

Working Paper
2009-11

**The multiple times of debt bondage and its
practices in southern India:
Temporary protection and over-
indebtedness**

David Picherit



Institut
Français
de Pondichéry



The multiple times of debt bondage and its practices in southern India: Temporary protection and over-indebtedness

David Picherit*

Abstract

This article is a study of the multiple temporal dimensions of social and power connections linked to and by debt, but also the stakes, negotiations, and resistance that they engender between maistris and debt-bonded laborers.

The objective is, on the one hand, to examine how time, an essential dimension of bondage, is controlled and negotiated at different levels, as much by the maistri as by the workers, and on the other hand, how tactics to shorten the time of domination – and thus personalized protection, trust, and loyalty – are susceptible to lead to over-indebtedness, considered as a gap between the two inherent terms in the relationship of debt, exploitation and protection. The search for less personalized multiple and temporary protection(s) is just as much a quest for dignity and markers of insecurity that oblige reimbursement.

Firstly, I will discuss how the power of debt plays out in the time control of workers at different levels, from the village to the workplace and labor camps, in general to the production of power in merest acts of daily life. Secondly, the study of the heterogeneity of the bonded laborers will allow for the analysis of the variable relations to the times of domination and debt

Keywords: Debt – India – Labour bondage – Power - Time

JEL:

* David Picherit is an anthropologist from University of Paris 10, Nanterre. He is currently in post-doctoral position at the Institut d'Etudes du Développement Economique et Social, UMR 201, Développement et Sociétés – Université Paris 1 Sorbonne. As a research fellow at the French Institute of Pondicherry (program “Labor, Finance and Social Dynamics”), he spent three years in India conducting his fieldwork. He is associated with the RUME project and his main areas of interest are labour, migration and rural development.

Introduction

The many studies about debt-bonded labor in India published over the last fifteen years have insisted upon “de-proletarianization” (Brass, 1999) or neo-bondage (Breman, 1996,2009), that is, upon the re-introduction of unfree forms at particular historical moments or upon the appearance of less personalized, more monetarized, bonded labor, with lesser protection. A fundamental dimension shows through in these definitions, that of the relationship of the time of debt and labor relations.

Dealing with debt, and the servitude that it causes or confirms, can be inscribed in the study of the domination relationships and the stakes at hand, that of attachment, which engenders a temporal shift between a monetary advance given to the bonded laborer and its eventual reimbursement. Managing, negotiating, even buying time are tactics employed as much by the lenders as by the debtors, in order to preserve, establish, or contest domination.

The system of debt-bonded labor that was put into place in the district of Mahabubnagar (Andhra Pradesh) in the 1930s, although still in place today, has been deeply modified, due, amongst other things, to the politicization and an increasing affirmation of lower castes, new modes of recruitment of *maistris*¹ and new forms of migration. The *palamur*² system is organized around a *contractor* who replies to government invitations to tender for the construction of canals, roads, dams, railways, etc. This *contractor* delegates the management of the labor force to several “*group maistri*” or *peddamaistri* who depend upon several local *labor maistri* responsible for the recruitment of workers at the local level. Generally, the groups do not exceed 40 workers, both men and women (Olsen and Murthy, 2002). When the *maistri* is absent from the camp, he delegates his authority to the *gumpupampupedda*, a trustworthy worker. The *maistri* gives advances to the workers before the beginning of the work. These are taken partly from his personal funds, which supposes a significant borrowing capacity. Today, the seasons last about nine months, from November to July³, with numerous variations. The workers are thus taken all over India for the construction of irrigation canals and dams. This practice, commonplace during the colonial era, whether it

¹ Labour middlemen.

² Palamur is the former name of the district of Mahabubnagar, but is commonly used. Migrants are commonly called “Palamur labourers”.

³ Beginning of the monsoon.

be for infrastructural work (Kerr, 1997) or for plantations (Behal *et al.*, 2007), has been continued in many sectors (Guérin *et al.*, 2009).

Since the 1980s, these migrations of debt-bonded laborers have coexisted with the seasonal departures of workers to construction sites in Hyderabad and Mumbai for six to nine months a year where they are employed as daily-wage laborers.⁴ From then on, these Palamur workers circulate between cities and countrysides, alternating statuses between that of daily-wage and bonded laborers and have become specialized in the construction industry (Picherit, 2009b).⁵ This multiplication of the forms of migration and work is integrated in a continuum graded according to the multiple and temporary degrees of dependency and helps to explain the strong diversity of the profiles of those in the group of bonded laborers.

Moreover, this particularly indicates how extremely variable the temporal gap between monetary transfer and counter-transfer can be (Weber, 2000: 96⁶), which Pierre Bourdieu details how it establishes personal domination that can lead to slavery (1980).

This article is a study of the multiple temporal dimensions of social and power connections linked to and by debt, but also the stakes, negotiations, and resistance that they engender between maistris and debt-bonded laborers.

The objective is, on the one hand, to examine how time, an essential dimension of bondage, is controlled and negotiated at different levels, as much by the maistri as by the workers, and on the other hand, how tactics to shorten the time of domination – and thus personalized protection, trust, and loyalty – are susceptible to lead to over-indebtedness, considered as a gap between the two inherent terms in the relationship of debt, exploitation

⁴ Approximately 200,000 workers, one third of whom are bonded labourers (proportion given by Olsen and Murthy, 2000), leave the district every year for nine months (Rao 1993). Rao L., Deshingkar P. and Farrington, J., estimations go up to one million seasonal migrants per year (2006). The villages in which the fieldwork was carried out have between 50 and 70% of the working-age population (15 – 45 years) on sites away from the village. All are owners of plots of land - between 1 and 5 acres – (83% of the bonded labourers have land in another district of Telangana, according to Subrahmanyam *et al.* 1995), but without access to water. The open wells are dry and water has been privatized: rice cultivation requires much water and the bore wells, which are costly, are reserved for the reddy.

