

# Bonded Labor in India

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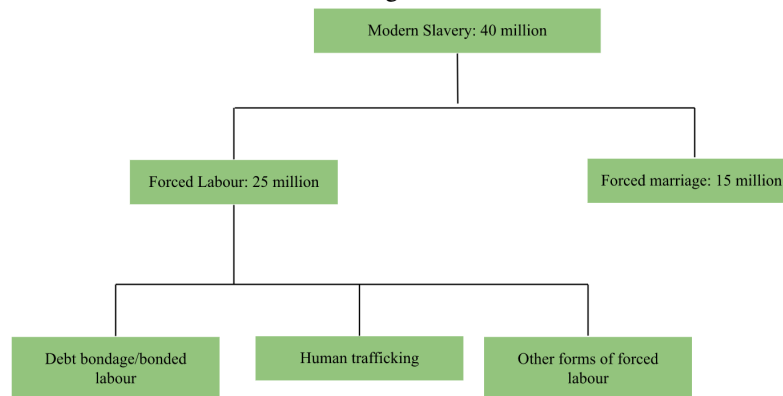
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## ABSTRACT

Slavery is not a relic of the past, there are approximately 40 million people worldwide that live in some form of modern slavery. Unlike the widely visible slavery that existed in the new world a few hundred years ago, modern slavery is less visible. It exists in the form of bonded labor, forced marriages, and human trafficking. In this paper, we focus on bonded labor. Approximately 1.1% of South Asia's population is still in bonded labor. South Asia is a hot spot for this form of slavery due to a unique confluence of poverty, social practices, and lax laws or enforcement. The paper focuses on a study that included interviews with seventeen current or freed bonded laborers in the Chikkaballapur area (near Bengaluru city in South India). The goal of the study was to understand - Why do people go into bonded labor? Why do they stay in bonded labor? How can they be freed and rehabilitated? What are their experiences post-freedom? The study examines the responses from bonded laborers in the context of the current literature on bonded labor in Asia. The study also examines the efforts of a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), Jeevika, including its efforts, strategies, and the challenges faced in freeing bonded laborers in Karnataka (a state in southern India).

## Introduction

We usually associate the Atlantic Slave Trade with one of the darkest moments and practices in human history. Over four centuries, 10.7 million Africans were shipped to the New World (Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, n.d.), unaware of the hellish circumstances that awaited them (and their generations) as slaves. Slavery was fortunately abolished in the US in 1865, and it is easy to believe that slavery is an ancient relic and practice of the past. We couldn't be more wrong. Today there are about 40.3 million slaves worldwide (ILO, 2017), three times more than the ones in the Atlantic Slave Trade. Based on the Atlantic Slave Trade, we associate a slave as an individual offering work and skills to another person for no money, working under varying conditions, for a varying amount of time. However, modern slavery is more complex and often more subtle. It can be categorized as follows:



**Figure 1.** Categories of Modern Slavery (ILO, 2017)

## Forced Marriage

According to ILO (2017), Forced marriage occurs when a person, regardless of who they are, is forced to marry without their consent. It usually happens due to cultural practices, where (mainly) females are married off in exchange for payment for their families and to settle disputes.

## Forced Labor

According to ILO (2017), Forced labor, a huge part of modern slavery, happens when a person is forced to offer their work and services, where there are restrictions on freedom of movement and employment, as well as threats and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse.

## Human Trafficking

ILO (2017) describes Human trafficking, as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, and harboring of a person through different forms of coercion, such as abduction, fraud, deception, etc. There are different types of human trafficking, such as sex trafficking, organ trafficking, and labor trafficking. Labor trafficking has some overlap with Forced Labor

