Capitalist agriculture, COVID-19 and agrarian labour relations in Punjab, India

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Abstract

In the state of Punjab, the heart of the green revolution in India, a large fraction of agricultural labour is expended by migrant workers. The unplanned lockdown imposed by the Indian government affected paddy transplantation, a labour-intensive activity in Punjab primarily due to interstate restrictions on movement. Drawing on a primary survey in a village from the Malwa region of Punjab, the paper examines the changes in agrarian relations in rural Punjab due to the Covid-19 pandemic by critically analysing the dynamics of capital labour relations. The restriction on labour movement and unilateral imposition of transplantation wage rates by a few Panchayats in Punjab (dominated by capitalist landlords and rich peasants) has intensified class conflict in the state. The Punjab government's policies, which are driven by the capitalist landlords and rich peasants, have played a significant role in the increased exploitation of workers. The paper concludes with a brief evaluation of the changes induced by Covid-19 in the agrarian political economy of Punjab.

KEYWORDS
agrarian question, Covid-19, employment, migrant labour, Punjab

1 | INTRODUCTION

When Covid-19 hit India, it was already in an economic downturn. Despite high economic growth rates in 2000s, employment was contracting in the second half of 2000s (2004–2005 to 2009–2010) (Thomas, 2012). Employment
further dwindled in the following decade, and reasons for that included demonetization (2016) and haphazard introduction of goods and services tax (GST) in 2017. That is, despite the growth in output, the country went from a “job less growth” phase to “job-loss growth” phase (see Kannan & Raveendran, 2019). The adverse impact of these two successive shocks was born by the informal workers, which account for 93% of total working population (Srivastava, 2020). The rising unemployment, which was at its highest in 45 years (6.1% of the total labour force in India, in 2017–2018), led to a plunge in demand.

The pandemic and unplanned lockdown further accelerated the problem of unemployment and shortfall in demand. Lockdown in India began on 25 March 2020, whereas reopening started from June onwards. The unplanned lockdown resulted in a collapse of non-agricultural work, and workers who are primarily employed in non-agriculture had to seek work in agriculture (as the lockdown was relaxed for farming in April 2020), resulting in an overall fall in employment and wages (Kaur & Kaur, 2020; Singh et al., 2020). According to an estimate by Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), 121 million workers in India lost employment in April 2020. Ramakumar (2020) points out that during the pandemic, India has witnessed a fall in food consumption mainly due to problems in the distribution of food, that is, not actual non-availability of food. Lockdown began during a month of harvesting of Rabi (winter) season crops. With the continuation of lockdown, the market sales of agricultural produce were significantly lower in March to June 2020 as compared with the same period in 2019. This was due to disruption in trade-related activities, shortage of labour and limited functioning of APMC (Agricultural Produce Market Committee) market yards (mandis) (Ramakumar, 2020). As a consequence of the disruption in the supply of food crops and also with a fall in demand, the prices of agricultural produce declined, particularly of perishable goods (Ramakumar, 2020; Singh et al., 2020).

Among the non-agricultural workers (mainly informal sector workers), the internal migrant workers were the most adversely affected, with abrupt job losses, food deprivation and decline in shelter (Srivastava, 2020). The curtailed migration also affected the labour supply in rural areas, which according to an estimate based on National Sample Survey (NSS) data employed around one-fourth of short-term migrants in India in 2017–2018 (Table 1; Srivastava, 2020). Punjab and Haryana have had large-scale seasonal migration of labour from Bihar, Jharkhand and elsewhere in the post-green revolution period (since the 1960s) for various agricultural activities, such as transplantation and harvesting. In the agriculturally advanced state, Punjab, the migration was due to (a) availability of more agricultural wage work with the introduction of the Kharif (summer) season paddy and (b) relatively higher agricultural wages than in the migrating states (Bihar, Jharkhand and parts of Uttar Pradesh). However, the Covid-19 pandemic and continuation of the nationwide lockdown gave rise to an unprecedented crisis for paddy cultivation in Punjab. The proximate cause of this crisis was the shortage of labour (low wage labour) for the transplantation of the paddy crop. The labour shortfall occurred primarily due to restrictions hitting workers migrating from one Indian regional state to another.

The share of migrant workers in the agricultural workforce of rural Punjab was estimated to be 23% (0.8 million persons) in 2007 (Ghuman et al., 2007). To combat the prevailing crisis for the Kharif season, the state government adopted various mechanisms such as (a) promotion of the labour saving direct seeded rice (DSR) by announcing subsidy on the paddy sowing machines and expansion of extension services; (b) advancing the official dates for transplantation (Punjab state government fixes the dates for transplantation around the time of monsoon arrival in order