⁵ This research is based on 24 months ethnographical fieldwork with labour migrants originated from a village of Mahabubnagar district (Andhra Pradesh). From this village, I followed different groups of migrants – debt-bonded, daily-wages, task paid labourers – and shared their everyday lives in migration places and working sites. Along with them, I made regular up and down to their village. Everyday observations, informal and formal discussions were the main tools used for this study.

⁶ If no time gap : immediate transaction and absence of debt ; if gap is infinite, counter-transfer is impossible (« *pure gift* ») ; if gap exists : « *maussian gift* » separated by the time of the debt in the sense given by P.Bourdieu (Weber, 2000 : 96).

and protection. The search for less personalized multiple and temporary protection(s) is just as much a quest for dignity and markers of insecurity that oblige reimbursement.

Firstly, I will discuss how the power of debt plays out in the time control of workers at different levels, from the village to the workplace and labor camps, in general to the production of power in merest acts of daily life. Secondly, the study of the heterogeneity of the bonded laborers will allow for the analysis of the variable relations to the times of domination and debt.

1. Times of debt-bondage

Time control of workers is an essential stake of production relations, in India and elsewhere. In the case of debt-bonded laborers, maistris' time management does not stop at the gate of the stone quarries or large construction projects where they are employed via migration. The maistri is *the* figure in the circulation of labor. He recruits in the villages where he is from and, if a chain of sub-contracted work dominates, it is locally that his power is strongest. Elsewhere, I have retraced the social mechanisms of recruitment and the stakes surrounding the notion of trust (Picherit, 2009), principally in the village, where social ties of debt are established. Here, I am interested in the migration period: the bonded laborers leave the villages for a period of nine months, settle in camps near the work site where they drudgingly work, but move three to five times per work season, covering distances varying between 50 and 500 kilometers.

Over the course of this period, the maistri manages the bodies, time and space of the laborers. Food, lodging, social and spatial organization of the camp are all under his responsibility. The objective of this part is to show how the negotiations and the control of time during migration are fully constitutive of the reproduction of debt, which cannot be understood without taking into consideration the activities of the workers when they return to their villages. This control is exerted in a global manner as well as through the daily repetition of small acts aiming to incessantly recall the power hanging overhead due to debt.

Time control operates at several levels: short term, direct control of time at the workplace and living quarters; mid-term, physical and psychological wear render the planning of any struggle delicate. Finally, on the long-term, the fatigue brought about by excess work

leads to inevitable rest in the village – which means an absence of revenue – and thus progressive indebtedness.

Maistri's control over the work camps

Here, I will describe a camp where I lived, located 300 kilometers north of the village where I settled for fieldwork. The departure from this village taking place in utmost secrecy, tolls the bell on any freedom of movement. At night, in the trailer of a truck, the group heads north to T elangana, and settles in a field a few kilometers from the stone quarry. The first tasks are to redirect water and electricity for the single light bulb. The huts are put up with materials that the maistri has collected: palm leaves and wood (plastic covers are available in case of rain). Everything is second-hand material salvaged from here and there: plastic, bags and oil cans decorated the huts and the landscape. Inside, the floor is plastered with cow dung mixed with water allowing minimal cleanliness differing it from the outside space for a limited amount of time.

The size of this basic habitation corresponds exactly to the number of people and to its primary function: sleeping. It is impossible to stand upright and there is no space outside the view of the maistri. The huts are placed according to solid informal rules: at the end of the two rows of huts is that of the maistri. This allows him to watch over the goings and comings of the camp, those of his workers and of any outsiders from whom he must protect his group.

The spatial organization of the camp reflects the hierarchical social structure of the group and the social organization of the work. This fine hierarchy is based on two well-established principles: the caste of the workers and then, the hierarchical position in the labor organization. Members of higher castes set up their huts closer to that of the maistri (he is always of the highest caste), whereas the Madigas (ex-untouchables) set up theirs the farthest away.

This social, spatial, and symbolic organization is identically reproduced at all of the camp sites during the season.

“Work, eat, sleep” repeat the workers when describing and summarizing their daily routine. If this expression represents well the temporal sequence of acts and reflects a conditioning of the relationship to time and work, that one needs to work to eat, as Kancha Ila h attests in his biographical essay (1996), it does not reflect the gestures, stakes, dreams, adjustments, and other daily acts.

A day with the workers

Govindamma is always the first up: Daseratta's wife is in charge of cooking for the group and never leaves the camp. At 5am, she starts preparing the morning meal.

In this month of April, many sleep outside. I get up and put away my mat. The maistri, Ramullu, wakes up slowly and the workers wake up fifteen minutes later. Everyone heads for the fields to relieve themselves. The camp awakens little by little in a deep silence: no one speaks to anyone. Ramullu stays sitting, observing in silence.

Everyone has just enough time to splash a little water on their face. No ritual is observed⁷: there is no time, the *muggu* [design drawn by women at the entrance of the home] will wait. Some run to the tea stall as the day breaks. The race is on. Krishnaiah gathers his tools. Anjali prepares a bag of clothing. Ramullu harasses those who are late. Twenty minutes after waking up, everyone is at the roadside.

The vehicle will wait for no one. We scramble to get in the back of the truck, but it has already started. The truck leaves the national road and heads down a dirt path. Faces harden as the vehicle drives along machines and finally reaches the heart of the quarry.

