**BONDED LABOURER IN INDIA – POLITY**

NEWS: The recent death of nine-year-old Venkatesh, taken as 'collateral' for his mother's unpaid debt vividly illustrates the harsh realities and enduring **challenges of bonded labor in India**, despite its legal prohibition.

**WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?**

**Definition of Bonded Labour**
- **Bonded labour**, or **debt bondage**, is a form of forced labour where individuals are compelled to work to repay a debt or due to social obligations, often with no clear time limit or fair wages.

- It is not merely an economic issue, but a **systemic violation of human rights and dignity**, rooted in structural inequalities.

**Current Landscape and Statistics**
**a. Prevalence**
- As per estimates from 2021, **India had around 11 million people** living in conditions of **modern slavery**, the **highest** number globally.

**b. Rescue and Rehabilitation (2024-25)**
- Between **April 2024 and January 2025**, about **250 bonded labourers were rescued** across India.

- However, in FY **2023-24**, only **468 bonded labourers were rehabilitated** against an **annual target of 1.3 million**, revealing **serious implementation gaps**.

**c. Social Groups Most Affected**
- Over **80% of bonded labourers** belong to **Scheduled Castes (SCs)**, **Scheduled Tribes (STs)**, and **Other Backward Classes (OBCs)**.

- This reflects entrenched **caste-based exploitation** and **social marginalisation**.

**Constitutional and Legal Safeguards**
**a. Constitutional Provisions**
- **Article 23**: Prohibits **begar (forced labour)** and **human trafficking**.

- **Article 21**: Guarantees the **right to life with dignity**, directly violated in cases of bonded labour.

**b. Key Legislation**
- **Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976**:

    - **Criminalises** all forms of bonded labour.

    - **Nullifies debt obligations** that result in bondage.

    - Establishes **District Vigilance Committees (DVCs)** for implementation and monitoring.

**c. Rehabilitation Scheme (2016)**
- Targets the rescue and rehabilitation of **1.84 crore (18.4 million)** bonded labourers by **2030**.

- Envisions convergence with social welfare and livelihood programs.

**Persistence of Bonded Labour in India**
**a. Poverty and Indebtedness**
- Acute poverty forces families to accept **small loans or advances** for survival.

- These loans are manipulated into **exploitative debt cycles**, leading to long-term bondage.

**b. Caste-Based Discrimination**
- Disproportionate prevalence among **SCs/STs** due to **social exclusion, lack of access to resources, and discrimination** in the labour market.

**c. Lack of Enforcement and Data**
- Weak implementation of the **1976 Act**, with many **District Vigilance Committees inactive or non-functional**.

- **Huge disparity** between the estimated number of bonded labourers and those **actually rescued or rehabilitated**.

**d. Informal Sector Vulnerability**
- Around **90% of India's workforce** is employed in the **informal sector**, with negligible legal protection or oversight.

- This unregulated space enables **exploitative practices** like bonded labour to persist.

**e. Policy Denial by States**
- Some state governments **deny the existence of bonded labour**, hampering efforts for rescue and rehabilitation.

- Example: **Maharashtra omitted bonded labour** from its 40-point program post-Emergency, reflecting policy neglect.

**Challenges in Eradication**
**a. Underreporting**
- Victims fear **reprisal**, lack awareness, or face **social stigma**, resulting in low reporting of cases.

**b. Inadequate Rehabilitation**
- Even when rescued, victims often **do not receive compensation**, land, housing, or employment entitlements due to bureaucratic delays or corruption.

**c. Intergenerational Bondage**
- **Debts and social obligations** are often inherited, keeping **entire families trapped** across generations.

**Way Ahead: Multi-Dimensional Reforms**
**a. Strengthen Legal Enforcement**
- Create **Special Task Forces** at district level to conduct raids, track employers, and rescue victims.

- Enforce **mandatory FIRs**, **time-bound judicial processes**, and **real penalties** for offenders.

- Recognize **bonded labour as organized crime** and prosecute employers as **traffickers** when applicable.

**b. State Action Plans and SOPs**
- Direct all states to adopt clear **Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)** for identifying, rescuing, rehabilitating, and supporting bonded labourers.

- Conduct **regular surveys**, as mandated by the **Supreme Court**, to map bonded labour prevalence in vulnerable sectors like brick kilns, construction, agriculture, etc.

**c. Robust Rehabilitation Framework**
- Enhance the **Central Sector Scheme** by:

  - Providing **immediate financial relief within 30 days** of rescue.

  - Linking victims with livelihood programs like **MGNREGA** and **PMKVY**.

  - Ensuring access to **housing (PMAY-G)** and land rights.

  - Issuing **Release Certificates** posthumously where necessary, so families can claim **compensation and justice**.

**d. Empower Vulnerable Communities**
- Design **targeted welfare schemes** for SCs/STs including:

  - Guaranteed employment.

  - Skill training and formal credit access.

  - Legal aid and social security.

  - Land ownership and secure housing.

**e. Improve Institutional Coordination**
- Assign a **nodal department in every state** to handle bonded labour cases.

- Ensure coordination among **Revenue, Labour, Police**, and **Tribal Welfare Departments**.

- Make **District Vigilance Committees (DVCs)** independent, active, and transparent by involving **civil society** and setting up **digital tracking systems**.

**f. Technology and Monitoring**
- Create a **centralised digital database** of rescued bonded labourers linked with **Aadhaar**, to track entitlements and prevent re-trafficking.

- Launch a **24×7 toll-free helpline** and **mobile app** for anonymous reporting, real-time tracking, and grievance redressal.

Source: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/freed-bonded-labourers-sent-home-without-compensation/articleshow/121503921.cms