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Review Article

Understanding Bonded Labor: A Traditional System of Slavery in India

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Bonded labor is a traditional system of slavery that continues to plague numerous countries, including India. It is often referred to as a traditional form of slavery as it has deep roots in the caste system that has historically denied equal rights and status to members who do not hail from the upper castes. The pain inflicted upon individuals and families through the bonded labor system is much worse than the caste system itself. This system is a form of debt servitude in which individuals and their families are duped into a life of forced labor characterized by degrading treatment, physical violence, and mental suffering at the hands of the perpetrators. The objective of this article is to offer a thorough examination of the characteristics of this crime, its history, its frequency, the underlying factors contributing to its existence, the financial and psychological repercussions experienced by the victims, and the initiatives that have been implemented thus far in an effort to combat this issue. The present article on bonded labor highlights a major barrier to the 16th Sustainable Development Goal, which is about promoting just, peaceful, and inclusive societies. One of the key reasons why bonded labor continues to exist is the lack of sufficient international attention to it. The authors hope to help change that through the dissemination of key information about the bonded labor system that can be used to weaken and break this inhuman system and restore the health and wellbeing of the survivors.

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Introduction

India is well on its way to development. However, there is a curious lack of interest in the working class and the human rights violations experienced by its members (Phelan et al., 2011). One of the major forms of human rights violations is the bonded labor system, which requires a deeper examination. Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) affirmed that “no one shall be held in slavery or servitude,” and yet the recently published Global Slavery Index (2021) by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and the Walk Free Foundation estimates that 50 million people can be classified as modern-day slaves, living and working in exploitative and degrading conditions. The report employs the umbrella term modern-day slavery to capture the many forms and shapes slavery takes: forced labor, servile marriage, debt bondage, forced commercial sexual exploitation, human trafficking, and child labor (Global Slavery Index, 2021). This article aims to offer an in-depth understanding of the bonded labor form, a system of modern slavery that is largely prevalent in India but also in a few other developing nations.

Bonded labor is often placed within the larger rhetoric of forced labor, slavery, and debt bondage by international agencies and organizations (Derks, 2010). The majority of instances of this practice are in South Asia, where caste-based discrimination,

landlessness, and poverty all contribute to its persistence (Samanova, 2019). In South Asia, bonded labor is highly prevalent in the unregulated sector, from agriculture to carpet making, brick kilns, fireworks, stone quarries, and fishing (Bales, 2005; Kara, 2017). The ILO's 1930 definition considers forced labor as “life under duress,” often with the experience of violence and social exclusion (Damir-Geilsdorf et al., 2016). The bonded labor system is distinctively diverse in its form and practice in India. It could be customary or caste-based, inter-generational, or a result of distress migration intertwined with trafficking (Mishra, 2020). In its most traditional form, bonded labor involves an informal, unwritten, and exploitative credit agreement between two parties. One common practice is the landowning and asset-wielding party providing credit or a loan to the poor debtor, who pledges his labor towards the repayment of the same (Kara, 2017). Given the severe imbalance of class and power between the parties, the laborer is often severely exploited. The arrangement then ascends to slave-like abuse.

The Indian legal definition drawn from the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act, 1976, underlines the forfeiture of four rights or freedoms and five types of obligations necessary to constitute bondage. The four rights and freedoms include the right to the minimum wage, the right to freedom of employment, the right to free movement within India, and the right to buy or sell at market value. Parks et al. (2019) note that in 2013, the Government of India made it clear that the bonded labor system is a trafficking offense due to its exploitative,

coercive, and violent nature. In India, the system of bonded labor and its prevalence did not disappear with the enforcement of the central legislation in 1976 and with the advancement of industrial production in the rural economy but have continued to evolve and take on new forms, which Breman termed neo-bondage (Derks, 2010). They are often short-term and non-hereditary, linked to seasonal migration and labor intermediaries. Moreover, laborers are recruited by 'agent' rings and trafficking 'networks' in villages, are tied to huge advances, and are forced to accept prolonged harsh and extreme working conditions with less than minimum wages (Guerin, 2013).

