a private money lender is paid off with the help of her husband's income that comes in intermittently. However, she needs to constantly ask her husband for this money. There are times when he cannot send the money due to lack of funds. There were occasions when Manjula's husband refused to send money because she took a loan without his permission.

In such situations the repayment of loans falls completely on Manjula. In times like these Manjula turns to the landowner for work and for money to repay the money lender. The loan from the private money lender is transferred on to the landowner. Money borrowed from the landowner is repaid through her labour time. Therefore, Manjula, enters multiple tied labour contracts with the landowner through relations of debt. The repayment of loans takes place through labour time, particularly female labour time.

For Manjula, the most regular and probably the only encounter with the state, is through the ration shop. She does not question why she receives reduced quantities of grains and commodities from the ration shop, and in doing so she does not question the state. The information that she receives is that there is a lack of stock. In her understanding, the state has made provisions of 20 kilos of rice but this cannot be fulfilled due to a lack of grains. She and many like her are sent home with the promise that they will receive the balance amount once stocks arrive. However, over the past six to seven months (prior to time of interview in 2012) she had not received any balance amount from the ration shops. In order to overcome these shortages, Manjula relies on existing relations with the Thevar landowner, which she can fall back on when required, thereby affecting her dependence on the landowner and agricultural wage work.

Vidya, an Ambalakar agricultural wage worker reported a similar story. She receives free rice under PDS, which has helped bring down her household expenses.

*"If I get free rice it means that I am spending less on food to feed my family. The money I earn can be spent on other things like school fees, books, etc. I can even have savings so that I don't have to keep borrowing money for small things."*

Vidya recognises that in providing free rice to families, the PDS can bring about substantial improvement in her financial capacities. However, she had a similar complaint as Manjula, about limited stock. When she does not receive the full quantity of ration goods, her household expenses increase, especially since all her four children go to a private school to study. At the time of the survey, Vidya had taken a loan of Rs.1800/- from a motorbike *vaddikaran* in order to meet her increased household expenses. She had bought 35 kilos of

rice at a rate Rs.22/- per kilo. The loan from the motorbike *vaddikaran* has accumulated interest and Vidya is paying this off through agricultural wage work and remittances she receives from her husband. Vidya has entered a relation of debt but not directly with the landowner she works for. She maintains good work relations with the landowner and relies on these wages to pay off the loan. Though not directly tied, Vidya's dependence on agricultural wage work does not allow her to free her labour. Vidya does not confine herself to the motorbike *vaddikaran* and on occasions has borrowed money from a landowner. Like Manjula, she enters multiple short duration labour tying contracts in a year to pay off her loan, especially when taken from a landowner.

Female respondents in Aranthangi spoke of shortages in PDS stock, and not receiving sufficient information about it. To combat this, the Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation (TNCSC) has introduced a system of disseminating information to customers about stock in their local FPS through an SMS (Short Message Service). This process is said to keep the customer informed about stocks beforehand and improve transparency in food distribution (Kumar, 2009). However, this scheme had not arrived in either in Karaiedu or Thirasu. Respondents believed that once this scheme would be put in place their villages, the problem of receiving incomplete stock would go away.

From the discussion above and as observed in other studies, it is clear that in Tamil Nadu PDS is well implemented (Khera, 2011; Heyer, 2012), and has provided agricultural labourers with the opportunity to free up their labour days (see Heyer, 2012). However, amid this success story, there are flaws in the operation of PDS which create/enhance debt relations among female agricultural labourers. These debt relations, as discussed in Chapter 5, increase dependence on agricultural wage work and landowners. The labour tying arrangements in Aranthangi are however, not long-term, and female labourers are only tied till the loan amount is repaid. While the labour relation itself is exploitative, the fact that it is short term and based on the ability to repay the loan enhances the bargaining capacity of the female labourers (De Neve, 2014). However, these interactions are shaped by relations of obligation, privileges and loyalty that internalise docility and self-discipline.

The following section looks at the effects of PDS in Chinsurah, which presents a drastically different picture than Aranthangi.

#### **7.1.2 Ambiguous Efficiency of the Food and Supplies Department in Chinsurah**

According to Khera's (2011) classification, West Bengal is a 'languishing state'. In this category, the performance of PDS is very poor and has high rates of diversion, without showing any improvement over time. Unlike Tamil Nadu, West Bengal follows TPDS, which was introduced to provide BPL cardholders more affordable rates of subsidised food (Khera, 2011; Balani, 2013). According to the NSS report (2007) on household consumption of grains from PDS in rural West Bengal, 22.50 percent of households who belonged to the bottom 30 percent, and 12.80 of the total population consumed rice from FPSs. Wheat consumption was relatively higher with 24.53 percent of households who belonged to the bottom 30 percent consumed wheat, with 14.42 percent of the total population, procuring wheat from FPSs. These figures, when compared to Tamil Nadu are extremely low, with barely a quarter of the rural population in West Bengal accessing PDS.

In the case of West Bengal one of the central reasons for this is diversion of grains from PDS (Bhattacharya & Rana, 2008; Khera, 2011). The Department of Food and Supplies blames the high rates of diversion of FPS goods on the nexus between the dealers and local *panchayat*, which was believed to have been strengthened during CPI (M)'s reign (Bhattacharya & Rana, 2008). The current Food and Supply Minister of West Bengal, Jyotipriya Mullick, put forward a solution, to do away with individual dealerships and engage self-help groups and co-operatives to run the ration shops (The Statesman, 2012). This move would result in reduced state accountability and function. The TMC in the process absolves itself of basic state responsibility, without addressing the problem of poorly functioning ration shops<sup>126</sup>.

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<sup>126</sup> Another reason for reduced grains in the PDS stems from lack of proper storage facilities. In 2012, food stocks had increased to 80 million tonnes creating massive storage shortage. Unlike in previous years, in order to avoid the problem of rotting grains, the Central Government had decided to provide an additional 5

Apart from claims of diversion, another problem that plagues West Bengal's PDS is the high cost of grains, though still lower than open market prices. In Chinsurah, 10 kilos of Annapurna rice (low grade) is provided free of cost, the price of rice for BPL and AAY card holders is Rs.2/- per kilo, wheat for AAY is Rs.2/- per kilo and for BPL is Rs.5/- per kilo. The PDS also allots the amount families can receive, for example AAY card holders get one kilo per week of rice, BPL and AAY families receive only 500 gms of *massor dal* per month at a price of Rs.42/- per kilo. Compared to Aranthangi, families in Chinsurah not only pay more for grains bought in FPS but they receive smaller quantities as well.

The ration shop in Madhabpur and Bardhanagar is open only for two hours in a day from 8 am to 10 am. On most occasions it is shut, even on days it is scheduled to be open. While carrying out field work in Madhabpur, I walked by the ration shop every day to get to the Santhal and Bagdi *basti* (locality). In the one month of working in this area I saw the FPS open on only three days. The reason often provided by the dealers is a lack of stock. However, what is noteworthy in this case is that the FPS is open only for those two hours when labourers are working in the fields<sup>127</sup>. For the workers to avail of FPS grains, they would have to forego one day (or maybe more, if they are asked to return another day) of work. The PDS in Chinsurah, is riddled with numerous problems of poor stock, small quotas, and leakages of grains. As observed in the case of Thiruvan, where he as the *pradhan*, and other *panchayat* members were actively monitoring the PDS, there is no form of social monitoring in Madhabpur or Bardhanagar, an issue that plagues the entire state (Bhattacharya & Rana, 2008).

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million tonnes of food grains for those families living below poverty line (Parsai, 2012a)

<sup>127</sup> Labourers work in the fields from 7 am to 2:30 pm on an average.





**Figure 19: Ration Shop in Madhabpur that opens for two hours from 8am to 10 am**

*Source: Author's own, Madhabpur, Chinsurah, May, 2012. Unlike in Karaimedu, the ration shop has no information on stock and price of commodities. Information about FPS goods are written in rosters and maintained by the FPS dealer.*

Agricultural labourers counter the poor provisions in stock by taking wage payments in both cash and kind (a system which is done away with in Aranthangi). Female agricultural labourers in Chinsurah very often take short-term loans from landowners in kind, which is usually rice. They prefer loans in kind, as this means that they can get food to their families immediately (as discussed in Chapter 5). Moreover, female agricultural labourers do not find cash loans (for the purpose of food) helpful, as they would have to purchase grains at a higher market price, and bringing home cash would often result in having to give a portion of it to their husbands. Among Santhals, Bauris and Bagdis, storing rice is beneficial for the family and is often used to barter goods and give loans to neighbours, as mentioned by Supriya, a Santhal agricultural labourer (see Chapter 5). 'Rice loans' taken from landowners are paid off through labour time, and those from neighbours through cash. Due to the frequency with which these loans are taken, female agricultural labourers in Chinsurah prefer to remain as *bandha kishens* to have greater/easy access to these loans.

