

The Root Causes of Bonded Labour System and Community Based Strategies to Combat it in Thiruvallur District, Tamil Nadu



Social Science

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ABSTRACT

Bonded labour is one of the contemporary forms of slavery which continue to exist in different forms in different parts of India. This modern day slavery taking advantage of the unequal social distribution and poor condition of the society, has taken numerous dimensions and continue to occur and reoccur in India. According to Walk Free Foundation, a human rights based organization, in their global forced labour survey revealed there are 38.8 million people working under forced labour conditions. In India alone 14 million are in bondage. In order to enroot the issue of bonded labour, India has signed in numerous International Covenants, formulated national level laws and legislation but due to improper ground level implementation and failure to enroot the primary causes of bonded labour, bonded labour still continues to live long in the country.

The system of bonded labour begins when an economically deprived person borrows money from the wealthy landlords in the name of advance by pledging his labour as a mode of repayment. Gradually the system of bonded labour will victimize the workers by restricting their basic rights of their movements, their employment, their rights to get fair wage and subject to severe abuses. Hence, the present paper aims to discuss about the prevalence, present condition, root causes of bonded labour system in Thiruvallur District and to study the community based challenges, opportunities and suggestion to enroot the issue of bonded labour among vulnerable communities.

Introduction

In 21st Century, it is shocking to know that slavery and its forms still exist in the world. Bonded labour is one of the contemporary form of slavery and it occurs all over the country in different forms and in different places. In spite of high level of awareness on human rights issues, unification of countries to fight against the social evils, International covenants, International human rights organization, and wealth of information, there are still 38.8 million people living under the forced labour or bonded labour circumstances around the world.

Bonded labour is a system of exploitation which particularly targets economically deprived and socially underprivileged communities by taking advantage of their poor condition and social ignorance. It subjects them to human rights violations, deny their rights in their freedom of movements, freedom to employment, inhuman working condition, rights on fair wages and all sort of mistreatment in work place (Mishra, 2011). This inhuman issue needs to be removed and the present victims of bonded labour must be freed. It is possible when the root causes of bonded labour are identified, challenges during the implementation of the act studied and community based opportunities and strategies formulated. Thus the present paper will briefly describe about what are the root causes of bonded labour and what are the community based remedies to combat the issue among the vulnerable communities.

Bonded labour system in India

The bonded labour system is banned in India through the Constitution of India, in Article 21, Article 22. The distinctive law was constituted by the Government of India in 1976. It is called The Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act, 1976 (NHRC, 2012). According to the Act, the bonded labour system is defined as the system of forced, or partly forced labour under which a debtor enters into an agreement with the creditor in consideration of an advance obtained. Due to such advance, or any customary or social obligation, the worker renders his labour to the creditor, for a specified or for an unspecified period, either with or without nominal wages, restrict the right of his' or his family's movement, employment, to sell at market value any of his property (Childlineindia.org).

The bonded labour begins when a person receives an advance (bonded debt) from his money lenders or landlord by pledging

his labour as a mode of repayment. The poor condition in the family due to lack of income or economic insecurity can push a worker towards debt bondage, especially during the social obligation such as marriages, funerals, or family emergencies (Prasad, 2008). The bonded labour characterized borrow of bonded debt, lack of freedom both physically or psychologically, lack of human dignity and respect (McCann, 2011). This system of bonded labour incapacitate its victim to enjoy their basic rights. The victims of bonded labour lose their freedom to work other than the creditor's worksites and a decent livelihood, lose their freedom to earn minimum wage which is determined by the government, lose their freedom to live or move from one place to another and have no rights to sell their products at the market value (NHRC, 2010).

Prevalence of bonded labour

The occurrence of this inhuman issue of bonded labour is very high around the world. In spite of all the International Conventions on Slavery and Forced Labour, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Conventions on protection of Civil, Cultural, Social and Political Rights, the bonded or forced labour still exists in high number. The Australian based human rights organization Walk Free Foundation, in its global survey on forced labour discloses that 38.8 million people are in forced labour, In that 14 million are from India (Walk Free, Global Slavery Index, 2014), the global survey by International Labour Organization revealed there are 14.2 Million people under forced labour in Asia Specific region (ILO, 2012).

