

**Paradoxes of Development:  
Case Studies from the Halpati Community in South  
Gujarat**

*By Anushka Rose and Vijeta*

**Centre for Labour Research and Action**

Supported by

**Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung- South Asia**

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This study is a fruit of a collaborative effort and collective labour; however, the faults, if any, solely belong to the authors.

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Data collection and transcription team:

Ms. Vanita Rathore and Mr. Jitu Baraiya

## ***Chapter 1: Introduction***

### ***Studying the conditions of local Agricultural Workers in South of Gujarat***

This study is an attempt to map the living and working conditions of local agriculture workers (*halpatis*) in South Gujarat. For better part of the last decade, CLRA has been engaging intensively with the migrant sugarcane harvesting workers who hail from the Tribal communities in the areas along the border of Gujarat. The harvesters migrate to sugarcane farms across South Gujarat to harvest the standing canes for the landowning farmers. The landowner. However till the arrival of the harvesters, it is the local agricultural communities that undertake all labouring activities pertaining to local agriculture such as preparing the land, sowing, irrigating, spraying of fertilizers and pesticides, picking of the harvests (of vegetables and grains) including cultivation of the sugarcane. The community of these local agricultural workers have been co-habiting the landowning class (better word that encompasses caste as well as class) for generations now. This community is resident in the same villages as farmers (the Patels, Dhuria Patels, Rajputs, etc). Eminent Sociologist Prof Jan Breman in the 1970s lived with the Halpatis, documented how the community of Halpatis for generations have been tied to one farm estate and required to perform a wide array of labouring activities. These activities range from performing labour on the agricultural land, domestic chores, taking care of the draught animals, arranging for additional agricultural labour, so on and so forth as required by the family. Over the years as the economy became increasingly monetised, the Halpati community associated with the landowning family, also began receiving daily wages in addition to one meal. Yet the arrangement assures the farm land owner and his household of cheap uninterrupted labour supply, while the labourer is left tied to the family, often without any means to escape this arrangement.

The community has been studied and documented extensively by academics particularly by Prof. Jan Breman who conducted his ethnographic work on the Halpati's and documented their lifeworld. The CLRA research team seeks to examine the present state of the agricultural workers through the lens of households located in Barasadi, Jetpor, Vanesa. and Mordevi. The reports through its findings seeks to closely examine the socio-economic dynamics of their relationship with the landed communities at present, their perception and experience of work, their access to public services and amenities, their experience of oppression at the hands of the landowning class.

This study is of an investigative nature seeking to document and examine the working and living conditions of the local agricultural community of Halpatis in South Gujarat. This study is integral to CLRA's existing work with the Sugarcane harvesters to forge synergies between the two working communities and become the foundation of the organization's intervention

Need of the study:

- Understand the extent of local agricultural wage labour engaged in agricultural crops such as the sugarcane, vegetables, fruits, and grains in the South of Gujarat
- Document local agricultural labour - Halpatis and delve into the nuances of in which Halpatis are engaged in

Objectives of the study:

- Map the living and working conditions of Halpatis, to examine how they have changed over the decades
- Understanding the various labour arrangements as practiced among the Halpati agricultural workers and Farmers

With the need of this study and for the objectives elaborated above, the outlay of the report is as follows: The study begins with a brief discussion about the context of the study, an elaborate discussion of locating the Halpati community in the existing literature, to walk the reader through the methodology before delving into the nuances of the findings to arrive at the final discussion in the concluding remarks.

## *Chapter 2: Locating Halpatis in the Literature*

Prof. Jan Breman conducted an extensive research on the Halpatis, a community of landless agricultural laborers in western India in the 1970's for his doctoral thesis. His work on the Halpatis has shed light on the complex issues surrounding poverty, exploitation, and social exclusion that affect many marginalized communities in India, particularly the Halpatis of South Gujarat.

Breman's research on the Halpatis has focused on the ways in which the community's labour was exploited and undervalued. He documented the harsh working conditions that Halpatis endured, including long hours, low wages, and little job security. Breman had also explored the social and economic structures that contribute to the exploitation of Halpatis, including the dominance of upper-caste landowners and the lack of access to education and other resources.

In his book, "The Poverty Regime in Village India," Breman presents a detailed analysis of the lives of Halpatis in Gujarat, India. He highlights the ways in which the caste system and other forms of social exclusion contribute to the poverty and marginalization of the Halpatis.

One of Breman's most notable contributions to the study of the Halpatis has been his documentation of the community's struggle for land rights. He has shown how landlessness has perpetuated poverty and exploitation among Halpatis and has documented their efforts to gain control over the land they work on. Breman has also explored the challenges that Halpatis face in their attempts to organize and demand fair treatment from landowners and employers.

Overall, Jan Breman's (1974a and 1974b) work on the Halpatis has contributed significantly to our understanding of the social and economic conditions facing agricultural laborers in India. His research has shed light on the ways in which poverty and exploitation are perpetuated within this community, and has highlighted the importance of land rights and collective action in addressing these issues.