The first nationwide survey to estimate the prevalence and magnitude of bonded labor was undertaken in 1978 (Srivastava, 2005). The National Commission of Labor, chaired by B.N. Yugandhar, presented the first detailed report on the system, noting high incidences of agricultural bonded labor, migrant bonded labor, and bondage among tribals or indigenous communities in India (Ministry of Labor, 1991). Several legal judgments from India's apex court strengthened the state's response to the problem, including the *Asiad Worker's Case* (1982) and the *Bandhua Mukthi Morcha Case* (1984), where the court clarified that the scope of the system is more comprehensive than Article 4 of the UDHR since "it was contrary to basic human values" (India Kanoon, 2023). Apart from the legal debates on how to define bonded labor, there is a need to examine how international organizations that have been specifically working to abolish modern-day slavery, including bonded labor, view this challenge. According to Anti-Slavery International (2023), bonded labor is a form of debt bondage wherein an individual is forced to pay off a debt. According to this definition, bonded laborers work far more, and for far longer, than it should take to pay off their loans, working tirelessly without seeing an end to their debt (Anti-Slavery International, 2023). This definition is perhaps one of the easiest to understand, although it is not as comprehensive as some other definitions.

Another definition that is a bit more complex is where bonded labor is defined as "the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of those services are not respectively limited and defined" (UNICEF, 2023). This definition is more comprehensive for two reasons. The first is that it not only highlights the nature of the debt but also points to a more hidden feature of bonded labor, which is the extension of that bonded labor onto other family members. The second reason is that it details another feature of the system wherein the service provided by the bonded laborer is not actually applied towards liquidating the debt. Instead, the debt is used as a pretext to simply exploit the individual and their family members.

After a careful examination of some of the well-known definitions of bonded labor, it is apparent that while most definitions highlight key features of this exploitative system, very few are truly comprehensive. This is partly due to the lack of international awareness of this form of modern-day slavery. The authors define bonded labor as an exploitative system of debt-bondage, a form of modern-day slavery wherein the debtor

(in some cases single women) and their family are forced to work in inhumane conditions under the pretext of repaying a debt. In reality, the debt is never liquidated, and the victims are forced to work until death. Even after the debtor's death, the responsibility of repaying the debt through slavery is carried forward by the debtor's children. Now that a basic understanding of the bonded labor system has been attained, the next section will focus on examining the status of this system in the contemporary world.

Who is a Bonded Laborer?

Bonded labor is widely understood to be closely linked with caste-based discrimination, highly unequal socio-economic structures, landlessness, poverty, and relations based on social hierarchy (Samonova, 2023). It is often characterized by a long-term relationship, usually attached to a debt, and is closely knit with India's complex caste framework. Shockingly, 80 percent of the loans owed by bonded laborers were used to cover daily expenses such as food, water, and cooking oil. The average size of these loans was a little over \$85, a sum that ensnared entire families in years of bondage (Kara, 2017). While Graeber (2011) considers debt the core factor that unleashes several layers of violence and heightened exploitation, Justice Bhagwati, one of India's leading jurists, noted that "bonded laborers lived not as humans but as serfs," often consigned to an existence with no freedom or choice.

Traditionally, India's caste system assigned menial tasks or jobs to Dalits for the 'upper caste' families in the village without any form of monetary compensation (Prasad, 2015). While remnants of these forms still exist in various states across India, British colonial rule replaced the traditional form of caste-based slavery with a system of contract labor known then in the British Empire as 'indentured labor' (Prasad, 2015). It essentially bound a laborer to an advance payment made initially in return for services that were usually rendered in deplorable and often violent conditions. This system provided no relief to the dislocated Dalit and Tribal communities who were recruited in large numbers to work across regions, including tea and coffee plantations in overseas British colonies such as Malaysia, Surinam, Fiji, and Mauritius (Kara, 2014).

Recent literature also sheds light on how distressed or forced migration entraps a large number of workers in bondage, especially in the unorganized and unregulated sectors such as brick kilns (Majumder, 2015). The debt-advance-wage-migration cycle requires poor laborers, often indebted at their source states (money borrowed for private needs including housing, marriages, etc.), to fail to repay their loans, take an advance, and outmigrate for work. On their return to their villages, the laborers try to pay off their debts, and the cycle continues (Majumder, 2015).