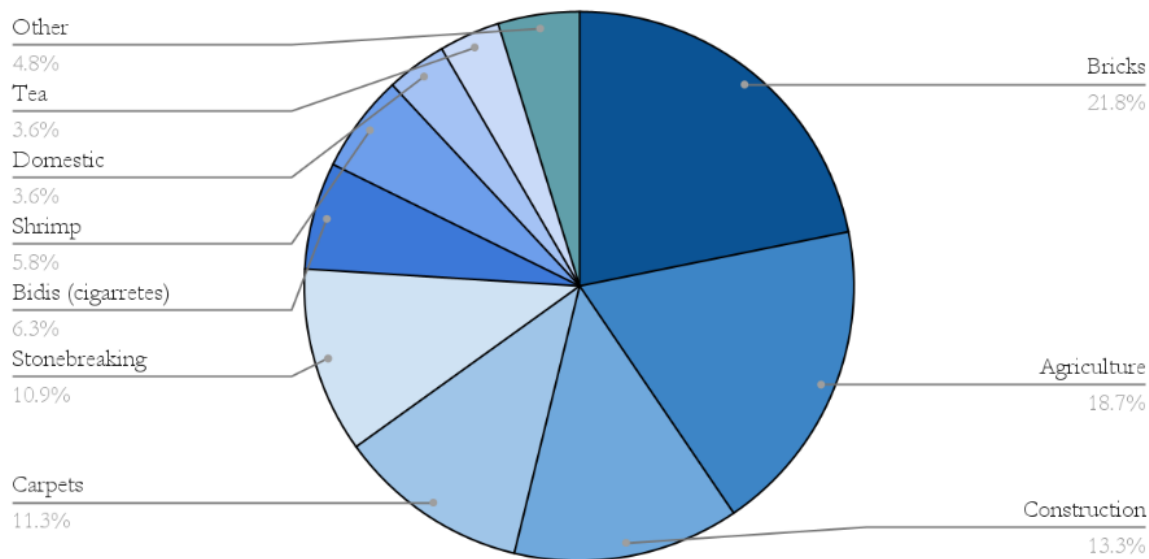
## Bonded Labor

The rest of this paper focuses on bonded labor. This is the most common form of modern slavery with 19 million victims (Kara, 2014). Siddarth Karra defines bonded labor as (Kara (2107)) “The condition of any person whose liberty is unlawfully restricted while the person is coerced through any means to render labor or services, regardless of compensation, including those who enter the condition because of the absence of a reasonable alternative, where that person or a relation initially agreed to pledge his labor or service as repayment for an advance of any kind”. The worker in most cases does not realize that he is tricked into working for a wage that can be significantly below the minimum wage. The low wages and high-interest rate make it often impossible to pay back the loan (Kara, 2014). Thus, enslavement becomes long-term if not permanent. 80% of bonded labor is in South Asia alone. 1.1% of South Asia’s population is in bonded labor (Brinkmann, 2018). Furthermore bonded labor makes its way into a number of different industries, often tainting the goods and products sold in the western world where buyers are unaware of the source of their purchases. The US Department of Labor lists the products produced in various countries that use child labor or forced labor (US DOL, 2021) and the list is large including items such as coffee, carpets, electronics, and textiles.

## Data and the Study

In summer 2022 we worked with Jeevika, a non-profit organization in Bengaluru, India which helps free bonded laborers. Jeevika has been actively working with bonded laborers since 1988 and has freed over 30,000 of them (Harmony Foundation 2019). The paper is based on interviews with Dr. Kiran Prasad, the founder of Jeevika, and interviews with seventeen bonded laborers in agriculture. Interviews with each bonded laborer were on average approximately 50 minutes. The laborers were from 3 talukas (taluka is a subdivision of a district) in the Chikkaballapur district in Karnataka. The interviews were conducted at the homes of the laborers. Only one of the seventeen bonded laborers we interviewed was not freed yet. The study included only one woman since agricultural bonded laborers in Karnataka are predominantly male. In this paper, only the first names of the bonded laborers are used to describe

their experiences. Their last name and village of residence are not included to protect their privacy. For the rest of the paper, this study is referred to as the Study.



**Figure 2.** Bonded Labor Cases Documented by Industry (In India) (Kara, 2014)

## History of Bonded Labor in India

The history of labor in the Indian subcontinent, while incredibly complicated, can offer some explanation for why there are such high numbers of bonded labor cases in that region of the world - the reasoning goes deeper than poverty and caste influence today.

Bonded labor may be traced back to the Harappan times (Kara, 2014) in Mohenjo-Daro (modern-day Pakistan) around 2600-1900 BCE, but became popular after the expansion of the agricultural economy around 500 BCE. With the agricultural economy expanding, land became more valuable, and was given to the upper-class people. Meanwhile, the lower classes worked under them in cruel, abusive conditions, as they did not have any assets, land, or capital, and were forced to sell their freedom for survival.