Apart from lack of stock in FPSs, marginal landholders and landless labourers in Chinsurah reported problems associated with their ration cards. With the government revising the APL and BPL categories, many Bauris and Bagdis were issued APL cards. They want to

revert back to BPL cards as it is very difficult for them to purchase food grains at the market price, and what they receive from the ration shops is not sufficient. The higher cost of food (in FPSs and the open market) results in an increase in household expenditure. For Bauri and Bagdi women, this situation results in increased dependence on landowners for loans (taken in kind) and on agricultural wage work.

The picture is not very different for those who are BPL card holders. Shanti Bauri (55-year-old agricultural labourer in Madhabpur) has a family of seven members and has three BPL ration cards. With the BPL card, she receives rice at Rs.2/- per kilo. However, the total amount received is not sufficient for her family. She is supposed to receive a total of 9 kilos of rice per month but actually receives only 3 kilos. She is also supposed to get 5 kilos of wheat per person at the rate of Rs.14/- per kilo but she and other family members are turned away on grounds of insufficient stock. On average, Shanti's family receives merely one kilo or even 500 grams per person (a total of 3.5 to 7 kilos per month). The only option available for survival is to take payment in kind and borrow either grains or money from the landowner. She borrows grains from Shafiq and works for him on his land, to combat the rising cost of living.

*"There are no savings. How can I have any saving? For ration (grains) I spend Rs.30/- every week. For clothes I need to spend money. Now-a-days one saree alone costs Rs.250/-. Food is a necessity and so are clothes."*

Shanti carries out both agricultural and housework for Shafiq. Her financial dependence on Shafiq gives him greater control over her labour. Within this indebted relation, Shanti works as a *bandha kishen*, not only to pay off the loan but to also do away with the uncertainty associated with access to food via PDS. Female agricultural wage workers like Shanti believe that this is the best way for them to secure their livelihoods, as this provides assurances of a constant supply of food for them and their family.

As mentioned above, agricultural labourers in Chinsurah complained of being wrongfully excluded from the BPL category. Bhattacharya and Rana (2008) refer to this as 'exclusion errors', where almost 30% of the APL population in West Bengal come under this category

(p. 68). This error further highlights the corruption prevalent in PDS in West Bengal. In Bardhanagar, Smriti Rai, a 34-year-old Bauri female agricultural labourer, said that it made no sense to her that she had an APL ration card and her father-in-law a BPL ration card. She was informed that in order to change this she had to deposit some money and provide some documents. She applied for a change in ration card three months back, and has not received it as yet. People at the *panchayat* office as well as the FPS dealer are now asking her to give them more money to expedite the matter. Mitra (2007), in her report on North 24 Parganas district in West Bengal, observed similar episodes of FPS dealers extorting money from villagers to make ration cards. Smriti blames the village *pradhan* for her current situation. With the increasing cost of food, and her husband's irregular remittances, she has borrowed both money and grains from a landowner. Though not in a typical *bandha kishen* relationship, Smriti remains tied (for short durations) to the landowner, so that she can pay off these loans.

The *pradhan* of the village is a Brahmin landlord. He has both social and political power but his non-participation in the matter pushes her away from approaching him. His inefficiency raises questions on his political legitimacy. Her encounters with the state are through corrupt officials and a non-participating *pradhan*. These encounters have forced her to think about bringing the CPI (M) back to power. Smriti and her neighbours agreed that-

*"The CPI (M) should come back. Didi's (TMC) government should not come back, forget about paribartan<sup>128</sup>, we can't even get our ration cards."*

The inefficiency of the *pradhan* and his reluctance to take on any role, forces the villagers to reconsider their decision of electing a TMC led government. This is unlike what was observed in Aranthangi, where the *pradhan*'s efficiency altered Selvi's political allegiance.

Rupa, a 23-year-old Bauri agricultural labourer, had a similar story, where she too did not receive a ration card. Rupa firmly believes that the *pradhan*, who is a TMC (Trinamool

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<sup>128</sup> *Paribartan* translates to change in Bengali. This was an important issue in Mamata Banerjee's election campaign.

Congress) supporter and member, is intentionally delaying the process, as she and her family members are CPI (M) supporters. She also reported that other Bauri members who worked for the *pradhan* had applied for ration cards at the same time as her and had already received their cards while she is still waiting. In order to overcome food shortages, Rupa borrows grains and money from landowners. Rupa's story clearly highlights the alignment of village politics and party politics. The *pradhan's* influence in the matter creates conditions where female labourers like Rupa secure their livelihood through insecure means.

Observations from Chinsurah highlight the lack of any social monitoring (Bhattacharya & Rana, 2008) from the *pradhan* and the *panchayat*. A reason for the disinterest of the *panchayat* and other local elites is attributed to TPDS, where the beneficiaries of the scheme are only those who live below the poverty line. This has made the rest of the population, especially the local elites indifferent to any of the problems associated with TPDS (Bhattacharya & Rana, 2008). Under these conditions, making PDS universal, as done in Tamil Nadu, would ensure participation of people across all social classes and proper implementation of the scheme.

Respondents in Aranthangi and Chinsurah complained about shortages in food supply from FPSs. With better implementation of PDS in Aranthangi, respondents could free up their labour days, and take loans that were short term in nature. In fact, the proper provision of food grains from PDS provided female agricultural labourers with the opportunity to free up their labour days. In Chinsurah, the low quantity provided, and the irregular supply created pressures on household expenses, which resulted in female agricultural labourers entering labour tying arrangements that last for longer durations because of the numerous loans taken from landowners. The problem with low or no stock is associated with varying degrees of corruption between the local *panchayat* and dealers and the state's ability to procure grains. State procurement of grains take place according to the Minimum Support Price (MSP) policy. The following section looks at the way MSPs operate in Aranthangi and Chinsurah and their effects on tied labour arrangements.

## 7.2 State Allotted Subsidies and Technologies: Minimum Support Price

One state policy which protects farmers big and small, is the Minimum Support Price (MSP). The MSP concerns itself with the procurement of food grains where the government has not set a limit or target but kept it open-ended (Balani, 2013). MSP does not consider the cost of production alone, but the risks involved in cultivation, changes in input prices, trends in markets prices, demand and supply of commodities, cost of living index, general price index and fluctuation of prices in international markets (Deshpande, 2008: p. 95). Based on the manner in which MSP operates, the country is divided into three regions. The first is Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana, where MSP operates in an effective manner without causing much distress to farmers. The second division comprises of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, and West Bengal, where the time-lag is extremely large, making the policy ineffective. The third category includes Tamil Nadu, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh where MSP works effectively only for a certain region or a group of farmers or for certain crops (Deshpande, 2008). West Bengal, as observed in the case of NREGA and PDS has a poorly operating MSP system in place compared to Tamil Nadu.

The primary crop for procurement in West Bengal as well as Tamil Nadu is rice, followed by potatoes and pulses respectively. Despite differences in the way MSP operates across the two states, between 2008 and 2012, the cost of farm inputs increased tremendously. There was a 30 per cent increase in the cost of fertilisers, 8 per cent in pesticides, 20 per cent in farm power, 34 percent in diesel oil for tractors and 44 percent in diesel oil for pump sets. Food inflation rose from 10.49 percent to 10.74 percent between April 2012 and May 2012. This led the Central Government to increase the MSP for paddy from Rs.1080/- in the previous year to Rs.1250/- per quintal for common variety. The MSP for *urad daal* was raised by Rs.1000/- to Rs.4300/- (Parsai, 2012b). This move, while encouraging farmers to sell to the government in order to cover input costs, will lead to a further hike in inflation (Parsai, 2012a). Raising the MSP is often criticised as a move to appease the farm lobby, and this move adds to the already increasing cost of food. In addition to inflation, the rising

cost of food grains is because of the introduction of private buyers such as Reliance and Mahindra (Bhattacharya & Rana, 2008). The introduction of private buyers results in reduced procurement from the Food Corporation of India, repercussions of which are felt on farmers' livelihoods and the amount of cereal and grains that are made available to FPSs.

MSP as a state policy has the ability to shape the market, i.e. the actions of the state determine access to goods and grains sold in the market (Corbridge, et al. 2005). By shaping the market, state policies benefit those who are already market oriented (the petty capitalist and medium farmers) and have marketable surplus (Brass, 1994). The result is growing inequalities between larger landowners and marginal farmers due to limited access to state prices and subsidies. In Aranthangi and Chinsurah, marginal farmers and tenants were able to access state procurement prices through networks with larger landowners.

In Karaimesu and Thirasu many of the landless labourers cultivate land on lease (as discussed in Chapter 4). Twenty-eight respondents spoke of leasing land from larger landowners and none of them had access to subsidised farm inputs. These cultivators had to sell their produce to private traders in order to try and pay off rising debts. This creates a situation where the cost of production increases but return from the yield is at a lower value than that stipulated under MSP.

In Aranthangi, a majority of Ambalakar, Paraiyar and Pallar women lease land from the richer Ambalakar and Thevar households. Their ability to sell their produce in government mills is governed by the information that they receive. Information that lies with the *pradhan* is easily accessible to larger landowners in the village, however, these channels of information almost never percolate down to the marginal farmers. Information channels usually follow kinship relations and at times party connections. None of the respondents in Aranthangi reported receiving information through political channels. However, it cannot go unnoticed that those respondents who did receive information had similar

political party allegiances<sup>129</sup>. This relation is suggestive of the network of local political parties with the local elite, along with their endeavour to maintain political power and loyalty.