It is in this context that the research team forayed in to discussions with the members of the Halpati community – to examine their present condition. Before delving into the

methodology and the findings of the study, the next section details the review of literature on the Halpati community:

The Halpati community predominantly resides in the district of Vadodara, Bharuch, Surat, Navsari, and Valsad in Gujarat. They form about 7.21 per cent of the total population of Gujarat, consisting of 89224 population (44240 male and 44984 female) (TDG; TDD, 2011). Earlier the social structure was divided into *ujliparaj* (light coloured) and *kaliparaj* (dark coloured). Halpati is maintained in the second type of social structure. The caste community in the central belt does not regard the Halpatis to be full-fledged Hindus despite the fact that they are not truly Adivasis (Breman, 1974a). But they are classified as a 'scheduled tribe'. There are twenty subdivisions in Halpati: Talavia, Rathore, Vohariya, Damaria, Valsadia, Olpadia, Mandavia, Umberia, Ghanghodia, Khodia, Choria, Ukharia, Baramia, Baria, Narda, Haevia, Thakura, Karcha, Watal, Parsi Dubla, and Laldatwala Dubla. Halpatis have not been recorded in the past as peasants or land owners. Historically, it is true that, locally, individual members of this caste own small piece of land, but the majority has had worked as agriculture labourers since long. According to the 1961 census, this was still the main, if not the only, source of livelihood for 73 percent of them. The other caste who reside in southern Gujarat were Anavil Brahmans, Kanbis, Kolis. Kanbis Patels - the dominant caste and Kolis form the largest caste in this region (Breman, 1974a).

**Hali System:** Hali-system also called *halipratha* is the predominant service relationship of southern Gujarat. Jan Breman (1974b) described the Hali system in South Gujarat as 'The Permanence of the Service Relationship'. A 'hali' is a farm labourer (*bhandela halis*; bonded servants) who regularly performed work for a landlord and his family. The service was typically provided on an ongoing basis and was not contracted for a specific amount of time. Not only did entry into bondage mark the beginning of a lifetime of servitude, but some inherited traits served to accentuate its unfree aspects. Dwelling on the generational aspect of the servitude, Breman discussed that since the boy had grown up and lived off of the master's food as a result of the master's generosity, the master had a claim to the son of his servant (ibid). They assisted his master in everything and what could reasonably be expected. Halis were considered as very loyal to the master. Hali's wife, colloquially termed as *harekwali*, served as maid in the house of the master. Moreover, she helped out on the land in the busy season (Breman, 1974b).



Gandhi replaced the pejorative word "Dubla" with the more honourable name "Halpati" for this caste of agricultural labourers. Breman (1974a) writes that during that time not all halpatis were permanently attached to a landowner. There were free agriculture labourers (*chuta halis* : free halis) existing at that time. They too were indebted to a landowner, so there were no clear cut difference between bonded and free agricultural labourers. The reason why hali stuck to the master was that they helped them on all occasions of death, marriage, and lent money during the time of need. On the other hand these entitlements were not applicable to other halis. Additionally, Breman said that free agriculture labours received their allowance/ remuneration based on work, on the other side halis was remunerated on the basis of his needs, which were rated low indeed.

**Efforts to put to an end to hali system in the past:** Breman (1974a) discussed the efforts in the past on removing this system. He elaborated on that the Gandhian movement aimed to convince landlords of the injustice of the hali system rather than mobilizing agricultural laborers towards discontent. However, the Kanbi Patel landlords did not adhere to the conditions of an agreement reached in Bardoli in 1938 that was designed to end the hali system. A new attempt to end the system by the political leader Morarji Desai in 1948 also failed. Despite the efforts of social workers, the change in the relationships between landlords and landless was only marginally affected by their interventions.

Overall, the efforts of the Gandhian movement and subsequent attempts to end the hali system were not successful in bringing about significant change. The landlords did not adhere to the agreements reached, and the change in the relationships between landlords and agricultural laborers was driven more by broader economic and social changes in the agricultural industry (1947a).

**Changes in Landlord-Labourer Relations:** Sharma (2021) described changes that occurred in the relationships between landlords and agricultural laborers during the 1970s. Traditionally, agricultural laborers were employed by larger landowners, who were typically members of dominant castes in the Bular and Surat districts of India. The laborers were dependent on their masters through the hali system, which institutionalized this relationship. However, the mechanization of agriculture led to the disintegration of the hali system and a shift towards more contractual and impersonal relationships between landlords and workers.

The commercialization of agriculture played a significant role in this change, as increasing market production disrupted the traditional arrangements that were based on mutual obligations of economic, political, cultural, and social nature. As a result, the daily grain allowance and other daily and seasonal perquisites that guaranteed a subsistence livelihood for the halpatis (agricultural laborers) were transformed into a cash wage in exchange for specific labour performance. The firm and intimate bonds between the households of landlords and their workers dissolved and were replaced by loose and limited contacts. The percentage of casual wage earners rapidly increased, and farm servants, to the extent that they are still required, are hired on a contractual basis. A significant shift in the relationships between landlords and agricultural laborers in India during the 1970s, driven by changes in the agricultural industry and market production.

Breman, in his seminal work described the socio-economic condition of agricultural laborers in South Gujarat in 1972 (1974). The daily wage for agriculture laborers fluctuated between Rs 1 and 2, indicating low wages. The laborers' dependence on landowners had not disappeared, but the humanizing features of dependence under the hali system had vanished. As a result, the exploitation of the Halpatis was more evident in the present relationship pattern. The deteriorating socio-economic condition of agricultural workers preceded the Green Revolution in South Gujarat and was, in fact, a precondition rather than an effect of this technological breakthrough in agriculture. He implied that the Green Revolution did not significantly improve the situation for agricultural workers. Social interaction with workers had been reduced to an absolute minimum, indicating a lack of communication and engagement between landowners and laborers. He reasoned it as depatronisation of the relationship between parties concerned.

One of the most significant changes in the labour market of South Gujarat was the mobility of rural labor over large distances. The presence of large-scale migratory labour had a wage depressive effect, indicating that wages are pushed down due to the abundance of available labour. This also facilitated replacement in cases of insufficient performance or impertinent behavior on the part of halpatis, suggesting that labourers are more easily replaceable than in the past. The transition from agrarian to industrial labour upheld by theories of dualism were belied here, by the continued existence of a large mass of unorganised and unprotected workers ( Srivastava, 1997).