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1. Jobless growth’ phase is defined as the phase ‘where there is no growth in employment even when the output growth in the economy is positive’, and ‘Job-loss growth’ is ‘where there is a net decline in employment in the presence of a positive output growth’ (Kannan & Raveendran, 2019).
2. As pointed out by annual survey report of Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2017–2018, for details, see https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1629366.
3. See RAS Editorial (2020), available at http://ras.org.in/covid_19_and_the_rural_non_farm_sector.
4. See details at https://www.cmie.com/kommon/bin/sr.php?call=warticle&dt=2020-09-14%2021:47:53&msec=416. Though some of these workers were able to regain employment in the following months after relaxation in lockdown.
5. See Nandy (2020).
6. Promotion of direct seeded rice (DSR) by Punjab State Government; for details, see https://www.pau.edu/index.php?_act=manageEvent&DO=viewEventDetail&IntEventID=5105 and http://dipr.punjab.gov.in/?q=content/view-concerns-over-labour-shortage-capt-amarinder-advances-paddy-sowing-transplantation-10.
to regulate the depletion of groundwater levels. To tackle the issue of shortage of labour in paddy transplantation, the state government announced an advancement of the dates for nursery sowing of paddy from May 20 to May 10 and paddy transplantation from June 20 to June 10\(^2\); and (c) bringing in migrant workers for transplantation from Bihar and other states.\(^6\) However, with the continuation of lockdown and unavailability of migrant workers, local workers started demanding higher wages for paddy transplantation. A few Panchayats (local governing bodies) in Punjab (dominated by the capitalist landlords and rich peasants)\(^9\) have in a unilateral and illegal manner fixed the rates (of piece-rate contracts) for paddy transplantation and also imposed restrictions on the movement of workers to other villages.\(^10\) The imposition of wage rates and restrictions on movement by the capitalist landlords and rich peasants was to control the cost of cultivation, in particular the cost of hired labour. This illegal system (which has however not been contested by the state government) was first adopted in a few villages in Malwa region, which not only have a high concentration of agricultural land but also employ a relatively large share of migrant workers.\(^11\)

The impact of Covid-19 on an agrarian set-up that is within the ambit of the neoliberal project has intensified class conflict between the capitalist landlords and rich peasants on the one hand and the rural proletariat on the other. As is the case of many other class conflicts, the opposition between these classes is also drawn along caste lines by and large. Against this backdrop, the paper examines the changes in agrarian relations in rural Punjab due to the Covid-19 pandemic by critically analysing the dynamics of capital labour relations by relying on a primary survey of a village (Kanchiyan)\(^12\) from the Malwa region of Punjab.

2 | THE SURVEY

The primary data were collected from a village—Kanchiyan of Sri Muktsar Sahib District—for agricultural years 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 (Kharif season). Kanchiyan is a large village with 1344 households and an area of 2910 ha (Census of India, 2011). There were 1469 households in the village at the time of primary survey in 2020. Forty-one per cent of the households belonged to the Jat Sikh caste. Seventeen per cent belonged to Other Backward Classes (OBC) (Kumhar, Mehra, Faquir, Ramgarhia, Chimba, Jhinwar, Khati and Sunari),\(^13\) 35% were Dalit households (Mazhabi Sikh, Ramdasia Sikh and Bazigar),\(^14\) and 6% households were from other Hindu castes. 1.2% (18 households) were Muslim (OBC).

In order to collect data on employment and working conditions in Kanchiyan, a house-listing survey was conducted of all households, and information on the ownership and operational holdings of land as well as their caste status was collected. The households were divided into different strata on the basis of their landownership and caste, and based on a stratified random sample, detailed household survey (by field visits to households) of 154 households was undertaken in August 2020.\(^15\) Those households that derive at least 50% of their income from

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\(^2\)A notice of advancing the official dates for transplantation is available at http://diprpunjab.gov.in/?q=content/view-concerns-over-labour-shortage-capt-amarinder-advances-paddy-sowing-transplantation-10.

\(^3\)Details regarding attempts to bring migrant workers for transplantation are available at https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/punjab-urges-centre-to-arrange-trains-for-bringing-migrant-workers-back-to-state/story-hQ6FJk0cQtevpRsEU1rZKJ.html.

\(^4\)See the survey section for the definition.

\(^5\)See Singh (2020) for details.

\(^6\)Ghuman et al. (2007) in their study of 36 villages in three regions of Punjab have analysed the regional distribution of migrant workers both as attached/regular (annual migrants) and casual workers (seasonal migrant) and pointed out that Malwa region of Punjab has the largest share of inflows of total migrant workers (75%), followed by Majha region of Punjab (16%) and Doaba region of Punjab (9%). Similarly, the regional distribution of casual migrant workers in the rural areas of Malwa, Majha and Dooba, is, respectively, 74%, 16% and 10% (ibid). This was due to the relatively larger geographical area of the Malwa region and also the higher share of households with large holdings therein, resulting in larger migration of labour into the region (ibid). See also Government of Punjab (2019) for distribution of households across size classes of holding and geographical area of Malwa region.

\(^7\)A pseudonym (Kanchiyan) is used for the surveyed village for confidentiality reasons.

\(^8\)OBCs are defined as ‘the socially and educationally backward classes’ other than the Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes; see http://www.ncbc.nic.in/User_Panel/UserView.aspx?TypeId=1113.

\(^9\)Dalit or Scheduled caste are castes with ‘extreme social, educational and economic backwardness arising out of the traditional practice of untouchability’; see http://socialjustice.nic.in/UserView/index?mid=28545#sc1 for details.