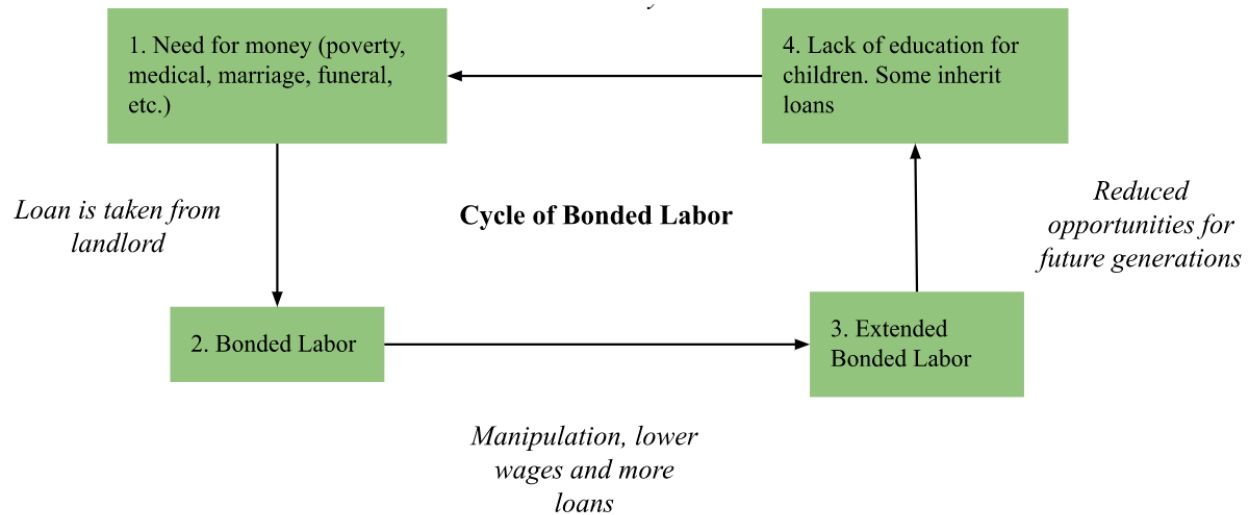
However, it wasn't until post-Mauryan times (321-185 BCE) (National Geographic Society, n.d.) that the boundaries and definitions of bonded labor originated. Indian scholars now categorized the different types of slavery, four of which would eventually mold modern bonded labor - life was saved during a famine in exchange for enslavement, they pledged to be a slave in exchange for money, one became a slave to pay off heavy debt, or you became a slave to receive basic maintenance. These categories were also created around the time the original caste system was formed.

After the Turks/Central Asians conquered northern India during the medieval period, the slave market, (including bonded labor) started expanding, resulting in the exploitation of lower caste Indians and even Africans. The Mogul rulers promoted slavery as a punishment - for instance, if citizens were unable to pay taxes, they would be forced to do so through slavery (something like bonded labor). Furthermore, several droughts and famines during the 16th and 17th centuries forced many rural peasants into bonded labor and other forms of slavery (Kara, 2014).

These forms of slavery were taken to a new level when the British colonized India, expanding the slave-trading market to ports in Bombay, Calcutta, Goa, and Madras. The British needed a large workforce to support expanding British industrialization. There was a large network of slave trade that extended across the British colonies that supported bonded labor.

Until they left in 1947, the British exploited the resources of India, stagnating its GDP significantly during their occupation (three centuries). Economic stagnation, large population growth, and lack of education left India impoverished in the decades following its freedom from British rule. On top of poverty, regularly occurring devastating famines and other natural disasters forced peasants and other poor, lower-caste Indians to work in abusive environments to make ends meet. India and many parts of South-East Asia are mired in a similar situation with bonded labor due to an amalgamation of economic circumstances, history, and social structure.

### Why do People End up in Bonded Labor in South Asia?



**Figure 3.** The Cycle of Bonded Labor (the Study)

People mainly end up in bonded labor because of poverty—they are burdened with many bills—medical expenses, living expenses, and family events such as marriage (dowry for brides) and funeral expenses. In South-Asian societies, where bonded labor is most prevalent, the issues are compounded by social hierarchies like the caste system, where Dalits and other ethnic minorities/tribal groups are viewed as expendable resources because they are “not equal” to the people of higher caste. Because of their caste, they are denied normal opportunities, leading to impoverished lifestyles with narrow job opportunities. Yet, they must uphold societal expectations, such as lavish weddings and dowries. Additionally, there are burdensome bills for medicine, electricity, funerals, etc, making them vulnerable to taking a loan from a landlord. Ramaiah, an ex-bonded laborer who was a part of the Study, had borrowed from a landlord to help pay dowries for his three sisters. Hanumantappa, another ex-bonded laborer we interviewed, said he was the eldest of nine siblings and wanted to help his family survive daily financial burdens.

