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Interview

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Interviewer:

MAYA JOHN

Email: mjohn@jmc.du.ac.in
Department of History
Jesus and Mary College

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**JESUS AND MARY COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI
NEW DELHI-110021**

THE WORLD OF LABOUR, PAUPERISM, AND THE PANDEMIC*

A CONVERSATION WITH PROFESSOR JAN BREMAN

MAYA JOHN[†]

Introduction: Professor Jan Breman is a noted sociologist and labour historian. He is Professor Emeritus of Comparative Sociology at the University of Amsterdam, and Honorary Fellow at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. He is best known for his work on the concept of “footloose labour”. Professor Breman’s work is spread over a period of forty-five years wherein he has conducted anthropological fieldwork in India (South Gujarat) and Indonesia (West Java), mainly on rural and urban labour and employment. The outcome of his research has been published in several books and journals. He has also been on the editorial board of journals such as *Development and Change*, *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, *The Journal of Agrarian Change*, and *The Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*.

Maya John (MJ): The lengthy lockdown imposed by the Indian government in 2020 in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic propelled an overwhelming migrant labour crisis, and made the vast numbers of such workers visible to many. How have the contours of the exploitation in the agrarian context changed in significant ways since the 1940s; thereby, propelling a steady rural to rural and rural to urban migration of the rural poor? And, what are the present-day peculiarities informing agrarian distress that reduces impoverished rural labour to a persistent state of inter-state and intra-state migration?

Professor Jan Breman (JB): Well, it is an important question. It is a crucial question of course, and it focuses on what we should understand is, a crisis, a deep crisis, a structural crisis, not a conjunctural one, of the whole economy and the whole society. What is this crisis? It is basically a loss of employment, and thus, also of income for those who have few assets to earn their livelihood. Few assets, land in the first place but also tools or cattle and other capital assets. They used to be dependent on those who owned those assets in the village. I am talking about rural labour. They used to be dependent on them, but their dependency was uprooted when they were no longer offered the employment which they had access to in the past. So, in general, a crisis of

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[†] Assistant Professor, Department of History, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi, New Delhi. Email: mjohn@jmc.du.ac.in

the rural economy and society leads to labour migration. This was not a new phenomenon, so let me contextualise.

In the mid-19th century, in the Atlantic basin, peasant society in Europe was transformed into another type of society; no longer a rural society and economy, but an urban one, i.e., not an agrarian one but an industrial one. And, we saw in this period in Europe what we have later also seen during the last decades in India, i.e., the moving out of people from the countryside, out of the villages and settling down in towns and cities. In Europe in the mid-19th century, the poor who were pushed out of the rural economy found employment in industry; mainly in factories and mills. If you read certain books from the 19th century, you know what I am talking about. The books of Charles Dickens, for instance, but also, the books of Friedrich Engels on the industrialization of Manchester are apt examples.

We were all waiting until this massive transformation would unfold in the southern part of the world, or what is called the ‘Global South’. However, the transformation which took shape in the mid-19th century in Europe did not materialise in the Global South after colonialism dissipated. Independence promised the people of India that they would get out of poverty and that they would be following the example set by the ‘Global North’. At the time people believed that they would also enjoy welfare, that there would be a welfare state, as well as plentiful employment and that too of an industrial nature. That transformation never materialised. So, in India we are not talking about change from a rural-agrarian to an urban-industrial economy and society. Rather we are discussing what I would call the transition from a peasant society to a post-peasant society. I would address India as a post-peasant society. It is not an industrial society. It is not an urban society, and I’ll come back to this.

There persist the problems of poverty and of impoverishment. “*Achhe din*” are not around the corner; life has become more and more desperate. And this was the condition in which lockdown was imposed. The lockdown of 2020 was announced with a four-hour respite which was not enough time to reach home. If you were working in Mumbai and your village was somewhere in Bihar, Odisha, Bengal, Uttar Pradesh or Rajasthan, you would not be able to reach home. In the end, most of the people who were thrown out of the urban economy managed to get back home, but it was a difficult and grim, and very often, a very expensive journey getting back home. Importantly, home had changed. Home was no longer the place where you recuperated and where you could enjoy the relationships with your family again. Home was a dead end because there was still no employment and there was poverty around. This reality is very important for understanding what has been happening to the labouring poor. Local level accounts do not understate the magnitude of the labouring poor. It is an enormous category, at least one-third of the population in India is living below what is called the poverty line.