Unfortunately, traditional and modern forms of bonded labor victimize *Dalits*, *Adivasis*, and *children* even today (Prasad, 2015). In his report for the International Labor Organisation, Mishra (2001) explains the diverse interpretations of the bonded labor system in various states across India. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, the system known as *Vetti*, *chakri/jeetam* was the direct outcome of the uneven social structure perpetuated by feudal and semi-feudal conditions. Referred to as the *Kamiau* in

Odisha and Bihar, the system was characterized by ruthless oppression, low wages, and inter-generational bondage. The *Sagri* system in Rajasthan, a hideous manifestation of usury, ties down the victim to a lifelong loan, usually taken for a marriage or other festivities, while in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the victim renders their services to the landlord as a *jeetha or adima*. The common pattern that underlines the different forms of bondage is the socio-cultural identity of the one bonded—communities and peoples of the margins. Factual data indicate that an overwhelming number of India's bonded laborers are Dalits and Adivasis, as noted by Prasad (2015). He further estimates that in some regions, they make up the majority of such laborers.

Where are the Bonded Laborers?

Since the term bonded labor encompasses a wide variety of slavery, its prevalence across different parts of the country is also varied. In the southern state of Tamil Nadu, for example, due to the rapid industrialization of the state's economy, young girls between the ages of 14 and 20 are recruited to work in the cotton industry under conditions indicative of bonded labor (Delaney & Tate, 2015). Another well-known sector in the same state where bonded labor, including child labor, has been recorded is the brick kiln industry (Bhukuth & Ballet, 2019). Ever since India adopted the new economic policy of liberalization, privatization, and globalization in 1991, it has experienced a significant increase in the inflow of foreign direct investment (Sajeev & Kaur, 2020), thereby spurring the growth of many industries, including the construction sector, which in recent years has become one of the fastest-growing industries with an annual growth rate of more than ten percent (Wuttke & Vilks, 2014). In other words, the construction industry in India demands a large and ever-growing workforce, which has led to the adoption of bonded labor in many instances. The brick kiln sector in Tamil Nadu is one particular sector of the construction industry that lures workers with an advance payment and an abhorrent interest rate well above 65 percent, which the workers need to pay off by working (Bhukuth et al., 2018). There are no written records of the amount of interest to be paid (Bhukuth et al., 2018), giving the enslavers an even greater opportunity to exploit the bonded laborers and their family members, who are also roped into bonded labor to “work off” the borrowed loan and interest.

In the northern and western states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, bonded labor can be found in three major sectors: the brick kiln sector, stone quarries, and sex work (Oosterhoff & Nanda, 2022). India has a complicated relationship with sex work. On the one hand, practicing sex work under certain conditions is not illegal. However, running brothels and pimping are considered illegal (Beattie et al., 2015). This has led to two types of sex workers in the country: those who have been forced into sex work by human traffickers and pimps, and those who have voluntarily chosen sex work as their profession (Azhar et al., 2020). Moreover, it is difficult to differentiate between the two groups, which provides human traffickers with an ideal environment to operate. Other factors create an ideal scenario for practicing bonded labor in the north Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Both states have high levels of poverty and a low human development index. In these states, most of the

bonded laborers are men and young boys working in stone quarries and brick kilns (Oosterhoff & Burns, 2020). In the northwestern state of Rajasthan, bonded labor and child labor are common in the sandstone mines. The sandstone from these mines is widely used for landscaping and flooring across north India (Marshall et al., 2022). This gives an insight into the vastness of bonded labor, including child labor, in the state, which has other issues such as landlessness, drought, and caste discrimination that add to the poor human rights conditions marked by bonded labor (Marshall et al., 2022).

To fully understand the phenomenon of bonded labor in India, one must also grasp the power of the caste system, a system of social stratification marked by discrimination and inequality (Jodhka, 2017). Essentially, it is a hierarchical system that discriminates against people based on the caste they are born into. Those at the bottom of this hierarchy are the scheduled castes (referred to as Dalits) and scheduled tribes (referred to as Adivasis), who make up an estimated 87 percent of bonded laborers in the country (Picherit, 2018). This is eye-opening because the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes in India constitute less than 30 percent and less than 10 percent of the population, respectively (Sahgal, 2021). This is a clear sign of targeted marginalization and exploitation leading to bonded labor.

