

## **Food Security and Bonded Labour**

**BY**

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Bonded Labour includes forced labour, with social and caste overtones. It also originates in bonded debt and is often inter-generational. A vast majority of all child labour is bonded labour. Bonded labour implies complete absence of wage or a minimal wage that has no relation whatever to the concept of minimum wage. A bonded labourer forfeits freedom of any sort including of movement and employment and to sell at market value the product of one's labour. Though the Constitution of India abolished *begar* and untouchability and the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 abolished bonded labour, it is prevalent on a large scale in almost all States of India, 86% of the bonded being Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. 63% of them have no lands at all and 75% of them are in debt bondage. The Government of India itself concedes its prevalence in 172 districts though its denial is a routine response of the State Governments.

2. The underlying cause and the first threshold of poverty is hunger. No strategy that does not recognize that hunger has to be dealt with as an issue in its own right as a condition precedent to eradication of poverty will ever even alleviate poverty, leave alone eradicate it. This lack of realization is also the first cause of bondage and the failure of rehabilitation efforts. Efforts at the eradication of bonded labour practices have been on for upward of three decades while those at eradication of poverty for twice that period. Mind boggling deficits remain in regard to both and the underlying link of hunger that is common to both remains unaddressed. There is complete failure in regard to this in the

context of the implementation of the anti-poverty programmes, with the resultant additional loss of freedom for the bonded labour. For example, though the Reserve Bank of India has had a consumption credit policy since 30 years it is implemented more in its breach by the banking system, driving the poorest even for their food grains needs into the arms of the usurious money lender who, in rural India, is usually the village landlord himself. Bondage follows inevitably in an economy where un-irrigated agriculture dominates and where the law relating to Minimum Wages, revised once in four or five years, is observed only in its breach even in irrigated areas, - the results manifesting in hunger.

3. If the bonded thought that they had escaped hunger in return for bondage, they were mistaken. Bonded labour activist and IAS officer S.R. Sankaran noted in the Methodology for Identification of Bonded Labour framed by him in 1976 that in certain areas the bonded labour were not provided any food at all as part of their otherwise negligible wages while “in districts like Medak (Andhra Pradesh) one *roti* is given and (even) the size of this is clearly laid down”. A study by the Institute of Social and Economic Change (ISEC), Bangalore on Bonded Labour in 1988 showed that nearly 28% borrowed for food and 13% for medical expenditure. The ISEC study found that in Karnataka the food given varied from no meals at all to one or two meals a day depending on the duration of bondage, just one meal being the rule when bondage was longer. However, so lackadaisical are the rehabilitation measures even if the bonded are got released that starvation compels the erstwhile bonded back to bondage as was brought out in the Neeraja Chaudhary case in the Supreme Court relating to the bonded labour

brought back to Madhya Pradesh from the Faridabad stone quarries (WP (Cri) 1263 of 1982) - “we might have been killed there but we are also dying here”. This is the position even today every where. A study by Manjit Singh (EPW 15<sup>th</sup> March 1997) showed that the Bihari bonded migrant labour in Punjab received near zero wages and one of them reported that they “can not have even food just to live on”. Reports on bonded labour children trafficked from the Usilampatti area of Tamil Nadu to several States in India to do hazardous work, ironically, in sweetmeat making factories and successfully tracked by the Government of Tamil Nadu and the NGO SOCO Trust showed ( vide Tamil Daily Dhina Thandhi, Madurai edition of 26<sup>th</sup> August 2003) that all that these children were given was merely gruel once in the morning and once in the night and nothing in between during the work day starting at 5 AM that went on till 11 PM, with no other wage. An investigation personally made by this writer in Yellheri village of Raichur taluk of Gulbarga district of Karnataka in May 2005 on behalf of the NHRC found that till 8 years ago the advance wages for one year of work for bonded labour amounted to only 8 bags of Jowar of 70 kg each. This rose to 12 bags three years ago. No cash was paid. As for those who are even now slaving away as bonded labourers in Yellheri, the advance given to them is now mostly paid in cash, though Jowar also constitutes a part of this advance often. Whether fully in cash or part cash and part Jowar, this advance is rarely ever more than Rs.9000/- per annum at present, which works out to about Rs.25/- per day. This is far below the minimum wage prescribed. There was no rest or relief for the bonded labourers who work from very early in the morning till late in the night. Some of them like the members of the family of Hanumanthu s/o Ramappa work as bonded labourers in several different households eking out small quantities of Jowar like half a bag of Jowar

