



Book Review

Capitalism, Inequality and Labour in India

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Jan Breman, *Capitalism, Inequality and Labour in India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019, [ISBN No: 978-1-108-48241-7]

Jan Breman's book, *Capitalism, Inequality and Labour in India*, is a product of his research conducted between 1962-2017 on the prevalence of bonded labour in India, specifically South Gujarat. The author considers the Hali community (landless tribes) in the southern part of Gujarat as a case in point to analyse the changes that have taken place in this regard in the last 75 years. His research was conducted on tribals and their owners, who were affluent farmers belonging to the dominant caste. He tests the validity of the three theories of double liberty, the dominant nature of the mode of production and disposal by accumulation, in the Indian context. According to the theory of dual independence, the rise of capitalism has generally led to the dual transformation of the working people (peasants, artisans and the rural working class) as they have been liberated from the means of production and are also able to get the best price possible for their products in the labour market'. Through the theory of production, Bremen examines the mode of production in the contemporary context in India and attempts to understand to what extent workers get exploited.

In the first part of the book, the author describes the politics that is associated with the problem of slavery. He mentions the committees or panels set up to document the labour regimes, which

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had recommended solutions to the issues identified. He focuses on the changing relationships between the two classes/castes found at the extreme ends of the agricultural hierarchy. The author, through his book, endorses the views of the National Labour Commission Report of 1969, which emphasized labour reforms. However, the Report does not observe the miserable situation of the workers in the informal economy. Bremen emphasizes the existence of a master-servant relationship in an age where organized market production was not of great importance, and money had a minimal role in the local exchange of goods and services. Although the Halipratha system (a kind of bonded labour system) is prevalent in South Gujarat, Bardoli is the worst in this regard. The system is based on the bonded relationship between the tribal agricultural labourers and upper-caste landlords, i.e. Patidars. In 1921, Mahatma Gandhi had visited the rural areas of South Gujarat and was briefed on the troubles of the farmers. Upon learning of the conditions in which the tribal Dubla community lived and worked, Gandhiji decided to withdraw from the disobedience movement he had planned to start at Bardoli.

In Part II of the Book, the author makes an effort to list and analyze all important aspects of the bonded labour system in Gujarat, suppression of class struggle and the Halipratha system. Bremen refers to the new generation of workers who brought with them more advanced agricultural technologies like plough and well-irrigation. Stationary farming is a method of farming in which a farmer selects a particular area to cultivate. In this method (which is also referred to as the primitive method), farms do not change according to the season. In this manner, farmers in Africa also did cultivate indefinitely from the same land. With the introduction of the aforementioned agricultural method, the settlers were able to rise to the position of landlords. These groups of intruders slowly moved up the agricultural ranks and began to exclude themselves from tilling the soil. The subjugation of the exiled native tribes made it possible for them to move upwards in the caste order too.

There was another group, which despite their interest in joining the conventional society, refused to get caught up in the tail end of the Hindu hierarchy. Indulal Yagnik and Dinkar Mehta, two senior disciples of Gandhi, gradually moved away from their mentor and

the congress movement to establish a more radical peasant organization within the Congress. Sardar Patel vehemently opposed their attempt, and after losing the support of Gandhi and later Nehru, these dissidents gave up hope. After successful deliberations between the peasants and the landlords, the official announcement was made that the landless labour force would no longer live as underprivileged and the landowners would abide by the consensus reached.

In Part III, the author brings out the political economy's boundless dispossession with respect to exploitation, labour migration and the manner of dealing with insolvency. Caste and power started altering the dynamics of farming, and the dominant caste gradually became capitalists. Restructuring is the result of a more diverse and primarily product-based production approach with a lower market outcome on money spent by a business or organization on acquiring or maintaining fixed assets, such as land, buildings, and equipment. New values and priorities started emerging that demonstrated the growing divisions between the upper and lower hierarchies of the rural class hierarchy. The Halpati Seva Sangh did suggest giving higher wages to landless workers. Social workers intervened and compromised when farmworkers began to strike. This is because the author feels that social workers are taking the initiative to reduce the increased tension caused by the strike. In contrast, self-esteem and class consciousness are not taught. It was not the goal of Halpati Seva Sangh to stand up for themselves even in situations of exploitation and oppression. Moreover, over a period of time, they were seen becoming subservient to the Capitalist agenda.

In Part IV, the author presents a string of suggestions that serve as a concluding note to the discussion on dispossession, immobility, displacement, politics and governance. The Halipratha system in the pre-capitalist system of peasant society was portrayed as a mutually beneficial relationship between a generous landlord and a landless servant. In the framework of a livelihood-based economy, one's arguments are the obligations of the other and vice versa. Poverty forced the workers to subjugate themselves to the upper caste peasants. In an economy in which private individuals or businesses have capital goods, slavery is not new. Bremen remarks

“that capitalism and bondage are not interdependent. They can and do exist without each other, but neither are they mutually exclusive” (237). The process of labour commodification seen in the author’s study is different from that of pre-capitalist agricultural slavery, which was the subject of his initial fieldwork research. Bonded labour ended not due to the active intervention from the government but due to the negotiations between employers and employees, intended to end subjugation. While doing fieldwork, the author noted the deep penetrations made by capitalism into the realm of poverty. The authorities completely overlooked the high cost of dealing with disabilities or medical treatment in case of serious disorders.

Bremen also strongly criticizes the ‘Gujarat Model’ of growth and development that the BJP projected for political gains. Narendra Modi, who was projected by the BJP cadres as their only victor, assured his party that the physical blueprint for bringing development to Gujarat would be a model to lead the country to a duty-free destination. In keeping with the Hindutva frame of mind and its majority predilection, the principle of separation of the state from religious institutions, for bearance of disagreement, and appreciation for pluralism are not encouraged by the current political regime.

Just as the title of the book suggests, the emphasis should have been more on parts II and IV as they focus on matters of concern in relation to destitution and oppression in bonded labour. However, the book would prove useful for researchers, students and others concerned with the issue of labour problem from a holistic perspective. It is a must-read for those who want to understand the nuances of applying labour principles in a country as diverse as India. The book is conceptually interesting and attempts to provide a picture of the wide range of issues that are relevant for ensuring that healthy labour practices exist in India.

The author concludes that the development of capitalism has brought about a process of exclusion from the means of production for the peasantry as well as for the rural and urban workers, in contrast to the dominant class, which has seen an increase in economic, social and political capital. This model has failed to bring the majority of the people out of poverty and permanent debt.

Therefore, the development of capitalism did not weaken the bonded labour system, making the concept of double freedom invalid, as far as India is concerned. This book is a valuable resource for socio-legal researchers working on issues of caste/class oppression and exploitation, various interpretations of the political economy and the exploitation of labourers from a historical, materialist framework.