Breman analyses changes in the occupational structure of halpati labourers between the early 1960s and the late 1980s and finds that there was a decline in agricultural employment, a shift from agrarian to non-agrarian work, primarily as casual labour, increased mobility, a decline in agricultural employment opportunities for women, and a predominance of lower-paying, unskilled jobs for which they were present. The temporary migration of local labourers to distant locations was caused not by dearth of local employment opportunities but rather to the fact that a growing number of workplaces within the region are occupied by labourers brought in from far away destinations (Srivastava, 1997). Breman (1976) elaborated that these regions had shown rapid and sustained economic growth. During the last thirty years these dynamics have provided great benefit to owners of capital but without fundamentally reducing the degree of exploitation of labour.

The report elaborates on the current economical and occupational structure of Halpati to understand the prevailing conditions of this community.

### ***Chapter 3: Methodology***

To document and understand condition of the Halpati community – the team adopted a qualitative methodology drawing on ethnographic methods of in-depth interviews and group discussions. The team relied on the methods of long and detailed interviews (semi structured) with the women and men from the halpati community across the four villages.

Qualitative methods offered an effective way to explore their relationship with work, employers, their own living conditions.

Given that our objective was anchored to understand what made the subordination of one community possible, ensuring that it continued to persist and sustain in the present day. Explorations were rooted in the questions related to this subordination – was it universal, historical, was it based on the material circumstances only? What was the role of culture and ideology, and was there diversity into how Halpatis subordination came into being. To conduct this exploratory study, the question for the in-depth interviews were framed to investigate on the past relationship of the family with the landholding class, their economic and social relationship, how their condition has under gone a change over the years, have they devised any coping strategies to emerge out the present conditions – to improve economic condition of the family.

During the period of the study, the team travelled to four villages near the city of Surat, members of five families were interviewed over two phases in the months of August and September. The interview strategy involved interviewing the family members together, separate interviews with different family members along with focussed group discussions conducted with the larger community members.

Case studies were developed to allow a deeper insight into the reality and the condition of the Halpati families. These case studies are representative and meant to provide a window into the lives of a Halpati in the present day conditions, how the community has been attempting to work through their oppressive conditions, and the structure that keeps resisting their attempts. Thus, the methodological framework was guided by the following:

- Undertaking detailed and long interviews (semi structured) and FGDs with a small sample of workers across four villages – Vanesa, Barasadi, Jatpor, and Mordevi

- Engage in comprehensive discussions with three groups of workers – Bonded workers (Halis), Domestic Workers, Daily wage workers

***Limitations:***

Several issues arose during the collection of data that have limited the scope of this study.

Firstly, the small size of the dataset meant that it was not possible to cover the scale or prevalence of the halpati community across south of Gujarat. As stated above, the objective for this study was to conduct an in depth analysis of the conditions, before dwelling into an expansive study.

During the period of interview resistances were encountered of various kinds. Firstly, the presence of the upper caste community members in the vicinity was obstructive to the conversations. Oftentimes the land owning community members or their representatives would arrive to interrupt the discussion or the interviews or group discussions proving to be disruptive to the flow of the conversation and the quality of the interview.

The threat of the repercussions or retaliation from the upper caste community added to the hesitation and apprehension among the Halpati community members. There were times when the interviewees backed out at the last moment or refused to participate in the interviews or left in the middle of the interviews. This was particularly prevalent when the respondent realised that the looming presence of the member of landowning class or community.

These disruptions and hesitations reflected expanse of the embedded power dynamics that led to apprehension among the Halpati community members to elaborate on their lived experiences

## ***Chapter 4: The Findings and Observations***

The project team undertook a primary visit to the settlements of the local agricultural labour across South Gujarat. During this period, the project team visited numerous villages across 8 blocks (Palsana, Choryasi, Kamrej, Bardoli, Mandvi, Navsari, Valod, Olpad) in Surat District before arriving on selecting the four villages for the study.

The team found that the local agricultural workers - the Halpati community were engaged in all kinds of agricultural activities such as ploughing, sowing, weeding, irrigation, picking of vegetables, sprinkling of pesticides, covering of the fruits, cultivation of sugar cane, spraying fertilizer in farms. Among this community of workers, the team further found that the workers can be broadly divided into two kinds of labour - one being permanent labour called hali (bonded labour) that was tied to a particular landowning family and the second one being the casual daily wage workers.

The reader may recall from the discussion in chapter 2 that this hali or bonded worker with his family was tied to the landowning family (here onwards referred to as Patel). This bondage ran across generations. In addition to the male members/head of the household - the women of the halpati households were expected to perform domestic work in the household of the Patels/patron – including but not limited to sweeping, cleaning, tending to the cattle, washing of utensils and clothes. Further in the event of the death of the head of the halpati household, the next male member was to replace the deceased Hali and continue the practice of bondage with the Patel family. The group of women that the team met in Shampura during the pilot visit in the last week of July 2021 during a group discussion described that their day started early with their own household chores. At about 6 to 6:30 am they were expected to start their work at the Patels house and wind up by 9am, before they were expected to work on the fields. The women shared that they worked for wages as much as Rs.300 per month for the household work they undertook for the farmers households.

When the team enquired about whether the women were allowed to work in more than one households (like in the urban and peri-urban areas) – the women quickly responded that the practice in the rural parts was such that no domestic help was allowed to change the households or undertake more than one household. They further added that the Patels/farmer households ensured that if a woman was dismissed from one house, she could not find work in any other household.