Everyone knows what he must do despite the absence of the maistri who has remained at camp. The women have brought the tools (pans and small rakes) and clothes and dress in the middle of the quarry as discretely as they can behind the truck. An hour after waking, the whole group is at work.

The task is to fill the truck's trailer and two tractors with stones. The vehicles can be reached by a wooden ramp.

"Men don't carry the stones, that is women's work. It is difficult, but men's work is even more difficult. They must gather the stones and break them. That is really hard. Women take the pans and carry them to the truck" explains Anjaneylu.

This rule is, as all of the normative discourses announced on the work-site, subject to continuous exceptions. The prevailing rule is pragmatic: the task must be accomplished on time. A man fills a metal recipient and helps a woman to lift it on her head. She carries it several meters to the trailer, climbs on ramp and empties the recipient in the trailer. Upon her return, there is already a pan filled and ready for her, and so forth. The work is carried out like

⁷ This is a current fact that migrants cannot perform everyday rituals in migration (Bremen, 1996).

a chain and is done in a silence punctuated by the throws of the empty pans on the ground and the sound of the stones thrown into the trailer.

The group is constantly supervised by someone: the maistri, the supervisors, and other machine drivers looking down from the top of the quarry. In addition to that, the group watches over itself. It is difficult to cheat.

Work continues like this throughout the day. The only pauses arise during a change of tractor: just the time to smoke a quick *beedie*. Some women take this short moment to sit down.

The distance from the quarries, the mechanical problems of the machines and tractors represent the biggest hopes for a pause for the workers.

At 8:30 a.m. the sun beats down on the quarry. The shade disappears from the truck. The meal break is at 9:30 a.m. Dusty, the workers wash up a bit. Each takes a plate and gets it filled by a Boya caste man. Everyone eats in little groups spaced out from one another, in the hot sun, neglecting caste and gender. The quantities of food are generous. The quality never changes, the *nukbyyam*⁸ is mixed with the curry that is always light on vegetables. One of the women complains about the maistri's *sonabiyam*⁹.

The atmosphere is relaxed. Some eat hastily in order to lie down a bit in the shade of the tractor. Meal time and the break depend on the tractors' and trucks' circuit, but also on the driver. He announces the end of the break.

Everyone gets up nonchalantly. The temperature increases incessantly throughout the day reaching 49 degrees Celcius according to the day's papers.

I head back to camp on the tractor and have tea with Daseratta's wife. Ramullu, who has also returned, has left to drink *kallu* (palm wine), she tells me, as he does everyday.

She explains the family's finances to me:

"I take care of the money. Daseratta drinks it all. Ramullu has agreed. What I am to do with him? Every year it's the same story. Five daughters to marry, my life is like that. My daughter has worked with us for five years. If she wants to get married, she will have to leave us. We are 80,000 rupees in debt. Ramullu gave us 37,000 rupees in advance to come with him. But Venkataiah, you remember the other maistri, claimed a

⁸ Rice of basic quality.

⁹ Best quality of rice.

part of that. Narayanna Reddy, his grand-mother, 9,000 rupees. Abireddipalle's son-in-law, that's 10,000 rupees and the second as well. Mohan Reddy has 5,000 rupees and 3,500 from Chandrudu his younger brother. Bal Reddy, too, 3,000 rupees, you know he lives next to Golla Srinu. Raja Reddy's son, Ravi, he took my grand-daughter for housework, he loaned 5,000 rupees.

Dasaretta doesn't want to go to Lalapet. I can cook there, here, it's not good. Daseratta is old, he drinks, he cannot work much longer. Ramullu has helped us, but I don't know what we'll do. The roof of the house at Alwal is damaged."

"Dasaretta was the one who decided to change maistri. The other didn't want to give any more loans. He wanted us to work two more years like that. Golla Srinu told us about Ramullu. They know each other well and he gave a big advance. I wanted to go to Lalapet."

Ramullu comes home for lunch and then goes back for *kallu*. The work at the quarry goes on unendingly, day after day, the same way as described above.

Just before nightfall, at about 6:15pm, the tractor rumbles in with its trailer filled with stones on top of which the dusty workers sit worn out by the labor.

As soon as the workers jump down from the truck, each heads for the hut. The women cut the wood that has been collected beforehand and heat the water for baths. Each one sweeps in front of the hut. Some men go to the roadside bar and watch some television, whereas others phone home to the village.

The evening meal is served at 8pm. After dinner, some get out their sleeping mats and sleep right away. Others head over to the tea shack, converse a bit, and come back twenty minutes or so later. At about 9pm, the camp, lit up since nightfall by two lightbulbs, falls silent.

Simply counting the working hours allows us to understand that possibilities are weak for any type of social life. In addition to this, the labor and the state of extreme exhaustion of the workers must be considered.

The days invariably follow the same temporal pattern: twelve hours of work and nine hours of sleep. There are only three "off-work" hours, among which a half-hour is dedicated to waking up, a half-hour for the evening meal and a half-hour for bathing. The one and a half hours remaining are the only time for the group. The management of the camp requires daily

tasks: sweeping, cleaning, searching for water, repairing tents. In order to fulfill these tasks, the maistri demands the help of men and women. For these called, any available time vanishes.

The maistri disposes of the time and bodies of his workers according to his wishes during nine months. He directs, supervises, and guides all of the activities of the camp. The remaining time is for breaks, for the recomposition of the workforce, time which he keeps a close eye on by accepting or refusing to give money for outings and drinking palm wine, by authorizing or not trips to neighboring villages, by sending an injured worker to hospital or not. For nine months, every movement is under his control.