\(^10\)The survey was conducted in August 2020 after taking permission from the authorities to visit the village.
manual wage work were defined as manual worker households.\textsuperscript{16} The share of manual workers households in total survey households was 35.71%. One permanent migrant worker (out of eight households) in the village was also surveyed and has been classified as manual worker as the household earns more than 50% of their income from manual wage labour in the non-agriculture sector.\textsuperscript{17}

Households who have had historically, economic, social and political privileges and hierarchies in the village and cultivate land entirely by hired labour are defined as capitalist landlords (see Ramachandran, 2011 for details). For the paper, the peasantry is identified based on the size of operational holding and classified using agricultural census of India methodology, as marginal (less than 2.5 acres), small (2.5–5 acres), semi-medium (5–10 acres) medium (10–25 acres) and large/rich (greater than 25 acres) peasant households.

\section{AGRARIAN ECONOMY OF THE VILLAGE}

In Kanchiyan, 50% of all households did not own any agricultural land, and 58% of the households did not have any operational holding for the agricultural year 2019–2020. The land is concentrated among Jat Sikh households, and only a small proportion (7%) of Dalit households own land, with an average land ownership of 0.14 acre. Among Jat Sikh households, 5% (28 households) are landless.

The land distribution in the village is very unequal: The Gini coefficient for ownership and operational holding was, respectively, 0.78 and 0.79 in 2019–2020. Agricultural land rent was high and varied between Rs. 55,000 to Rs. 68,000 per acre in 2019–2020 and between Rs. 57,000 to Rs. 72,000 per acre in 2020–2021. Land rents in the village increase every year by 3%–5%. Differences in land rent are due to quality of land (‘fertility’) and access to irrigation (both groundwater and surface) and on account of kinship ties between landowner and tenant.\textsuperscript{18} The high land rents, which are to be paid upfront for every crop season, make agricultural land inaccessible to the landless households, and these households are thus compelled to sell their labour power. Therefore, a significant proportion of landless households, predominantly composed of Dalits in the village, are dependent on both agricultural and non-agricultural casual employment for their livelihood.

High land rent also prevents marginal and small landowning households from leasing in land. Therefore, leasing in land was most common among the large landowning households (with some cases of reverse tenancy).\textsuperscript{19} A constant rice–wheat sequence dominates the cropping pattern of the village. In 2019–2020, paddy was cultivated on 94% of cultivated land in the \textit{Kharif} season, and wheat was cultivated on 99% of operational holding in the \textit{Rabi} season. Cotton cultivation accounted for around 5% of total operational holding in 2019–2020 during the \textit{Kharif} season.

Land in Kanchiyan village is irrigated by both canals and groundwater. Because paddy is a water-intensive crop and the village has limited access to surface water, there has been a consequent over-exploitation of groundwater resources.\textsuperscript{20} Along with this in Kanchiyan and in Punjab as whole, fertilizers are used extensively, even among marginal and small landowning households, to maintain yield levels. As a result, both the water table and the quality of land have deteriorated.\textsuperscript{21}

In the recent period, there has been some stagnation in agricultural production not only in Kanchiyan but also in most parts of Punjab. With the changes in agricultural policies in a neoliberal direction from the 1990s onwards (both in the centre and Punjab), which has resulted in removal of subsidies for seeds, fertilizers, agricultural machines, etc.,

\textsuperscript{16} For a discussion of this methodology, see Ramachandran (2011) and Ramachandran et al. (2014). Fifty-five households from the sample are classified as manual worker households. Out of these 55, 42 were Dalit households (mainly Mazhabi Sikh and Ramdasia Sikh), eight from other backward castes, and five from Other castes (three Jat Sikh, one Pandit and one Baniya household).
\textsuperscript{17} Survey among annual migrant (one worker in 2019–2020) and seasonal migrants could not be conducted, as they had gone back to Bihar before the survey.
\textsuperscript{18} Bansal (2020b) for tenancy in Doaba region of Punjab.
\textsuperscript{19} Reverse tenancy is the case where the small peasants lease out their landholding to large peasants.
\textsuperscript{20} Most of the ‘worst affected’ districts of depleting water table in Punjab are from Malwa region (https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/punjab-tops-in-over-exploitation-of-groundwater-shows-government-data/story-tMipvIMF0ofw57kZcULOBK.html).
\textsuperscript{21} See also Ramachandran (2011).
the cost of cultivation has increased. Despite the rising cost of cultivation and high land rent, cultivator households in Kanchiyan and Punjab as a whole are able to maintain relatively stable agricultural incomes because of relatively low wages and output procurement by the state.22 though there are disparities between the capitalist landlords and rich peasants and other peasants in this respect. Low wages in the agriculture sector are attributed to stagnant agriculture productivity, high levels of mechanisation, lack of alternative employment in the non-agricultural sector, the low collective bargaining power of the manual workers and the presence of significant share of migrant workers in the total workforce.23

The three forms of labour migration into Kanchiyan are permanent migration, annual migration and seasonal migration.24 Every year, seasonal migrants arrive in large groups to work during the paddy transplanting season and for post-harvesting work of wheat. During the lean season in agriculture, some of these seasonal migrant workers work at the APMC mandi of the village as palledar (loading and unloading worker) and in the construction sector.