When asked about the Hali practice, the participants were unanimous in the view that the entire family is at times bonded to the Patel's family and was expected to perform all chores or labour as demanded by the Patel's family. The group reported that the Hali was also responsible for arranging the workers for the agricultural work and supervise the agricultural task. In case of a celebration or social event in the Patel household, the Hali's family was expected to provide their labour throughout the event in exchange of one meal. With little to no social mobility for the Hali families – the relationship indicates the continuing roots of traditional bonded labour practices.

The discussion gave a fleeting insight into the exploitative and deeply oppressive labour practices that the community of Halpatis find themselves entrenched. Thus, these discussions rooted the need for the study to focus on documenting these experiences and bring forth how these nuances of violations the workers experience on everyday level.

As detailed in the above sections, four case studies have been carved out of discussions to offer a representative discussion on the varying experiences of the Halpati community:

There are four case studies that have been thematically arranged as follows:

Jetpor – to set the context of the study, the case study details the prevailing conditions and arrangements about people working for daily wages, nature of work, workers working in other fields, general relationship with landowning class, access to public services and goods such as education condition for children, nutrition and health services.

Barasadi – this case study takes the reader from a general to a specific case of a Hali family. Payal's family history discusses the generational feature of hali system as manifesting today after the death of his father wherein the son was employed as the hali. The son worked as hali in the day, and went to the factory at night. The family looked after the estate for the family that now lived in the USA and had left behind their elders. The Patel's family returned for two months every year. The respondent's house was the only house that stood out in the entire settlement. They had also received 1 bhiga land – unlike many others. The grandmother and the other continues to work at the Patel's house, while respondent Payal was considered as the adopted daughter whose education was funded by the Patel's family.

Vanesa – The case study describes deep embeddedness of the hali system and its impact on a family, non payment of wages, daily expenditure of the family, dependency on the farm owner, influence of the farm owner on the communities members of the village.

Mordevi – different yet the same hali practice. People diversifying in other livelihoods, trying other alternatives. Yet, the upper castes pay the workers lower than the other communities.

### ***Jetpor:***

Jetpor was one of the first villages that the team visited located about fifty kilometers away from the city of Surat. The team met Reena who has been working since 2016 as a domestic worker for a landowning family - Deepak Patel. Before working as a domestic worker, Reena used to undertake agricultural labour.

During the interview Reena shared that she was required to go once a week and clean the residence of the Patel. The Patel's family has been out of country and was due to return in the winters – then she will be required to go for work at their house every day. Reena reported that her salary was paid in lumpsum by the owner semi-annually, since transferring small amounts to her bank account every month was expensive. Reena reported that her employer would give her about Rs. 2000 to Rs. 4000 annually in addition to her salary to help her meet expenses for groceries, education expenses, health related expenses. The Patels family had no farmland or draught animals, and they have been living abroad for many years. She revealed that she gets Rs. 1200 per month for the domestic work for maintaining and cleaning a two floor, six bedroom, one big hall and kitchen residence. Reena has been given a phone by the employers and was in regular contact with them. The family returns every year for about five to six months from November to March. However, the family did not return the previous year due to Covid-19.

In this conversation with Reena, she was joined by Kirti who had just returned from the field for lunch. She and her mother were the only members who earned by agricultural labour. In the mornings they left at 8 am and returned at 2pm for lunch – for this shift they earned a daily wage Rs.100 each. If they went back for work after lunch from 2pm to 5pm– then an additional Rs 60 was given.

Sugarcane sowing, the duo explained, was the only cash crop that farmers gave on contract. That is a group of agricultural labourers would work on an acre of land for a lumpsum



amount. For last season, Kirti and her group of 10 workers had worked for Rs2200 for each acre of land. Majority of the people from the 55 households across the three Halpati settlements in the village worked as agricultural labour. Barring Sugarcane, every other crop attracted a daily wage of Rs.100 for tasks such as vegetable picking or weeding (which can be wound up in the first half of the day). On enquiring if the workers had negotiated for a higher daily wage, Kirti explained that knowing that the farmers would lower the rate, the workers already inflate the rate and then settle on the one that they wanted. However getting the minimum agricultural wages was a long road. The interviewees reported that the landowning caste in the village – Kodhi Patels (constituting 30 households in the village) were aware that the halpati community depended on them for agricultural work primarily, and knew that they can always get workers to work in their fields for lesser wages – and thus used this to keep the wages lower. On the other hand, Kirti and Reena explained that in order to cut down on transportation costs, the agricultural workers prefer to work either in the same village or in the nearby villages where they can travel on foot. Thus, the workers would prefer to let go Rs.20 to 30 on daily wages to work in the same village than travel to other villages for a higher daily wage. Kirti and her mother are able to support themselves and Kirti's two children by working on the fields as agricultural workers. Kirti explains that till her children were old enough to support themselves, agricultural labour was the only source of the income for the family. She added that since the village school was shut down and the school was merged with a school at a distance of five kms away, she was unable to send her children to the school due to costs of travel. Once the children were old enough to work, they would help their mother and grandmother to support the family.

Also, given the seasonality of the sector, domestic work allows the households to sustain themselves when the demand for agricultural workers was lean.

It was in Jetpor that the team met Hemkumar, who was an agricultural worker, and lived with his wife who worked as Aanganwadi sahiyika, their son, his wife and a son.

While Hemkumar has been an agricultural worker, his son sprays medicines and pesticides in the field earning Rs.350 per acre of field. The medicine was provided by the landowner. The son also irrigated the fields for Rs. 300 per acre – a weekly task, and was a middle man that supplied agricultural workers when required by the farmers for a meagre commission.

