THE PLIGHT OF BONDED LABORERS IN INDIA: EXPERIENCING EXPLOITATION AND BONDAGE IN THE BRICK-KILN INDUSTRY

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BIO

Neha Mallick is a PhD student in the Social Policy and Policy Analysis concentration at the Columbia School of Social Work. Her research focuses on migration, bureaucracy, and social policy in India. Building on her experience in policy practice, her collaboration with policymakers, and her direct work with communities, she examines how caste, informality, and uneven implementation together shape marginalized workers' access to rights and protections.

INSPIRATION

This paper was inspired by my longstanding interest in labor exploitation, migration, and the limits of policy implementation in India. In particular, bonded labor in brick kilns is especially urgent because it reveals how deeply caste and poverty remain tied to contemporary forms of unfreedom. This connection led me to write about the issue, as it challenges the comforting idea that exploitation survives only where laws are absent. Here, the law exists, but enforcement, rehabilitation, and accountability remain deeply uneven. That contradiction stayed with me throughout the writing process and further motivated my research. I was also driven by the need to make this issue more visible, both within India and internationally, as bonded labor in brick kilns often remains hidden behind the language of informality and development. Ultimately, my hope is that readers come away understanding that this is not an isolated labor problem, but a structural and moral failure that demands stronger enforcement, survivor-centered rehabilitation, and sustained public attention.

ABSTRACT

Atrocities in the form of forced labor, forced servile marriage, debt bondage, and human trafficking, known as modern-day slavery, continue to be used to exploit the most vulnerable. Despite efforts to curb these atrocities, their continued presence reflects deeply entrenched social and economic inequalities. Unfortunately, in India, like in many other South Asian countries, these atrocities are rooted in caste hierarchies, colonial policies, and feudal land ownership practices that continue to shape contemporary realities. Around the 1970s, India made efforts to mitigate such incidents by enacting the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, and designed targeted policies such as the central sector scheme for rehabilitation. At the same time, civil society organizations emerged as the fourth pillar, increasing the system's accountability. In this essay, we delve deeper into understanding why one of the most exploitative forms of modern slavery, bonded labor, persists in India and how policies have failed to combat such atrocities.

Keywords: bonded labor, modern slavery, India, caste hierarchy, Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976, human trafficking, social inequality, rehabilitation policies, civil society

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Despite India's status as the world's largest democracy and its remarkable economic growth and modernization, the country continues to grapple with deep-seated atrocities. This includes bonded labor, a legacy drawn from India's colonial and feudal past that has trapped millions of disadvantaged

individuals in a cycle of exploitation. Reports indicate that South Asia, particularly Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Nepal, accounts for about 89% of the world's bonded labor, with 15% estimated to be in brick kilns (Kara, 2009). The 2023 Global Slavery Index Report states that approximately 11 million people in India are subjected to bonded labor, entangled in debt bondage across generations (Walk Free, 2023). This is the consequence of a practice rooted in the caste system and exacerbated by feudal agrarian relations and colonialism (Srivastava, 2005). Despite the enactment of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act (BLSA) of 1976, these issues have persisted within the current social structure, worsened by economic inequalities.

The Indian brick-kiln industry, the second-largest brick producer globally, starkly illustrates this exploitation. Laborers, primarily men, women, and children from Scheduled Castes (SCs, or Dalits)[1] and Scheduled Tribes (STs, or Adivasis),[2] who are usually landless, impoverished, and lacking agency to change their circumstances, are trapped in this cycle (Srivastava, 2005). This reflects not just an economic problem but also a social system characterized by caste-based stratification.

The formation of BLSA in 1976 and the central sector scheme for the rehabilitation of bonded laborers, alongside

1 The Constitution of India recognizes certain castes, races, and tribal groups as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under Articles 341 and 342. Scheduled Castes are those castes/communities that suffered from the age-old practice of untouchability. They are subjected to geographical isolation and need special consideration for safeguarding their interests.

2 Scheduled Tribes are people belonging to tribes. They often live in forests, although there are some nomadic tribes as well. As these people are usually not a part of any organized religion, they are commonly considered outcastes. Socially they have their own traditions, dressing styles, and food habits, and a distinguished culture.

other welfare schemes (wage employment, food security, social security, urban poverty alleviation), were designed to address both the demand and supply-side challenges of the bonded labor system. However, progress was limited to the exit-only level, focusing on identifying, releasing, and rehabilitating laborers, while the structural levels of bondage persisted without much change. Civil society and voluntary organizations worked in tandem to identify and mitigate the incidence by ensuring greater accountability among government stakeholders, contractors, and brick-kiln owners. However, this remains a complex, multidimensional challenge.