Another clear pattern that emerges when examining the profile of a typical bonded laborer is the high probability of their engagement in occupations within the unorganized sector, particularly those that are directly labor-oriented, such as brick kilns, stone quarries, and construction projects (National Human Rights Commission, 2022). This observation is crucial, as workers in India's unorganized sector constitute ninety-three percent of the total workforce and suffer from a lack of job security and poor working conditions (Mishra, 2017). In other words, they are in a vulnerable situation, making them ideal targets for exploitation through bonded labor. Despite the government's best efforts to improve the living conditions of unorganized workers, progress has been extremely slow (Mishra, 2017). There is an urgent need to ensure social security for these workers to protect them from falling prey to the bonded labor system.

On the whole, economically disempowered and socially marginalized communities are often exploited through bonded labor. This is a worrying trend, especially since the demand for rapid urbanization in the country is also leading to a rise in the demand for large and cheap labor to aid in this quest for development. Since the vast majority of bonded laborers lack significant political influence to effect change directly, there is an urgent need to understand more about them and the possible efforts that could be taken to significantly reduce the number of individuals trapped in this system. In the next section, the existing legal provisions to prevent and reduce the prevalence of bonded labor in the country and their impact are discussed in detail.

Economic Exploitation

At the heart of the bonded labor system lies the issue of economic exploitation. The ultimate goal of the perpetrators is to secure free or unpaid labor, even if it means violating several

human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2023). As discussed previously, the perpetrators often lure unsuspecting victims into the system through a loan, which is used as leverage to extract a tremendous amount of free labor. Although there are no official estimates of the economic exploitation endured by those trapped in this system, an estimate can be made by examining the number of hours a bonded laborer is forced to work for free to “work off” the loan and the minimum wage in the country. For most individuals, a typical workday is between 6–8 hours, but for bonded laborers, it can extend up to 14 hours a day (Thakre, 2023). This means that a perpetrator can secure about two days’ worth of free labor from their victims every single day. Currently, the minimum wage rate per month for unskilled labor in the country is around US\$210 (India Briefing, 2023). One must also remember that bonded laborers can be forced to work for about 14 hours a day, which is well above the number of hours a typical individual works. At this rate, a perpetrator can secure a minimum of US\$250 worth of free labor per month from a single bonded laborer. If the perpetrator has a family of four members working for them for a month, then about US\$1,000 worth of free labor can be secured each month. US\$1,000 might not seem like much, but when converted to Indian rupees, it’s a significant amount of money. The bonded labor system targets not only the initial borrower or victim but also ties the entire family into debt bondage on the pretext of paying back the loan borrowed by one of the family members, as seen in many cases (Mounika, 2022; The Hindu, 2023). The only labor cost incurred by the perpetrator is the cost of providing cheap food to the bonded laborers. In one case, the perpetrator was so calculative that after providing food to the bonded laborers, he only gave them five minutes to eat before forcing them back to work (NDTV, 2023). To add to this cruelty, the perpetrator did not allow the bonded laborers any toilet breaks either (NDTV, 2023). On the whole, the goal of economic exploitation of bonded laborers is one of the key drivers for the continual existence of this crime. In most cases, the bonded laborers are not educated, nor are they aware of their human rights, which increases their vulnerability to this form of economic exploitation. As mentioned previously, a vast majority of the bonded laborers in India are Adivasis (indigenous people) and Dalits, who have been historically exploited by mainstream society. Therefore, the problem is much deeper than just economic exploitation of the vulnerable. It’s a systematic denial of rights and economic empowerment to a group of people based on their identity. The other major issue that has received little to no research attention is the psychological impact of this form of treatment.