The lack of flow of information about government procurement mills excludes a large section of the classes of labour and particularly female tenants. Female tenants in Aranthangi want to reduce their dependency on landowners, and turn to private traders for the sale of their crops. This affects the amount of information female tenants receive from landowners as the private sellers make the most of the situation where their mobility makes it easier for female cultivators to sell their produce to them. Under such an arrangement women cultivators do not have to worry about transportation costs but do receive higher prices for their grains, making it difficult to increase profits (as discussed in Chapter 4). The control of private traders over female cultivators in particular in Aranthangi, diminishes any access to state controlled MSPs.

Sreelatha, a 49-year-old Christian Pallar (case discussed in Chapter 4), relies on the private trader to purchase rice from her. Selling grains to the private trader is important for Sreelatha as she sees this as a mechanism of reducing dependence on the Thevar landowner. She is dependent on the landowner for land but does not want to increase her dependence any further with the landowner controlling her income from the sale of grains. However, cultivators like Sreelatha are caught in a web, where they sell grains at lower rates to the private trader, which does not help in freeing themselves from multiple relations of debt easily. There is growing debt with the private moneylender, which is then paid off through loans from the landowner and repayment through labour time. Sreelatha might not work as an agricultural labour for the same landowner from whom she leases land, but directly or indirectly she forges relations of debt with her employer, private trader and lessor.

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<sup>129</sup> In Aranthangi, respondents who received information about government mills were DMK supporters and respondents in Chinsurah who sold grains in government mills were AIADMK supporters.

The poor channels of information were observed in Chinsurah as well, where the large landowners who had “connections” with the local bureaucracy (Block Development Officers), received information about when government mills were going to be set up. For example, Shafiq (male petty capitalist) from Madhabpur and Ramesh (male medium farmer) from Bardhanagar, knew the Block Development Officer (BDO). For Shafiq it was through KVC (Krishi Vigyan Centre) and for Ramesh, the BDO was his brother-in-law. Shafiq and Ramesh both reported sharing information about when government mills would be set up, to other farmers in their villages. However, on closer observation, this information was usually received by family, friends, and occasionally a *bargadar*. The information was occasionally passed on to female *theke* tenants, who also worked as *bandha kishens*.

In the case of Chinsurah, the flow of information is delineated through kinship, caste and labour relations. Unlike Aranthangi, female cultivators do not sell their produce to private traders; all sales take place via the landowner (who on occasion is also the trader), or their husbands would sell it to private traders. Female cultivators do not have direct control over the sale of their produce. A majority of female *theke* tenants obtain land through the *bandha kishen* relation, which makes them dependent on the landowner for land, wage labour and credit. Female *theke* tenants indirectly access government mills through the landowners they work for.

As discussed earlier, information regarding when government mills are purchasing grains almost never percolates down to sharecroppers and *theke* tenants (male). These tenants sell food grains to the next available private buyer at lower prices, often making it difficult for these tenants to break even and come out of their debt. Recognizing this, the West Bengal Government (under CPI (M) rule) established Large-Sized Multi-Purpose Co-operative Societies (LAMPS) to rescue local workers from exploitation by private traders (Mazumdar, 1989). These societies are meant to work in the interests of the subaltern classes and to transform hegemony. However, since this is a project from above and not the ground level, it is fraught with numerous bureaucratic problems (Mazumdar, 1989).



Farmers in Aranthangi and Chinsurah acknowledge that MSP, as a state policy offers them higher rates for grains and vegetables, however, these are not without problems. Apart from not receiving information, those who could sell their grains at government mills complained of the time lag in receiving payments. Farmers could not immediately sell their produce in government mills but were allotted specific days when this could be done. The delay in sales created a problem of storage. When the crops were sold, they were given cheques, and the time taken to obtain the cheques and cash them, further increased the time lag (in Chinsurah, this process took almost 45 days). Under such conditions, small and marginal farmers, especially in Chinsurah, prefer to sell their produce directly in the open market through private buyers. This situation also reduces the amount the government is able to procure for FPSs.

Another factor leading to a decline in procurement quantities by the government is the entry of large corporates such as Reliance and Godrej, who now directly buy stock from the farmers. The move to promote agri-business has resulted in a decline in procurement targets set by the state government, which further increases shortages in FPSs (Bhattacharya & Rana, 2008). In the case of Chinsurah, any decline in the procurement grains for PDS does not directly affect the large and medium landowners, as they are now offered competitive market prices for the goods. Instead the classes of labour are affected; those who rely on goods from fair price shops for their daily survival. With the growing unpredictability of MSPs and FPSs, [female] labourers in Chinsurah look for means to secure their livelihood, often resulting in them taking up work as *bandha kishens*.

The universal PDS model in Aranthangi on the other hand, ensured involvement of all caste and class groups in villages, which ensured relatively better access to government mills, and a properly functioning FPS. In comparison to Chinsurah, female agricultural labourers in Aranthangi are less dependent on landowners and on agricultural wage work with better implementation of welfare policies.

This section looked into the ways in which PDS and MSP operate in the two regions and

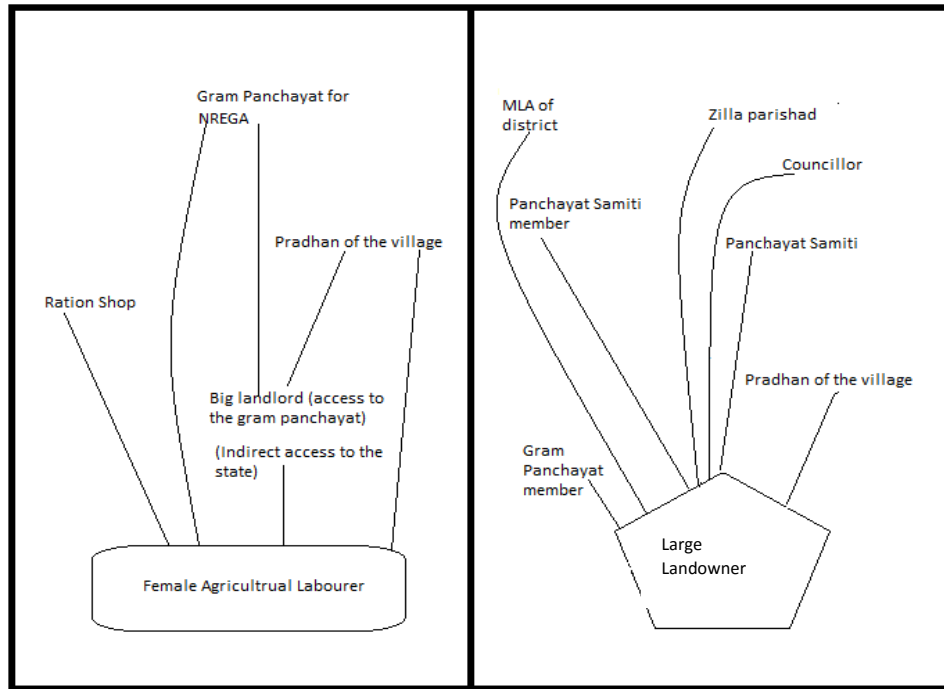
how they generate relations of dependence, privilege and obligation. The relations result in women entering (either voluntarily or through coercion) tied labour arrangements to counter growing debts.

The following section deals more closely with the relationship of the local bureaucracy with the rural elite. These relations affect the classes of labour and their encounters with the state, which affects labour-landowner relationships.

### **7.3 Encounters with the State and Labour Dependencies**

PDS and MSP are two large scale welfare based programmes introduced by the state. However, as seen particularly in the case of Chinsurah, these policies succumb to patronage politics and corruption, where contrary to the policy, the benefits are not received by the entire target population. The relationship of the local elites with the state and the manner in which the labourers encounter the state are very different. As discussions in the previous sections highlighted, different agrarian classes interact with the state (through local bureaucracy and policies) in various ways. These encounters and interactions with the state are often seen to be driven through what Harriss-White (2003) refers to as 'everyday forms of communalism' (p.75). Under these 'everyday forms of communalism', the actual beneficiaries are determined through relations of class, caste, gender and religion (Harriss-White, 2003). For example, petty capitalists who belong to a higher caste have greater access to bank loans or government mills than a female agricultural labourer who is a Dalit or belongs to any other lower caste.

There are different 'geographies of the state' formed through different interactions. Drawing from my observations and interactions with respondents in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, I map out different encounters with state apparatuses between a female agricultural labourer who belongs to the classes of labour, and a petty capitalist. (The mapping system follows Corbridge et al's (2005) work on Midnapore in West Bengal.)