Delving deeper, this paper examines the complex interplay of caste dynamics, economic inequalities, weak law enforcement, and poor policy implementation that perpetuates this exploitative system in the brick-kiln industry in India. By exploring the historical roots of this issue alongside current realities, this paper will shed light on why bonded labor in brick kilns persists even today in the world's largest democracy.

HISTORICAL IMPACT AND FACTORS SHAPING THE CURRENT STATE

India's caste system, a social stratification system that is hereditary by nature, positions an individual's social status based on birth and family background rather than personal merit. This system has long supported most forms of slavery. The *Manu Smriti*,[3] written between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E., established rigid social hierarchies based on the varna system, which enforced stratification and inequality. Rooted in this stratification, the caste-based system flourished during

3 Traditionally the most authoritative of the books of the Hindu code (Dharma-shastra) in India. It is attributed to the legendary first man and lawgiver, Manu. The received text dates from circa 100 C.E.

medieval India and persisted under British colonial India.

THE COLONIAL PERIOD

Britain led global abolitionist efforts in the 18th and 19th centuries, abolishing chattel slavery in the British Empire through the Slave Trade Abolition Act of 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. But at the same time, the British Raj's economic and legal policies significantly expanded slavery in India. This expansion took various forms, including caste-based debt bondage, laborers' movements to fuel the growth of the textile and agricultural sectors, and exploitative land revenue policies. Bonded labor in particular thrived under contracts and credit advances (Kara, 2012).

Repeated famines in the early 1700s had forced thousands of landless people into extreme poverty and vulnerability. This situation worsened with the introduction of the Zamindari system by the British through the Bengal Permanent Settlement Regulation (1793) and the Madras Permanent Settlement Regulation (1802), which turned millions of peasants into tenants-at-will, exposing them to severe exploitation by feudal landlords (Mishra, 2011). This system persisted for over 150 years, created, supported, and enforced by the colonial rulers. The inevitable consequences of this system included rack renting, absentee landlordism, poverty, indebtedness, and bondage. Over time, the system of bonded labor pushed itself into the twenty-first century, where these workers, beyond income loss, carried generational trauma and faced continuous social exclusion. These factors culminated in centuries of exploitation of an entire subclass of disenfranchised, low-caste, and utterly deprived workers (Kara, 2012).

The atrocities prevailed even after India freed itself from British rule in 1947. Aggravated by caste-based discrimination,

bonded labor persisted. Acknowledging the presence of this atrocity, policymakers enshrined fundamental rights[4] in Article 23 of the Constitution of India, which aimed to abolish forced labor. Simultaneously, India ratified the International Labour Organization's Forced Labor Convention on November 30, 1954. While these legislative and policy efforts were made with good intentions, their implementation failed to tackle the issue comprehensively, allowing the problem to persist in a new shape. This was evident in the increasing number of bonded labor cases. Many state governments enacted legislation to curb these cases, which eventually led to the first national legislation to mitigate bonded labor.

PASSAGE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BLSA

The BLSA, passed in 1976, was a pivotal legislative step toward ending bonded labor. The BLSA was drafted during India's Emergency period (1975–1977),[5] when then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi prioritized its abolition (Mishra, 2011). Following a Labor Ministry conference on July 19, 1975, and subsequent drafting of an ordinance, the law was enacted in 1976. The BLSA aimed to abolish bonded labor, free those trapped in the system, and prevent its recurrence. The legislation was a beacon of hope, signaling the government's commitment to ending this exploitative practice.

4 The Indian Constitution offers all citizens, individually and collectively, some basic freedoms—equality, dignity, and liberty. These are guaranteed in the Constitution in the form of six broad categories of fundamental rights, which are justifiable. Part III, Articles 12 to 35 of the Constitution deal with fundamental rights.

5 Between June 25, 1975, and March 21, 1977, India was placed under a state of emergency under Article 352 of the Constitution. It was declared on a backdrop of mounting political unrest and judicial developments that shook the legitimacy of the ruling leadership. Constitutional safeguards were systematically suspended.