In 2019–2020, 63% of the total area under paddy crop in Kanchiyan was transplanted by the migrant workers in sample households, and the remaining 37% of the area under paddy was transplanted by local manual workers (including a negligible share by family labour).25 Migrant workers also account for 43% of the workforce for unloading wheat straw in the village.

The workforce participation rate for Dalit households (78.5%) (Table 1) of Kanchiyan is significantly higher than the workforce participation ratio of Jat Sikh households (48.4%). The landless households of the village are mostly dependent on manual work in agricultural and non-agricultural wage work, and a few belonging to Other households (non-Dalit and non-OBC households) are dependent on self-employment in non-agricultural activities (Table 2). Dalit households are primarily manual workers in agriculture, even though some of them have small landholdings. Apart from casual wage work, the workers from Dalit households also work as long-term agricultural worker or cultivate land as hisedar (referred as siri as well).26 Hissedar contracts have characteristics of both long-term labour contract and share tenancy. The participation of female members in the workforce is essential for manual workers’ households. Most of these female workers either work as manual workers in agriculture for paddy transplanting and cotton-picking or work as domestic workers in others houses or are engaged in animal husbandry. As only a small proportion of land is cultivated with cotton in the village, workers from manual workers’ households, primarily women, collectively travel to neighbouring districts and states for cotton-picking.

Studies on agricultural wage employment point out that cropping pattern and intensity, irrigation intensity, uses of material inputs and machines and also land concentration determine the pattern of labour use in agriculture (Ramachandran, 1991). In Kanchiyan as well as elsewhere in Punjab, high land concentration, unchanging cropping patterns and rising levels of mechanisation have reduced the labour required per unit of agricultural land (Singh et al., 2021).

One widely employed mechanism adopted by the capitalist landlords and rich peasants to enhance their bargaining power vis-à-vis manual workers has been the conversion of time rate-based agricultural wage work to piece-rate work. In Kanchiyan, agricultural activities such as spraying and weeding are undertaken on piece-rate wages. In piece-rate contract workers, the duration of labour is enhanced (more than 8 h per day), which involves a rise in the rate of surplus value. However, this results in a fall in the number of days they work and often their wage bill for the total number of days worked if the fall in the number of work days exceeds the rise in the ‘per day’

22The government procures crops from peasants at a minimum support price (MSP). The central government announces MSP of 23 crops (mainly food crops and oilseeds) every year. But the procurement by the government is largely done for rice and wheat in certain parts of the country, and Punjab has been one of the major beneficiaries of the procurement process.
23See Singh et al. (2021) for discussion on fall in employment for manual worker households in rural Punjab.
24Permanent migrants are workers who have migrated to the village over the years and have settled in Punjab. Annual migrants are workers who come to the village on an annual basis and work as long-term workers (attached workers with one household and work on agriculture and allied activities) on agricultural land. And seasonal migrants are workers who come to work in the village in large groups during the paddy transplanting season as well as for post-harvesting work in wheat every year.
25On an average, migrant workers transplanted an acre land in 3 labour days, and local workers transplanted in 5.5 labour days.
26See Rawal (2006) for details of the siri contracts. In Kanchiyan, the hisedar (siri) was given 1/5 share of produce from the contracted land, and the cost of manual workers was borne by hisedar (siri). The machine is mainly operated by the landowning household, and the labour is provided by hisedar (siri).
wage payment. Access and availability of low wage labour facilitates the accumulation of capital as, as mentioned before, public procurement provides a floor price for agricultural output. This transition has not only resulted in a reduction of casual manual employment in agriculture but has also brought some changes in labour hiring contracts in the village, including conversion of daily wage rate contracts to piece-rate contracts and shortening of long-term contracts from 12 to 3 months. However, several factors constraint workers from ‘freely’ selling their labour power. As Ramachandran (2011) explains, ‘To begin with, unfreedom continues because workers cannot just opt out, walk out of the village and find a job elsewhere in a place and occupation (in a town and factory, for instance) where they will be free. A labour force that is far in excess of the means of employment is trapped within the village; it is little wonder that the scale of poverty and unemployment, amidst growth, remains Himalayan’.

In the manual workers households, 44.1% of the workforce is employed in agriculture mostly as casual manual workers (Table 3). The remaining 55.9% are employed in the non-agricultural sectors where 29% are working on casual basis primarily as manual workers in construction sector (Table 3). 5.3% are regular salaried employees, which include work such as clerical employees, technicians and salespersons (Table 3). A noticeable share of this workforce is involved in petty production such as potters, tailors and small shopkeepers in the village.

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**TABLE 1** Workforce participation among all sample households for age group of 15–59 years, in per cent, 2019–2020, in Kanchiyan

| Social group | Total population (in number) | Workforce participation rate (in per cent) |
|--------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| SC           | 191                          | 78.5                                     |
| OBC          | 121                          | 57.9                                     |
| Others       | 279                          | 47.7                                     |
| Total        | 591                          | 59.7                                     |

Source: Survey data.