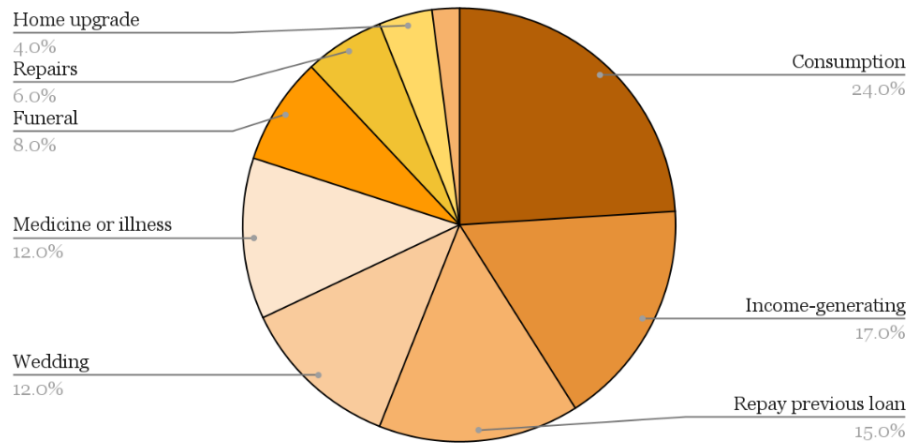


Figure 4. Reasons for Going into Bonded Labor (Kara, 2014)

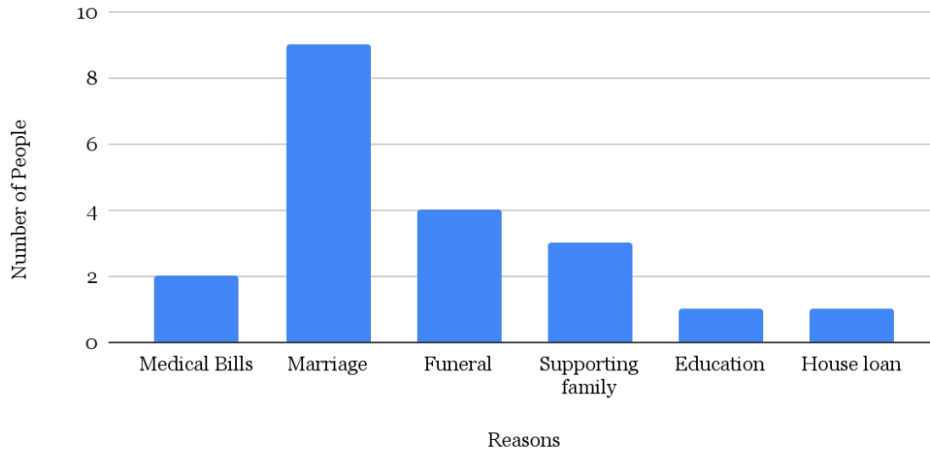


Figure 5. Reasons for Going into Bonded Labor (the Study)

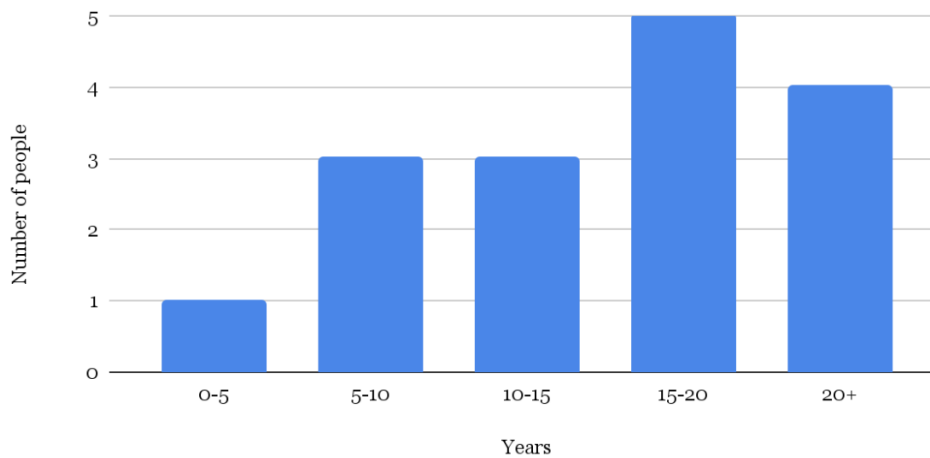


Figure 6. Age of the Laborer at the Start of Bonded Labor (the Study)

Most people in the Study started in bonded labor between the ages of 5 and 20 years. Some were in elementary school, most were in middle school and some were in high school before they started as bonded laborers.

## Why do They Stay in Bonded Labor?

Guerin (2013) discusses the cases of bonded laborers involved in manual rice drying in Tamil Nadu (a state in South India). Manual rice drying is a tedious yet meticulous process. Consequently, the work hours are long (13 to 16 hours) and all year long (unlike other bonded laborers who can leave for a few months for paid labor work). Hygiene conditions are awful, leading to the easy spread of diseases (like tuberculosis), and wages are so low that any medical help requires them to take on more debt.