Source: Fieldwork, Aranthanai and Chinsurah November, 2011 to September, 2012

**Figure 20: Encounters with the State: Female Agricultural Labourer and Large Landowner**

The figure above draws from evidences mentioned in Chapter 4, 5 and 6. As the figure highlights, large landowners have direct routes to the local government/bureaucracy and interactions increase for those who are already in political positions. For example, Thiruvan in Karaimesdu is a large landowner and the *pradhan* of the village. His interactions are not restricted to the *panchayat* but extend to other local government bodies such as the BDO, MLA office, etc. Rural female labourers interact with the *panchayat*, FPSs and very recently government banks because of MGNREGA. Interactions of female agricultural labourer (or the classes of labour in general) with the bureaucracy takes place fundamentally through the local elite, their husbands, or male members of their household. In both cases, interactions with the state are initiated through men. Interactions with, and dependency on the local elites help maintain the asymmetrical power relations in rural society.

The power relations are complex and not unidirectional, i.e. effort and allegiance are not drawn only from the classes of labour to local elites. The local elites also need to maintain good relations to retain power, as these undergo transformation with the introduction of welfare schemes that work in favour of the classes of labour. The efforts to maintain the balance of power is often done through interpersonal relationships.

In Aranthangi, the AIADMK government has set up co-operatives for farmers to improve access to subsidised goods. However, the *tehsildar* determines the effective functioning of these co-operatives. According to Aatmanathan from Thirasu, the *tehsildar* registered him as a *periya vevasaey* (large landowner) rather than a *siru vevasaey* (small landowner). Consequently, he did not receive the free fertiliser sprinkler that was distributed to *siru* and *kuru* (marginal) *vevasaey*s. Aatmanathan reported that he could have used his position as a councillor to get his name shifted to the *siru vevasaey* list and possibly get the *tehsildar* transferred. However, he decided against it and did not change his name from the list. Aatmanathan uses his current predicament to maintain power between him and his labourers. The villagers envision Aatmanathan as a fair and just person, and it is of primary importance to him that he maintains this image in order to hold on to his political and economic power within the village.

Labourers who work for Aatmanathan are provided with both physical security and job security. He employs approximately 25 labourers out of which 5 lease in land from him, and in a year around 10 labourers borrow money from him. Due to Aatmanathan's political connections he receives information about subsidies which he uses to his benefit and passes on to a few of his *kuthagai* tenants. Through these relations Aatmanathan controls and manages his labour and tenants, extracting work and allegiance. For Aatmanathan, this is a point of accumulation of labour that lies outside the economic understanding of capital. Labourers who work for Aatmanathan in exclusionary labour arrangements avail of benefits, such as easy access to land, work and subsidies. Aatmanathan's relationship with his labourers and tenants is one of reciprocity, which also helps maintain relations of debt.

Saraswati, one of the Ambalakar labourers who work for Aatmanathan does not consider herself to be a tied labourer (or more specifically a *pannaiyal*). Instead, she works in what she understands to be a mutually beneficial relationship that provides her access to loans and land for cultivation. Saraswati repays the loans, and does not feel tied down to Aatmanathan. She considers Aatmanathan to be a just employer, and through this longstanding relation is able to access benefits. In 2011, Saraswati had borrowed money from Aatmanathan on three different occasions and was able to repay all the loans through her labour time. Despite the benefits extended to Saraswati, the relationship itself places limits on her labour time and she could not go and work for another employer. Aatmanathan is her link to the state and state benefits. However, despite this, even though she does not consider herself tied, she is in fact, tied in certain respects, and certainly undervalued and constrained.

In Chinsurah, Shafiq evoked similar sentiments among labourers who worked for him. Shafiq was not an elected member of the *gram sabha* but the sense of growing distrust expressed by labourers in the village against the *pradhan* led them to place their trust in Shafiq, who was envisioned as a benevolent and just employer. Shafiq is a large landowner and employs over 60 labourers in a *fasli* year. He has connections with the Krishi Vigyan Centre, and BDO, and is one of the few landowners who has a *Kisan Credit Card*. Shafiq has ten female *bandha kishens* who work for him. Along with this he maintains good relations with other female agricultural labourers and is an important source of interest free consumption loans for many of his labourers. Shafiq's position in the village and his image made villagers turn to him to resolve their problems and obtain certain benefits and privileges. The labourer's dependence on Shafiq moves beyond interest-free consumption loans and extends to everyday decisions.

Shafiq is able to control the large number of labourers and *bandha kishens* who work for him through the economic and social positions he occupies that generates consent and ensures a pliant workforce. One of the ways in which Shafiq accomplishes this is through the extension of loans but refers to it as 'helping the labourers'. Shafiq helps his labourers

and other villagers when they need money for a medical emergency, need to get their ration cards, and he has helped some of his labourers by providing school fees for their children, and so on. The 'help' encompasses daily loans required by labourers and assistance in other matters as well. Moreover, during the most important festival of Durga Puja, Shafiq ensures that he provides gifts to his labourers, and in doing so, becomes more approachable to them. As De Neve (1999) points out in the case of Tamil Nadu, by extending loans and ensuring that the labourer is in debt, Shafiq is able to control the workforce, or at least able to maintain the asymmetrical power relations. The process of control operates alongside aspects of compassion that further strengthens bonds of trust with his labourers. Like Aatmanathan, Shafiq is the link to state benefits for female labourers. Through this link the labourer is drawn into relations of obligation, loyalty and labour tying.

Both cases in Aranthangi and Chinsurah highlight that landowners do not follow traditional patron-client relationships, but are able to draw out services through various mechanisms of control (which also include attributes of compassion). Moreover, Shafiq and Aatmanathan act as important points of contact/ mediators between the state and the classes of labour, strengthening relations of dependency and power. The positions of power are however, not set in stone but are in a process of constant flux. For example, in Aranthangi, the successful implementation of welfare schemes frees up labour time and increases the ability of female labourers to pay back loans. This keeps the relations of power in a constant state of flux, with the landowners constantly looking for ways to control labour. In Chinsurah, the poor operation of MGNREGA, PDS and MSP makes dependence on the landowner for work and loans a common occurrence, where female agricultural labourers in particular enter the *bandha kishen* relations, at times voluntarily, to secure their livelihood.

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed how pro-poor state policies and the interactions of the local bureaucracy with the landed elite create conditions of dependency and labour tying.

Female labour in particular, are drawn into the dependent relations through interlocked factor markets, and more importantly through relations of power that determine encounters with the state. This chapter shows that in the Indian context, with growing importance on pro-poor policies, power relations and dependencies are maintained through the relationship between the rural elite and the local bureaucracy.

De Neve and Carswell (2011), highlights how political parties maintain supremacy through the proper implementation of broad based, development focussed agendas (p.205). The success, particularly witnessed in Tamil Nadu, is due to the shift from patronage/clientelistic policies to broad based application of policies (McCartney & Roy, 2015). PDS in Aranthangi follows a universal distribution model, where larger quantities of grains are provided free to ration card holders compared to Chinsurah which continues to follow a targeted approach and charges relatively higher prices for grains. That said, the state governments in Aranthangi and Chinsurah are both working with the intent of poverty alleviation.

Despite the larger development agendas set by the state to alleviate poverty, the policies themselves are completely enmeshed within local power relations and local party politics (Adhikari & Bhatia, 2010; De Neve & Carswell, 2011). The alignment of village level and caste politics affects the way policies are implemented. For example, Rupa had not received a ration card and blames this on the *pradhan's* inefficiency. The *pradhan's* inefficiency, while a common complaint among all respondents, is further accentuated for Rupa and similar cases like hers, as they are all CPI (M) supporters. In Chinsurah the relationship between local village level politics and party politics resulted in opposition party supporters not receiving ration cards or receiving erroneous ones. In Aranthangi, with political party supremacy resting on the performance of development policies, the *pradhans* work in close contact with FPS dealers to ensure the proper distribution of food, minimising the effects of corruption. This was observed in the case of Selvi, who had decided that she wanted to vote for DMK in the next assembly elections.

A similar set of linkages was observed in the case of MSPs. Access to MSP and government procurement is dependent upon the networks and connections that farmers have with the *pradhan* and *panchayat samiti*. In Aranthangi and Chinsurah, the landowners, especially those who had connections with the *pradhan*, were able to gain access to government procurement agencies. The passing on of information takes place along lines of kinship ties and political relations.

Selling grains at the government MSP rate has its advantages for farmers. However, female cultivators in Aranthangi preferred using private traders. The private traders reduced the burden of transportation, and payments (less than the market rate) were received promptly. In addition to this, female tenants in Aranthangi do not want to rely on landowners more than they have to. These female tenants rely on landowners for land, and at times credit, and they do not want landowners to control their earnings as well. Any relation of debt entered into with the landowner is repaid immediately. The female tenant, is however indirectly dependent on the landowner for land. The indebted relation with the private trader makes it difficult to break away from dependencies created through tenancy relations. In Chinsurah, female cultivators are not in the forefront of tenancy arrangements and those who have obtained land through tenancy arrangements were able to do so through the *bandha kishen* relationship. Under such conditions female tenants depend on landowners for land, work and credit.