Psychological Impact

The mental health of those who have been trapped under a system of slavery or labor exploitation (marked by trafficking in some cases) could certainly be affected. This is particularly true for children (Dhakal et al., 2019; Trinh, 2020), many of whom are from marginalized sections of society and face a higher risk of being trafficked in India (Krishnan, 2023). It is also true for adults in general (Munro-Kramer et al., 2019). There is a significant amount of literature on this among those who have been trafficked (Nodzinski et al., 2020). However, there is a paucity of studies on the mental health impact of bonded labor

on individuals and families. One study that examined this issue in Nepal found that the survivors of bonded labor experienced high levels of psychological distress, with 61 percent of the respondents experiencing depression, 46 percent experiencing anxiety, and 18 percent experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (The Freedom Fund, 2017). Working in inhuman conditions marked by torture and undernourishment is the typical situation most bonded laborers are caught up in. In many cases, the bondage extends to family members as well (The Hindu, 2023). This means that family members would be forced to watch their loved ones be exploited as well. This additional layer of psychological torture could lead to negative long-term mental health consequences. Almost all the other features of the bonded labor system appear to be detrimental to the mental health of the laborers. For example, research suggests that good sleep is essential for good mental health (Scott et al., 2021). However, bonded laborers are often sleep-deprived and forced to work for extremely long hours every single day. Then there is also the feature of food deprivation among the bonded laborers. Many bonded laborers are not supplied with regular meals. Food has been linked to mental health; those who are constantly facing hunger, have fears of not securing sufficient food, and do not get their regular meals long-term are more likely to suffer from poor mental health and wellbeing (Elgar et al., 2021).

Children Working as Bonded Laborers

In this context, there is a need to explore the long-term consequences of bonded labor on the brain development of children, as children of parents who have been forced to work are also roped into this system and deprived of nutrition. One other long-term consequence of bonded labor is post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, as reported in one study (The Freedom Fund, 2017). People who experience traumatic events may develop PTSD (American Psychological Association, 2023) as a psychiatric disorder. Disturbing thoughts, feelings, nightmares, and flashbacks to the traumatic event are characteristics of the disorder (American Psychological Association, 2023). For some bonded laborers, the traumatic experience might also include forced migration, which is also closely associated with bonded labor.

Forced Migration and Bonded Labor

The bonded labor system, in many cases, is closely associated with the issue of forced migration, as the lack of sufficient agricultural income leads many to become forced migrants who fall into the trap of the bonded labor system (Carswell & De Neve, 2013). In this context, an efficient migration policy is critical to preventing crimes such as bonded labor (Castles, 2014). Although the service sector has made significant strides towards becoming an important sector, it is the agricultural sector that continues to employ the most citizens in the country, followed by the rapidly growing construction industry (The Wire, 2023). To better understand the bonded labor that is partly powered by forced migration, one has to deeply examine the vulnerable condition in which many migrant laborers find themselves when they become victims of the system.

The failure of crops, often caused by climate change among other factors (Mall et al., 2017), leaves the typical landless laborer working on the farm with no option but to seek a loan to make ends meet and fulfill responsibilities such as marrying off their children or securing medical treatment for serious illnesses. Despite the growth of small financial banks offering loans to the poor in rural areas, many landless laborers still depend on moneylenders to meet their financial needs. They prefer moneylenders (Nagaraj & Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2020) over the formal system for several reasons, such as the ease of securing a loan without much documentation and the incorrect assumption that they can favorably negotiate with the moneylender to extend the repayment date without major consequences. This incorrect assumption, coupled with the desperate state, leads them to trust the moneylender, who acts as a gateway to the bonded labor system. Once caught in the system, the landless laborer and his family, who often have no known relatives in the location they are trapped in, have no option but to become bonded laborers. The fact that the individual and his family are forced migrants with no one to contact is advantageous for the perpetrator, who continues to operate with impunity.

What is Being Done to Abolish Bonded Labor?

Bonded labor is a clear form of slavery and a blatant violation of human rights as set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Sands, 2019). India, being one of the signatories of the declaration (Nadkarni & Sinha, 2016), has an ethical responsibility to curb such violations. The Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act, 1976, is one such law that protects debtors from being forced to offer their labor for free or at a nominal rate (Prasad, 2015). The Act also prevents debtors from selling their labor when their freedom of movement is restricted (Prasad, 2015). The implementation of this Act led to the immediate extinguishment of existing debts, and freed laborers were granted protection from eviction from their place of residence (National Human Rights Commission, 2021). Although this law has been deemed landmark legislation against the system of bonded labor, its implementation across different states has remained weak.