However, there are grades of poverty, and in my recent work I have focused on the differentiation among the labouring poor. No longer are many of them hovering around the poverty line any longer. In fact, they have slipped down even further. They are further

dispossessed. They are now in a situation of *pauperism*. This is a phenomenon which needs historicization. Pauperism was written about and talked about in the late 19th century when it was found out that not all people were able to join work in the factories and mills for a variety of reasons. They were dispossessed from what they always used to get; namely, their right to livelihood, which was institutionalised under the poor laws. The poor laws have never been there in India. The poor laws basically promised to the poor that in the days of adversity they would still get livelihood because those who were not poor were accountable to provide that livelihood. They could, from the people around them in the village, get the food which they themselves could not earn. That poor law framework, in the transition to industrialization in Europe, was changed. It was amended whereby people living in poverty were no longer able to get the rations from those who were not poor. Instead, they had to go out of the village and earn it themselves. They had to go off to the cities to work in the mills, etc. This transformation took place, as I said, in Europe. Such a transformation has not taken place in India. In India, people are driven out of the village because those who are not poor in the village refuse to be accountable for the livelihood for those who cannot spare their livelihood. However, they are *also* driven back when they are redundant, i.e., when they have lost their labour power wherever they have gone to. That is why urbanisation is a very problematic notion in India. While the poor move to the cities to find employment which is not there back home, they are nevertheless not easily allowed to settle down in the city.

When I first came to India for field work – which started in the village but then I moved on and followed the migrants who went to the towns and the cities – I saw either rural to rural migration or rural to urban migration. I found that they were accepted as labour but they were not accepted as citizens. When I started my research in Surat (Gujarat), and later on in Ahmedabad (Gujarat), I found the labouring poor from the countryside were living on the pavement, did not have a roof above their head, and that there were all kinds of niches in the urban economy where they squatted down, simply as long as they were able to find work in the city. But if they lost their labour power, they had to go back home because without income in the city you cannot afford to live on in the city. This is where I situate Indian in the global context. In many other countries in the Global South, the same thing has been happening. The poor are driven out of the countryside and are going to the urban economy, hoping to find work there. They are allowed to squat down, not to settle down, on public land, on public resources, on pavements, in empty niches in urban areas. So, in India, if you do not have labour power, you are also denied space in the urban economy. You are not allowed to settle down because urban land has become a commodity which you have to pay for, or which you have to buy or rent. The poor, if they have lost their labour power, are not able to buy their presence in the city. So, they are going back after they have lost their labour power.

In this way, we see not a shift from a rural to an urban society, but a shift from a society where the rural poor are driven back to where they come from as soon as they have lost their labour power in the city. Settling down in the city, as I found out in Surat and in Ahmedabad, is only

possible if you have some assets, some capital, a vehicle or a booth to operate, selling wares in the streets; then you are able to find, somehow, a place to pay for. That fades away fast if you have lost your labour power. You are then driven home. So, this journey which the rural poor were making and are still making during the pandemic, is not a new one. It has happened to them before, but now the difference is that they are also thrown out of the economy. Part of the migrants coming back to the cities are again taking up, picking up what they used to do in the past, but the rural economy is in a crisis. It is not only the rural economy which is in a crisis. The segments of the economy in which the poor are moving around are in a similar crisis, as in the rural economy. This is important because it means you lose hope of a better future. Where are the days when the future will be better than it is today? Those days will not come, and that is an indication of the pauperization; of the spreading pauperism which we notice not only in the rural economy but also at the periphery of the urban economy; in the slum quarters where the urban poor are taking shelter.