The bonded laborers, in this case, tend to be Irulars: a previously forest-dwelling tribal community from the Salem district in Tamil Nadu. They previously lived in isolated areas and survived by hunting rats and snakes, gathering honey, beeswax, and medicinal plants, and digging out tree roots. However, since the 1950s, they have been driven off their land, forcing them to find other work as other communities moved in on their land. Due to difficulty with social integration, it became harder for them to find work. Hence, when they got into the rice drying business they viewed it as a sanctuary: while work is hard, they are provided shelter, food, and small amounts of wages.

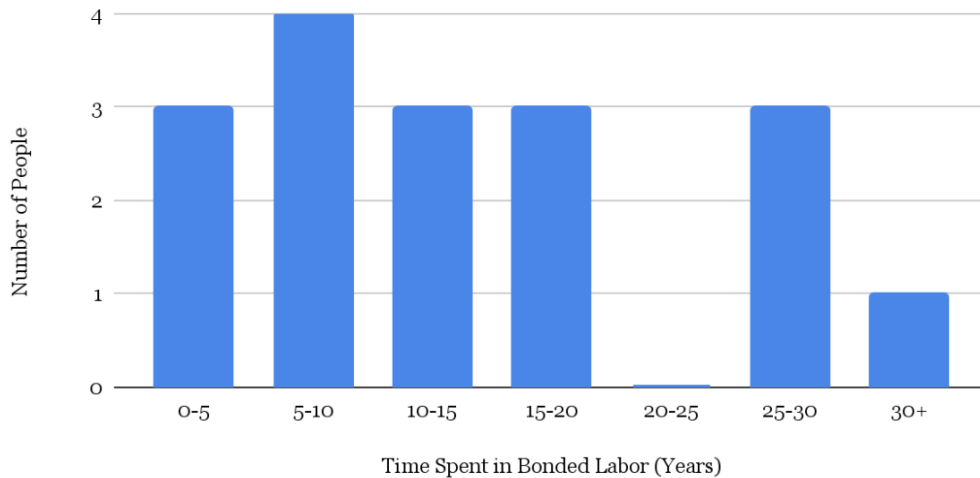
However, even in cases where bonded laborers want to leave, there are many factors that prevent them from doing so.

Laborers are afraid of the consequences of leaving, as they may be caught and experience physical punishments including violence. Laborers may also be subject to coercion and threats directed either towards them or other family members, instilling fear. For example, one of the bonded laborers interviewed, Narayanappa, tried to escape from his master after 7 years of being in bondage. After 4 days, his master tracked him down and presented him in front of the panchayat (village council), who agreed with the landlord and asked him to fulfill his duty -leaving him no option but to go back.

Laborers are generally not allowed to leave unless their debt is repaid (which is very difficult). Additionally, if a family has a member in bonded labor, the family often continues to borrow money for other needs including medicine, marriages, and daily expenses, putting them deeper into debt (like Ramaiah). In some instances, the family gets accustomed to a child staying at the landlord's house and not burdening the family even though the child is not treated very well by the landlord. For example, Ventkateshappa was around 13 years old when his father gave him up to bonded labor to marry off his sister. After his mother died, his stepmother was not keen to have him back so he remained in bonded labor for about 12 years.

There is also a psychological aspect. After spending all their time working for these landlords, these laborers may develop some sort of Stockholm Syndrome, and develop an attachment to their landlord- they don't want to leave their master. Venkteshappa was sick with jaundice and the landlord took him to the hospital which made him grateful to his landlord. Muniappa talked about how the landlord's wife would personally bring him meals every day when he was sick. For people with low self-worth, small acts of kindness can create emotional bondage.

Furthermore, there may be a fear of the unknown once they leave their master: where would they go if they left him? For a number of them, their basic needs are being met: they receive shelter, clothes, and food in exchange for their work. This is what they do every day, and they know of nothing else. Consequently, they are unsure that another job will give them the same rewards-that is if they can find another one.



**Figure 7.** Time Spent in Bonded Labor (the Study)

## Life in Bonded Labor

The quality of life of bonded laborers in the Study varied from very harsh to somewhat poor depending on the landlord and the circumstances. Some of the landlords were kind to their laborers, taking them to the hospital when sick and giving them time off to see their families. But some experienced horrible treatment. Krishnappa, who was a bonded laborer for fifteen years, was caught up in a scandal in his landlord’s family. The landlord and his sons lived in the same house with their respective families. At one point the sons wanted to split up and live separately with their own families. However, there were disagreements about how the family wealth was going to be divided. It was during the negotiations between the family members that some of the family’s gold ornaments went missing. The blame was somehow pinned on Krishnappa. As a punishment, he was tied to a coconut tree with a thick rope and beaten for a day and a half, while stones were hurled at his feet. After he did not confess to the crime, his tormentors pierced a needle through each of his upper fingertips. After a day and a half of torture, he was almost unconscious. He was eventually rescued and freed. To this day, he still deals with physical and mental trauma from that experience. Some days he is unable to physically function and his wife and daughter have to carry him to bed.