Even after 3 decades of implementation of the bonded labour abolition act, 1976 in India, the prevalence of bonded labour continues to exist in different forms around the country. The nationwide survey by Gandhi Peace Foundation and National Labour Institute in 1978, estimated 2.62 million of bonded labourers (Dingawaney, Vidasagar & Chaudhary, 1981), the National Sample Survey Organization estimated 3.45 lakhs of people working as bonded labourers (NSSO, 1978), the Ministry of labour and employment, discloses that there are 2,88,123 bonded labourers identified and released in India (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2009 - 2010). In Tamil Nadu, there are 25,005 bonded labourers identified by the two man commission formulated by the Supreme Court of India in 1996-1997 (People Watch, 2012). These numbers clearly declares the existence of bonded labour in India.

Causes of bonded labour

The heartless practice of bonded labour continue to exist in India even in spite of the implementation of the laws because of its failure to address the root causes of the issue. The causes of bonded labour in India is classified into two major categories. The economic cause and the social cause. The economic causes are un-employment, under-employment, landlessness, poverty and indebtedness and the social causes are caste system, illiteracy, social customs and traditions (Dingawaney, Vidasagar & Chaudhary, 1981). Economic deprived conditions, un-employment and lack of minimum wage leads to failure of meeting the needs in the family. During unexpected family needs or during emergency medical needs, the labourers approach the money lenders or landlords for an advance presenting themselves in a vulnerable position to enter in to the system of bonded labour.

Migration is another factor that pushes labourers into bondage. Lack of employment opportunities, landless and asset-less conditions in the families force the labourers to migrate from one place to another. At the beginning of migration, the labourers are paid an illegal advance money and forced to work until the advance money is repaid. The National Commission on Rural Labour (NCRL), 1991, in their national study on bonded labour system mentioned that migration is the primary factor of bonded labour. The study reveals the labourers from Bihar migrate in large numbers and work in the brick kilns of Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and in sugar cane fields and stone quarries in Gujarat (Srivastava, 2005). In social causes, Caste system is the major cause of bonded labour in India. Most of the bonded labourers in India are from the Dalit community and are also known as “untouchables”. The Anti- Slavery International discloses that there are 2 million bonded labourers in India who are Dalits (Anti-Slavery International, 2009). The weak economic position of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the society and lack of access to resources creates dependency to work as a daily wage labourers under landlords or owners. The poverty and economic insecurity conditions force Dalits to receive loan by pledging their labour (idsn.Org, 2012).

Therefore, this study was conducted to find out the root causes of bonded labour system and solutions to combat this issue among released bonded labourers in Thiruvallur District. The major objectives are,

- * To study the root causes of bonded labour
- * To study the community based approaches to combat bonded labour among vulnerable communities

This study was conducted in Thiruvallur which is one of the largest districts of Tamil Nadu. Thiruvallur District is comprised of four Revenue Divisions, Nine Taluks and twelve blocks. The prevalence of bonded labour is very high in this district. According to the RTI filed with the Adi-Draavidar and Tribal Welfare Department of Tamil Nadu, reveals that Thiruvallur District top the list with 1250 bonded labourers who have been identified and released in the past 10 years from 2005-2006 to 2013-2014.

The Mixed Methodology (*Qualitative and Quantitative*) was used for the study using Interview Schedule and Case Study as a tool of data collection. The study was conducted among 50 released bonded labourers who are released by the district administrations.