**TABLE 2** Distribution of workforce by category of employment, among all sample households, for age group of 15–59 years, by caste group in per cent, in per cent, 2019–2020, in Kanchiyan

| Distribution of workforce by category of employment | Social group | SC | OBC | Others | All |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------|----|-----|--------|-----|
| Agriculture                                          |              |    |     |        |     |
| Self-employed                                       |              | 1.3| 7.1 | 55.6   | 23  |
| Casual worker                                        |              | 36.7| 7.1 | 6      | 19.3|
| Long-term worker                                     |              | 4.7 | 0   | 0      | 2   |
| Subtotal                                             |              | 42.7| 14.3| 61.7   | 44.2|
| Non-agriculture                                      |              |    |     |        |     |
| Self-employed                                       |              | 16 | 57.1| 25.6   | 27.8|
| Casual worker                                        |              | 23.3| 15.7| 2.3    | 13.9|
| Monthly paid casual worker                           |              | 8  | 2.9 | 3      | 5.1 |
| Salaried/regular/gov’t employees                     |              | 10 | 10  | 7.5    | 9.1 |
| Subtotal                                             |              | 57.3| 85.7| 38.4   | 55.8|
| Total                                                |              | 100| 100 | 100    | 100 |

Note: The categories of occupation in the village has been defined based on the engagement in primary economic activity (for a relatively long period not less than 30 days) in the agricultural year 2019–2020 (see NSSO, 2001 for details).

Source: Survey data.

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27See Ramachandran (2011).
Because of both push (from the mechanisation of agriculture in the state) and pull factors (the growth of non-agricultural activities in a few segments of the state), workers have been shifting away from agriculture.\textsuperscript{28} However, industrial activities are primarily concentrated in the Doaba region of the state, and workers elsewhere are still dependent on agriculture for wage employment.\textsuperscript{29} In 2019–2020, in Kanchiyan, the average number of days of work for workers employed in non-agriculture sectors is 77 days. Along with this, the work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)\textsuperscript{30} provides a very limited number of working days in the village. The average number of days of work under MGNREGS was 14 for the entire year, whereas as per law the employment to be provided is 100 days per year. Moreover, 67\% of workers from manual worker households did not receive wages for MGNREGS work in the agricultural year 2019–2020 in Kanchiyan.

Due to the complex ways in which gender oppression interacts with class exploitation, female workers are primarily confined to the agricultural sector in activities such as cotton-picking and paddy transplantation. The average number of days of work for female workers is very low as compared with male worker (Table 4) due to the previously mentioned ensemble relation between gender oppression and class exploitation. The latter results in rural female workers obtaining lower levels of formal education, relatively lower geographical and occupational mobility, etc.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Distribution of workforce by category of employment, among manual worker households, for age group of 15–59 years, by caste group in per cent, 2019–2020, in Kanchiyan}
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|l|l|l|l|}
\hline
\multicolumn{2}{|c|}{Distribution of workforce by category of employment} & \multicolumn{4}{|c|}{Social group} \\
\hline
 & & SC & OBC & Others & All \\
\hline
\multirow{4}{*}{Agriculture} & Self-employed & 1.7 & 0.0 & 0.0 & 1.3 \\
 & Casual worker & 41.4 & 18.2 & 50.0 & 38.8 \\
 & Long-term worker & 5.2 & 0.0 & 0.0 & 4.0 \\
 & Subtotal & 48.3 & 18.2 & 50.0 & 44.1 \\
\hline
\multirow{4}{*}{Non-agriculture} & Self-employed & 10.3 & 36.4 & 7.1 & 13.8 \\
 & Casual worker & 29.3 & 31.8 & 21.4 & 29.0 \\
 & Monthly paid casual worker & 6.9 & 4.6 & 21.4 & 7.9 \\
 & Salaried/regular/gov't employees & 5.2 & 9.1 & 0.0 & 5.3 \\
 & Subtotal & 51.7 & 81.8 & 50.0 & 55.9 \\
\hline
\hline
Total & & 100 & 100 & 100 & 100 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

Note: Same as Table 2.
Source: Survey data.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Average days of employment in agriculture and non-agriculture among manual worker households, by gender, in days, 2019–2020, in Kanchiyan}
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|l|l|}
\hline
\multicolumn{4}{|c|}{Average days of employment} \\
\hline
 & Agriculture & Non-agriculture & All \\
\hline
Male & 41 & 113 & 154 \\
Female & 40 & 21 & 61 \\
All & 40 & 77 & 118 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

Source: Survey data.