The differentiated way in which PDS and MSP operate, both in Aranthangi and Chinsurah, resulted in creation of debt, albeit in varying proportions. Female labourers and cultivators devise numerous ways to work around the exploitation that accompanies relations of debt. As observed in Aranthangi, the ability of female tenants to accomplish this rests on the success of welfare policies and schemes. Female labourers in Aranthangi are able to put up stronger fronts of resistance than in Chinsurah due to the proper implementation of welfare schemes like PDS and MGNREGA, which creates tensions in the landowner-labourer relationship (see De Neve & Carswell, 2011). The landowner devises ways to combat these tensions and secure labour. The landowner maintains power



and control over the labourer through relations of debt, obligations, and connections with the bureaucracy. Landowners, in the process of making themselves more approachable and portraying themselves as fair and just employers, secure labour loyalties, iron out the tensions and maintain debt relations. For those who belong to the classes of labour, maintaining good work relations is important, where in addition to providing access to work, land and credit, landowners provide indirect access to state apparatuses. All these networks of relations emphasise the importance of the nexus between labourer, landowner/local elite and bureaucracy.

As discussed in this chapter, the successful implementation of PDS in Aranthangi has improved the bargaining capacity of female labourers. At the same time local elites and the bureaucracy remain silent on the high rates of corruption in PDS observed in Chinsurah, or the inaccessibility to MSP and government procurement agencies for the classes of labour. The silence of political parties and a general disengagement of the local elites is suggestive of state complicity. Despite the implementation of welfare-based schemes, their success is dependent on local level politics and power relations. Therefore, while the focus of the state has shifted to pro-poor politics, it is the political clientelism and relations of patronage operating at the ground level that determine the transformative capacity and effectiveness of welfare policies. These conditions affect relations of debt, dependency upon the landowner, relations which result in the persistence of labour tying.

## Conclusion

The stated objective of this thesis was to investigate the persistence of labour tying arrangements in agriculture in India. This study refutes the binary understanding of the semi-feudal and deproletarianization thesis. In this research, labour tying arrangements are not viewed as pre-capitalist relations, and while these labour relations might not be the most preferred labour arrangement within capitalism, it is identified as an important mechanism to generate surplus. I argue that the presence of labour tying arrangements needs to be understood through multi-scalar power relations that are contingent upon gendered class power and state politics. These power relations constitute what I refer to as a 'regime of labour tying' which is characterised by cheap [female] labour, subsumed under debt and found working in poorly paid jobs.

I have identified these labour relations across four villages in the southern state of India in Tamil Nadu and the eastern state of West Bengal<sup>130</sup>. The aim was to compare how multi-scalar power relations operating in the two regions, under distinct and diverse socio-political conditions, create labour tying arrangements. The study identifies tied labourers as those who are indebted to a landowner/employer, primarily through loans in cash and kind. Within these relations labourers work to repay loans, and therefore, wages received are lower than casual daily wage employment. Consequently, it restricts their ability to repay loans which extends the period they remain tied. The focus in this research was on female tied labour in agriculture. In light of the increasing feminisation of the agricultural workforce, female labourers are left with the burden of breadwinning and securing the survival of their families (see Lerche, 2010). Within this context it becomes important to identify how rural female labourers constitute the lowest position in the wage hierarchy with little chance of upliftment.

In this concluding chapter I discuss the key findings of this research and highlight contributions made in this study, its limitations and potential areas of further research.

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<sup>130</sup> Refer to Figure 1 for Tamil Nadu and Figure 2 for West Bengal.

## Addressing the Question

Studies that examine the changing nature of unfree (tied) labour relations in India, often identify how their numbers are on a decline (Bardhan and Rudra, 1981; Heyer, 2000; Jodhka, 2014). Bardhan (1983) in his study on West Bengal observed that a decline in agrestic bonded labour was accompanied by an increase in labour tying arrangements, strengthened through capitalist development. Tied labour arrangements can range from long-term attachment to short-term seasonal contracts, and therefore, their presence should not be dismissed as a relic of semi-feudalism (Bardhan, 1983, 2001). However, Bardhan (1983) explains the presence of tied labour in agriculture as an outcome of imperfect markets, where these contracts are prevalent in tight labour markets. Rudra (1992) steps away from Bardhan's economism, and attributes the presence of tied labour arrangements to being a product of social control. Studies by Ramachandran (1991) and Athreya et al. (1990) show how local power relations extort labour servitude and generate unfreedom. Breman's (1976; 1996; 2007) work in South Gujarat highlights the transformations and adaptations of bonded labour, where the labour contracts are now monetised in nature. Brass (1990), explains unfree labour relations as an outcome of capitalist development, but rejects Bardhan and Rudra's notions of voluntarism. Brass (1990) draws on relations of debt bondage as a mechanism to cheapen and discipline the workforce, and suppress the formation of class-consciousness.

These different studies highlight the complexity and diversity of rural labour arrangements within agrarian capitalism. However, their explanations still succumb to the dualism of capitalism versus pre-capitalism, and that these relations are an outcome of labour tight and/or labour slack seasons. In order to move away from this dualism, I use Hart's (1986a) theoretical framework which identifies the presence of labour tying arrangements as an outcome of multi-scalar power relations, how they work at the village level, and the effects and interactions with wider macro-economic and political processes (such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme). I identify macro-level processes

through state welfare policies and how their implementation and transformative effects on labour relations is contingent upon interactions of the ruling elite with the local bureaucracy. Using this theoretical framework helps answer my central question- how and through what mechanisms do labour tying arrangements persist?

I have explored this question through Bernstein's category of classes of labour, with emphasis on rural female labour. The classes of labour is a dynamic category, where class formation is conditioned through non-class attributes such as gender, caste, and kinship. Using the category of classes of labour draws the analysis away from reductionist methods of class identification, such as ownership of land. This is important as it recognizes that labour is extremely mobile, engaging in a range of activities and occupying different production relations within agrarian neo-liberalism.

I have found in this study that labour tying arrangements emerge out of a diverse range of relationships: the labour and employer, the nature of interlocked contracts and the role of state policies, all of which shape labour and employer strategies. In using Bernstein and Hart, my research identifies that rural female labour enter into insecure and oppressive labour tying relations, conditioned through relations of power at both the micro and macro level. I noted instances where tied labour under different circumstances operated as untied (or so called free labour), ascribing a kind of fluidity between these labour relations. The fluidity and persistence of this labour relation is therefore, an intrinsic part of capitalist development in agriculture, resulting in what I refer to as a regime of labour tying.

To understand these processes, I conducted field work across two states in India. I chose a total of four villages- Karaimedu and Thirasu in Aranthangi<sup>131</sup>, Tamil Nadu and Bardhanagar and Madhabpur in Chinsurah<sup>132</sup>, West Bengal. The data collection methods were carried out in two phases. The first phase was a household level village survey where a total of 685 households were covered in Aranthangi and 462 households in Chinsurah. The second phase of the fieldwork consisted of semi-structured interviews, across

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<sup>131</sup> Refer to Figures 4 and 5.

<sup>132</sup> Refer to Figures 11 and 12.

different classes. In Aranthangi, I interviewed 15 large landowners, 4 medium landowners, and 42 respondents who belong to the classes of labour. In Chinsurah, I interviewed similar number of people- 14 large landowners, 5 medium landowners, and 44 from the classes of labour.

From the data collected in these two field sites on tied labour relations, I identify three domains of transactions through which labour tying is forged. These are identified as tenancy relations, credit relations and interactions with macro-level process (observed through state policies). These three domains constitute my empirical chapters in this thesis. The following sections are organised as per the main empirical chapters, discussing the key findings of this research and placing labour tying within the larger political economy debate to point at the contributions thus made.

### **Key Findings: Female Labour Tying and Interlocking Transactions**

Labour tying arrangements identified in Aranthangi (Tamil Nadu) and Chinsurah (West Bengal) are very different. Female labourers in Aranthangi are tied for shorter periods of time in an agricultural year, lasting only up to the repayment of the loan. If the labourer makes arrangements for the money, she ceases to be a tied labourer upon repayment of the loan. The shorter durations imply that a labourer can be tied multiple times in a year depending on the frequency of loans she takes. This system of labour tying is very different from the traditional *pannaiyal* relations that existed in the region. The traditional *pannaiyal* relation, also an outcome of loans, kept the labourer tied for longer durations of time. Respondents reported that the period of tying could last an average of five to twelve years and at times even an entire lifetime. Moreover, it was usually men who entered such relations and women accompanied their husbands as unpaid family labour (see Heyer, 2000).

Only female labourers in this region become tied labourers. Most male labourers consider agricultural wage work degrading due to the low wages and the oppressive conditions of work, and therefore, migrate out in search for higher paid non-agricultural work. Very few

female labourers are currently tied to landowners for longer durations. Those who were tied were repaying loans that their husbands had taken, who have now moved out of agriculture all together. This phenomenon is similar to observations made by da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) in Andhra Pradesh, where male labourers experience freedom from tied labour at the cost of female labour (also see Kapadia and Lerche, 1999).

In Chinsurah the predominant tied labour relation identified was *bandha kishen*. The *bandha kishen* relation is different from the traditional *krishani* system that existed. The *krishani* was an indebted male labourer who was also a *bargadar*. He cultivated land and carried out agricultural wage work for the landowner. The *krishani* remained indebted for life, where it was not only his labour but also that of his family which was appropriated. The *bandha kishen* relation identified in Chinsurah was predominantly female. Entry into such relations did not result in the appropriation of male labour from their families. Male workers, as in Aranthangi carried out non-agricultural work, were *bargadars*, and if in agriculture, restricted themselves to higher paid male activities.