Hemkumarbhai explained that since his wife had a reliable source of income as an Aanganwadi Sahayika, their condition was better than the other Halpati families in the village. The stability of one parent's income allowed their son to explore other alternatives to livelihood. Otherwise many families like that of Kirti are unable to emerge out of the generational trap of agricultural farm hands.

Although there were families like that of Hemkumar's that were seeking alternative livelihood options given the low levels of daily wages and seasonality of the agricultural season – that results in lean period of work. Hemkumar explained that farming for sustenance was not an option given that no one in the Halpati community in their village had any land – thus everyone was reliant on the farmlands of the upper caste Patels. Secondly even if somehow a family can manage to buy a bigha of land – the patels will not allow the family to do so. Also due to the limitation of land around the village itself, this was not possible.

Hemkumar shared that during lean seasons, the agricultural labour goes to the nearby villages for work, some of them also found work in the local factories. Additionally, few women have started undertaking piece rate home based work to support the family. Hemkumarbhai also added that few families have been able to sustain themselves without being reliant on the agricultural work exclusively. These families brew country liquor. The earnings have elevated the economic situation of these families. However only a few have been able to sustain themselves in this business.

When enquired about their views of the migrant workforce of harvesters – the Hemkumar responded that they cannot work like the harvesters – even though he has heard that the harvesters received Rs.400 per tonne. Firstly, the work was harder – they would be required to work for longer hours starting early in the day. Furthermore – the farmers arrange for their transportation. If the local workers started harvesting, they would have to arrange and pay for their own transportation.

Thus the halpatis prefer do not prefer to work for harvesting of the canes.

### ***Barasadi:***

Barasadi was a village located about 7 kms from Jetpor. The team met Payal's family – that had been tied to a Purushottam Patel's family for generations under the Hali practice. Payal's father worked as a hali for Patel's family after his own father. In 2020, the family lost the patriarch to complications due to Covid19. This meant that Payal's 17 year old brother now

had to take their father's place as the Hali and work for the Patel family. In addition to Payal's father – his wife Rekha and mother – Kumudben have been working as domestic workers for the family. Kumudben (now 70 years) indicated that she started working for the Patels 60 years ago when the daily wages given was one-sixteenth of a rupee with two rotis for food and Rs. 3 as monthly wages. Kumudben lost her husband when she was in her early thirties. She raised her children, married them while working under the same family. When she first arrived in the village, her husband was working for Purushottam Patels father. With time Purushottam bhai migrated to the USA but retained Kumudben as a Hali for Rs.20 per month. Kumudben was responsible to perform household chores, wapes, clothes, cleaning work. As her eldest son replaced his father, Kumudben continued to work both as domestic worker and in the fields for Patels.

About 25years ago, Rekhaben (40 years old) - Payal's mother – she recalled that while the burden of work has increased, the wages have remained low. Generations of her family have been tethered to the same Patel family for at least 100 years. The family has been tied in servitude to the Patel family for generations over centuries. When Rekhaben got married and arrived in the village, the daily wages paid were Rs.70. Since the last five years, the agricultural wages have remained stuck at Rs.100. This was highly inadequate given the rising inflation. She added that given that the family has been working for Purushottam bhai, in times of need they were able to make borrowings from the Patel. Reflecting on her family's situation with the other Halpati families – she added that hers was the only house that a Patel family had helped build – which visible from a distance. Payal's home was one of the few houses with a concretised roof. Secondly given the centuries of patronage system, the Patels had given 0.5 acre of land – making them the only Halpati family to own a landholding in Barasadi. Kumudben explained that the land was reward for her family's loyalty towards the Patels over generations. Payal's family has been looking after the homestead for decades now. Now that the Purushottam bhai is an octogenarian – he and his wife have returned to India and live in the village. It is Payal's family that care for the patriarch while the Patels live in San Francisco only to return once a year in the winters.

Payal's brother Mitesh works for the Patels during the day, but works in an incense factory at night. Mitesh shared that he was able to finish his work early and take a two hour nap during his shift. In the morning, he required to report at the Patel mansion and work on the fields during the peak agricultural season. Similarly Payal's elder sister has been working in a candle making factory owned by a farmer in Barasadi. Payal herself had been working in a

beauty parlour in the nearby town. Payal explained that the Purushottam Patel's family paid for the beautician's course and she was often called by the other Patel households in the village for her services. For this she was grateful.

During COVID-19, there was no work available. The Halpati families, the Kumudben explained can sustain themselves only if they earn each day. While the public distribution system ensured that families could get grains and pulses, but the families had to sell grass in order to purchase spices and oil. The family shared that on an average a Halpati family spends about Rs. 120 to Rs. 130 each day for basic groceries. The families were forced to borrow from the local grocery store so that they can sustain themselves.

Payal's family however did not encounter such a crisis. The family recounted that during the COVID-19, Purushottam Patel was in India while son was stuck abroad. Payal's family cared for the octogenarian couple, while the Patel's son sent some money so that Payal's family can sustain themselves.

Rekhaben reflected that Purushottam bhai was one of the generous Patel families in the village. Unlike them, other farm owning Patels did not provide assistance to their Hali families, ever paid for maintenance of their Hali's houses, or financially assisted them. Further with more members in their house, they were in position to explore other livelihood options to improve their economic condition.

### ***Vanesa:***

From discussions with Jahanvi's family in Barasadi, the team travelled to Vanesa. There the team met with Seema and Ramesh a young couple in their late twenties the monsoon of 2021. Vanesa is a village located in Palsana, about 29 kms away from the city of Surat.