\textsuperscript{28}See Singh and Bhogal (2014).
\textsuperscript{29} Bansal (2020a).
\textsuperscript{30}MGNREGS is an employment guarantee scheme for providing at least 100 days of wage employment to rural households in the unskilled manual work at minimum wage.
4 | COVID-19 AND LABOUR RELATIONS

Covid-19 and the related lockdown restricted the movement of seasonal migrants and annual (negligible in number), and permanent migrants simply stayed on in the village. The permanent migrants, who were primarily engaged in the non-agricultural sectors, lost their employment during Covid-19. The seasonal migrants are employed on piece-rated basis. For piece-rate work in agriculture in many parts of Punjab, the wage rate is unilaterally decided by the capitalist landlords and rich peasants and is denoted as the ‘village rate’. The manual workers (including the seasonal migrants) have negligible or low power to bargain regarding the village rate. The rates are followed almost uniformly although some very small variations across households arise from the employer–employee relationship. For instance, manual workers are not only dependent on landed households for agricultural wage employment but also for loans. Even though the old types of bonded labour do not exist in the village,31 workers are not free (in the capitalist sense) to sell their labour power. Most manual worker households have been working for a single employer even on casual and piece-rated basis. The seasonal demand of labour is met by the migrant workers.

Although agriculture has become increasingly mechanized over the years, some key agricultural operations are still labour intensive in Punjab. These are paddy transplantation, unloading straw (mainly of wheat) and also cotton-picking in the Malwa region. With restrictions imposed by the government on movement during the unplanned lockdown, the capitalist landlords and rich peasants were apprehensive that rural wages may rise due to the resulting reduced availability of migrant workers during the Rabi harvesting season for the labour-intensive work of unloading wheat straw. The Panchayat of Kanchiyan, led by the capitalist landlords and rich peasants of the village primarily belonging to the Jat Sikh caste, unilaterally imposed a fixed rate for unloading wheat straw at Rs. 200 per trolley. This unilateral imposition intensified class conflicts between the capitalist landlords and rich peasants and the manual workers. The Panchayat also decided to impose a fine on those not following their unilaterally decided rate. The resistance of the manual workers to this unilateral imposition was sought to be countered by the capitalist landlords and rich peasants by the use of the ‘threat of their sack’, that is, denial of employment unless it was at the wage rate decided unilaterally by the former. In the last season before Covid-19, that is, in the 2019–2020 season, the workers of the village protested for a week, demanding an increase of the daily wage rate for agricultural work. The protests were curbed by sacking a worker from a household that was part of the protest. The worker was employed on contractual basis as a security guard at the APMC market yard and was removed with the immediate effect, without any prior information. The coercive action against the contractual worker resulted in the withdrawal of protests.32

Given this incident of the previous year, during Covid-19, most manual workers were compelled to work at the wage rate that was unilaterally imposed by the Panchayat for unloading straw. However, with continuation of lockdown and with unavailability of migrant workers, the local manual workers started demanding a higher wage rate (Rs. 4000/acre for non-basmati rice field work and Rs. 4500/acre for basmati rice field work) for paddy transplantation. The landed households (and the capitalist landlords and rich peasants in the first place) were not willing to pay this higher wage rate, and workers were unwilling to transplant paddy at lower rates. In the midst of this class conflict over wages, the Panchayat once again unilaterally proclaimed that wage rates for paddy transplantation would be Rs. 2700/acre for non-basmati rice fields and Rs. 3000/acre for basmati rice fields. The rates imposed by the Panchayat were slightly higher than the rates paid for paddy transplantation of the previous year. The real wage rate for paddy transplantation in 2019–2020 was Rs. 2647 for non-basmati rice fields and Rs. 2859/acre for basmati rice fields (in 2020–2021 prices).33 The Panchayat, which is dominated by capitalist landlords and rich peasants, also has members from Dalit and manual worker households. But the members from these Dalit and manual worker households were not included while deciding about the rates but were made to sign the documents at later stages. This coercion by the capitalist landlords and rich peasants was compounded by the Panchayat moving to restrict the

31A bonded labour is where ‘farm servants were bonded by debt to landlords’ and ‘is unfree to choose his or her employer’ (Ramachandran, 1991). For details, see Ramachandran (1991) and Patnaik (1985) (as cited in Ramachandran, 1991).
32After the withdrawal of the protest and a month-long pleading, the worker was hired back.
33Prices are converted to 2020–2021 prices, using the averages of June–July 2019 and June–July 2020 from CPI (AL) data for Punjab.
movement of manual workers from Kanchiyan to other villages. Resistance by manual workers against these explicitly coercive and illegal actions of the capitalist landlords and rich peasants was sought to be dealt through illegal threats of exorbitant ‘fines’.

Given that most manual workers operate at the margin of subsistence, the coercive actions of the capitalist landlords and rich peasants (with implicit backing of the government by silent acquiescence and by not taking any action against it), the struggle of the manual workers suffered a setback. During the period of the unplanned lockdown, 23% of the workforce from manual worker households lost employment in the non-agricultural sectors, most of them for a period of 60–90 days. The rural manual workers not only lost their employment but had to either borrow from the landed households of the village or from private finance companies (at exorbitant rates of interest) for sheer survival. Among manual workers households, 86% of the outstanding debt was from non-institutional sources including peasants/rural employers, shopkeepers, friends and relatives. The loan amount from private finance companies accounted to 37% of the total outstanding loans among manual worker households. The terms of loans, repayment and exorbitant rates of interest of private finance companies not only aggravated the economic crisis for manual workers households but also brought down the bargaining power of workers.