MJ: In your work you have systematically defined modern day nomadism, embodied or captured in the precariously placed category of “footloose labour”. Nevertheless, a category is always better comprehended when it is not reduced to a static ahistorical entity. Hence, what are the significant changes that you have been noticing within the ranks of “footloose labour”, i.e., in terms of their caste composition, gender composition, regional trends, the section of the peasantry joining these ranks of footloose labourers, etc.?

JB: Well, I have to answer that question in two ways. In the first place, from the class perspective, which means that if you have no employment locally any longer; if you cannot gain your livelihood locally any longer, you have to move out. That is where labour migration begins. Of course, labour migration by landless people is accompanied by a trajectory of dispossession. We see that those who are dispossessed now, were very often owners of assets in the past, i.e., owners of some land, owners of some herds of cattle, owners of some tools, etc. But we find that the situation of being without property is the end, and the end is where landless people are. But the changing composition is not only the landless class which is moving out of the villages; it is also the landed poor. Those peasants who had some land, for a variety of reasons are no longer able to cultivate that land. In the first place this is because of demographic rules. If a small farmer had some hectares, some *bighas* (as they say in Gujarat), it had to be subdivided among his sons, and they end up with less property, less ownership than their father had. So, there is the demographic situation. But it is not only the demographic situation. When you have only a tiny plot of land to cultivate, you are not able to get livelihood out of that. What we see in many villages today is the amount of land lying waste is enormous. Plots are not cultivated anymore because it does not pay to work on less than half hectare or few *bighas* of land. You are not able to gain livelihood for yourself and your household by staying on and cultivating that small piece of land.

We see a change in farm management. It seems that landlordism is back again, but in a way which was different from the feudal type of landlordism during the colonial era. The new landlordism that you see in today's demonstrations comprises the rich peasantry, who have become landlords because they do not cultivate the land themselves. They in fact hand it out; either getting it cultivated by landless labourers, or very often, getting it cultivated by share-cropping or by contracting it out to agri-business. I have found in Gujarat, the owners of land gave the operation of the land to the sugar mills, i.e., to what are called co-operative sugar mills, which constitutes in real terms capitalist agri-business. Instead of cultivating their land, land is being contracted out, shared out, either to tenants, to small owners or even to agricultural labourers, or to agri-business.

This is what struck me looking at, of course, the news on what is called the farmer class today. The rich peasantry is resisting the introduction of new legislations which they find makes them dependent on agri-business. I think they have a major point there that cannot be disputed. They protest, and they are able to protest because they engage in collective action. What is important to realise is that the labouring poor are not allowed to team up in this collective action. It is not that they do not resist but they are not able to do that on an organisational basis. And that is what strikes me as a very important difference between the farmer protest which we see today, mainly in Delhi but also elsewhere in the country, and the protests by labour. I bring to your notice the enormous difference between what was announced as the biggest labour strike ever going on in human history, that was 26th of December 2020. The trade unions in India called that strike and announced that it would be the biggest effort in human history. The strike failed miserably, it fizzled out, and we didn't hear much about it. It failed everywhere because the teaming of labour in collective action is nowadays called a law-and-order problem.

One striking way of defining labour in the informal economy is to point out that they have no voice and no visibility; that they are not organised and are not able to gather to demonstrate and to ask for better, higher wages, better conditions of employment, social security and protection by the law. Collective action is not possible for the labour in the informal economy. However, there are a few exceptions. And, I bring to your notice again a very important exception, i.e., SEWA, the trade unions set up for female labour, operating first from Ahmedabad but now not only countrywide but worldwide. So, there are a few daring and courageous exceptions to the notion that labour in the informal economy is unorganised, but that is basically what is the case and what makes them very vulnerable. Their lack of organisation makes them easy victims of being accused even of sedition. Those who speak up to protect labour, to allow labour to have dignity, they are now in jail. Labour activists are jailed, they are held in detention without being brought to trial because they dared to speak up on behalf of those who remain mute, who remain invisible and who remain silent.