The couple (both in their late 20s) were parents to a 5 year old and 1 year old infant. Seema and her husband Ramesh have been working for Hetalben Patel under the Hali system. Ramesh remarked that his family has been indentured to Hetalben's for as long as he can recall. His father too worked for Hetalben and her family. Upon his death, Ramesh replaced his father as Hali to the Patel's family when Ramesh was 21 years old. Ramesh described Hetalben – whom he refers to as malkin, as a mother like figure who had seen him grow into a youth. She had also contributed to his marriage to Seema about 7 years ago. Hetalben was a guardian to this family – Ramesh stated.

As per the norm of the land, after her wedding to Ramesh, Seema was expected to work in Hetalben's household as domestic help under the hali-pratha against Rs.500 monthly and one meal. Before Seema, Ramesh was responsible to do all the domestic chores such as washing utensils, laundry, cleaning of the house, maintaining the homestead, tending to the animals for the Patel household. Before Ramesh, after his mother's death Ramesh's father would do all these tasks and also undertake agricultural work. In order to support the family, Seema also started doing domestic for a young doctor posted in the primary health centre and who also happens to be Hetalben's neighbour. However after the birth of his children, Ramesh often helps Seema in her domestic work at the doctor's house since 2017. Seema described that after the birth of her second child she has not been able to work as before, and thus Ramesh would help her finish the domestic chores. Ramesh added that he felt no shame in doing domestic chores, especially at Hetalben's house since he has been familiar with the household since he was a young boy and Hetalben has always treated Ramesh and his father as members of their household. To indicate Hetalben's generosity, Ramesh remarked that :

*'Malkin humein wahi khana deti hai jo woh khud khati hai'*

(‘The hostess/mistress of the house gives us the same food that they eat’)

Rather, Ramesh added that his malkin was keen that his children complete their studies and she was willing to pay for his children's education if required. Both Seema and Ramesh shared that they were happy that they worked for Hetalben and her family; who would trust them enough to leave the household and the homestead under Ramesh's watch. While the family would be away, Ramesh and Seema along with their children shifted to Hetalben's house – wherein they would be responsible to take care of the mansion and maintain the upkeep with regular dusting, sweeping and tending to the animals.

Ramesh explained that Hetalben had always been there for his family, she provided the family with a one meal everyday, took care of the family in times of need - assuring Seema and Ramesh about the security of their livelihood. Ramesh added that Hetalben took care of both his children and celebrated the birth of his daughter. Describing his relationship with the patron family, Ramesh elaborated that his family was allowed to eat and cook for themselves in Hetalben's house- when the owner was away. He had also accompanied Hetalben in her travels on many occasions. In the event of social festivities, he helped in cutting of vegetables when Hetalben was hosting a feast or festivities. Ramesh added that the upper castes group would not allow members of the Halpati community to enter their kitchens or cook for them.

On our subsequent meeting, we met Seema while Ramesh was out for the evening. As it turned out, the couple's daughter was turning one year old the next day. Seema shared with much joy that Ramesh was out to catch extra fishes on the occasion of the child's birthday. When the team enquired about what arrangements they would be making for celebrations, Seema shared that malkin will be bringing the snacks, the cake, the decorations, the new clothes for the child the next day. Malkin, Seema described, was caring and gracious to look out for the child. However malkin refused to give money to Seema when she requested.

Seema concluded '*malkin mujhe paise kabhi haath mein nahi deti hai par jo mango de deti hai*'.

( Translation: *The hostess/mistress never gives my wages in cash to me, but she buys me what I need or demand.*)

Seema explained that the malkin believed that Seema and Ramesh would use all the money to support Ramesh's drinking habit. Further, the malkin ensured that her neighbour- the doctor (for whom Seema did domestic work) did not given any cash amount to Seema, instead the doctor was supposed to hand over Seema's monthly wages of Rs.500 to Hetalben. Seema disclosed that she has not been handed over her wages ever since she worked for Hetalben, instead the malkin keeps the cash with herself. If the couple wants to buy groceries, they are to purchase it from the local grocery store- accounts for which are cleared monthly by Hetalben. In case someone falls sick in the house, Hetalben arranges a vehicle to take the member to the government hospital and buys medicines. On occasion of festival, Hetalben buys saree or has a stock of sarees that she had already purchased and gives it to Seema. Only Ramesh gets Rs. 100 as a daily wage for his work on the farm land – which was used for daily expenses of vegetables, drinking, tobacco, packet of chips for children. if ever the family wants to visit Seema's village they need to seek prior permission, and money for the travel. Hetalben, Seema added, only gave them exact money to travel and return from Seema's parents village. The discussions revealed that the couple were entirely dependent on their patron family – Hetalben.

### ***Mordevi:***

From Vanesa, the team travelled to Mordevi, a village located in Valod block of Surat. The team during the recce found that the Hali system – although prevalent in the village, functioned a little differently. To examine this, the team interviewed three respondents to

explore how the system differed when compared to other villages and what was different in this village.