Recently, the National Commission for Human Rights issued a notice to the government of Maharashtra over the torture and enslavement of 11 laborers by contractors, wherein the officers failed to take appropriate action in a timely manner (Mishra, 2023). The 11 laborers were forced to work for 12 hours a day and were given only one meal a day by the contractors (Mishra, 2023). Out of the estimated 11,050,000 bonded labor cases in India, only 315,302 individuals between the years 1978-2023 have been rescued (Paliath, 2023). This means that only a fraction of the actual number of bonded laborers are ever reported or receive media attention; therefore, the practice persists despite legislation such as the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act, 1976. In fact, it is estimated that India will miss the target of ending bonded labor by 98 percent (Paliath, 2023).

Apart from the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act, 1976, other legislations in the country aim to prevent labor exploitation, including the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, which

ensures the payment of fair wages to workers; the Contract Labor (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970, which outlines the roles and responsibilities of contractors towards their workers; and the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979, which aims to prevent the exploitation of workers who migrate from one state to another in search of work. The gravity of the bonded labor problem is such that even international organizations like the International Labor Organization have carried out projects to help prevent or reduce its prevalence. One such effort by the International Labor Organization involved providing microfinancing for vulnerable communities to prevent them from falling into the bonded labor system (International Labor Organization, 2014).

However, despite the government's best efforts and those of both international and domestic organizations, India ranks 6th in terms of the total number of people trapped in modern slavery, which includes debt bondage and forced labor, among other forms of exploitation (Global Slavery Index, 2023). This translates to a total of 11,050,000 individuals trapped in this system. In the Asia Pacific region, where India is situated, the most powerful factor currently driving modern-day slavery, including bonded labor, is the marginalization or disenfranchisement of groups at the societal level (Global Slavery Index, 2023). This indicates a need to examine how the rehabilitation of bonded labor survivors is taking place so that they do not fall back into the same system. In the Indian context, while examining bonded labor, one must also acknowledge the role of the caste system, which reinforces the belief among rescued bonded laborers, who often hail from marginalized sections of society, that they too have human rights. There is thus an urgent need to integrate human rights education into the rehabilitation process and to sensitize the community about the inhuman and illegal nature of the bonded labor system so that rescued bonded laborers are not ostracized for skipping the repayment of their debt if they decide to return to their old community.

Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Released Bonded Laborers

Rehabilitation can be defined as the care necessary for someone to regain their ability to live their daily life without much pain and suffering. Rehabilitation is necessary for people who have undergone trauma (National Library of Medicine, 2019). It is not only limited to physical care but also includes psychological support for survivors of horrific events and experiences (Mittal et al., 2021). Survivors of the bonded labor system have often undergone several forms of torture and degrading treatment by their employers. This is why the state has taken measures to help rehabilitate and reintegrate them. One such measure is the establishment of the 'Central Sector Scheme of Bonded Laborer, 2016,' wherein an amount of \$1,200 to \$3,600 is granted to the released bonded laborer based on the nature and extent of deprivation (Government of India, 2018). These efforts are a welcome improvement. However, is it truly sufficient? Considering the magnitude of the problem and the meager amount of \$11,99,654 allocated by the state as part of its annual budget (Government of India, 2018), it can be stated that much

more could be done to address this modern-day slavery that exists in the country.

The other major problem with the current scheme is its implementation. There have been reports of the lack of impact of the scheme at the ground level. In the state of Odisha, for example, the case of 2,000 bonded laborers who have not received compensation after rescue has been reported by a reputed newspaper (Barik, 2023). On the whole, several issues have been reported regarding the smooth delivery of compensation to survivors of human trafficking, including the survivors of bonded labor (US Department of State, 2021). This issue has been noted by the National Human Rights Commission (2021a) in one of its advisories to the government regarding the rehabilitation of bonded laborers. Monetary compensation, however, is only one aspect of rehabilitation.