The time for favors

The time period of the debt relation is a key element of the personal domination exercised over men. The maistri must reaffirm this daily through the smallest of gestures and actions. He must gain trust and reputation all while making sure to continuously establish his power. The relation of trust, and thus that of time and power, is constantly staged in a theatrical manner at various levels. Having command over the time of others is the power over others that allows debt. The workers must display marks of respect to reassure the maistri of their loyalty. The temporal gap between the monetary advance given and its hypothetical reimbursement is not sufficient to ensure domination: the debt must take the form of a gift given out of goodness and protection.

The complexity of the relations between the workers and the maistri stems from their proximity of caste and social milieu. These maistris of lower castes become maistris thanks to their extreme loyalty. Moreover, the maistri lives and shares the daily life of the group. Despite not physically working alongside them, he shares all of their living conditions, the heat, the ambiguous relationships where camaraderie, jokes, and games are mixed in with economic and extra-economic exploitation. The management of this distance is delicate for the workers and for the maistri. The sentiment of class, which is displayed through the experience of labor, the hardship at work, sharing living and working conditions, favors the collective solidarity limited by the personalization of the relations with the maistri. The workers personally negotiate with the maistri concerning their advances and, throughout the working season, the “favors” are obtained through the “goodness” of the maistri. The limits of the group’s solidarity are linked to individual strategies. The members of the same caste as the

maistri hesitate to show a privileged link with the maistri. In the same way, the maistri must take care to divide the workers without provoking any conflict which would hinder smooth working operations.

For the workers, obtaining “favors” is the sole means of freeing themselves from their daily routine, even if it is simply to drink alcohol or smoke *beedies*. The advances made are very frequently spent in their entirety even before leaving. Many never even see the money which only but transits between the moneylender and the maistri, or between two maistris. Govindamma explained that upon arriving at the labor camp, she had only 1,000 rupees for two people and nine months: they were obliged to borrow money during the entire season to cover their regular expenses and phone calls.

All of the expenses of the workers are recorded carefully and daily in a notebook as well as the days off for break, illness, rain, and other situations – all to be subtracted out at the end of the season. At that time, the workers find out how much they must pay back. The imposition of the written form for illiterate people is superimposed upon a discourse of trust. The notes are reused by the maistri, the only capable of reading and writing.

Each request is extremely ritualized: the laborer shows him/herself as affable and docile during the day and tries to work without complaining. When Kondanna goes for a pack of *beedies*, he stands waiting outside the tent with his arms crossed behind his back, a usual respective position. By waiting outside the tent, he demonstrates his respect for the maistri who takes note of this and makes him wait patiently as he questions him about his attitude and the work he has done:

“I don’t have time. Have you brought the wood? Have you brought water?”

He uses his time. In some cases, knowing what is at play, other workers come by to benefit from the maistri’s “generous gifts”. The maistri shows his busy schedule, worthy of that of an important figure: *“I have a lot of work. I can’t listen to them all day”*. Kondanna must accept several refusals, leave and come back. Sitting on his bed, Ramullu expects the workers to carry out his orders immediately, using their time, making them wait and work through several refusals before obtaining a positive reply. The maistri equips himself with the means to exercise and expose his power by controlling the time and money of the worker. Each cigarette, each rupee lent with interest is a service given, a “favor” from the maistri, proof of his generosity and good will. The worker is not dupe and responds with the compliant body and verbal language expected by the maistri. The form of the request or the

act of hidden resistance (hiding to smoke on the work-site, leaving camp...) must take into account the potential reactions of the maistri: the workers must beg using their bodies, compliant postures, polite language that the maistri cannot refuse. They must use an appearance of subordination in order to obtain things. These are social plays around authority, with two actors who are relatively aware of the situation. Ramullu will give in after three refusals but will never accept at the first request. The worker knows that he must reiterate his request three times during the day.

The lack of spoken language allows room for important gestual and body language. Raising ones arm with folded fingers accompanied by a light whistle, “*tsss-tsss*”, and someone will come. The maistri expects this automatic coordination between his needs and the capacity of the men of the group to respond.

One of the limits of the possibilities of resistance resides in the absence of time for and by oneself. Resisting requires energy which is entirely spent on laboring. Contestation is too costly on a daily basis and gains are uncertain: the exhausted body and limited time leads to avoiding conflict. On a daily basis, the available methods are stealing away to smoke a cigarette, avoiding the maistri so as to get out of doing anything for him, personally begging for a favor: using or abusing of these gestures and acts is a manner of resistance while reaffirming one’s position. The maistri exposes his good will and the worker obtains what he wishes. Each daily and personal act of resistance is transmitted through the bodily, linguistic and symbolic expression of subordination.

The changing of maistri and the circulation of debt constitute two diverted forms of resistance and conflict avoidance that take place in the village.

Rest and indebtedness in the village

At the end of nine months of migration, the group goes back to the village. The costs of reproducing the labor force nourishes debt and the need to become indebted. Intense labor, in difficult physical and psychological conditions, fatigues the body. The return of migrant bonded laborers is marked by extreme exhaustion and health problems. Rest (and alcohol consumption, “pilfering” the fields) is one of the main activities when returning to the village. This time has a cost: it contributes to debt-bondage by generating the need to continue borrowing for survival.

The maistris of lower caste have neither the capacity nor the will to protect “their laborers”. They do not have the means either to offer them agricultural work: they own too little land to ensure a revenue for all of the members of the group. Only the most faithful and loyal can hope for such tasks. Agricultural work is also mostly feminine.