While the legislation was drafted at the national level, its success could only be ensured through complete accountability at the local level. Under section 13 of the BLSA, vigilance committees were to be constituted at the subdivisional and district levels[6] under the chairmanship of the district magistrate (DM)[7] and subdivisional magistrate (SDM). Each committee aimed to identify the incidence of bonded labor systems in that region, rescue bonded workers and issue release certificates, provide economic and social rehabilitation to freed workers, and coordinate with rural banks and cooperative societies to augment rehabilitation efforts.

Despite the optimism surrounding the BLSA, its implementation faced significant challenges, particularly in identifying and rehabilitating bonded laborers. Official mechanisms for identifying bonded laborers proved ineffective, and efforts to rehabilitate freed laborers failed to comprehensively address their needs (Samonova, 2019). Further, several state governments refused to acknowledge the presence of bonded labor in their regions and thus never formed vigilance committees. This limited the act's ability to achieve its intended outcomes and showed gaps in enforcement and support structures. Further, it highlighted the government's apathy toward those affected by the bonded labor system, particularly where the most marginalized suffered—thus maintaining the status quo.

Following the enactment of this legislation, in May 1978 a centrally sponsored scheme was introduced that provided $48 to rehabilitate each bonded worker. The scheme was

6 A district is a territorial division for administrative, judicial, electoral, and other purposes, equivalent to a county in the United States.

7 A district magistrate is an Indian Administrative Service officer who is the seniormost executive magistrate and chief in charge of general administration of a district in India.

expected to be implemented through land-based, non-land-based, and art, craft, or skills–based programs. The rehabilitation process was supposed to be consistent with the fundamental principles of social justice, which served as the basis for rehabilitating the freed laborers.

PUBLIC INTEREST LITIGATION AND JUDICIAL ACTIVISM

While the legislation and policies were implemented, structural gaps within them led voluntary organizations and civil societies to use the judiciary to hold the union and state governments accountable. This resulted in some landmark judgments.

From 1976, with the formulation of BLSA, to 2000, the apex court of India, the Supreme Court, delivered 23 judgments on various aspects of the law relating to forced and bonded labor. Among them, two seminal cases of 1982 and 1983 laid the grounds for addressing the law's critical implementation challenges.

- **1982: People's Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India and Others.** The so-called Asiad Construction Worker case established three crucial legal principles in the fight against bonded labor.
    - First, it underscored the role of public-interest litigation in enforcing the fundamental rights of India's poorest citizens.
    - Second, it affirmed that bonded labor constitutes forced labor as defined by Article 23 of the Constitution of India.
    - Third, it stated that any worker paid below the government-stipulated minimum wage should be considered a forced laborer.

- **1983: Bandhua Mukti Morcha (Bonded Labor Liberation Front) v. Union of India and Others** (Giordano, 1986). This landmark case focused on the issue of bonded labor and the implementation of the BLSA, while examining the state's role in identifying, releasing, and rehabilitating bonded laborers to ensure the protection of their fundamental rights. The guidelines from this case set basic principles that the Supreme Court emphasized should be considered while formulating any rehabilitative program for released bonded laborers. The case reinforced three key points:
    - The state must identify, release, and rehabilitate bonded laborers, upholding their fundamental rights under Articles 21 and 23.
    - Failure to implement the act would violate the fundamental rights of bonded laborers and direct the state to take immediate action.
    - The state must acknowledge the importance of judicial activism in safeguarding the rights of marginalized and vulnerable populations. The state must submit periodic reports on the measures taken to enforce the BLSA.

While this shows the recurring efforts to mitigate exploitation, there are a myriad of reasons for the ongoing failure to implement the BLSA. Forces impacting the Indian government's inability to eliminate bonded labor include corruption; an apathetic bureaucracy that poorly understands and implements the law; the district magistrate and vigilance committees' inability to identify, free, and rehabilitate bonded laborers; and insufficient prosecution of the crime. These structural gaps are further aggravated because powerful brick-kiln owners maintain high control over local policies and law enforcement. This has created challenges for government

officials seeking to intervene against labor exploitation in brick kilns (Kara, 2012). Unfortunately, these gaps and the policies meant to address them are interwoven and mutually reinforcing, so any piecemeal solution, such as more rescues or more committees on paper, will not dismantle the system. As a result, the cycle of bonded labor exploitation persists.