Results and Discussions

Table 1: Causes of Bonded labour

No	Causes of bonded labour	In Percent
1	Debts (Receiving Advance)	30
2	Emergency Needs (Family Events and Medical expenses)	25

3	Economic Deprivation or Poverty	20
4	Economic Insecurities	14
5	Un Employment / Under Employment	11

The majority of released bonded labourers around 30% mentioned that receiving debts or illegal advance for work is the major cause. Due to economic deprivation or poverty in the family, the poor labourers receive debts such as an advance from the landlords or owners. That becomes the major cause for bonded labourers. One of the nationwide survey on bonded labourers mentioned that 32 lakhs of bonded labourers are in India among which 98 % of bonded labourers trapped into bondage due to bonded debt/ advance and rest of 2 % is due to social obligation (Mondal, P. 2014).

The second majority 25 % of the released bonded labour mentioned that sudden needs such as family events like weddings, funerals, medical expenses are the causes of bonded labour. The people living under poverty line are more vulnerable to become bonded labourers. Due to lack of assets, land or money, poor people are literally selling themselves into bondage to access their basic needs, sudden needs such as marriages and wedding and other social obligations (Anti – Slavery International, 2009).

The 20 % of released bonded labourers are trapped into bonded labour due to economic deprivation or poverty in the family. The bonded labourers are chronically poor meaning, they are materially deprived, helplessness situation and are prone to vulnerability (Anti-Slavery International, 2009). This poverty makes the labourers depend on daily wage labour under wealthy lands or owners for low wage. Lower wages create economic deprivation thus resulting in borrowing a debt and resulting in bondage.

14 % of the respondents mentioned that economic insecurity is the major cause for bonded labour among them. The routine cycle of lack of employment opportunities, improper or failure of minimum wages for work results in lack of economic security in the family or personal life. Saving is one of the top and basic mechanism to prevent economic insecurity but savings can be done only when proper income is received.

Finally 11% of the respondent mentioned that unemployment or under employment is the main cause of bonded labour. Again all these factors are inter-linked with each other. The lack of job opportunities leads the communities to migrate to the place where there are job opportunities. Taking advantage of this situation, owners or job brokers provide advance to the labourers and in return demand labour.

Table 2: The Suggestion to Combat Bonded Labour

No	Combat bonded labour	I Percentage	n
1	Increase Livelihood opportunities	35	
2	Government Issuing of petty loans for SC/ST	20	
3	Education (for both children and elders)	18	
4	Creating awareness of bonded labour among vulnerable communities	15	
5	Share the inhuman stories of bonded labour life to vulnerable communities	12	

The majority of released bonded labourers 35% mentioned that lack of livelihood is the main reason for people getting into bondage.

- * Therefore increasing the livelihood opportunities among vulnerable communities would prevent the people from bondage. Considering this fact, the government must register all the vulnerable communities under the poverty alleviation schemes, employment schemes (e.g. NREGA) and ensure employment opportunities for the economically weaker communities.
- * Educated youngsters of the economically weaker section

of the community must be given priority in allocating government job opportunities. Also these potential candidates must register under vocational guidance program, skill based trainings through Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) and economic provision must be arranged through nationalized banks in India.

- * Landlessness and no assets is another challenge to sustain labourers from getting into migration. The government must allocate agricultural lands based on the economic condition of a person and encourage agriculture employments.

20% of the respondents mentioned that providing petty loans during emergency situation for economically deprived communities would help the community such as Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes to withstand during crisis situation and safeguard them from the evil of bondage.

- * The economically weaker communities must be given petty loans considering certain emergency situations because economic crisis situations are when the bonded labourer borrows a loan from the owner or landlords by pledging their labour. In order to avoid certain situations, the government must provide petty loans or crisis situation debts through village level Society Banks and if possible nationalized banks. If the government is able to protect the economically deprived people from receiving illegal advance, this would definitely combat bonded labour. Since 93 per cent of released bonded labourers are trapped only after receiving an advance.

18% of the released bonded labourers mentioned that ignorance and falsification of accounts and money are the major factors which is used by the perpetrators to make them work for years. This can be stopped by Education.