A more urgent and perhaps more important factor to consider is the psychological support provided to survivors to ensure their full recovery from the traumatic experience. Those trapped in this system often experience violence at the hands of the perpetrators. They are beaten and tortured daily and also witness the torture of their co-workers (Sami, 2021). This degrading treatment results in them developing distrust towards others, displaying signs of withdrawal, and developing a bleak view of their future (Sami, 2021). According to the central scheme for the rehabilitation of bonded laborers revamped by the government in 2022, the rehabilitation package also involves providing psycho-social counseling and skill development (Government of India, 2022). Therefore, while on paper there appears to be recognition of the psychological aspect of rehabilitation, the ground reality of this aspect is yet to be examined empirically in the Indian context.

There could be a large number of rescued bonded laborers living with untreated mental health issues developed as a result of their enslavement. The third aspect of rehabilitation is skill development. The government offers skill development or capacity building for rehabilitated bonded laborers (Government of India, 2022). This is to empower the released bonded laborers and help ensure they do not fall back into the system of bonded labor. Although rehabilitation might appear challenging, re-integration is even more difficult due to the complexities of the existing social structure, including the caste system. As mentioned previously, a significant majority of bonded laborers hail from marginalized sections of society (Picherit, 2018). Therefore, for them to fully re-integrate into society, they need to enter a community where they are not viewed as instruments to be exploited for profit or socially excluded due to their caste but are treated with dignity and care. This means it is better to ensure that they can escape their previous exploitative environment and move to a comparatively safer location where they are less likely to be forced into bonded labor again. In this regard, there is an urgent need to examine the social factors leading to the re-bondage of many released and rehabilitated bonded laborers, re-condemning them to a life of misery from which they had previously escaped. There is also a need to re-examine the existing job opportunities for the rescued bonded laborers so that they can lead a decent life. An improvement in public-private partnerships to increase job opportunities for rescued bonded laborers is necessary.

What next?

One of the greatest challenges in identifying and rescuing victims from this system is the hidden, plain-sight nature of this crime. For example, brick kiln factories are not suspicious or unusual to the naked eye, but they might very well be powered by bonded labor. A significant flaw that offenders frequently exploit is the lack of proper documentation for workers in such factories (Raman, 2024). Therefore, there is a need to develop a more detailed system for documenting workers. Since the causes of bonded labor are multidimensional, the solutions to help reduce its prevalence must be multidimensional as well. In this regard, there is a need to seek the assistance of the general public. In an effort to reduce the distress of street children and prevent their exploitation, CHILDLINE, a toll-free phone number, was launched in 1996 (Government of India, 2023). This phone number (1098) has since become one of the most well-known phone numbers among the general public and has been used countless times to help protect children in the country. Similarly, there is a need for a nationwide toll-free number to report bonded labor. Currently, in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, there is a toll-free helpline number—1800 4252 650—to help report bonded labor (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2021). While this is a welcome development, there is a need for a nationwide toll-free phone number that is much shorter and easier to remember and is specifically designed to report bonded labor in all its forms. Another major drawback of the current system is the delay in the distribution of compensation or monetary relief to individuals released from bonded labor. Although the 2016 scheme has been revamped and has been in effect since 2022 (Government of India, 2022), there are still a few adjustments that could be made to smooth the process of distribution, and one of them is digitization. Since 2015, the government has been strongly pushing for a campaign called Digital India (Government of India, 2015), which has several objectives, including the delivery of its services directly to citizens through mobile applications. This philosophy could be extended to the realm of the distribution of relief for freed bonded laborers as well. By digitizing the process, the distribution system becomes more transparent and centralized, reducing delays caused by state governments that are often reported in the media and also bringing down the possibility of corruption in the system. Digitization would also provide survivors with an option to track when they would likely receive compensation. With an expected 1 billion smartphone users in the country by 2026 (Business Standard, 2022), digitization is perhaps the best way forward in ensuring the effective delivery of government services.