The control of time, space and bodies of laborers, by putting them to work or overworking them, by the spatial organization of the camp and by the food distributed contributes to the perpetuation of debt, a central element in the relations between maistri and workers. By managing all of the activities and needs of the group, the maistri reproduces the labor force while minimizing costs: food and lodging are as basic as possible. Salaries are not the only source of savings for the maistri. These salaries are three to four times inferior to those of daily wage laborers. Calculations from field data indicate, for information¹⁰, a salary of 30 rupees a day for a bonded-laborer, compared with 80 rupees a day in Hyderabad to 120 rupees a day in Mumbai. Taking into account twelve hours of work for the bonded laborers compared to eight hours for daily-wage laborers, the gap widens: 2.5 rupees per hour, compared to 10 rupees in Hyderabad.

These savings shape the increasingly scrawny bodies of the men and women. The body is their only possession that they cannot dispose of at their will. This body has a limited lifetime, as the worries of Govindamma concerning Daseratta suggest. Those who live over the age of fifty are rare in the villages and many can no longer leave for work after forty. The period of migration is fully integrated in the reproduction and perpetuation of the Palamur system.

The maistri does not aim to maintain the laborer in a state of drudgery all his/her life in good health, but to ensure that the worker is replaceable by another member of the family. It is not the person who is inscribed for the duration, but the social ties in which debt is inscribed, an immutable element of the system. The worker dies, but the debt as social tie remains and survives.

The impossibility of leading collective resistance on migration sites is also a marker of a certain loyalty: accepting an advance implies accepting the conditions. The contestation is left for later, in the village, where a new advance, a new maistri can be envisaged. The social relations of debt-bondage are built and unbuilt and represent an integral part of power

¹⁰ This calculation is purely informative: to cut the advance in this timeframe has no other meaning, as it doesn't take into account all other elements included in transaction. But the difference between bonded and daily wages labourers appears nevertheless significant.

relations of the village, where the Reddys hold the political and economic power and profit from the hierarchy of castes. They control the land and access to water, the dominant positions of the ruling party (Telugu Desam Party) and the resources of development programs.

2. Power relations and multiple relationships to time

Regular changing of maistri or departures as daily-wage laborers in urban areas indicate how relationships of personal attachment have transformed, how the multiplication of the statuses of labor have deeply modified the time of the debt relationship. Diminishing or ending debt means shortening the period of domination. It also means entering in multi- but temporary dependancies. This part (of the article) will illustrate the extreme diversity in debt-bondage relations, and the heterogeneity of those within this category which are too often analyzed from a theoretical point of view opposing free and unfree labor.

This category encompasses people of heterogeneous personal situations who maintain variable debt relations. From intergenerational bonded laborers, loyal laborers to others alternating between debt-bondage and daily-wage labor, many strive to manage structural insecurity. One of the objectives is to negotiate time well, to transform personalized long-term ties into multiple, short-term and temporary, dependancies. Each of these situations translates the contemporary tensions of relations of debt, trust, and power, as well as the multiple tactics, negotiations, and resistance that can be expressed upon the return to the village.

2.1 Returning to the village

Returning home to the village means returning to the hierarchized village space, returning and entering into power relations in order to contest, lessen, or strengthen them. In other words, playing on the temporal dimension of relations of domination. Returning to the village is the opportunity for two major but intermingled events: settling accounts with the maistri and negotiating a new advance; finding an advance from a new maistri. Either a negotiation to obtain a greater advance or increase the circulation of debt, that is, negotiation, no longer with one maistri, but also with money lenders and other maistris. This is also a way of demonstrating loyalty, multiplying temporary protection, forming or breaking alliances.

For workers, one of the ways to limit personalized attachment is to circulate debt, which can be a form of resistance that does not aim to break with the system but to “get by”

within the system. It allows workers to affirm dignity and their relative autonomy among the search for the merest dependancies and protection.

Changing maistri may require workers to temporarily end relations with a former maistri. Open and conflictual resistance is smothered by this possibility and the maistris know that it is a tool for both the emancipation and discipline of the workers: conflict is postponed for later:

“I won’t work with him next season. I will go with Chandraiah, a maistri of Peddamandadi. He is Uppari. They know how to work. He [the present maistri] doesn’t give anything, the labor camp is dirty and he shouts all the time. Chandraiah gives good advances and my brother-in-law has already worked with him, he knows him and will speak with him. If I contract a large amount, I will work it out with this maistri, ” explains Madiga Ramullu.

For Kushemma, speaking in front of a group of women, things are a bit different:

“They think that with a new maistri, things will be better. He smiles, he gives money, but then, what really changes? It’s always the same. Working, eating, sleeping...that’s our life.”

Kondanna’s wife intervenes:

“Everyone chips in in the village, we help each other when there are problems. For us, there is always a problem, the house, wedding our first daughter, everyone wants money. What is one to do? The interest rate [mitti] is always the same, 3% a month. I have land, but there is no water, so we leave. We had a good maistri before, the new one isn’t as good. I am looking for another. If he gives me an advance, that will do. We will settle the accounts at dipāvali. With an advance, that will do.”

The goal of the maistris, and many of the laborers, is to never end a debt. It remains open as it circulates from maistri to maistri. The system generates and preserves the labor force within the system: the debt is open and circulates in the village, the center of the organization of the circulation of labor and power relations.

2.2 Intergenerational debt and loyalty

This period is negotiated in several ways. One is to reinforce privileged ties with the maistri, reinforcing personalized attachment.

At one extreme of the category of “bonded laborer”, a son is born with the debt contracted by his father. This is what Shivaiah, Madiga of about 30 years, expresses:

“My father died when I was just about so high [about 9 years old]. My mother continued to migrate with Maistri Ramullu from Kothapalle. I didn’t work, I helped out, made tea and carried it. I started working later, had to eat. Each year the maistri gives my wife and I an amount of money, so we have to work, that is my life. My father had borrowed a lot. Both of my sons work with us now. The maistri has changed. It’s Kondanna, Maistri Ramullu’s eldest son.”