Female *bandha kishens* belonged exclusively to the Bagdi (SC), Bauri (SC) and Santhal (ST) communities. Unlike in *krishani*, *bandha kishens* were not given land for cultivation (on most occasions), since farming is not considered a female activity in the region. However, access to land for the purpose of cultivation for female labourers was ensured through the *bandha kishen* relation. The period of tying in a *bandha kishen* relation depends on the ability of the female labourer to repay the loan, which she usually does through labour time. Unlike in Aranthangi, where female tied labourers tried to restrict their activity to agricultural wage work, *bandha kishens*, carry out agricultural wage work as well domestic chores for the landowner (which is often unpaid). *Bandha kishens* in Chinsurah identify this labour relation to be beneficial as it provides them with job security and access to loans- both essential for the survival of the classes of labour.

Apart from *bandha kishens*, female labourers in Chinsurah were tied for shorter durations as well. These female labourers borrowed everyday consumption loans from landowners and repaid this through labour time. The shorter periods of tying were identified among

female labourers who would migrate out for work, or had received more MGNREGA work in a particular year, which helped increase their household income. These loans were taken to cover any immediate shortage. However, multiple occupations are not something that is available every year and, there are times when these very same women become *bandha kishens* in order to secure their survival.

As is the case with female tied labourers in Aranthangi, the burden of debt and responsibility of repayment of the loan lies with the woman. While male members engage in higher paid non-agricultural work, their contribution to household expenditures remains limited. The precariousness of work has created individualized and contractualised relations of labour tying. The following section deals with tenancy patterns and the creation of tied labour relations

### **Tenancy**

Labour tying in both districts—Aranthangi and Chinsurah—was identified through relations of privileges and obligations that generate debt. The first set of relations are identified through tenancy cultivation among rural female labour. Tenancy in both regions is considered a lucrative option for larger and medium landowners. One of the mechanisms to ensure surplus is through tenancy that generates relations of debt and creates dependency upon land and the landowner that reinforces asymmetrical power relations at the village level.

In Aranthangi, the predominant tenancy pattern is *kuthagai* – a tenancy pattern engaging women. Within the region, Pallars (SC), Paraiyars (SC) and Ambalakars (MBC) entered such tenancy relations. Land was leased from the larger landowners, mainly Thevars (BC) and Ambalakars. Tenancy cultivation for the classes of labour is considered as a process of social upliftment – a move away from agricultural wage work which is deemed exploitative. However, access to land for the purpose of cultivation is determined through familial relations with the landowner, often established through generational ties with the landowning family.

Female tenants have access to land through these familial ties. In the case of Philomena, as discussed in Chapter 4, tenancy relations are used to repay loans. The loan was taken by Philomena's husband. However, with her husband moving out of agriculture, the responsibility of repayment of the loan falls on Philomena. Even though she wants to remain a casual daily wage earner, the familial relations restrict her mobility, forcing her to become a tenant farmer. The transfer of loans onto the female labourer is a common practice in the region, where debt keeps the women dependent upon and tied to the landowner. Da Corta and Venkateshwalru (1999) identify a similar practice in Andhra Pradesh, and refer to this process as 'tied harvest'.

While tenancy is viewed as a mechanism to improve household income, there is a continuous requirement of loans for tenant farmers to successfully cultivate their land. Women who belonged to the classes of labour borrowed from numerous sources including the landowner. In Aranthangi, despite men migrating out to higher paid jobs, it was found that they made limited contribution towards payment of individual loans taken by women. Therefore, female labourers were constantly looking for alternate sources of credit as they did not want to tie themselves down to a particular landowner and hence took loans from private traders and money lenders. The private traders are flexible with their loans. However, the inability to repay the loans places restriction of the female tenant farmers to move out of agriculture. Tenancy therefore, does not reduce dependency on land and hence the landowner. Such asymmetrical power relations create obligations towards the landowner, who can extract surplus through land and labour.

Tenancy cultivation comes with the obligation of carrying out agricultural wage work for the landowner. Even though female tenant farmers do not want engage with agricultural wage work, they still need to carry out this work to access land- the interlocking of land and labour relations. Therefore, these female tenant farmers become labourers in disguise [similar to observations made by da Corta and Venkateshwarlu (1999) and Garikipati (2009) in Andhra Pradesh and Rudra (1982) in West Bengal]. These relations place limits on their (female labour) ability to look for other work or move out of agriculture altogether.



Chinsurah displayed a different gendered division of work. Unlike in Aranthangi, there are no formally recognizable female tenants in the region. Farming is not considered a female activity, and the tenants identified in this region were primarily men. Within the region, tenancy is not a common practice among the classes of labour, where only 4.76 per cent of STs and 2.16 per cent of SCs lease land from the total sample. Agricultural labourers within this region, particularly male labourers, want to move out of agriculture and more specifically, out of sharecropping. The two important tenancy patterns observed in Chinsurah are *bhaage* and *theeke*. Unlike in Aranthangi, land is not rented out for an entire year. Landowners cultivate rice and usually give their land on *bhaage* for potato and *theeke* for vegetables. Both the *bhaag chaasi* (farmer) and the *theeke* tenant require frequent loans for cultivation. The male tenants who were seen to borrow money from the landowners, repaid the loan in kind (harvest), or with their labour and that of their wives. In Chinsurah, landowners extracted loyalty from the male and female labourer through these loans and access to land.

Female labourers in Chinsurah operate not only as unpaid farmers but as tenant farmers in guise, an arrangement made possible through the *bandha kishen* relationship. The labour relation that keeps the female labourer tied to the landowner extracts certain privileges. The *bandha kishen* is given access to land and loans for the purpose of cultivation. Loans required for the purpose of cultivation are taken from the landowner. As a result, this increases the overall loan and burden of debt that the *bandha kishen* repays through labour time and harvest crops (kind). This entire process keeps the *bandha kishen* tied to the landowner for longer periods of time. These relations place numerous constraints on her labour time and on her ability to move out and look for better paid work. Moreover, in a context of limited work options for female labourers, *bandha kishen* emerges as a means to secure employment.

As discussed, the two regions display different kinds of labour relations. Interestingly, in Chinsurah, the ability to enter tenancy relations is conditioned through the *bandha kishen* relation. In Aranthangi, women enter tenancy relations and consider this to be a positive

move away from agricultural wage employment. However, the female tenants are drawn into debt relations in order to cultivate land, where repayment takes place through their labour time. Female labourers consider short term labour tying as one of the conducive mechanisms of loan repayment. While tenancy cultivation, as I witnessed in Aranthangi, provides alternate employment avenues, it does not necessarily result in greater freedom of choice for female labourers. Once drawn into tenancy cultivation, the debts generated from these relations makes it difficult for female labourers to move out of tenancy cultivation with much ease.

### **Credit**

Credit relations in Aranthangi and Chinsurah need to be understood through the much larger policy changes in rural credit that has taken place with neo-liberalism. Liberalisation policies implemented in the country resulted in a change in the rural banking sector (Chavan, 2007). The state cut back rural credit and was providing land to the marginalized at the same time. The paradox of the situation cannot be more apparent, as these farmers began to rely on informal credit in order to cultivate land, owing to increasing inaccessibility to banks. The loan transactions I identified in the two regions are differentiated along lines of gender, caste and class.

Different sources of borrowing vary along social lines, which is observed in both Aranthangi and Chinsurah. The state has set up a three tiered rural credit structure. These rural cooperatives provide short and long term loans for farmers and supply farm inputs such as fertilizers at subsidized rates. In addition to this, the Central government has introduced the *Kisan* Credit Card to help farmers access loans with greater ease. Despite these provisions, access to rural credit remains confined to a handful of the rural elite, occasionally filtering down to medium farmers and very rarely small farmers. Access to formal credit is usually determined through farmers knowing 'someone' in the banks. For smaller farmers, this takes place via the rural elite. The fragmented access to credit heightens the asymmetrical power relations, and the manifestations of these are witnessed among informal credit relations.

In Aranthangi, a large number of the respondents rely on money lenders, followed by private traders. The landowner is always the last choice for loans as labourers do not want to replicate the traditional *pannaiyal* labour relation that labourers have fought hard to exit from. One of the common informal sources of credit are the motorbike *vaddikkarans* (money lender) and pawn brokers. These informal sources offer credit at very high interest rates. While this can be a deterrent for the labourers, Paraiyars and Ambalakars prefer borrowing money from them as it provides an avenue to reduce dependence upon the landowner (see Guerin et al. 2012). However, the usurious rates of interest of the private money lenders and the frequent requirement of loans among the classes of labour does not decrease the dependence on landowners.

Dependence on informal sources of rural credit varies in Chinsurah from Aranthangi. A majority of the respondents preferred going to landowners to avail everyday consumption loans compared to private money lenders. Female labourers borrowed money from landowners, and responsibility of repayment of loans often lay with the woman of the household. In order to have easier access to loans, these women decided to become *bandha kishens*, where they carried out agricultural wage work and unpaid domestic work for the landowner.