- * Education is key to life. When a person is educated he gets aware of things and issues around him. The future generation of today's children lies on education. Also the decision of getting into bondage mostly taken by uneducated elders in the family, the government must educate the elders through "ELDERS EDUCATION PROGRAMS" in the evenings.

15 % of the released bonded labourers mentioned creating awareness on bonded labour and 12% mentioned sharing the stories of inhuman bonded labour life will stop the vulnerable people getting into bondage.

- * As most of the bonded labourers are from lower caste or communities such as scheduled caste and scheduled tribes and a predominant number of them are illiterates. Considering this fact, community based awareness programs such as street theaters, storytelling, dance program and street plays must be performed.

To echo millions and million on bonded labour in India, the following cases study was added to this paper. This case study will give a clear picture of how the economically deprived worker is pushed into bondage, the bonded labour elements encountered by the worker and how he was able to reach out to government official for release.

CASE STUDY - RAMESH

My name is Ramesh, 30 years old, belongs to Irular community from Thiruvallur District. I am an illiterate and work as a daily wage worker in my village to provide for my family. I am a released bonded labourer, rescued in the year of 2013 by revenue officials of Thiruvallur District from a Flower plucking field. While I was working in my village as a daily wage labourer, I arranged a wedding for my daughter and we were in need of

money to meet the wedding expenses. I managed to arrange money from relatives, but I was pushed into the situation where I needed more money for my daughter's wedding. Knowing this my landlord volunteered to give money asking me to work for him in his flower garden. Not knowing the hidden motives of the landlord, I received an advance of Rs.20000 and agreed to work in his flower plucking field until I repaid the money. I worked in the flower plucking field for more than 8 years to repay the advance. While working in the field, I was restricted in my movements and was forced to stay in the field. I was not allowed to go for relatives' weddings and funerals. I was restricted to work in the nearby fields as well. When I tried to work in a nearby agricultural field to earn some more money, I was physically and verbally abused by the landlord and forced to return back to his field.

I was paid Rs.34 per day for 14 hours of work in the field. The landlord used my illiteracy and showed false wages to me and said that my wages are deducted against the advance money that I received so that I can go home early. The landlord continues to say the same for almost 8 years to me and my family. The landlord also instructed me to bring my daughter's family to the field so that we all can work together and repay the advance money quickly and leave the field and I did. Later I understood that that was a trap for my children too. My wife and my daughter are taken for granted by the landlord and his friend who visit the flower plucking field occasionally and sexually assaulted them. Being an illiterate was the biggest barrier for me to get into any decent jobs that were available in the town. One of my friend shared with me that he was trapped in a brick kiln and the district administration released him from the bondage and that he is free now.

When I heard this, considering the strong restrictions in the facility, I escaped from the worksite, went to the government office, as I don't know how to write a petition, my friend's known person helped me write my petition and gave it to the officials. It took a month for the officials to act on my petition, but today I am released and free. Now I am rescued and released and work as a daily wage labour in the agricultural fields in my native village. Now that I know the consequences of bonded labour, I will not take an advance money from any owner and get trapped into bondage. I share my inhuman stories with the fellow workers in the agricultural fields to sensitize them on the issue of bonded labour. After hearing my stories, several vulnerable people refuse to get advance from the owners during economic crisis condition. * To protect the identity of the labourer, pseudo name is used in the case study.

Conclusion

Bonded labour is a complex phenomenon which takes several dimensions and continue to live in different forms and different parts of India. This evil must be eradicated before it victimizes some more millions in India. This eradication of bonded labour is possible only when the ground reality of bonded labour, challenges in implementing the act, root causes and combating opportunities must be known. In order to make known of all these factors, released bonded labourers are the ones who have got trapped, lived bonded lives, experienced the elements of bonded labour, reached out to official for assistance in release and rehabilitation. Therefore the present paper described all the root causes of bonded labour and communities based solution to combat the issues has been discussed. Based on the suggestions from the released bonded labour, the government must take necessary action and enroot bonded labour.

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