Based on the data collected for the Study, on average, the laborers worked 14.5 hours a day, and for 6-7 days a week. Their work mostly started early in the morning and ended around 9-10 pm. The work involved grazing domesticated animals, tilling fields, cleaning animal sheds and manure, harvesting, and other agricultural work.

The treatment by the landlords varied. 70% of laborers received 2 meals, while 30% received three meals. The meals usually consisted of leftovers from the previous day or cooked ragi (millet, the common grain grown in the region). The laborers mostly slept outside the house in a shed and were not allowed into the house because of their caste. While violence did not seem common, 18% of the laborers said that they were beaten regularly if their work was not satisfactory. Yet, in most cases, the landlords did create an environment of fear - for instance, Narayana explained that if the work was not good enough, he was scolded and hit a couple of times. While he was given medicine when he was sick, he had to keep working while he was sick.

## How can They Get Out of Bonded Labor?

Many bonded laborers who have earned their freedom have received help from NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations such as Jeevika). Either the bonded laborers become aware of NGOs from friends and family, or the NGOs contact them. The NGO activists try to explain to the unaware laborers that their landlords are exploiting them and abusing their human rights and that it’s illegal. In fact, India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh (and others) have

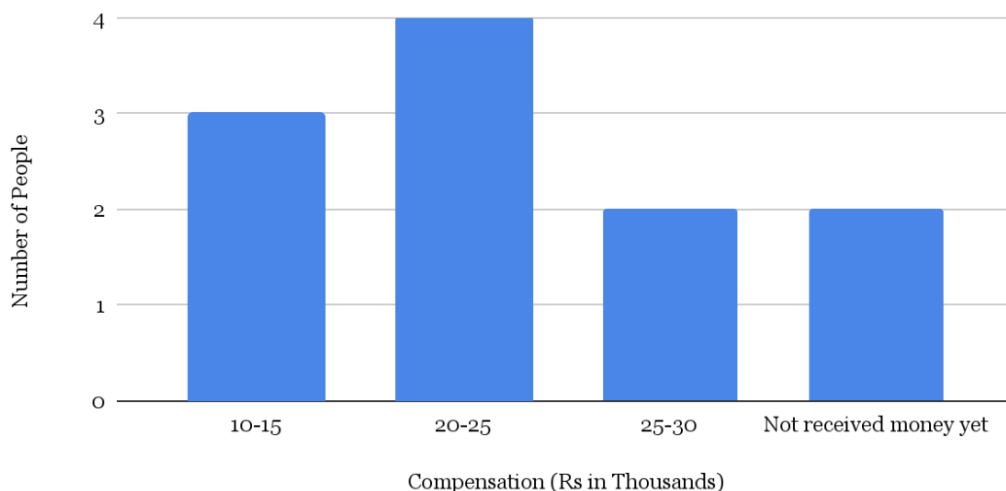
specific laws that ban the practice of bonded labor (Kara, 2014). In India, the Bonded Labor System (Abolition) Act of 1976 (Government of India, 1976) provides a framework for freeing bonded laborers. The NGO activists in India are trying to use the Act to encourage the bonded laborers to fill out government papers/forms and help free them from the clutches of the landlord. Based on Jeevika’s experience, in a number of cases, the laborers are surprised and reluctant to believe that freedom is possible. But as they spend time with the volunteers and get educated, they come around. Some of the laborers we interviewed said they felt betrayed by their landlord after they understood their rights, even if their landlord was kind to them during their time in bonded labor.

Jeevika has a well-honed process to approach the bonded laborers and engage them in a dialogue. They hold meetings with bonded laborers to educate them about their situation. The meetings are generally spaced 15 days apart. During these meetings, the activists educate the laborers about the abuse created by the social structures in India and teach them how to build confidence and face their landlords. Over time, most of the laborers learn to develop self-confidence and courage, fill out government forms, receive government certificates confirming their release from bonded labor, declare to their landlord that they will no longer work for them, and start a new, liberating chapter in their life. Channarayappa, now a Jeevika activist, talked about his days in bonded labor, and how he initially had no confidence to face his landlord. He believed that the landlord, a person of a higher caste, was genuinely superior to him, and was in awe of him. After he was educated by the volunteers about bonded labor and his rights, he filed an application with the government and was given a release certificate. He developed a realization that he was equal to the landlord and was manipulated during his time in bonded labor.

## The Hardship of Earning Freedom

Even though the steps explained above are reasonably simple, the practice of freeing bonded laborers is complex. What makes matters worse is getting bureaucratic governmental organizations to enforce the law appropriately and cleanly which does not always happen in a timely fashion.