MJ: I would like to pick up from your observations about informal labour and how this component of the workforce finds it difficult to organise, given the fact that whatever

protective labour legislation exists in the country is very strategically *not* extended to them. Presently, sections of migrant workers have been made the focus of certain labour legislations, while of course the larger push of labour policy has been towards dilution of key already existing protective labour laws. Construction workers, for example, have for some time now been covered under the Building and Other Construction Workers Act. We have also seen the introduction in 2008 of the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act; components of which have been carried into the new Labour Code on Social Security. In other words, social welfare benefits are being supposedly extended to sections of informal workers as well. However, at the same time, crucial labour legislations that determine the work relationship and its renegotiation, such as the Trade Union Registration Act, the Industrial Disputes Act, etc. have seen their provisions constantly amended so as to exclude more and more workers. I am referring to the threshold provision within these laws regarding the size of the workforce on which such laws would apply. Hence, although informal workers are being gradually made recipients or beneficiaries of welfare, they are not empowered as *agents* for the enforcement of such welfare, simply because the larger corpus of labour law amendments undermine the *collective* expression and interests of labour. What are your more detailed comments on the unfolding trajectory of so-called labour law reforms in India? Are dedicated laws on migrant workers a solution or part of the problem?

JB: Well, my short reply to this would be that the new legislation is fake legislation. It is not meant to be implemented and it has so many conditionalities that those who are targeted are not able to get it. Let me explain in some further detail. In my latest book, *Capitalism, Inequality and Labour in India*, I have also discussed the trajectory of labour legislation. It is very interesting that the formal labour legislation which was enacted after Independence was substituted and changed to suit the informal conditions of employment. That has been a process dictated by the ruling heights of neoliberalism, by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It was said that informality creates welfare, but that was again an example of fake news, fake policy. I have discussed informality by looking at how labour in the formal industries of Ahmedabad got informalized when the corporate textile enterprises began closing down from the 1970s onwards. The mill workers shifted to the informal economy again to find work of short durations always, i.e., not jobs but short contracts which were characterised by features like dismissal overnight and that too without any compensation. A similar story unfolded in many other places of India. Then, some legislation came up to protect labour in the informal economy. This was, for instance, the abolition of the Contract Labour Act, which was introduced. Similarly, we saw the introduction of the Protection of Inter-State Labour Migrants Act that along with various other Acts, promised protection, security and employment to the people in the informal economy. That legislation became a racket because the inspection was by a labour inspectorate belonging to the government which did not implement the legislation but made a racket out of it, i.e., by cashing in from the employers for non-implementation of what they were

supposed to do, to give higher wage, to reduce hours of work, etc. We see how during the pandemic, the Indian state has made use of the growing vulnerability of labour by revoking labour legislation which promised workers an 8-hour work day, timely payment of wages, etc. Earlier legislations have been replaced by the four Labour Codes, which are not meant to be implemented, and we have to see the background of that and that is a very important issue.

A surveillance state has come up where we see how the state is moving in, even to the grassroot level; even going into the slums and into the labour colonies in the countryside. So, the surveillance is there but the benefits of surveillance are not there. The surveillance is not to promote employment or welfare even. The surveillance goes together with ignoring what is going on in the quarters of society where the labouring poor are to be found. We see how the registration of the labouring poor has folded up; the state has turned its face away from registering, and from monitoring the plight of the labouring poor. In short, the Indian state does not want to be informed about what is going on in the quarters of poverty and pauperism. And that goes together with the pretence of new legislation or the four labour codes, which were driven through a Parliament and were not discussed with trade unions.

