



ROLE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN COMBATING BONDED LABOUR – INSIGHTS FROM INDIA

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ABSTRACT Forced labour is addressed in five out of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pertaining to gender equality, poverty, decent employment and economic growth, reduced inequalities, and to peace, justice, and strong institutions. Also known as debt bondage, bonded labour is a specific form of forced labour in which compulsion into servitude is derived from debt. Categorized and examined in scholarly literature as a type of forced labour, bonded labour entails constraints on an individual's conditions and duration of work. Forced labour is a development issue that is exacerbated by several factors, including poverty, lack of education, child labour, violence, exploitation, gender inequality, migration, and climate change. The study aims to examine the status of sustainable goals to combat bonded labour. The role of each of the Sustainable Development Goals and their connection with eradicating bonded labour, which is a form of forced labour, is illustrated. Accordingly, this research study employed the analysis of secondary data, resources, and previous studies. The study's findings indicate that the following sustainable goals— Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and its specific aim 5.3, Goal 8 (Decent employment), Target 10.7 (Reduced Inequalities), and Goal 16 (Guarantee a Legal Identity)—involve combating bonded labour.

KEYWORDS : Sustainable development goals, Bonded labour, Forced labour, Slavery, Trafficking.

1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, which includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets aimed at promoting People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership. A key focus is to protect vulnerable populations, including migrants and refugees, from economic, social, and environmental injustices. Several SDGs address issues related to forced labour, such as gender equality, decent work, and peace, justice, and strong institutions. The complexities of forced labour involve interconnected issues, including poverty, illiteracy, discrimination, and climate change. Terminology like slavery, bonded labour, and human trafficking denotes varying degrees of exploitation. In India, despite legal prohibitions, many employers exploit vulnerable individuals, trapping them in a cycle of poverty and limited opportunities. Tackling this issue requires not only stricter law enforcement but also addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality. This study aims to explore the role of sustainable development goals in combating forced labour and assess India's progress toward eradicating this issue.

2. Review Of Literature

Jacob and D'Sami (2021) studied the changing demographics of bonded workers, highlighting that many are now young individuals who migrate away from familiar environments. This migration often limits their freedoms. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to eradicate bonded labour and promote fair working conditions, although these objectives are not solely independent. Despite existing legal frameworks, justice for victims is often elusive. To address this complex situation, solutions must be proposed.

Boyd et al. (2021) explore the use of machine learning, Earth observation, and remote sensing to assess modern slavery and exploitative labour in South Asia's "Brick Belt." This study is the first to analyze spatiotemporal trends in Bull's Trench Kilns, linked to several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8.7, which aims to end modern slavery by 2030. The research also examines connections to urbanization (SDGs 11, 12), environmental issues (SDGs 3, 14, 15), and climate change (SDG 13). The findings suggest practical measures to address key SDG concerns related to brick production.

Taunk, A., & Nimbalkar, V. (2021) emphasize that global economic growth should benefit all countries without harming the environment. It is crucial to ensure that this growth leads to decent jobs, upholds workers' rights, and eliminates modern slavery and child labour. By enhancing access to banking and financial services, we can promote innovation and entrepreneurship for everyone. The article primarily focuses on sustainable development and equal employment in the context of India's economic growth.

Pattadath, et al., (2020). The 'stories' of women and others from

marginalized backgrounds who migrate in quest of freedom, survival, and autonomy are frequently erased or neglected since migration narratives resist including a gendered lens. This is consistent with the current understanding of women's labour, particularly in relation to exploitative forms of it.

Bhukuth, A., Ballet, J., & Sirven, N. (2018) explore how debt bondage's credit-for-work contracts can benefit both businesses and workers in certain contexts. Their empirical study in southern India aims to assess whether individuals choose credit, thus increasing their vulnerability to debt bondage, to mitigate other risks like financial instability and potential violence. They argue that eliminating debt bondage might inadvertently heighten the risks that households seek to avoid, highlighting the need for alternative employment solutions for those in rural areas.