This situation is becoming more and more rare. In the same manner that the systems of personalized attachment like *baghela* or *jeethagadu*¹¹ have almost disappeared, the intergenerational character and attachment to a particular maistri has rarified. This structural debt is reinforced by caste domination and ever present patronage.

Maintaining privileged and long-term ties allows some workers to enjoy a special status. It is the case of Golla Ballaiah, who has become *gumpupampupedda* under Jagan Mohan Reddy, the most important maistri of the village and whose family is among the most important landowners of the Mandal¹²: Ballaiah finds regular agricultural work when he returns to the village.

This factual presentation of the social relations between Shivaiah and Kondanna is placed in the context of the transformations of social relations. It also sets the temporal dimension of the two protagonists’ relationship: they have known each other since birth and are linked by a relationship of domination and an ongoing debt whose term is combined with a very uncertain future.

On the one hand, the relationship is perpetuated as long as the debt is not settled. The creditor fixes the amount of reimbursement and the way in which the debt must be paid back: the amount of work to be done is determined by the maistri who is the only one, thanks to his mastery of the written language, to be able to guarantee the accuracy of his calculations.

On the other hand, this long-term temporal dimension always establishes a more personal domination, a servitude, of which the compensation is affirmed daily through

¹¹ Agricultural worker bound on a yearly basis to a landowner. At present in the village, they are particularly young, between 10 and 15 years. They are available 24 hours a day, given lodging – outside with the animals – and fed. The work day is around 17 hours, as Atchi Reddy (1983: 175) already observed. Clothing and health expenses are *a priori* the responsibility of the landowner. I have, however, never been able to observe this: *jeethagallu* who are injured are asked to return to their homes and take care of themselves.

¹² Administrative spatial organisation : around ten villages.

services rendered, markers of respect and loyalty. Trust appears in Shivaiah's discourse as a marker of their long-term relationship that each personally works to reproduce. Here, the length of the relationship engenders and renews trust and the state of servitude.

Over-indebted from an economic point of view, the debt-bonded laborer has no possibility in this framework, and especially no intention of reimbursing his debt! Reinforcing this link, striving to demonstrate loyalty in the eyes of those who manipulate on the short and long-term proves for Ballaiah to be a way to protect himself and to lessen risks.

2.3 Making the best of things

Many complex situations associate a strong will for emancipation with a status of debt-bondage: the refusal of personalized dependency is confronted with insurmountable poverty.

"I go wherever I want," explains an angry Golla Daseratta. "I have worked hard everywhere, in Bombay, on the Narmada, in Goa, in Kanyakumari¹³, in Nagarjuna Sagar¹⁴, and he doesn't give me any advances. I have built canals, roads, dams, I have ! I don't need any maistri, I'll go to Hyderabad and will take care of my land. His food is disgusting, his camps are dirty. How am I supposed to pay him back? I have five daughters and three are to be married. I'll go to Hyderabad, I've already worked there. My daughters are with their useless husbands. He doesn't want to help me."

Two months after saying this in the village, Daseratta works with his wife and one of his five daughters in the north of Telangana for a new labor middleman. In July, however, Daseratta goes to his two married daughters settled in a neighborhood of Hyderabad where daily-wage laborers of his caste (Golla) migrate and find daily employment in construction. He goes back to the village, but faces the social pressure of the dominant and members of his caste. He returns to his *gumpu* [workgroup] in the north of Telangana. Back by September for the festival of *vinayakacaviti*¹⁵, Daseratta occasionally works for a Reddy, landowner. At the same time, he negotiates a departure for the new season under the orders of a new maistri: the former having refused another monetary advance. He leaves again for nine months.

¹³ Southeast place in India.

¹⁴ Dam in Andhra Pradesh.

¹⁵ Religious hindu festival of *Ganesh*.

This discourse is held by Daseratta, a debt-bonded laborer for the past thirty years and fervent critic of daily-wage labor. The migratory pattern is repeated year after year, unchangingly and seasonally:

“Before the “Skylab¹⁶”, I left with my wife for Karnataka with Suddakar Reddy, then with Indu Reddy; I worked with Govardhan Reddy on a canal in Warangal, then with Mandadi in Anantapur, with Raja Reddy in Pochampad, in Maharashtra on a dam, then in Pune, and in Khamma jilla [district], then on the great Kakatiya canal. There, there were 3,000 laborers, almost all palamuru. Then, I left for Chandrapur in Maharashtra. I came and went four or five times after sankrānti. I came and left near dipāvali¹⁷. I learned to distill sārāyi. I would make it at night and then sell it.”¹⁸

This narrative conveys several characteristic points of present transformations in labor’s social relations: an accrued circulation of labor in the rural and urban zones, in agriculture and construction; an alternation between the status debt-bondage, of daily-waged laborer, of agricultural worker, even of landowner, but also frequent changes of maistri; the possibility of expression, at certain moments and in certain contexts, the desire to escape from debt-bondage, even the negotiation of these relations (“*I go wherever I want, whenever I want*”). This is placed in parallel with a recurring statement of debt-bonded laborers: “*we go where the maistri tells us to go*”.

