END BONDED LABOUR

IJM India
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International Justice Mission (IJM) India is a not-for-profit organisation that collaborates with the government in protecting vulnerable citizens from violence and oppression, irrespective of their gender, community, caste, race, and ethnicity.

IJM India works with the State and Central governments to combat bonded labour and sex trafficking in India. Between 2012 and 2017, IJM India trained 30,000 government officials on various issues pertaining to trafficking and bonded labour. IJM India also encourages victims to approach the public justice system for legal redressal.

In Tamil Nadu, IJM India has over 15 years of expertise working alongside the district administration in conducting rescues and rehabilitating victims of bonded labour.
Bonded labour is an illegal practice that compels labourers to provide services to an employer for little or no wages. Though outlawed by the government in 1976 through the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, it still flourishes underground. It is a crime under Section 370 of the Indian Penal Code. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) classifies it as a form of human trafficking.

Most often, bonded labour includes an element of debt bondage. The trafficker—sometimes an owner or his middleman—provides a loan or an advance to the labourer, who then moves to the worksite and provides his/her services against the borrowed amount.

While this could seem like a fair agreement between two consenting parties, it is important to note that the advance is merely a ploy to lure the labourer into providing cheap service. Labourers find themselves trapped in situations where their freedom is restricted, they are paid abysmal or no wages, denied medical attention, and subjected to various forms of physical, verbal, and/or sexual abuse.

Most often, due to inflated interest rates, retention of identity papers, and low wages, the labourer is bonded for years, sometimes generations, unable to pay debts that usually range between Rs. 5000 to Rs. 30000.
Though illegal, there are about 1.07-1.27 crores of bonded labourers in India. Bonded labour continues to thrive not only because the practice is profitable for the offender, but also because perpetrators face very little consequences for their crime. According to the National Human Rights Commission, “of the 25,477 bonded labourers identified between 2006 and 2015, only 277 cases are at the conviction stage.”

In May 2016, the Central Government modified the Scheme for Rehabilitation of Bonded Labourers by significantly increasing the rehabilitation amount to Rs. 1 lakh for male bonded labourers, Rs. 2 lakh for female and child bonded labourers and Rs. 3 lakh in cases of bonded or forced labour involving extreme cases of deprivation.

Having released the highest number of bonded labourers in India, Tamil Nadu is a leader in the fight against bonded labour. The Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department (ADTWD) reported that 3,678 bonded labourers were identified and released between the years of 2010 and 2016. 610 bonded labourers were released in 2014-2015 and a further 860 released in 2015-2016. Between January 2016 and October 2017, media and NGO data indicate that 1414 bonded labourers were rescued.

In 2017, the Tamil Nadu Government nominated a State-level officer to handle the release, rehabilitation and prosecution of bonded labour cases. Later, in September 2017, a State Action Plan was implemented, giving clear directives to tackle the crime.


www.ijmindia.org
In Tamil Nadu, IJM India works alongside diverse stakeholders such as grassroots organisations, academic institutions, people’s movements and corporates to rehabilitate survivors and help them sustain their freedom.

IJM India social workers encourage survivors to make use of government entitlements in improving the quality of their lives after rescue.

IJM India has partnered with the State Government to conduct sensitisation programmes in various parts of Tamil Nadu. IJM India also collaborates extensively with the government to educate officials on the issue of bonded labour.

IJM India is a knowledge partner at Anna Institute of Management, Police Training College, and Tamil Nadu Police Academy.

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“Bonded labour can only be curtailed if we instil fear that offenders will be punished and prosecuted.”

Rahul Nadh, IAS, Additional Collector (Development)
Project Officer, DRDA, Kanyakumari

“The magnitude of this crime is very huge. There are 45 million people suffering. Rights are being denied, poor are being exploited. Therefore, this is a serious crime - a serious human rights violation. Laws will be of no use unless they are sincerely implemented.”

Prof. P. J. Kurien, Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabha

“Our vision is to end bonded labour in Tamil Nadu. We are marching towards this vision. We will be proud when we can say ‘There is no bonded labour in Tamil Nadu.’”

Mr. Marimuthu, Additional Commissioner, Labour and Employment Department, Government of Tamil Nadu

“SWELECT is excited to give bonded labour survivors an opportunity to rebuild their lives through sustainable micro-loans. Once the family gets a step up, they repay the loan and the principal goes to another family in need. We hope that this self-sustainable model will help many labourers pursue the livelihood of their choice. Survivors have been able to thrive in freedom and they have demonstrated ownership, responsibility and financial stability.”

Raghunath VC, Executive Director, SWELECT Energy Systems Ltd.