

Q&A Seeds of Oppression

16 Aug 2021

What is the *Bhag- keti* or wage share cropping system?

Bhag-kheti, is a practice whereby a worker or a group of workers are hired to work full time for a single or multiple cropping season on an agriculture farm. The workers are paid a share of the harvest to compensate for their time instead of regular wages. The person providing this kind of labour is called a *bhagiya* and usually lives on the farm. It is considered a form of bonded labour.

(Before independence all farmers in India were share-croppers as land belonged to the state. With mayor land reforms in the 60s, farmers became owners of land. This term wage sharecropping dates from those days. In practice wage sharecroppers nowadays should be seen and treated as agricultural labourers, however this often does not happen.)

How wide spread is this system?

This system of wage share cropping is very common in Gujarat. However other states have similar forms of bondage and exploitative labour systems in agriculture.

Is this system a new phenomenon?

The wage share cropping system as such is not new, however it is new to us and the researchers we worked with that this is also practiced for the production of cotton seed. We see a movement of commercial crops shifting to areas where labour is cheaper, areas where tribal communities live who have very few livelihood options and often have little or no knowledge about their rights regarding health, safety, housing and wages.

Why is this system problematic?

The system is problematic as the *bhagiya* ends up in a form of bondage with the landlord. Usually the *bhagiya* is attracted to the work by the possibility of receiving an advance. However, consequent wages received as a form of the share of the harvest are too low to repay the advance loan, leaving the *bhagiya* in a situation of little choice but to remain working to repay the advance loan. The system is one sided creating vulnerability for the workers. The worker is completely dependent on the farmer for the settlement at the end of the season.

Is the advance not good for the worker?

Cash flow is indeed a problem for many people living on, or under, the poverty line. They at times have extra expenses, e.g. for education, health, funerals or other matters. A lumpsum that could never be acquired by saving then indeed is desirable and welcome. However with little to no information about how to repay, what the interest is and insecure wages often the *bhagiya* ends up in a situation of debt he/she had not anticipated and was not informed about. Furthermore, people working as *bhagiya* are often from marginalised communities with low literacy rates. Most agreements are made orally with the farmer.

While conducting the study, was the opinion/reaction of landowners sought?

The report is based on (in-depth) interviews with the *bhagiya* workers, it shows their stories.

What is Bt cotton?

Cotton is known for its susceptibility to pests, the boll weevil (*Anthonomus grandis*) - also often referred to as bollworm - being a notorious one. A genetically modified or hybrid cotton seed, *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) was developed to be resistant to the boll weevil in particular. Bt cottonseeds cannot be reused without major yield reductions. Therefore Bt cotton growers need to purchase new seeds every season.

At present, around 93 percent of the total area under cotton production in India grows Bt hybrids, while the remainder mostly grows the indigenous or desi variety and other hybrids.

Are Dutch companies involved in this practice?

As far as we have been able to research there are no Dutch cotton seed companies. However India is a major producer of cotton and garments and textiles. So it is likely that also Dutch garment and textile industries and brands are linked to these practices deep down in their supply chains.

In the report recommendations are given for a wide range of stakeholders, why?

The issue of harmful labour practices and exploitation of people is complex and needs a wide range of actors to all take up their various roles and responsibilities to change this. It is a matter of changing attitudes, beliefs, policies and practices of many actors. All have an important role to play to enhance change. In the report we try to spell out what each actor could do to address the issues raised in the report.

What was the reaction of Labour department officials of Sabarkantha and Banaskantha districts with regard to this practice of wage share cropping?

The Department is reluctant to accept share cropping as a form of bondage. An ex Labour Department official reacted adversely to the report.

What about consumers, what can they do?

Consumers can always ask questions to their shop, brand and their local MP. This alone can create awareness and pressure that these practices are unacceptable. Consumers can also support campaigns and actors that try to address these issues. Smartly use your vote!

And what will you be doing?

We will share the report with as many stakeholders in the Netherlands, the EU and India, as possible and try to enter into a dialogue with them to raise awareness about the issue and also to stimulate working together on solutions. We will discuss the report with the government in the Netherlands and the multistakeholder initiative on garments and textiles (<https://www.imvoconvenanten.nl/en/garments-textile>) as well as the trade association for manufacturers and suppliers in the fashion and textile industry in the Netherlands (Modint). We will also remain in close contact with our partner CRLA to support dialogue with relevant actors and work towards solutions. We will also fundraise to do more research.

You call this bonded labour, is this modern day slavery?

The terms bonded labour and modern day slavery are highly contested terms. However if a person does not have a choice but to work so as to be able to pay off a debt held by its employer it can be seen as bonded labour according to the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 where bonded labour is defined as a system of 'forced or partly forced labour... under which a debtor accepts an advance' of some kind, for a pledge of labour. This arrangement compels an individual to work until

the debt has been paid.

[https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/TheBondedLabourSystem\(Abolition\)Act1976.pdf](https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/TheBondedLabourSystem(Abolition)Act1976.pdf)

Background data:

India is the world's second largest exporter (after the USA) of cotton and cotton yarn

<http://texmin.nic.in/sites/default/files/Data-3.pdf>

Cotton is one of the most important cash crops and accounts for around 25% of the total global fibre production. India occupies first position in the world in cotton acreage with over 126 million hectares under cotton cultivation which is around 38% of the world area.. India has emerged one of the largest producers, consumers and exporters of cotton in the World.

http://texmin.nic.in/sites/default/files/AR_Ministry_of_Textiles_%202020-21_Eng.pdf

The textile and clothing industry is one of the largest sources of employment in India. From 2018 to 2019, according to the Ministry of Textiles, the textile and clothing industry directly employed over 45 million people, and accounted for 12 per cent of the country's total export revenues. (The Ministry of Textiles, Government of India, 'Annual Report 2019-2020'

http://texmin.nic.in/sites/default/files/AR_MoT_2019-20_English.pdf

The chain is complex with very many actors involved: thousands of cotton gin warehouses receiving cotton produced by millions of farmers across the country. In this stage many brokers and intermediaries are active. The next stage of spinning, here the processed cotton fiber is made into yarn through spinning process. See also the report Spinning around workers rights for more on working conditions in spinning mills in India: <https://arisa.nl/wp-content/uploads/SpinningAroundWorkersRights.pdf>

This yarn then woven into fabrics which is then bleached and dyed. In India, the majority of spinning units are in southern states of India. Finally, the last stage is the garment manufacturing where all the products are assembled and include activities such as cutting, stitching, embroidery, buttoning, labelling and packaging. See also picture in report on page 6.