Kiran, her brother Suraj and his wife Garima – worked as agricultural workers in the village of Mordevi. Like many women in the village, Garima does domestic chores for the upper caste landed community – the Desai households. She left early in the morning for the Parvesh Desai's household to wash utensils, laundry, clean the homestead and the house, tend to the cattle, dusting – anything that was demanded from her in exchange of a daily wage Rs.120. Garima began her work at the Desai household at 8 am to 10 am, and then again 1pm to 4pm. Garima elaborated that she preferred the domestic work as against the agricultural work that she used to undertake four years ago before she began working for Parveshbhai. Given the regularity of the pay, she found that domestic work was far more secured than being hired as agricultural worker (the availability of the work that was highly dependent on the agricultural season). Furthermore, the daily wage of Rs.120 was at par of the daily wage that was paid to the workers hired for agricultural work, particularly by the Desai's in the village. While the other communities who hired additional labour during the peak agricultural season had to pay a wage of Rs.150, the Desai's paid lesser. Garima added that in 2020 – the Halpati community refused to work till the wages were raised to Rs.150 – however during the negotiations the Desai community agreed to pay only Rs.120. The hali's were paid a daily wage of Rs.170 (Rs.150 + Rs.20 for tobacco). Of course this was due to the political clout and the influence that the Desai's enjoyed at various levels – with representation at all levels in the local bureaucracy and the Panchayat compounded by the privileges that came by the virtue of their position in the area.

While Garima works as a domestic worker, Suraj her husband works as an agricultural worker. Given that agricultural work was seasonal, Suraj also worked at the nearby kiln to load and unload bricks along with 16 others from the same village that regularly work at the kiln. The couple had two daughters who were studying in the village's primary school and the household relied on the wages that Garima earned every day. The wages leave her family in a hand-to-mouth situation – where survival was the main motive of the family. To secure her future – she has been struggling to make savings. Garima confided that she was aware that they had to find other reliable ways to secure the future of the household. One such way she shared was her wish to invest in a cattle like buffaloes similar to other Halpati households who had invested in dairy animals or poultry in order to diversify their household incomes.

Kavita's household was one such family who were able to sustain themselves with the domestic work, agricultural labour and by selling milk to the local cooperative. Of course, her journey has been a difficult one— she shared that when she began foraying in to dairy – she had to take a loan of Rs.30000 on two accounts. The first time - her animal died within a year, before it could start producing milk. Somehow by working as agricultural labour and domestic work, she was able to repay part of the loan and was able to again get a loan to buy another buffalo. Rearing buffalo entails a lot of other costs as well, she continued to explain –that in order to ensure production of milk the animal needs to be fed nutritiously. Part of her earnings also went in to the upkeep of the animal. In spite of this, she revealed that the economic situation of her family has marginally improved – in a way that if her husband did not find agricultural work – she can manage by the earnings from selling 7 litres of milk. Over the years, Kavita's family realised that just working as agricultural workers in the village will not ensure a sustained survival of the family. They had to find other means to support the family income.

***“ Mehangai toh roz badhti hai, lekin mazdoori utne se nahi badhti, aur na badhne diye jaegi”  
– Kavita***

(Translation: *The cost of living rises each day, but the daily wages don't increase by the same rate or nor will they be allowed to increase- Kavita*)

Rearing dairy animal was one alternative. There were also other factors that helped the family to tide over the crisis of losing cattle while also ensuring the family's survival. Kavita's children – two teenage sons were old enough to work and support the family when the family was struck by the financial loss. Children particularly adolescents and teenagers often assisted their parents by working as agricultural workers especially during the peak season when daily wages can go up to Rs.300 to Rs.400. Although the children are only able to earn Rs. 120 to Rs.150. Kavita added that not everyone was that fortunate. For instance Garima's daughter cannot assist their mother or the family's income because they were too young. Secondly the village was witnessing a rise among the youth that were migrating outside the village in search of better livelihood opportunities – Kavita shared that about five to six people had migrated to Surat for construction work.

Garima explained that on a daily basis the following expenses had to be incurred:

Table 1: Daily expenses incurred by a Halpati Family in 2021



Expenses	Amount (Rs)
Oil	10
Sugar	10
Soap	8
Bathing soap	10
Shampoo	1
Tea leaves	5
Masala (which lasted about a week)	20
Vimal (tobacco)	10
Tomatoes & potatoes	20
Lentil	15
Potli (liquor)	40
Total	149

These groceries were in addition to the grains that were distributed through the public distribution system that included -1kg lentil, 20kg wheat, 10 kg rice, 2 kg sugar, , the people can get an additional 1kg of another lentil, 1 kg salt, 1 litre Oil by paying Rs. 200 additionally.

## ***Chapter 5 : Concluding Remarks***

The discussion above paints a grave picture about the condition of Halpati community in the district of Surat. Multiple interviews and group discussions revealed that the practice of bonded labour continues to thrive till date. Although there has been a certain evolution and arrangements may differ across the villages, yet the community was still tied to the landowning class in servitude. The Halpatis were engaged in 5 types of work mainly:- 1) Daily wage labour directly in agriculture operation; 2) Permanently working for one landlord family; 3) Those who work to clean the landlord's house; 4) Labourers tending big farmer's cattle; 5) Casual wage labour. The wages were found to be far below the statutory minimum wages for agriculture (Rs.268 per day) in Gujarat.

During the sampling process, the team engaged with the Halpati community of – Vihaan – that had in 2021 organized a protest against the low daily wages. In April 2021, the members from the Halpati community came together to protest against the daily wage paid to the agriculture and allied work that was very low, and the Halpati labourers were in favour of getting increased wages. And a few of them have been toying with the idea of a strike too. In all the types of work the women formed the majority of labourers. Several of these Halpati labourers are elected representatives in the local self-government structure as Ward members, councillors, head of the panchayats, block and district representatives too.