PREVALENCE OF BONDED LABOR IN INDIA'S BRICK-KILN INDUSTRY

With an annual production of 233 billion bricks, India ranks second globally in brick production, behind China. The unorganized brick-kiln industry operates nationwide, predominantly in rural areas, employing 10 to 23 million migrant workers (Zaffar, 2024). This industry is pillared on a caste-based hierarchical division of labor framed under the guise of "skill-based labor." Work responsibilities in this industry are primarily predetermined by caste. Brick molders (pathera), responsible for tasks such as digging and molding clay, typically belong to the lowest castes, constituting Dalits and Adivasis, with no opportunity for upward mobility. Brick molding accounts for approximately 70% of total labor in brick kilns, and studies show that 90% of patheras belong to SC or ST communities. Other roles in the industry, such as loaders (kumar/bharaiwala), stackers (beldar), arrangers, and firemen (jalaiwala), are often assigned to individuals from marginally higher castes (Anti-Slavery International & Volunteers for Social Justice, 2017).

Rapid urbanization and construction have intensified labor demand in the brick-kiln industry. In India, the construction industry is regarded as one of the most important sectors of the economy, as it provides about 35 million jobs and adds almost 9% to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Jha & Kumar, 2025). The demand for infrastructure and

services will continue to grow, as India's towns and cities are projected to swell by an additional 404 million people by 2050 (Garcia, 2023). For the construction industry to remain sustainable, brick production will also need to increase.

ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION BY KILN OWNERS

To maximize profit within this industry, brick-kiln owners often resort to exploitative practices that reinforce existing caste dynamics. Jamadars (subcontractors/middlemen), often from the same villages as the workers, exploit individuals with limited livelihood options. These middlemen recruit laborers of marginalized castes from rural areas by offering enticing packages, including monetary advances, transportation, and assurances of wages, food, and shelter. However, due to widespread illiteracy among these workers, agreements are usually verbal or signed with a thumbprint, making them legally ambiguous. These contracts bind not only the male workers but also their families, creating a system of generational bondage.

Wages are often withheld for entire seasons and loans are provided at the start of work periods so that workers are immediately in debt. This system of advances, which ultimately perpetuates debt, is beneficial to brick-kiln owners because it ensnares a captive labor force throughout the brick-making season. This further keeps wages heavily depressed and helps kiln owners avoid wage competition, thereby boosting their profits and competitiveness (Kara 2012). During the brick-making season, which lasts from October to May, after the monsoon (which is from June to September), workers often receive no payment until the season ends. This delay forces workers to seek additional advances to meet subsistence needs, perpetuating their indebtedness.

Furthermore, women and children actively participate in the labor process, yet their contributions are frequently unpaid and unacknowledged, exacerbating the systemic exploitation within the industry (Anti-Slavery International & Volunteers for Social Justice, 2017).

GOVERNMENTAL REHABILITATION ATTEMPTS

Given the persistent nature of this exploitation, the government has repeatedly announced initiatives to curb it across various settings. In July 2016, the Union Government of India announced a 15-year plan to achieve "total abolition of bonded labor" by 2030, aiming to identify, release, and rehabilitate 18.4 million bonded laborers. Recent government data show that between 1978 and January 2023, 315,302 people were freed from bonded labor, of whom 94% were successfully rehabilitated (Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles and Skill Development, 2022). However, the latest Parliamentary Standing Committee report, 2025, states that since 1978, 297,038 bonded laborers have been rescued—highlighting inconsistencies in the government's data reporting (Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles and Skill Development, 2025).

A possible reason for this inconsistency, as unofficially reported by an official from the labor ministry, is the difference in the use of the terms "rescued" and "rehabilitated." While rescue refers to the release of bonded laborers, rehabilitation implies providing post-rescue support. Given that the rehabilitation scheme is demand-driven rather than based on fixed targets, rehabilitation often proceeds more slowly, which helps explain why the number of people rescued differs from the number rehabilitated (Paliath, 2025). At its current rate, India will miss its objective of identifying, releasing, and rehabilitating 98% of bonded laborers.

In addition to technical flaws in the policy design, the continued poor implementation of the policy to curb bonded labor has been a key reason that the Indian government has consistently lagged in eliminating bonded labor. Similarly, the Central Sector Scheme for Rehabilitation of Bonded Laborers of 2016 has encountered significant challenges stemming from design flaws. One major issue is that the payment of full cash assistance to bonded laborers is conditionally linked to the conviction of offenders. This requirement has severely limited the expansion of allocations within the scheme, as convictions are rare. This problematic design creates a substantial obstacle to rehabilitation (Socio-Economic and Educational Development Society [SEEDS], 2009). To address this issue, many have proposed that cash assistance be provided to bonded laborers immediately upon issuance of the subdivisional magistrate's release certificate, without waiting for offenders to be convicted. The release certificate should be considered adequate proof of bondage (Khan, 2018).