3. Research Methods

The study examines the current status of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in combating forced labour. It outlines the role of each SDG in eradicating forced labour and employs a regressive technique to analyze secondary data and previous studies. Researchers suggest that conducting a systematic or semi-systematic literature review alongside secondary data analysis enhances understanding of the topic. This approach ensures the research is based on empirical data and effectively identifies and synthesizes how SDGs address forced labour.

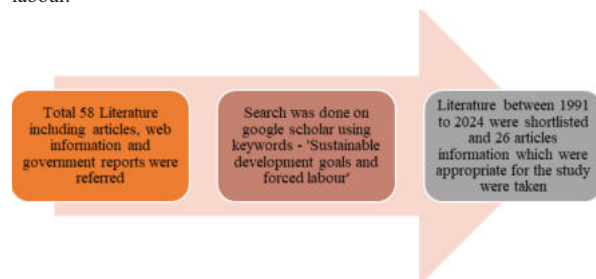


Figure 1 – Research method

By monitoring the data from the secondary sources, policymakers and organizations can better understand the impact of their efforts and make informed decisions on how to further promote sustainable development.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Sustainable Development Goals Related To Forced Labour

Forced labour is a complex issue that intersects with migration, gender, education, human rights, and more. Achieving the abolition of forced labour globally will support various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and its target 5.3 aim

to eliminate harmful practices like child marriage, which will significantly address the problem. Prioritizing paid domestic work, providing equal economic opportunities, and promoting gender equality in leadership can empower women and girls, making them more resilient against exploitation and vulnerability.

Addressing the root causes of forced labour can be achieved through Goal 8, which focuses on promoting economic growth, decent employment, reducing unemployment, strengthening labour rights, and ensuring safe working conditions, particularly in least developed nations. Many cases of forced labour arise from individuals seeking job opportunities or leaving home due to a lack of options, highlighting the need to improve access to decent jobs. Target 10.7 (Reduced Inequalities) which urges States to "promote organized, secure, and accountable migration and mobility of individuals, including by implementing structured and effectively controlled migration policies" reinforces this. States recognize that by improving migration management systems and increasing the availability of safe, organized, and legal migration options, the risk of migrants and refugees being subjected to violence, abuse, and exploitation during dangerous and irregular journeys can be reduced.

Goal 16 is to guarantee a legal identity, including birth registration for all, improve the rule of law, decrease corruption, build effective and accountable institutions, and further combat forced labour. People are far more likely to be victims of forced labour and are unable to receive social and community assistance if their births are not registered. In reaction to forced labour, law enforcement agencies, in conjunction with other governmental and non-governmental organizations, take the lead in the majority of nations.

In addition to these targets, the results of Goal 4: Ensuring Access to Quality Education and Opportunities for Lifelong Learning for All will tackle critical elements that put millions of people around the world at risk of being victims of forced labour. Goal 4's emphasis on the world's educational system harmonizes well with Goal 5's emphasis on gender equality and Goal 8's emphasis on decent employment and economic growth. Goal 4.1 states that all students, regardless of gender, should have access to and complete a free, equitable, and high-quality elementary and secondary education that produces meaningful and applicable knowledge. Forced labour is more common among unschooled children because their parents either force them to work or prevent them from receiving the protections that are meant to keep them safe.

Goals 4.3 and 4.4 both stress the need to enhance adult and youth access to technical and vocational training in order to better prepare them for the workforce. This is very important because people who are economically disadvantaged or have a low level of education are more inclined to seek out irregular migration channels, which can put them at danger of exploitation and forced labour, rather than using the legitimate channels to migrate.

Last but not least, in order to improve monitoring and accountability of action against forced labour, Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals, Targets 17.18 and 17.19 both demand for greater capacity to collect, manage, and analyze data.

4.2 Bonded Labour Abolition In India

With the passing of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, the practice of bonded labour was nationwide outlawed as of October 25, 1975. At the same time that it liquidated their obligations, it unilaterally liberated all bonded labourers from their bonds. It formalized bondage as a crime with legal consequences.

The Centrally Sponsored Scheme for the Rehabilitation of Bonded Labourers was launched by the Ministry of Labour in May 1978 to assist the state governments in rehabilitating released bonded labourers. Initially, the costs of rehabilitation, capped at Rs. 4000 per labourer, were shared between the central and state governments. Over the years, the scheme has been revised multiple times, with the most recent update occurring in January 2022, when it was renamed the "Central Sector Scheme" for the Rehabilitation of Bonded Labourers.