As in Aranthangi, the responsibility of repayment of loans in Chinsurah lay with the woman of the household. Women in Chinsurah complained about how their husbands would not work, but would take a portion of their income (usually spent on alcohol). The female labourer's limited control of her earnings has resulted in dependence on agricultural wage work for survival. Female labourers in Chinsurah have tried to regain control over their earnings by continuing to take a part of their wage in kind. Moreover, the everyday loans that they take are usually in kind (rice), unless money is required for a specific purpose. Taking loans in kind is preferred as it protects these women from the vagaries of the market and from their husbands' usurpation. However, in the process these loans tie the female labour to either short-term tied labour arrangements or *bandha kishen* relations.

A disproportionate burden of loan repayment falls on the shoulders women workers. Even though involvement in Self-Help Groups (SHG) and micro-finance networks attempted to alleviate poverty and reduce dependence on agricultural wage work, these institutions could not dislocate the deeply ingrained power networks in society (Sengupta, 2013; Guerin et al., 2015). In Aranthangi, women who borrowed money from SHGs, did so mainly for the purpose of consumption (see Sengupta, 2013). In Chinsurah, on the other hand, female labourers were not a part of the local SHG, and thus they depended on landowners, private money lenders and neighbours.

Both Aranthangi and Chinsurah displayed dependence on varying sources of credit. Female labourers in both regions enter tied labour relations due to individual loans or loans that were taken by male members of their household. The familial and gendered relations placed the burden of work and debt on these women. The cyclical manner in which debt operates in the lives of these women results in women receiving lower pay within tied labour relations, and further places limits on their ability to repay loans. These women were not, however, passive recipients within credit transactions but were actively negotiating their work relations. The negotiating capacities of these women are also shaped by the implementation of state-led social welfare programmes. The following section discusses this in greater detail, highlighting how interactions with the rural elite and macro political and economic forces affects not only implementation of these policies but also the bargaining capacity of the female labourer.

### **State Policies and Social Welfare**

The thesis examined the impact of one of the country's biggest social protection policies, the MGNREGA. The evidence in this thesis points towards the differentiated way in which MGNREGA was implemented in the two regions and the transformative impact it had on the livelihoods of those who belong to the classes of labour.

In Aranthangi, MGNREGA job cards were distributed among the Dalits and the poor Ambalakar households. A majority of these MGNREGA workers were women. The

availability of MGNREGA work presented the women with an alternative to agricultural wage work. As documented by other studies as well (Heyer, 2000; Jeyaranjan, 2011; Carswell and De Neve, 2014), the successful implementation of MGNREGA in the region resulted increased participation of women and subsequently enhanced the bargaining capacity of female labourers. Female labourers were able to demand higher wages in agriculture bringing it at par with MGNREGA wages. In addition to increased wages, female labourers received meals and medical benefits that they now demand in agricultural wage work. These demands were made through individualised forms of resistance such as foot-dragging (see Scott, 1987).

Female labourers, especially among the Paraiyars, perceive MGNREGA work as government work, which is associated with ideas of independence, dignity, freedom from caste discrimination, equal pay and decent work. Thus, MGNREGA presents an opportunity for female labourers to reduce dependency upon landowners (see Khera and Nayak, 2009; Carswell and De Neve, 2014). Landowners on the other hand feel that the introduction of MGNREGA has made labourers lazy, and therefore the increased wages they receive for agricultural wage work is not appropriate.

I also observed the influence of MGNREGA among female tied labourers in Aranthangi. The landowners would have to accommodate MGNREGA in their work schedules if they wanted to keep the labourers. If their demands were not met, instances were noted where female labourers had the option of shifting employers and transferring their debt onto the new employer. MGNREGA has not obliterated indebted relations, but has provided female labourers with improved bargaining capacities.

The effects of MGNREGA on female labour were different in Chinsurah compared to Aranthangi. Despite the distribution of job cards to poor households, it was mainly men who took up MGNREGA work in Chinsurah. Female labourers, had limited participation in MGNREGA work. Reduced access to MGNREGA did not allow female labourers to negotiate their wage, as was observed in Aranthangi. As a result, dependence on agricultural wage work and consequently on the landowner was not reduced. Studies on

MGNREGA in West Bengal, has confined its analysis to the *panchayat* level. This empirical evidence highlights how the benefits of MGNREGA are differentiated along the lines of gender.

A comparison of the two regions shows that MGNREGA created changes in the hierarchy of social control, more so in Aranthangi than Chinsurah. However, the rural elite are not silent bystanders in this entire process and wield a certain amount of control that stems out of their class positions and interactions with the local bureaucracy. In Aranthangi, for example, landowners, and their connections with the local bureaucracy, shifted the dates of MGNREGA work so that it did not coincide with harvest work. This would have been a profitable condition for the labourers if the number of days of work they received in MGNREGA would remain the same. However, as described in Chapter 6, the villagers were not compensated for the number of days lost. I observed similar manipulations in Chinsurah, where labourers who belonged to the current ruling party, Trinamool Congress (TMC), received job cards and MGNREGA work, whereas those who belonged to the opposition party were left out. Respondents who are Communist Party of India Marxist [CPI (M)] supporters spoke of how they received more work when the party was in power. The effects of political clientelism is, thus, evident within this region (Das, 2015). MGNREGA would have helped increase household income and reduce dependence on loans but this does not take place in Chinsurah due to local political clientelism. Such conditions create pressures for female labourers to hold on to their agricultural employment, even if in tied labour arrangements.

The reason for the successful implementation of MGNREGA in Aranthangi is the state government's commitment towards effective implementation of social policies. I observed this for PDS in the region as well, which brings me to my second social welfare policy. Tamil Nadu is the only state in India to have universal PDS structure. The successful implementation of PDS determines political dominance in the region, and provides female labourers the ability to negotiate their work contracts and helps free up their labour days (see Heyer, 2012).

Chinsurah, which follows a targeted PDS model, suffered from numerous problems. Respondents in the region complained about not receiving ration cards and those who had received ration cards were wrongly allotted Above Poverty Line Cards (APL). Here, again, distribution of ration cards was channelled through networks of political clientelism. Additionally, fair price shops in Chinsurah were found to suffer from corruption, where the shops are open for a limited period and suffers from pilferage, which leaves the villagers with little access to ration goods. This situation forced households to spend more towards food, which resulted in female labourers taking loans in kind (rice) from landowners, which kept them tied. In Aranthangi, shortages in ration goods was not associated with pilferage. During periods of shortage, instances were noted where female labourers borrowed from neighbours and landowners, where the latter resulted in labour tying until repayment of the loan. However, unlike in Chinsurah, the efficient functioning of PDS in Aranthangi did provide female labourers the opportunity to move away from agricultural wage work.

The third social policy discussed in this thesis is Minimum Support Price (MSP). MSP set by the state government, holds particular significance for small farmers, as it allows them to cover production costs. However, as observed in both field sites, effects of the policy first reach the larger landowners. Accessing MSP for a large section of the medium and small farmers is dependent on the percolation of information, which occurs through kinship ties.

Female tenant farmers in Aranthangi can only sell their produce in government mills if they receive information of the same from landowners. However, these female tenants want to reduce their dependence on the landowner and turn to private traders who buy the crops from them at rates lower than MSP. The lower prices received keeps them in relations of debt and dependence on land for cultivation, indirectly generating dependence on the landowner. Hence, these female tenants remain tied to relations of debt with the landowner, private trader and lessor despite their efforts.

In Chinsurah, even though women cultivate land, they are usually seen as unpaid labourers who accompany their husbands, or are identified as *bandha kishens* who cultivate land. Access to MSP and government mills takes place through the landowner, or their husbands.

These women do not directly sell their produce in the market. All information regarding when and where the government will procure comes directly to the larger landowners in the region, a process identified by Harriss-White (2008) in West Bengal. Farmers such as Shafiq and Ramesh (see Chapter 7) received this information due to the links they enjoyed with the local bureaucracy. Female tenant farmers are able to sell their produce to government through relations with the landowner. These tenants are therefore dependent on the landowner, for land, employment and credit.

For female labours implementation and access to government programmes in the two regions, are shaped by local level politics, because political clientelism and patronage politics rule policy implementation on the ground. Further, female labourers face severe restriction on their bargaining capacities due to their limited access to political institutions, often mediated through husbands and landowners. As observed in the case of Aranthangi, the very fact that the successful implementation of the different social welfare policies provided female labourers with an alternative, has created conditions of improved bargaining capacity, not witnessed in Chinsurah.

### **Contributions, Limitation and Policy Implications**

To recapitulate, the tied labour relations identified in the two regions range from long term tying (such as *bandha kishen*) to short term labour tying that lasts only till the repayment of the loans. Loans between the employer and labourer help maintain the asymmetrical power relations. For landowners, it is not the amount of loan that matters, but rather the extension of a continuous supply of credit which is of greater value (De Neve, 2010); this process enables landowners to secure labour. Dependencies on the landowner are not created by agricultural wage work alone, but through land, market and state provisions.