Furthermore, this 2016 scheme did not increase funding for crucial components such as awareness programs and evaluation studies. This lack of financial support also extends to other critical areas (Khan, 2018). For instance, vigilance committees, which are vital to addressing bonded labor issues, often cannot function due to constraints such as insufficient funding, limited training and capacity-building opportunities, and inadequate infrastructure. These systemic shortcomings have a cascading effect on the identification, release, and rehabilitation of bonded laborers. The current approach fails to provide timely, effective support to those who need it most, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to the scheme's design and implementation.

The present state of bonded workers is precarious. The state-crafted frameworks are nearly impossible to implement efficiently, making it difficult for workers to access relief and funds. This situation is further worsened by the need for workers to make multiple court visits and endure threats from employers. If they do escape bonded labor, the alternative livelihood opportunities are limited.

Bonded labor in the brick-kiln industry demands urgent attention due to its widespread prevalence and profound socioeconomic implications. Despite being prohibited under international law and national legislation, bonded labor remains highly prevalent, particularly in these kilns.

WIDER ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF BONDED LABOR

The brick-kiln industry's reliance on bonded labor stems from the arduous nature of brick-making, its low wages, and its colonial lineage. Workers, often entire families, are trapped in a cycle of debt bondage, forced to work long hours under hazardous conditions to repay loans taken from their employers. This system of advances effectively binds laborers to their workplace, making it extremely difficult for them to leave or seek alternate employment. The average workweek exceeds 70 hours. Laborers perform repetitive tasks in harsh environmental conditions, which exposes them to health risks and physical strain (Anti-Slavery International & Volunteers for Social Justice, 2017). Furthermore, when the debtor dies, their debt is transferred to their next of kin, such as their children or spouse. This intergenerational transfer of debts is common among brick kilns across India (Mitra & Valette, 2017).

The impact of bonded labor extends beyond the individual worker, affecting entire families and communities. Children are particularly vulnerable, often forced to work alongside

their parents to help repay family debts. A health study on child labor estimated that brick kilns employ about 1.7 million children in India (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2014). This practice not only violates children's rights but also perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty by denying children access to education and opportunities to develop their skills. The lack of education and transferable skills further entrenches these families in the brick-kiln industry, making it nearly impossible to break free from the cycle of bondage.

The economic implications of bonded labor in brick kilns are significant. Workers often earn less than the extreme poverty threshold of $2.19 per day, with wages frequently falling below the legal minimum wage (Anti-Slavery International & Volunteers for Social Justice, 2017). As noted earlier, the payment system in brick kilns is designed to keep workers in perpetual debt. This system not only violates labor laws but also contributes to income inequality and economic marginalization of vulnerable populations. This situation persists due to brick-kiln owners' resistance to any meaningful government intervention in the brickmaking system, as this sector contributes the highest net profit per laborer among forms of bonded labor in South Asia (Kara, 2012).

Addressing incidents of bonded labor in brick kilns is crucial not only from a human rights perspective but also for sustained economic development. The endemic nature of this practice in certain regions undermines efforts to reduce poverty, improve education, and promote social mobility. Furthermore, the ongoing exploitation of workers in this industry perpetuates social inequalities, particularly along caste and gender lines, as evidenced by the disproportionate representation of marginalized groups in bonded labor situations.

On paper, policies and laws are necessary, as they delegitimize bonded labor, focus on mitigating debt, and create a pathway for release and rehabilitation. But they are not sufficient to dismantle the system. The government views these schemes as demand-driven and implements them primarily through a victim-centered framework. This approach does not adequately challenge the structural conditions that perpetuate bonded labor, especially when both employers and the industry benefit economically from its continuation.

This represents the demand side of this system and dismantling it would require credible enforcement against brick-kiln owners and contractors, which the BLSA aims to do to some extent but not sufficiently. On the supply side, to systematically uplift bonded laborers, structural protections are necessary to prevent households from needing coercive credit and from returning to bondage. As bondage is closely tied to the current social structure, eliminating the cycle will take a long time.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN RESPONDING TO BONDED LABOR

While the legislative, executive, and judicial branches form the foundation of governance, civil society organizations and voluntary organizations serve as a crucial fourth pillar that holds these institutions accountable and complements government efforts to support citizens. Although formal social work existed in limited form in rural India before independence, it was only after independence that efforts to address caste-based discrimination became more visible and organized. Social reformers advocated for the rights of marginalized communities and laid the groundwork for future social work interventions (Mishra, 2011).