I also want to point out the importance of what is going on at the moment by investigating at the local level, i.e., the labour colonies in the countryside in the rural economy, the slums in the cities, etc. Local level investigation to find out what is happening is needed because the government does not want to find out. It is now up to civil society to find out what is happening to the people, to the vulnerable section at the bottom of the economy and society. But it seems, and I find that very disconcerting, that civil society too seems to have folded up. Not all of them. For instance, Action Aid India, and as I earlier said, SEWA, still exist on the ground. However, it seems that civil society has folded up because the state does not want civil society to be active and to be engaged in finding out what is happening to people who are citizens of the country but are not allowed to exercise their citizenship. They are made invisible, they are muted, they are without voice. This is precisely because the state does not want to acknowledge that it does not try to improve the plight of the labouring poor, but is rather defining the labouring poor as a threat to the welfare of other segments of society. The system of inequality which is age old in India, has not only lingered on, it has become aggravated. We should realise that if there is no promise of equality, democracy too will not be sustained.

MJ: Thank you for these insightful cautionary comments. I would like to draw very specifically from the period from March to May of 2020. What have revealed themselves as key obstacles in the active mobilisation of this vulnerable segment or footloose labour as you call it, during the pandemic cum lockdown crisis, particularly from March to May 2020? This labour was trapped in its places of employment during this period. This restive, distressed labour threw up periodic challenges to the ruling regime, in terms of various forms of sporadic disjointed resistance. Thus, we saw numerous, though under-reported, instances of citizen-police conflicts, food riots, stone pelting, *gheraos* of employers and

government officials by workers, which is why by May 2020, transport facilities like the *Shramik* trains, etc. were grudgingly granted to migrant labour. According to you, was the voice of opposition from the mainstream Indian Left lacking and was it geared far too dangerously towards middle-class philanthropy, rather than giving the disparate localised resistance of this distressed labour, a concrete direction, an organisational platform that was required to actually expose the system through and through?

JB: Again, the absence of collective action is not because labourers would be shy to team up in resistance, but because they are not allowed to do so. Wherever they are going to and wherever they find work, they are not allowed to team up in collective action. Their efforts are defined as a law-and-order problem. There is an imposition of dependency.

Furthermore, there is also the problem of indebtedness. I am scared by the investigations which report – and it is also reflected in my own findings in Gujarat – that the working poor have become more indebted than ever before. Indebted how? Not by formal credit but by taking loans at high interest rates from labour contractors, from *muqaddams* and other owners of capital where they live in the village. What I would like to emphasise is that such indebtedness shows that the labouring poor are fully embedded in the capitalist economy, and are at the same time trying to make use of that to gain dignity, decency and respect. In the labouring *bastis*, we see expenses which are not in accordance with their earning capability, and the outcome of that is increasing indebtedness, which again makes them dependent. When you are indebted to that extent, you do not dare to speak up because you know you are in debt, you are dependent. I hence focus on a new form of bondage which has come up, which I call neo-bondage. It means that labour accepts loans and false wages for labour power which they will have to produce later on. They go off already in debt and they know that they have to pay back. I talked to labourers who told me about their nightmares of how to pay back the debts and the compulsion to take up work of whatever condition. Indebtedness is the consequence of being embedded in a capitalist society. Among the labouring poor, indebtedness is a major obstacle to active resistance. It is indebtedness which does not increase the price you get for your labour, and you get a lower price because you have no bargaining power. You are bound hand and feet to the employer, to the man or figure from which you have taken loans.

At the same time, we should not understate the resistance which is going on, even on an individual level. In a way, labour migration is also a form of resistance. Labour migration is not only because there is no work around in the locality, but it is also an assertion of emancipation, i.e., a refusal to remain stuck in dependency to the rich peasantry in the village. Labour migration is also a move to get out of suppression, intimidation and discrimination. It does not end exploitation because when you go out you are also exploited elsewhere, as in the city or in other rural arenas. But you are more or less exploited anonymously since you are not a well-known figure in the new environs. There emerge strikes; people do resist. Indeed, we must not think that

the labouring poor are docile. They may not be visible; their voices may be mute, but they operate also on an individual level against the odds that threaten their livelihood.

MJ: Any specific comments on the latter part of the question that I posed about whether you see a lack of intervention from the mainstream Left in addressing the situation that unfolded during the lockdown of 2020?