Tied labour relations identified in this research, are differentiated as per class, caste and gendered/familial relations. The gendered and caste divisions within the workspace are apparent, where low paid agricultural wage work is predominantly female, who belong to the low and Schedule Castes and Tribes. The plight of the agrarian female is particularly



notable within the context of male outmigration, where female labourers are drawn into low-paying, poor remunerative work (see Kapadia, 1996). The burden of meeting household expenses falls on the shoulders of these female labourers – they feed the family and pay off loans (see da Corta and Venkateshwarlu, 1999; Garikipati, 2008). It is this repayment of loans that draws female labour into tied labour relations. Female labourers who enter tied labour relations (irrespective of the duration), not only face restrictions on their mobility, but are drawn into relations of obligation to the landowner. The extension of privileges and the accompanied obligations result in female labourers carrying out unpaid work for landowners (a natural extension of gendered socialisations and expectations), which extends their work day. It thus places restrictions on their ability to look for higher paid jobs.

The discussions that have arisen from this research point towards understanding the presence of tied labour relations through multi-scalar power relations. It is in this context that Hart's (1986) analytical framework proves to be particularly relevant. The unfreedom experienced in these relations vary from mild to worse forms, and as Hart describes, restricting the understanding of these labour relations as free or unfree confines the discussions within the various theoretical disputes (1986a). This idea finds resonance in understanding unfree labour relations as a part of a *continuum* of labour relations, proposed by Lerche (2011). Identifying tied labour within this continuum takes into consideration the myriad ways in which labourers enter such relations and the varying degrees of unfreedom experienced.

The entry into labour tying arrangements can be voluntary or involuntary. The decisions and choices made available to female labourers are shaped by the asymmetrical power relations. The presence of labour tying is therefore, not about choice or duration of tying but more about recognizing these power relations, where the landowners lay out the broader terms and conditions of the work contract. This comparative study underlines the cultural specificities of the two regions, and how this affects the formation and negotiation of tied labour relations. An important nexus is highlighted in this thesis between

bureaucracy, ruling elite and the classes of labour. State policies focus on social welfare of the rural poor, the implementation of which is crucial to maintain political power. However, the interactions between the rural elite and the local bureaucracy result in the manipulation of these policies. The limited effect of these policies result in female labour relying on agricultural wage work for their survival. The very same work that draws them into tied labour relations, keeps them fragmented and in exploitative relations. This interaction of micro-level process and macro-level policies helps explain the presence of labour tying arrangement. The presence of tied labour arrangements in both regions highlights that the process of agrarian capitalism thrives on such labour tying relations to generate surplus – a system that I identify as the 'regime of labour tying'.

The study suffers from a few limitations that need mention here. First, in order to understand the idea of persistence of labour tying more clearly, this research would have benefited from a longitudinal study that charts the changes observed within these specific relations.

Second, the research focusses primarily on large landowners and female labourers (classes of labour) to identify asymmetrical power relation. Limited attention was paid to labour relation with medium farmers and how they affect labour relations. This research does identify certain labour relations with medium farmers. However, with a small sample size, it faces the problem of representativeness, and creates difficulties in analysing it as a broader trend. These limitations however, provide avenues for further research, which can help develop the idea of a regime of labour tying.

The identification of female labour tying within the context of feminization of agricultural wage work, underscores certain policy level implications, and the need to address universalistic policies which end up marginalizing women. First, the proper implementation of the pro-poor MGNREGA policy in Aranthangi highlights how increased female participation in this work has improved bargaining capacities of female labourers. With women taking up the responsibility of repayment of loans, it becomes important that similar efforts are made in Chinsurah to prioritise female recruitment within its agenda.

Changes in MGNREGA policy suffer from gender biases. I observed this within the shift from direct cash payments to bank transfers. The job card is made in the name of the head of the household and so are the bank accounts. The head of the household on most occasions is not the woman. This process of bank transfers does not take into consideration the domestic politics that deprives female labourers of a part or even their entire earnings. Policy changes within MGNREGA should try and enhance women's control over their earnings, which can help improve their bargaining capacity.

Third, SHGs, despite their admissible limitations emerge as an alternate source of income for female labourers. I observed this particularly in Aranthangi, where membership consisted mainly of female labourers. Such was not the case in Chinsurah, where membership within the SHG was limited to women from medium landowner households. This situation resulted in female labourers to rely on landowners for their everyday consumption loans. Incorporating female classes of labour would help provide an alternate source of loans – there is diversification of credit sources which could result in a decline in dependence upon the landowner.

Fourth, expanding the point of diversification of credit sources, policies should try and make state banks more easily accessible to women. Women complained about the long distances they had to travel to get to the banks, which acted as a deterrent. Opening banks closer to the villages, and providing women incentives to do so, could help transform the prevailing lending environment present in these regions. The access to loans at lower interest rates would not only reduce dependence on landowners but would also reduce dependence on money lenders (whose usurious loans are most easily accessible to female labourers).

Fifth, with more women taking up the responsibility to repay loans, they have very limited capacity to influence household decisions. Asset ownership often emerges as policy suggestion which can change gender imbalances within the domestic sphere and increase their ability to refuse work that they consider exploitative (see Garikipati, 2008). One such asset is land ownership as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Land ownership for women will

provide them access to other benefits such as access to government loans for agriculture and even access to state procurement of grain.

Finally, with male outmigration and women taking up cultivation (as observed in Aranthangi and to a lesser degree in Chinsurah), the government procurement of paddy needs to be made available to these female cultivators. This could potentially reduce dependence on landowners (Chinsurah) and on private traders (Aranthangi), and in turn reduce debts that these female cultivators and labourers are drawn into.

The much larger issue that the findings in this thesis point to are the gender divisions of labour and the attitudes that surround work in agriculture, all of which are embedded in cultural norms (see Chant, 2007). Despite the provision of pro-poor policies and its effects on the bargaining capacities of female labourers, nothing is done to address the growing burden of women's work. It is apparently a familial matter but is actually also a political issue.

The presence of tied labour relations therefore, needs to move beyond a basic understanding of wage labour politics and the dichotomy of freedom versus unfreedom, to incorporate multi-scalar power relations within its analysis. In order to understand and tackle issues of persistence of labour tying experienced particularly among female labourers, one needs to recognise there are many dynamics that emerge from these power relations that, do not entirely do away with tied labour and at the same time do not result in the unchangeable bonded labour relations. The persistence of tied labour is placed in between these two extremes- of which women hold an unfair share.

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## Appendix 1

### Percentage Wage Gap of Daily Wage Rates in Agricultural Occupations in Rural India (2009 and 2013)

States	Sowing		Weeding		Transplanting		Harvesting	
	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013
Andhra Pradesh	31.14	20.33	28.94	-	14.63	-	19.58	30.29
Assam	13.15	-	9.75	-	18.41	-	13.63	7.01
Bihar	8.40	12.65	5.58	8.59	13.76	11.78	6.98	9.97
Gujarat	19.38	13.17	2.70	3.7	2.80	3.6	2.26	7.38
Haryana	-	-	4.49	-	6.40	0.99	6.30	1.59
Himachal Pradesh	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Jammu and Kashmir	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Karnataka	35.38	32.25	25.11	31.80	20.29	33.78	25.72	31.21
Kerala	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18.13
Madhya Pradesh	19.59	12.45	16.79	13.04	12.21	22.90	23.14	10.09
Maharashtra	37.21	39.40	30.20	28.04	23.78	34.45	43.47	31.22
Manipur	-	-	7.80	-	8.82	-	10.45	-
Meghalaya	29.41	-	24.74	-	20.93	-	35.41	35.71
Orissa	-	-	-	-	17.51	-	23.74	19.59
Punjab	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rajasthan	-	23.56	24.74	3.26	-	-	13.13	10.49
Tamil Nadu	37.56	21.86	23.59	-	36.11	-	34.71	28.61
Tripura	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Uttar Pradesh	19.06	19.99	15.05	12.66	9.70	17.69	6.5	13.28
West Bengal	11.11	43.88	10.211	4.88	11.01	7.73	10.05	7.07
India	26.84	20.79	16.51	11.56	14.58	10.35	17.95	17.17

Source: Wage Rates in Rural India, 2009-10 and 2013, Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Labour Bureau (2011).

## Appendix 2

### Household Level Village Census Questionnaire

**Serial No.**

Date:

State name: District name:

Sub-district name: Village name:

1. Name of household head and address:
2. Religion:
3. Caste/ Tribe (actual name):
4. Caste/Tribe category: Upper / OBC / MBC / SC / ST
5. Current occupation of the head of the HH:
6. Within the village, do you belong to the better off, middle or lowest economic group:
7. The economic status of the household: \* a. Upper; b. Middle; c. Poor; d. Poorest
8. What is your occupation/s throughout the year? Do you migrate for work? (distance)
9. What is your spouse's occupation? Do they migrate for work? (distance)
10. How much of land do you-

Own	
Cultivate	
Lease Out	
Lease In	

10. How many days of labour in the field are-

Hired in	
Hired out	
Self-employed	

11. What is your major source of income from –

Agricultural Wage Work	
Non-Agricultural Work	
Cultivation	

Rank in order of preference, with one being most preferred and 3 least preferred.

12. Do you have an NREGA Card? If yes how many days of work have you received?