The passage of the BLSA in 1976 and the establishment of the rehabilitation scheme in 1978 empowered voluntary organizations to intensify their efforts across two interconnected levels: At the macro level, they employed institutional and legal channels to strengthen enforcement, which included advocating for the formation of and participation in vigilance committees, documenting implementation gaps, and filing public-interest litigation. At the meso/micro level, they prioritized direct intervention, which included rescuing bonded laborers, mobilizing these bonded laborers, and providing them with legal aid. These efforts were instrumental in mitigating atrocities and establishing obstacles to their recurrence.

Bandhua Mukti Morcha (Bonded Labor Liberation Front), founded in 1981, became one of the most prominent voluntary organizations in the fight against bonded labor in stone quarries, brick kilns, and the agricultural sector, including through its landmark litigation in the mid-1980s. The group prioritized two objectives: one, to eradicate bonded labor, with greater emphasis on children; and two, to ensure that rescued laborers receive the full rehabilitation packages provided by law. Similarly, Shramjeevi Sangathan, founded in 1982, concentrated on rescuing bonded laborers from sugarcane farms and providing post-rescue support.

In the 1990s and 2000s, there was increased focus on rehabilitation programs for freed laborers. For example, Vimukti Trust (established in 1996) worked extensively in the southern state of Karnataka through a rights-based approach that combined macro-level advocacy and enforcement with meso- and micro-level organizing, mobilizing bonded laborers and landless agricultural workers, and increasing workers' legal awareness of their rights (Mishra, 2011). The trust's presence in Karnataka reduced the incidence of bonded

labor. Furthermore, the trust promoted effective leadership among ex–bonded laborers and agricultural workers. Through this reformed leadership, they addressed oppressive practices and mobilized Dalit (SC) youth from rural areas to become activists in the fight against the bonded labor system. Additionally, Kailash Satyarthi's Bachpan Bachao Andolan (Association for Voluntary Action) played a significant role in rescuing children from bonded labor.

Through collective action and coalition building, meso-level mobilization helped expand macro-level pressure. The creation of the National Campaign Committee for the Eradication of Bonded Labor (NCCEBL) in 2014 was one such effort, involving activists, human rights organizations, trade union leaders, students, and several voluntary organizations. NCCEBL focused on identifying, releasing, and rehabilitating bonded laborers. Around the same time, a transnational advocacy group, Union Solidarity International, in collaboration with the human rights and legal organizations Prayas, ActionAid, War on Want, and Thompsons Solicitors, launched the "Blood Bricks" campaign to fight bonded labor in the Indian brick-kiln industry. This movement resulted in wage increases through unionization by brick-kiln workers, resolution of wage disputes, and a greater awareness of legal rights (Wainwright, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The prevalence of bonded labor in India's brick-kiln industry reflects a complex interplay of historical, social, and economic factors that maintains this cycle of exploitation. Despite legislative efforts and judicial interventions, the deeply entrenched caste-based discrimination, widespread poverty, and weak enforcement of labor laws have allowed this exploitative system to endure. The challenges faced

by brick-kiln workers, predominantly from Dalit and Adivasi communities, are multifaceted and require a comprehensive approach to address effectively.

A comprehensive strategy to address bonded labor should include stricter enforcement of existing laws—for example, establishing fast-track courts that would solely handle cases related to bonded labor and child labor. Since local district magistrates would oversee this, independent observers could help ensure neutral support and limit the effect of any magistrate bias. On the supply side, implementing comprehensive rehabilitation programs and alternative livelihoods for affected communities—such as expanding microcredit, forming self-help groups for women, and enrolling rescued children in school—can support reintegration. Providing initial financial support for their education and dedicated counseling can further help women and children reintegrate into the community.

Additionally, to effectively combat bonded labor, it is crucial to strengthen the role of civil society organizations and foster greater collaboration among government agencies, voluntary organizations, and international bodies. Moreover, addressing the fundamental issues of poverty and social inequality is vital to breaking the cycle of debt bondage and achieving lasting change. We can only fulfill the constitutional promise of dignity and equality for all citizens—including those trapped in brick kilns—through coordinated efforts that tackle systemic issues. This includes dismantling systems such as those perpetuated by brick-kiln owners, in which profit-making trumps human rights and acts as a major barrier to progress.

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