During the unplanned lockdown period (after March 2020 till the survey), MGNREGS work was also not provided by the Panchayat, even though the demand for this rose as alternative sources of employment declined. As Panchayats are liable for providing work within 15 days of registration of demand for work by manual workers, the Panchayat simply did not register such demands during the lockdown. Average number of days of work provided per household during 2020–2021 by the Punjab state (39 days) is about 31% lower than average days of work provided at the all India level (51 days). Evidently, the capitalist landlords and rich peasants were able to, by and large, ensure that the working of the MGNREGS did not undermine their bargaining power in Kanchiyan.

For manual workers, a number of factors were responsible for the setback in their bargaining power. These include the government’s implicit backing of the capitalist landlords and rich peasants and the superior bargaining power of the capitalist landlords and rich peasants, which was due to the absence of alternative employment for manual workers and the ways through which the balance of bargaining power tilted in favour of the capitalist landlords and rich peasants. Further, the caste divide in Kanchiyan tends to strengthen the cohesiveness of rural employers (as they are relatively homogeneous caste-wise) although it tends to diminish the cohesiveness of manual workers (as they are relatively heterogeneous caste-wise).

The peasantry, on the other hand, is a heterogeneous class. Small and marginal peasants are primarily oriented towards subsistence cultivation. Small, marginal and at least a section of semi-medium peasants often use family labour besides ‘exchanging’ labour to cultivate their land. However, paddy transplantation was mainly done by hired workers across peasant classes, by migrant workers in particular. With the continuation of the altercation between the rural classes, a few peasant households (small, marginal and semi-medium) were willing to pay a wage that was marginally higher than the one unilaterally imposed by the Panchayat to complete the paddy transplantation work on time. This happened in spite of state government support for DSR, which is a method of sowing rice seeds directly to field by machine as an alternative to the manual transplantation of seedlings. The state government made announcements of subsidies for this and also about the expansion of extension services, but a large number of peasants were apprehensive about DSR as there was delay in the transfer of relevant information. Apprehension about

34A labour union from Malwa region reported these incidences (of Malwa region) to the district authorities, but there was no action taken against these arbitrary resolutions of Panchayat for deciding wage rates; see https://thewire.in/agriculture/punjab-paddy-farmers-labourers for details.
35About 19% of the total workforce from the surveyed households of the village lost employment in non-agricultural sector.
36A recent study by Singh et al. (2021) points out that 79% of the rural suicides are by agricultural workers because of low incomes and high levels of debts.
37As of 31 March 2021, data from Ministry of Rural Development available at http://mnregaweb4.nic.in/netnrega/all_lvl_details_dashboard_new.aspx?Fin_Year=2020-2021&Digest=ueg/HIV54GGJ8Q6GUB2ew.
38Small, marginal and semi-medium peasants are 27% of all households in the village.
39https://www.pau.edu/index.php?_act=manageEvents&DO=viewEventDetail&intEventID=5105 and http://diprpunjab.gov.in/?q=content/view-concerns-over-labour-shortage-capt-amarinder-advances-paddy-sowing-transplantation-10
40http://diprpunjab.gov.in/?q=content/punjab-government-announces-subsidy-upto-50-machinery-paddy-and-maize-cultivation
DSR and unwillingness to delay the sowing meant that the peasant households were willing to pay a higher wage rate for transplantation. This resulted in a small increase of the real wage rate from that of the previous year (2019–2020). For basmati rice fields, the median wage rate was equivalent to the rates imposed by Panchayat. The manual workers largely bargained higher price for non-basmati rice fields as about 74% of the total area under paddy cultivation was of non-basmati rice fields. The groups comprising younger workers (mostly below 30 years of age) were able to fetch higher wages as compared with others. As the higher wage rates were offered by the peasant households, the Panchayat decided to not to take any action against them for not following the rates decided by Panchayat.

In 2019–2020, about 71% of paddy transplantation undertaken by the workers from the manual worker households took place in neighbouring villages as the wages there were relatively higher than Kanchiyan (see Table 5). However, in 2020–2021, the workers primarily worked within the village both because of Covid-19 restrictions and because of the restrictions imposed on movement by Panchayat in the early days of the paddy transplantation season. The median wage rate received by the manual workers of the village and the median wage rate paid to the migrant workers for paddy transplantation in 2019–2020 were similar. In 2019–2020, the variation in the wages for migrant worker was very small (of about Rs. 100/acre for basmati and non-basmati rice fields), whereas there was relatively larger variations among manual workers from the village (between Rs. 2330 and 2859 per acre for non-basmati rice fields and Rs. 2647 and 3177 per acre for basmati rice fields). Such variations were determined by their relative bargaining power and socio-economic relations within the village.