Daseratta was a goat-shepherd, debt-bonded laborer, bonded laborer –*jitagadu* –, daily-wage laborer, agricultural worker, landowner, and now once again a debt-bonded laborer. When Daseratta and Govindamma leave for the north of Telangana, their youngest daughter, nine years old, is hired in a neighboring town as a servant in the village head’s house: at total disposal for 1,500 rupees per year. By conceding his daughter in such a way, Daseratta was able to borrow 6,000 rupees at 36% annual interest¹⁹ from his family. Another daughter, thirteen years old, is in Hyderabad with her two older sisters who are married and daily-wage laborers in construction. Daseratta’s mother is alone in the village.²⁰

¹⁶ « *skylab* » is a famous time mark all over India, referring to US space shuttle which crashed in 1979 (and the risk was high to crash on India (...and then on the village !).

¹⁷ Important time mark in the organisation of circulation of labour.

¹⁸ Places are distant between 300 and 1000 kilometers from the village : it means different states, languages and food habits.

¹⁹ The interest is commonly expressed as 3 rupies of interest for 100 rupies borrowed, without notice of the length of the credit. It is here 36% of interest per year. .

²⁰ Only few bags of rice obtained through ration card. She must work to eat.

Changing maistri represents one of the only possibilities for a couple to escape personalized power, all while regularly playing on the use of kinship terms with the new maistri. The pragmatism and the will to preserve a certain dignity is striking. The wife's wish to work as a daily-wage laborer cannot become reality, especially with five daughters to marry: it is necessary to leave again, and it is above all the amount of the negotiated advance that will determine the maistri.

Debt remains within the structured framework of the village, with its own temporalities based on religious festivals (which are also economic, *dipāvali* being the time when accounts are settled with the maistri). But, the time period of the relations is shortened each time. These social plays, between the search for dignity and dependency, are the stakes of the negotiations.

2.4. The decline of the status

It may appear that the laborers willingly enter into debt-bondage in the hopes of obtaining a significant monetary advance. In this case, the entrance into debt-bondage is due to pragmatic and family reasons. Negotiations are made, calculations established and one of the family's sons works to pay back debt for two to four years: a family can send a son to claim an advance at certain moments and reimburse it through labor, while his brothers may be agricultural or daily-wage laborers. Labor is thus guaranteed but above all subordination is relative: the maistri cannot abuse of the laborer without the risk of losing the advanced money. This situation nears the social relations observed by Geert De Neve in Tiruppur and the laborers' and maistris' relation to debt-bondage (1999). In an industrial context, De Neve describes how laborers of small textile units succeed in obtaining the better part of these advances all while recognizing and refusing the bondage to which they are objected.

This voluntary servitude is most often due to necessity and survival. Extreme poverty, a failure in migration, the impossibility to pay back a loan, in other words any series of incidents can fragilize their situation and lead them to migration under the orders of a maistri. This entrance into bondage, degrading in terms of status, can be put into perspective by rusing with debt and a lesser subordination: *they get by*.

The circulation between forms of labor indicates, neither freedom nor fluidity of movement, but above all a structural insecurity and multidependency (Breman, 1996, 2007b). It is this insecurity that leads to punctual and temporary dependency, which is also a relative source of protection.

Whatever the case may be, no one is free from the risk of setbacks: the merest economic or family problem can put independence acquired over the years at risk.

Chandraiah and Kushamma own a plot of several acres of land, a small herd of goats and two buffalos:

“That is my son. He studies in Wanaparathi in Inter 2nd. He is very good, he stays in a “hostel”. He must study. Anita is in 7th Class at the school here [really in 3rd class]. Over there are our goats, nineteen of them. We also have two buffalos...and four acres of land. There is no more water. We had three wells, the first lasted two years, the second three years, and the last, nothing. What can we do? A well costs a lot of money...20,000 rupees maybe. I am a kūli and Chandraiah takes care of sheep and a little bit of the fields.”

“Karimnagar, Rajahmundry, Srikakulam, Bombay, everywhere. For four years, we were with the same maistri. He passed away. We slept in tents for six months, two months in the village and then would go on migration. We didn’t know how to get a loan.”

They were nevertheless able to invest in a first tubewell, then in successive herds: goat-herder is a caste trade and owning a herd is a true form of prestige. The accent on the children’s education indicates a change of status.

Kushamma is worried about the current situation:

“We have spent 6,000 rupees for corn. He is sick, there will be no profit. Either we pay back or we lose everything. We have taken 40,000 rupees to buy some goats. One goat costs between 6,000 and 10,000 rupees depending on its size, shape and milk...We pay 50 rupees a day each month for the care of the buffalos [...] Then, we have 80,000 rupees loan on the house. The loans are private. We have two, 50% each.”

The first loan of 40,000 rupees for the goats has been paid back. By “private”, Kushamma means a known and reputed person who only loans to recommended people offering some sort of guarantee.

“We went to see a well-known person [telisinimanisi], my brother-in-law introduced us to him. Here, there is “3% mitti” [3 % interest rate]. We gave him bracelets and jewelry.”

Another comes from the Government Bank of Kothakotta:

“That was for the well and the pump. That was seven years ago. We didn’t have any money and the bank loaned us 40,000 rupees.”

After discussion, the bank had in fact only loaned 28,000 rupees. The 12,000 remaining are determined by the regularity of the reimbursements. For this type of loan, the land is put up as collateral for the loan. If the bank spreads out the reimbursement installments, the “*private*”, the “*telisinimanisi*”, sends thugs and does not hesitate to brutalize clients in order to get back the money.

Some months later, I learn that Chandraiah has died. The corn has been definitively lost and the son has stopped going to school. His mother has harassed the NGO director for work: he used his network and became the “helper” on the worksite with a maistri uncle.

This description outlines the shifting borders between the status of laborers in a context of permanent insecurity: death, illness, work-related accidents, drought remind these Gollas of the precariousness of their situation. For this formerly debt-bonded family in the process of ascension, where the son and daughter’s education was a crucial factor, sending the son on migration, as daily-wage or bonded laborer, is among the possibilities evoked by the mother after this death.