JB: Well, that is cause and consequence, both, of a system of inequality and of a refusal to share. What is difficult to come to terms with in India, is the social question. We are not a commodity, we are human beings, we have a right to livelihood. That is how labour in industrialization and urbanisation Europe teamed up and fought for inclusion in mainstream society; in having a fair price for their labour power, in splitting up the fruits of growth proportionately and not exclusively seeing to it that it would reach the hands of the powerful and the rich. That social question and posing of that social question is lacking in India by the policy makers and by the class of politicians which is in power at the moment.

MJ: We know that the government's handling of the stranded migrant labourers was not only humiliating for the latter but also endangered their livelihood. However, apart from tussles in May 2020, amongst stranded migrant workers and police, no major upheaval and unfolded, such as of the kind we see in the case of the peasantry who have mobilised across Delhi's borders in these last few months. Why haven't the labouring poor of Delhi, for example, joining ranks with the ongoing peasant movement.

JB: Yes, the problem is the lack of propensity to share, the lack of solidarity. It is not only what has happened to footloose labour during the pandemic. It has not only been humiliating to the labouring poor, but also humiliating to society that they allowed this to take place and go on. Oh yes, there was compassion when we saw the photos of the people walking back to their homes for hundreds of kilometres. There was compassion. We see how they were doused, being sprayed with insecticides to control their contamination. How they were put in transition camps, as it was called, at the border of districts or at the border of states. But it did not go beyond fleeting compassion. The majority who have a voice and visibility, that is, those who have assets and enjoy the fruits of capital growth, do not allow those fruits of growth to be shared with those who are heaped up, down below. We accuse politicians and policy makers of what is going on, but the blame should also be on the society which tolerates that. That civil spirit is not there. It was there of course, in the movement which led to the end of colonialism, dependency, stagnation, massive poverty. But then the classes who have enjoyed what happened in the decades after independence, have not bothered about lifting up those who were left behind. The inequality – there are many facts and figures to underline that – has increased; it is cumulative now. Accumulation goes together with dispossession. Accumulation, growing prosperity for those who enjoy it is taken out of the toil, sweat and the blood of the poor in the country. There is a

close relationship between accumulation and dispossession, and we see that happening in India today.

MJ: A large section of India's population is still tied to the agricultural economy. Recently, we have seen the farmers' movement surface in a big way against the new farm laws. In relation to workers' struggles, how do you see the farmers' movement?

JB: The farmers' demonstration going on in India comprises largely of the rich peasantry. Do not forget that rich farmers have been responsible for huge exploitation and suppression of landless labour, of agricultural labour, and also, of the small peasantry in their own localities. When we discuss the phenomenon of labour migration, we should also understand that this class of rich peasantry, the dominant caste, as it used to be called, decided a couple of decades ago to replace their local labour with outside labour, which was cheaper and more docile. Do not forget that these people, who are now standing up to the Indian state, are themselves guilty of exploitation, oppression and suppression.

Having said that, yes, I agree with the question, that the agrarian question should be posed anew. The rural economy as I said is in crisis; it is in a state of distress, and we would have to redefine it and reposition it in a new way. Land reforms would be a major article on that agenda. It should start with land reforms; land to the tiller as it was called in the days of the anti-colonial struggle. The tillers are now the victims of exploitation, and they should get the land.

We see, indeed, that there is a section of those people who were driven back to the villages during the pandemic, now refuse to go out again because they were defined as redundant and they lost their employment and whatever they had built up in the urban economy. We see that plot, fields which remained uncultivated for years on end are now being cultivated again, if only to get food for their own household. Add to this scenario, the problem of environment, which I would not elaborate on. To sum up, the agrarian question has to come back in full power. While the policies and politics are firmly focused on urban economy, urbanisation, etc.; policy framing should be revisited to promote livelihood in the countryside. Livelihood in the countryside does not only provide livelihood, but also provides decency and dignity. We have to stop an economy in which human beings are treated as a commodity that can be thrown away, that can be discarded.

MJ: Thank you for this insightful interview, Professor Breman.