The survivors of the bonded labor system and other forms of modern slavery and exploitation are likely to experience serious mental health problems as a result of the traumatic experience (Wright et al., 2021). It is, therefore, important to take all necessary measures to reduce the prevalence of this crime in the first place. One effort in this regard would be to promote human rights education, especially among vulnerable sections of society. The propagation of the concept of human rights, which emphasizes certain rights as inherent to all human beings (United Nations, 2023a), is the first line of defense because its knowledge can help the vulnerable sections of

society bravely stand up to potential exploiters who often target those least aware of their own rights. The second area where there is a need to devote state resources is awareness among the general population about the different forms of labor exploitation, how to spot individuals trapped in such a system, and whom to report it to. India, which was once projected to overtake China and become the most populous country in the world in 2025 (Gu et al., 2021), has already attained this status. With a massive population such as India's, state authorities need the assistance of the general population, especially in rural areas, to help identify and rescue individuals from the perpetrators. This calls for a greater push for awareness programs in villages and even in some urban regions where bonded labor has been most reported. This is important because perpetrators are less likely to engage in this crime if they know that members of the community are aware of what they are doing and are likely to report it to the concerned authorities. The third area of focus needs to be a revamping of the current rehabilitation model for survivors of bonded labor. The state could encourage and motivate corporate companies in the country to offer skill training and job opportunities for the survivors as part of their corporate social responsibility program. The concept of corporate social responsibility has gained significant importance in the country (Dhanesh, 2015). However, many companies lack a systematic plan on how to invest their funds towards socially responsible and society-empowering efforts, and one way they could carry this out is by economically empowering the survivors of bonded labor, which would help significantly reduce the instances of survivors falling back into the exploitative system of bonded labor. The causes of bonded labor are multivariate; therefore, the solutions must be multivariate as well. Perpetrators of this exploitative system often take advantage of the lack of coordination between the state, civil society, and the general public. There is an urgent need to unite the efforts of all stakeholders and formulate improved policies, laws, and schemes, followed by effective execution at the ground level. While one half must be geared towards reducing the prevalence of this crime, the second half of the efforts must aim at rehabilitating and empowering the survivors of the bonded labor system.

Conclusion

In the past few decades, while most researchers have focused on human trafficking, there has been a paucity of information available on bonded labor, which this article aims to address to some extent. The bonded labor system is a hidden form of modern slavery. It is a form of economic exploitation that negatively impacts both the physical and psychological health of individuals and families. It is a crime that violates several rights outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as the fundamental rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Such a system needs to be halted before it permeates further into other industries. Although there are laws in place to deter this crime, the bigger challenge is to successfully detect it and appropriately rehabilitate those affected. Since bonded labor is largely confined to rural or semi-rural areas (though it can exist in urban areas as well), where there is a lack of human rights education and awareness about the formal banking system, perpetrators find it easy to trap

individuals and families into debt bondage. Until rescue and release by government agents or members of civil society, many bonded laborers believe there is simply no way out. Apart from the lack of human rights education, there are deeper causes behind the continued existence of this crime. The use of the caste system as a tool to push individuals and families into this system is another reality that the government and civil society need to confront. Since it is often the marginalized sections of society that are victimized under the bonded labor system, there is a lack of seriousness among the general public to address this challenge, reflecting a lack of understanding, respect, or both toward human rights. Awareness among the general population as well as the most vulnerable sections of society is the need of the hour. What then does the future of bonded labor look like? On the one hand, an improvement in the literacy rate combined with human rights education among the rural population could help prevent individuals from falling into this system of exploitation. Over the past few years, the state has been designing its financial policies to suit its Digital India initiative, which aims to digitize governance, including most financial transactions. The ultimate goal is to ensure accountability and transparency and to make banking services remotely accessible to all, including those living in rural areas.

If this initiative succeeds, it might help reduce crimes such as bonded labor, which is marked by the economic and psychological exploitation of innocent victims. This also means that perpetrators might need to devise novel ways of trapping their victims. On the other hand, with an increasing population that is yet to attain its peak and with a great demand.

If certain underlying factors, such as illiteracy, a dearth of human rights education, and an unfavorable rural banking system, which drive some people to rely on predatory moneylenders, and the absence of an effective criminal justice system, persist, bonded labor may transition from a predominantly rural form of human exploitation to one that is more focused on urban areas.

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