During the contact process, it was learnt that the Halpati labourers of Vihaan village had organised a strike earlier (April 1-3, 2021). During the strike there was a bitter conflict between the labourers (both men and women) on the one hand and the community of landlords on the other. A large police force had camped in the village for some days, during and after the strike. The strike ended after an agreement was reached for a wage hike from Rs.100/- per day to Rs.140/- per day. The community members described that the standoff had to be called off and arrive at a negotiation because halpati families relied on earning from daily wage labour. Eversince the strike working in the village was no longer an option, thus the workers had to seek work in the nearby villages. Secondly the landowners in Vihaan had informed the landowners in the nearby villages to not give work to the agricultural workers from Vihaan. Responding to this, the workers also ensured that the workers from other

villages could not arrive to work on the farms. The halpati and farm owning community thus had to negotiate and then revise the daily wage.

The butterfly effect of this event in Vihaan was felt in other villages. However the backlash came in stronger. For instance, Hemkumarbhai shared that after the events in Vihaan, whenever the halpati community demanded for a raise in the daily wages, the farm owning Patels threatened that they would rather call the migrants to work on their farms.

Secondly the strategy that helped the landowning class in Vihaan has also amplified. The moment there were discussions of agricultural workers demanding raise in wages, the Patels would communicate with each other and ensure that the wages do not rise beyond a certain point.

Similarly respondents in Mordevi shared that landowners would stretch to any lengths to ensure that the agricultural workers from their villages were paid low wages. In July 2019, the Desai community in Mordevi, attempted to squash the protests by getting the agricultural labour from other villages– who they were willing to pay a higher wage than the workers in their own villages. The local workers ensured that the workers from other villages do not work in Mordevi. Eventually the Desai's of Mordevi agreed to pay Rs. 20 more to workers they got from other villages when the local workers refused to work in their own villages for 15 days (who they used to pay Rs.100 then). Eventually the Desais settled to pay Rs.120 as against the demand for Rs.150 by the local workers, and continued to do so for the next 2 years. At present while all the other communities who hire agricultural labour paid Rs.150 – the Desai's continued to pay a daily wage of Rs.120.

There have been micro- resistances by the Halpati community to demand a raise in the wages, however many of them have been silenced by fractional incremental rise in the daily wages. As Hemkumar cited – that the farm owners were acutely aware that the halpati community was entirely dependent on the daily wage agricultural labour and will not be able to sustain itself if they did not find work. Thus, the odds were always found to be stacked against the halpati community.

The empirical findings in this study provide some renewed understanding and some re-iterations of the previous findings about the phenomenon of generational servitude in form of Hali:

- The Halpatis were engaged in five types of work mainly:- 1) Daily wage labour directly in agriculture operation; 2) Permanently working for one landlord family; 3) Those who work to clean the landlord's house; 4) Labourers tending big farmer's cattle; 5) Casual wage labour.
- Generational servitude – The head of the family along with their spouse and in multiple cases the entire family was bonded to the patron family
- Indiscriminate access to resources- the systemic inequalities with differentiated access to resources have for centuries carved out power asymmetries in the favour of the land owning castes. The land owning class continues to feel entitled to the labour of the halis and ensures that there is availability of cheap workforce to work on their farms
- Squashing of protests – as evidence from Mordevi and Vihaan, the landowning class have worked to ensure that any instance of demands to raise wages are immediately snuffed out. Rather the landowning classes have worked in coalition to ensure that the daily wages remained low
- Little opportunities for social mobility and livelihood diversification – the study revealed that families with stable income options (like Hemkumar in Barasadi) or sustainable livelihood alternative (liquor brewing) or with younger generation that was able to seek opportunities beyond agricultural work to work in dairy or factories – were in a better position to mobilize the family out of the servitude system. Although research team was yet to meet a family, that has been able to free themselves completely of the system; however the alternative income streams allowed the families to reduce their dependence on their patrons
- Absence of Halpati's representation from Village level governing bodies – the respondents shared that the representatives in the Panchayat was chosen by influential castes in the village. If and when as per the law – a halpati had to be appointed as the head of Gram Sabhas, the farm owning communities would choose a person they were assured would listen to them only. Thus, the respondents reported there was no representative that could advocate for the halpati community in the village. Further the Gram Sabhas had been suspended due to covid-19. In cases that there was any representation at the level of the panchayat – most of the representatives were reported to be puppets at the hands of the Landowners. For instance in Mordevi – all the panchayat representatives were under the influence of Vikesh Desai – a brute,

oppressive man – that ensured that halpatis remained at the margins. He was able to suppress any kind of dialogue and ensured only puppets were elected in the Panchayat.

A ray of hope in the midst of this dismal picture has been the attempt of younger generation of the halpati families to seek out alternative livelihoods. In the past few years – some of the halpatis have started migrating to Saurashtra as seasonal agricultural labourers. Though a recent change, the discussions revealed that the halpatis have started migrating for few months to harvest ground nuts, pick cottons, or harvest vegetables. Secondly, as iterated above, younger generations (under 25 years) that have received some education are increasingly applying to work in factories. This provides additional income to the families to supplement income from agricultural activities.

There is a need to document the extent of this diversification and to map what are the new livelihoods that the halpatis are foraying in, in addition to the agricultural tasks. Few possible recommendations to improve the condition of the Halpatis community as a whole could be the following:

- Welfare Board for Halpatis under the Tribal Development Ministry
- Upskilling of Halpati Youth to prepare them with industry ready employable skills
- Stronger Implementation for Halpati welfare programmes

As the nation grows, the rural tribal communities like the Halpatis in South Gujarat continue to exist in the clutches of indentured servitude. With abysmally low wages, deprivations and exploitative conditions. The report evidenced that the community has been struggling to negotiate for wages that are far lower than the statutory minimum wages for the state of Gujarat. It is indeed a paradox that in a state such as Gujarat that is at the forefront of progressive growth and development, the rural tribal communities such as the Halpati continue to live in the shadow of paradoxes of development.

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