per annum from those various households. Some of them started their life of bondage when they were mere children as in the case of S/Shri. Sumant S/o Thimmappa, Basavaraj S/o Ashappa, Durgappa S/o Buggappa, Basavaraj S/o Nagappa and Bhimshappa S/o Naganna. The case of the family of Hanumanthu S/o Sabanna is a case of inter-generational bonded labour. He is a bonded labourer at present and so is his 12-year-old son Reddappa. Hanumanthu's father also had been a bonded labourer. This is the story of food security for the bonded labour in various parts of India, including in the "progressive" South.

4. The main reason for child labour also is household level hunger but, when released, the one-dimensional strategy of schooling often unsupported by food security measures for the family and for the child at the school puts paid to the eradication of child labour practices. To illustrate, when 235 children were released from child labour in Kurnool District in Andhra Pradesh in 2002 following the release of the chained bonded girl Bhuvanewari, most of them were returned to their parents for want of enough residential schools that could have provided them with food even as they studied, which would mean they went back to child labour. Child labour can never be eradicated unless the dual strategy of economic rehabilitation of the family and the educational rehabilitation of the child is adopted hand in hand, the fight against hunger, the first threshold of poverty, forming the centre piece of that strategy.

5. Food Security can not be discussed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century merely in the context of human survival. We must aim at positive health as fundamental to those who live on their

physical labour. Both quantity and quality of food for the poor as needed at different stages of life are therefore essential. As the most eminent authority on this subject Dr. C. Gopalan would tell us, food security is also a function of nutrition security. Indian Maternal Mortality Rates (MMR) and Infant Mortality Rates (IMR) are unacceptably high, their main cause being micro-nutrient deficient malnutrition-induced maternal anemia leading to low birth weight babies. The only answer to this is adequate food supplemented by fruits, vegetables, milk or flesh foods or medical deliveries of iron, iodine and folic acid. Mortality apart, consequences like irreversible disabilities like mental retardation, speech and attention deficits and behavioural problems visit the surviving children. This absence of the present and the future are the lot of half the women and child population of India. It needs no imagination to extrapolate the causes of this predicament to the bonded labour and bonded child labour families who are totally outside any kind of nutrition surveillance or programmes like those relating to the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) or the Iron and Iodine Deficit Disorders (IID), inadequately implemented as they are even in the best of circumstances.

6. The solution lies in our realizing that measures required to fight poverty and bondage are the same but the starting point in terms of priority has to be the bonded household. The first threshold in the crossing over from poverty is the threshold of hunger and therefore the strategic need is to monitor every poverty household village-wise on a permanent basis to determine the household's food security/hunger levels at the micro-level. Having identified the "hungry family" we should determine the cause of that hunger in quantitative and qualitative terms (macro and micro-nutrient). It is in relation to

that cause or causes that answers in terms of specific programmes for the hunger family have to be devised. In doing that, regardless of the assumed future success of the scheme so devised for that family to eradicate its poverty, the strategy should have a provision to banish that household's hunger itself as an ingredient of the device even as assets and working capital are ingredients of that scheme. Only a non-hungry, healthy household not preoccupied with hunger can work an anti-poverty scheme successfully to its advantage. Non-recognition of this is, and has been, the surest recipe not only to continuing poverty but to the consequent loss of individual freedom as well. The only way food security for the bonded can be secured is by abolishing the cause of initial bondage and the cause that continues to perpetuate it even after release, that cause being HUNGER. Bondage will die only when Hunger dies.