The process of freeing bonded laborers can be extremely long and can last for several years due to the callousness of the authorities (remember that bonded laborers come from the lowest social class). In addition, there have been cases of corruption, where a landlord knows the authorities turn a blind eye to violations (Pokharel et al, 2021). It can be difficult to make sure that the officials do what they are supposed to do and implement the Bonded Labor System Act.



**Figure 8.** Compensation of Bonded Laborers (the Study)

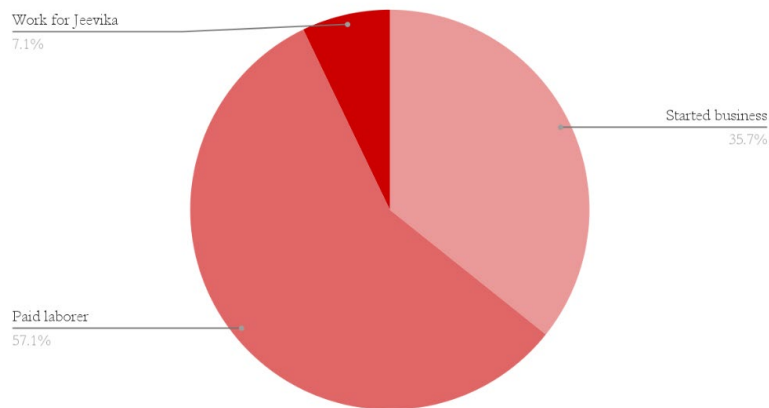


The law required the government to award freed bonded laborers Rs 20,000 initially. The government is supposed to give up to RS 300,000 to each person in the second phase (generally a total amount of Rs. 100,00 for men, Rs. 200,000 for women and children, and Rs. 300,000 for bonded laborers in special circumstances). However, they only receive the money in the second phase if their landlord is convicted in court, which doesn't always happen. Sometimes, the delays in receiving even the initial amount can be large (Srivastava, 2018). For example in the Study, Munikrishnappa was released from bonded labor in 2010 and granted Rs 20,000 by the government but has yet to receive the money due to bureaucratic issues.

In Nepal, the situation is even worse (Kara, 2014). The government requires the signature of the landlord to obtain a release. Laborers are afraid that the landlord will find out about their efforts to be freed which hinders the efforts to free bonded laborers. Furthermore, the landlord knows the system better so these laborers have a hard time getting released.

## How do They Stay Out of Slavery?

In India, with the help of the government and NGOs, the freed bonded laborers receive compensation, as discussed in the previous section, to help them get a fresh start. This helps them build some savings or start a small business. Among the people who participated in the Study, Venkatesh started a business selling trinkets, and Chandrappa started a business fixing flat tires.



**Figure 9.** Careers of Bonded Laborers post Freedom (the Study)

However, a number of times there are delays in receiving the financial award from the government or individuals can be setback by personal tragedies. In our Study, we noticed that a number of ex-bonded laborers have formed self-help groups, with the help of Jeevika, where they pool together their savings. When any member needs money they can borrow money from the pool without going to a landlord. Their daily wages from jobs (after they are freed) are decent but there is not a lot of cushion due to a lack of savings, and it's very easy for them to get back into bonded labor. The group functions as a financial and psychological support group for the members. In the villages we visited, the women of the family often meet regularly and act as a glue that keeps the group together.

## The Gray Area of Bonded Labor

Is it possible that bonded labor is a black-and-white issue, or are there shades of gray? Is the relationship always exploitative, or can it be symbiotic? While we may morally feel that bonded labor and slavery are wrong and it is right to be against it, the reality may be more nuanced. There is debate in academia about the concept of free and

unfree labor, but there is no agreed-upon definition of these terms. For instance, Guerin (2013) asks whether unfree labor means either inability to sell services (negative freedom), or being able to sell services but having no negotiating power (positive freedom).

Lerche (2011) argues that labor in the Asian geographies cannot be neatly divided into free and unfree, but rather falls on a continuum of labor relations ranging from totally unfree until it reaches a point where wages and terms are negotiated based on leverage, historical precedents, and social structures.

Srivastava (2009) believes that there is more to labor than just financial arrangement; the social structure and customs have to be considered along with the credit to understand the outcomes. He believes that the lack of social mobility narrows the options available to these workers. Consequently, the unfair labor contracts could be more voluntary.

Guerin (2013) argues that the wages, bargaining powers, and freedoms of bonded laborers are influenced by debt. Bonded labor is not a single uniform concept but rather a continuum, with both mild and harsh forms. She believes that bonded labor can be symbiotic in some situations for employers and laborers in spite of unequal relationships and exploitation, and while it might not be a preferred working arrangement, it's still a pragmatic solution to the problems faced by both employers and workers in a society with a variety of frictional elements including social structures, lack of education and awareness, and mobility.