In 2020–2021, a group of 12 migrant workers (from Bihar) entered Kanchiyan on 14 June 2020 (1 week after the transplantation began) and transplanted paddy in about 5% of the total area under paddy cultivation. They stayed for 15 days in the fields near the village and transplanted paddy during the quarantine period. They transplanted paddy for households with whom they had ties for transplantation in the previous years. The initial wage contract with the migrant workers was of Rs. 2700/acre for non-basmati rice fields and Rs. 3000/acre for basmati rice field. However, later, from the most households, the migrant worker also demanded a higher wage rate (Rs. 2900/acre for non-basmati rice fields and Rs. 3000/acre for basmati rice fields) than the rates announced by the Panchayat; and both Panchayat and capitalist landlords and rich peasants agreed to pay the higher rates. A few of the rich peasants had made ties with both migrant workers and workers from neighbouring villages. Both migrant workers and workers from neighbouring villages were hired in the midst the ongoing class conflict, in order to transplant paddy in time. Five per cent of the total area under paddy cultivation was transplanted by the manual workers from the neighbouring villages, who also were paid a higher rate than the rates decided by Panchayat because of their stronger bargaining power.

| Crop             | 2019–2020 Within the village | 2019–2020 In neighbouring villages | 2020–2021 Within the village |
|------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Non-basmati (Rs. per acre) | 2647                         | 2859                              | 3000                          |
| Basmati (Rs. per acre)     | 2859                         | 3177                              | 3000                          |

Note: Prices are converted to 2020–2021 prices using the averages of June–July 2019 and June–July 2020 from CPI (AL) data for Punjab. Source: Survey data.

41Kaur et al. (2011) points that approximately 63% peasants preferred migrant workers to local workers for paddy transplantation because they claimed that would result in a more rapid completion of the task and reduce losses if any in productivity.

42For wage rate payments to migrant workers, we have used the wage payment data from peasant households to migrant workers, as migrant workers had returned to Bihar, at the time of survey.
The shortage of migrant workers resulted in three significant changes in the agrarian economy of the village:

1. A small increase in the area under cultivation of cotton, from about 5% in 2019–2020 to 7.5% in 2020–2021.
2. A few capitalist landlords and rich peasants opted for leasing out their agricultural land (at enhanced rent) and often for only 1 year due to the reduced availability of migrant workers. Previously, these households employed manual workers for cultivation on the basis of both long-term and casual contracts.
3. Twenty-six per cent of total area under paddy cultivation was directly sowed (DSR) with greater use of machines on the fields of a few capitalist landlords and rich peasants.43

The shift in area under cultivation (from paddy to cotton), the use of DSR, the labour hiring from neighbouring villages and the increase in supply of labour (of Kanchiyan) due to the loss of non-agricultural employment resulted in a fall in employment for each manual worker. The fall in average days of work per worker for paddy transplantation among the manual workers was 17% (30 to 25 days) from 2019–2020 to 2020–2021 (Table 6).

Though the real wages within the village for both basmati and non-basmati rice fields witnessed an increase than the previous year, overall, the real wage rate of paddy transplantation from total wage work in the village and in neighbouring village of basmati transplantation fell from 2019–2020 to 2020–2021. Together, with the fall in the days of employment, this brought down both average and median income of the workers in Kanchiyan for paddy transplantation (Tables 5 and 6).

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Agrarian relations in Kanchiyan involve capital accumulation through exploitation of workers. Covid-19 enhanced the class conflict between the capitalist landlords and rich peasants and manual workers. But the contours of this class struggle were influenced by the historical conditions that inhere in rural India (which involves the ensemble of relations involving class exploitation, gender oppression, caste oppression, etc.). The manual workers are both landless and lack any other means of production and are therefore compelled to sell their labour power at wages that do not exceed the level of subsistence. The migration into Punjab was propelled by the large-scale introduction of *Kharif* season paddy, and this attenuated a rise in agricultural wages, which otherwise might have taken place. The capitalist landlords and rich peasants are the principal beneficiaries of the miserable condition of the manual workers and the low cost migrant workers as public procurement provides a floor price for their agricultural output.

43These households purchased their own paddy sowing machines on government subsidy.
In the midst of the unplanned lockdown, the manual workers households lost out although there were complex forces at play. On the one hand, they had setbacks in their bargaining power due to various reasons such as their loss of employment in the non-agricultural sectors, the unilateral imposition by the Panchayat (dominated by capitalist landlords and rich peasants) restriction on labour movement and its unilateral imposition of transplantation wage rates, the absence of employment under MGNREGS, their high share of non-institutional debt and the government implicitly backing the capitalist landlords and rich peasants. On the other hand, a few peasant households (mainly, small, marginal and semi-medium peasants) were willing to pay relatively higher wage than proclaimed by the Panchayat in order to ensure that their transplantation was finished within time. The higher wage rate offered by these peasant households to manual workers broke the deadlock between the two principal classes in the village. However, in spite of this, the median income per worker from manual worker households declined. This was due to the rise in the number of workers for paddy transplantation, the shift in area from paddy to cotton and the use of DSR and restriction on movement to other villages.

The paper focuses on how Covid-19 and the imposed lockdown benefitted certain rural classes in a specific village in Punjab. But the role of government policies was nevertheless clear, and the policies of the central government, which involve negligible relief in terms of health and economic measures for the working people, resource squeeze over state governments, etc., are part and parcel of the attempts to strengthen the neoliberal project in India, and this provides the setting within which the class conflict is played out in states such as Punjab.

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Author elects to not share data: Research data are not shared.

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