4.3 Status Of Achieving SDG Goal To Abolish Bonded Labour In India

In July 2016, the Union administration informed Parliament that as part of its 15-year plan to completely eliminate bonded labour, it will identify, liberate, and reintegrate around 18.4 million bonded labourers

by 2030.

According to figures from the Union government, 315,302 individuals were freed from bonded labour throughout the period spanning from 1978 to January 2023. Out of this number, 94% have successfully undergone rehabilitation. According to the data, the government has only managed to release 32,873 individuals from bonded labour since its announcement in 2016. This translates to an average of 4,696 people every year. If the government continues at the current annual rate, by 2030, it will have only accomplished 2% of its goal of 18.4 million, resulting in 18 million Indians still being in bonded labour.

In 2019, the National Crime Records Bureau recorded 1,155 cases under the Bonded Labour System Abolition Act, 1976 (BLSA), with 96% of these offenses being committed against individuals belonging to the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. In 2020, a total of 1,231 instances were recorded under the Act, with 94% of them being against SC/ST. Similarly, in 2021, there were 592 cases registered, with 96% of them being against SC/ST. These numbers indicate that the statistics on rescues and rehabilitation do not align with the number of cases officially reported.

In spite of many efforts, the elimination of bonded labour in India looks difficult due to deeply ingrained societal norms and the lack of strict enforcement of laws. The practice continues to thrive in rural areas where poverty and lack of education make individuals vulnerable to exploitation. Additionally, powerful landowners and businesses continue to benefit from the cheap labour provided by bonded workers, further complicating efforts to eradicate this form of modern-day slavery. Only through comprehensive government intervention and education can this harmful practice be truly eradicated.

5. Recommendations

Recommendations to eradicate bonded labour, forced labour, human trafficking include implementing strict laws and regulations to punish those who exploit vulnerable individuals for labour. Additionally, creating awareness campaigns to educate the public about the dangers and consequences of these practices can help prevent them from occurring. Providing support and resources for victims to escape and recover from these situations is also crucial in eliminating bonded labour, forced labour, and human trafficking.

Recommendations Are As Follows:

- The applicable SDG targets should inform the adaptation of project programming, strategic objectives, and communication activities by states and financing organizations.
- Find ways to join forces with other international organizations and pertinent regional forums to combat forced labour in discussions and debates around migration, gender, human rights, and law enforcement.
- By harmonizing research and capacity-building activities targeting forced labour on a national, regional, and international scale, we can maximize the effectiveness of anti-trafficking efforts..
- Promote consistent reporting towards SDG targets and indicators and guarantee sufficient gathering of age-and sex-aggregated data, including on populations of migrants, stateless people, and refugees.
- Allocate more financial resources to districts with heightened sensitivity.
- Enhance the central coordination and monitoring system for rehabilitation.
- Create a national online platform dedicated to addressing issues related to bonded labour and providing access to welfare entitlements.
- Facilitate data gathering from nations and establish a centralized repository for all forms of aid.
- Guarantee enhanced working conditions and prompt remuneration for labourers.
- Periodic surveys conducted in vulnerable districts to detect and eliminate the practice of bonded labour, along with efforts aimed at raising awareness.
- The convergence of the rehabilitation benefits for the released bonded labourers with other schemes at the Union and state levels aims to reduce the vulnerability of people being re-trafficked.

6. CONCLUSION:

To conclude, the SDGs play a vital role in combating bonded labour by providing a comprehensive framework to address the root cause of the

violation of human rights. The government, civil society, and the private sector need to work together to eradicate poverty and provide alternative livelihoods, to educate and raise awareness about the issue, to empower marginalized communities, especially women and girls, to promote fair labour practices and safe working conditions and to strengthen legal frameworks. Although the SDGs offer a powerful tool for combating bonded labour, their success depends on collective action, coordination, and commitment. By working together, we can create a world where no one is trapped in the cycle of debt and exploitation, and where everyone can enjoy their fundamental human rights and dignity.

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