It is in these cases of statutory decline that multiple debts cause a true social problem: they must be paid back. The honor, prestige, and future of the family are at stake. Playing with time can be, in cases of crisis extremely perilous: there is no safety-net, long-term protection does not exist.

Conclusion

The time of the relation between laborers and maistris is a significant stake and takes on extremely varied forms. The laborers’ defiance towards relations of personalized attachment is not to be considered as part of a unilateral resistance nor victory, but as part of a more complex framework of transformations of social relations where high castes do not aim to maintain a large and regular laborforce. These social plays of time management are not linear: laborers articulate and alternate between long and short periods of domination, adapting over the course of circumstances. This circulation of debt takes place within the

villages of the *mandal* and the laborers remain inscribed in the relational networks that shape the circulation of bonded and daily-wage labor.

Refusing personalized attachment leads to the search for multiple and temporary protection, through debt, but also through the access to local resources controlled by political parties. Submitting to temporary dependency to maistris, money-lenders, and/or landowners only provides limited protection. Over-indebtedness comes about harshly when the incapacity to reimburse a debt must be honored: the intergenerational debt-bonded laborer does not consider this option. Those who get by in this system give themselves assurance and a certain dignity by multiplying maistris without mentioning the reimbursement of the debt. Over-indebtedness is set within this framework of statutory decline, in the moral, symbolic, and physical obligations of reimbursement. I have shown that, contrary to the intergenerational debt-bonded laborer for whom reimbursement is not current, over-indebtedness appears when the moral and physical obligation to reimburse is combined with the absence of dependable protection and an eventual decline in status.

The fractioning of protection, outside of the domain directly linked to labor, is inseparable from the relationship to time in labor and debt relations. This may be one of the major transformations taking place in India, accentuated by globalization that is increasingly contorting space and time.

Bibliography

BEHAL, Rana P., VAN DER LINDEN, Marcel dir. *India's Labouring Poor : Historical Studies c.1600-c.2000*. New Delhi : Cambridge University Press, 2007. 286 p.

BOURDIEU, Pierre. *Le Sens pratique*. Paris : Les Editions de Minuit, 1980. 475 p.

BRASS, Tom. b. Towards a Definition of Bonded Labour. In BRASS, Tom. *Towards a Comparative Political Economy of Unfree Labour : Case Studies and Debates*. London : Frank Cass, 1999. p. 9-46.

BREMAN, Jan. *Footloose Labour : Working in India's Informal Economy*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1996. 278 p.

BREMAN, Jan, GUERIN, Isabelle, PRAKASH, Aseem dir. *India's Unfree Workorce : Of Bondage Old and New*. New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2009. 399 p.

- DE NEVE, Geert. Asking for and Giving back : Neo-bondage, or the interplay of bondage and resistance in the Tamil Nadu power-loom industry. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 1999, vol. 33, n° 1-2, p. 379-406.
- FARRINGTON, John, DESHINGKAR, Priya, JOHNSON, Craig, START Daniel. *Policy Windows and Livelihood Future : Prospects for Poverty Reduction in Rural India*. New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2006. 512 p.
- GUERIN, Isabelle, BHUKHUT, Augendra, MARIUS-GNANOU, Kamala, VENKATASUBRAMANIAN, G. Neobondage, Seasonal Migration and Job Brokers : Cane Cutters in Tamil Nadu. In BREMAN, Jan, GUERIN, Isabelle, PRAKASH, Aseem dir. *India's Unfree Workforce : Of Bondage Old and New*. New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2009. p. 233-258.
- ILAIAH, Kancha. *Why I am not a Hindu : A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Calcutta : Samya, 1996. 133 p.
- HEUZE, Djallal. Bondage in India : Representing the Past or the Present ? The Case of the Dhanbad Coal Belt during the 1980s. In BREMAN, Jan, GUERIN, Isabelle, PRAKASH, Aseem dir. *India's Unfree Workforce : Of Bondage Old and New*. New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 2009. p. 147-169.
- KERR, Ian J. Free or Unfree ? Railway Construction Labour in Nineteenth Century India. In BRASS, Tom, VAN DER LINDEN, Marcel dir. *Free and Unfree Labour : The Debate Continues*. New York : Peter Lang AG, 1997. p. 405-426.
- OLSEN, Wendy K., MURTHY, Ramana R. V. Contract Labour and Bondage in Andhra Pradesh (India). *Journal of Social and Political Thought*, [en ligne], 2000, vol. 1, n° 2, [consulté le 15 avril 2009]. Disponible sur : <http://www.yorku.ca/jspot/2/wkolsenrvramana.htm>
- PICHERIT, David. 'Workers, trust us!': Labour middlemen and the rise of the lower castes in Andhra Pradesh. In BREMAN, J., GUÉRIN, I. and A. PRAKASH (ed.), *India's Unfree Workforce. Of Bondage Old and New*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009. p. 259-283.
- PICHERIT, David. Territoire et Dépendances: espoirs d'ascension sociale des travailleurs migrants en Andhra Pradesh. In DUPONT V. and LANDY, F. (Eds.), *Circulations et*

territoires dans le monde indien contemporain. Paris : EHESS, (Collection *Purushartha*), 2010.

RAO, Usha. *Palamur Labour : A study of Migrant Labourers in Mahabubnagar District*. Hyderabad : Deshmukh Impart Centre, Council for Social Development, 1994.

WEBER, Florence. Transactions marchandes, échanges rituels, relations personnelles. Une ethnographie économique après le Grand Partage. *Genèses, Sciences sociales et histoire*, 2000, vol.41, n°1. p. 85 – 107.