Choi-Fitzpatrick (2019) interviewed a number of landlords who employed bonded laborers. His study reveals that while most people who read about bonded labor think of landlords as bad people, these slaveholders come in all forms. Most landlords believe that they are doing the right thing for their laborers by providing them with food and clothing and teaching them "how to behave and act in everyday situations". Many of these masters are respected members of the community and not villains hiding from the law. He argues that they are violating human rights but not social norms.

In interviews we conducted, we heard from some laborers that while there was no need to work for the master, alternatives were not great. One of the bonded laborers we interviewed, Shabana, works at a silk factory for Rs 220/day and has a loan from her employer, but while she does not need to work in the factory, the alternative employment options are not great. She has been working for the same person since she was 8 years old and is now 46.

Ultimately, while we can debate the definition of bonded labor, if we are to have basic human rights and equality for everyone, the problem of bonded labor has to be solved. The reality in India and other countries is that the long-held traditions and local norms combine with poverty and lack of awareness to enable bonded labor. When human rights and social structures do not align, solving the problem becomes more complicated and will likely take time.

## **How do We Solve the Bonded Labor Problem?**

Siddarth Kara (2014) proposes 10 initiatives to eliminate bonded labor. His proposals involve legal reform, transnational slavery intervention force, fast-track court system, anti-poverty programs, free rural education, rapid rehabilitation, rural integration, rapid responses to environmental disasters, and national awareness and education campaigns. While many jurisdictions have some form of laws, there are loopholes that need to be closed, and enforcement that has to be improved. Cutting through bureaucracy can be hard.

A number of nonprofits are trying to fill the gap left by government authorities by helping the bonded laborers get access to legal remedies and economic programs. Jeevika is an example of an NGO that has been successfully helping bonded laborers since 1988. The organization is working in the majority of the districts in the state of Karnataka to educate agricultural bonded laborers in different villages about their rights and the actions they can take to be freed. Apart from educating bonded laborers and the public and regularly identifying bonded laborers in remote villages, Jeevika has evolved and adopted many strategies, programs, and activities to obtain justice for the bonded laborers if not fully eradicate the practice. They also organize protests when they need to draw attention to

particular issues and cases. When Krishnappa was tied to a tree and beaten (as detailed in a previous section), Jeevika took up the cause and staged a protest to successfully have the landlords arrested. In addition to helping free bonded laborers, Jeevika is also focused on putting in place structures that will help rehabilitate freed bonded laborers. They strongly believe that if the freed victims are not provided an adequate support structure there is a risk of relapse. They help villagers organize self-help groups who meet regularly and provide emotional and financial support to families of victims. Jeevika is also focused on other elements that strengthen these groups by helping them access various poverty alleviation schemes and healthcare, and also secure food, drinking water, housing, and employment. Education for kids is a big focus to ensure that the next generation has access to better opportunities. In the Study, when the bonded laborers were asked what they wanted the most for their kids, around 70% of the people identified good education as a priority. While workers freed from bonded labor do not have a lot of job opportunities, they are starting to become aware of the power of education to break the cycle and enable a better life for their kids. NGOs also help the villagers secure a place for themselves in society by gaining representation in gram panchayat (village government), and also secure special rights for disadvantaged communities like the Dalits and Moolnivasis (tribal communities).

To see big changes you need social changes. It is hard to make a lot of headway when the landlords who employ these bonded laborers continue to be considered respected members of society. While traditions change slowly, vigorous enforcement of laws can force the issue.

## Conclusion

Slavery is not a thing of the past, and is very much present in some societies, specifically in Asia. There are a variety of factors that force people into bonded labor: poverty, rigid social hierarchies, lack of education and awareness of human rights, and laws that don't necessarily work. While NGOs like Jeevika are part of the solution, the problem is large as there are millions of laborers spread everywhere, making it difficult to identify and reach out to everyone. In order to dig deeper and treat the root of the situation, there needs to be better laws, stronger enforcement of laws, better awareness of basic human rights, and education. But most importantly, social norms and customs have to change if we are to eradicate this form of modern slavery and restore basic human rights and dignity to these people.

## Limitations of the Study

The Study has several limitations. It was based on interviews of sixteen ex-bonded laborers and one current bonded laborer in one district in India and the answers to our questions may not be as comprehensive. Further study would have to take a more comprehensive approach that would include (i) a greater number of interviews, (ii) a more balanced mix of ex-bonded laborers and current bonded laborers, (iii) bonded laborers from different regions of India, (iv) a more balanced male to female ratio, and (v) bonded laborers in different professions.

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