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Holding her precious belongings, a trafficked bonded labourer begins her journey home.



INCREASED COLLABORATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT, COMMUNITY GROUPS AND PARTNER ORGANISATIONS INTENSIFY FIGHT AGAINST BONDED LABOUR

Increased collaborative efforts between government and community groups across Tamil Nadu is leading to multiple rescues and invaluable assistance for bonded labour survivors as they journey towards restoration.

Owing to the efforts of Social Action Movement, an NGO committed to the release and development of bonded Dalits and Tribals, six people were rescued from a rice mill in Kancheepuram. The NGO brought the case to Thiru. Paneerselvam, RDO of Chengalpattu, who then led the rescue. Additionally, two boys were rescued from a sheep grazing unit through a referral from a group of local community leaders engaging on matters of injustice. Following this, Shed India, an NGO working to empower the vulnerable, collaborated with the government and Child Welfare Committee to conduct a rescue operation in which two survivors received Release Certificates and an initial rehabilitation amount of Rs. 1000.

Community organisations are also intensifying efforts to assist survivors of bonded labour. Saath Chalo, a coalition of individuals from corporate and media houses, not-for-profit organisations, vulnerable communities and the general public, has helped raise funds to rebuild homes for survivors affected by flooding in Chennai. Similar efforts are also being made by students from Madras Christian College (MCC) as they raise funds to build homes for rescued bonded labourers in Tirukazhukundram. They are also helping survivors generate income through a mushroom farm.

“As survivors struggle to rebuild their lives and become self-sustainable, these proactive efforts are a major source of encouragement to them,” says Loretta Jhona, Director of IJM’s rehabilitation programme. “We look forward to partnerships like these which help survivors stand on their own feet.”



RESCUED BONDED LABOURERS UNITE TO EMPOWER THEIR COMMUNITIES

One of the significant reasons for people being lured into bondage is their ignorance of the illegality of the system as well as their lack of awareness about government welfare schemes and entitlements. To address this gap, the National Adivasi Solidarity Council (NASC) started the Rescued Bonded Labourers' Association (RBLA) in 2014. The Association, registered under Indian Societies Act 1975, functions in the five districts of Kancheepuram, Vellore, Dindivanam, Tiruvallur and Villupuram.

Bringing together rescued bonded labourers with proven leadership qualities, the RBLA aims to work collectively to represent their own vulnerable communities. IJM partners with the RBLA by training members on the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act and other relevant acts, government provisions and the processes to be followed while accessing government benefits on behalf of their communities.

After attending a training in 2015, Gopi, an RBLA leader in Kancheepuram, helped community members receive over 20 Ration Cards, 64 Community Certificates, 21 Voter IDs and 20 NREGS cards. "The training was an eye-opener," says Gopi. "It helped me understand my own village and the needs of my community."

Highlighting the need for the association, Clement David from IJM says, "It is the responsibility of survivors to raise awareness in their communities and prevent other vulnerable people from falling into the trap of bonded labour."

Association members meet and map out areas that require intervention and support. One of the RBLAs submitted a proposal to the Tamil Nadu Government to establish a brick kiln where released bonded labourers could work and receive appropriate wages. The Government approved the proposal and has promised to release funds toward this project. "This was a great victory because it shows that great things can happen when RBLA groups raise their voices. Economic empowerment is not out of reach," says Clement.

Apart from this, the RBLA is also engaging with corporates to develop model communities with access to good water, housing and livelihood opportunities. To create one such community, SWELECT Energy Systems Limited gave grants to the RBLA in Kancheepuram to run the programme for three months starting from April.

PHOTO SERIES: RDO RELEASES TRAFFICKED BONDED LABOURERS



▲ *Thiru. M. Narayanan, RDO of Ponneri led the largest rescue operation in IJM history at a brick kiln in Tiruvallur in March 2016. Over 560 labourers were rescued from a repeat-offender who had escaped penalty in 2011.*



▲ *Survivors, many of them trafficked for labour from Odisha, raise their hands when asked by the RDO if they want to return home.*

The successful collaboration between District Administration and Police results in strong legal action against offenders. The owner (not pictured here) was later arrested under relevant sections of Bonded Labour System

▼ *(Abolition) Act, Section 370 of Indian Penal Code and Scheduled Castes and Tribes Act.*



GOVERNMENT SPOTLIGHT

Having led the landmark rescue of over 560 labourers, Thiru. M. Narayanan, Revenue Divisional Officer of Ponneri speaks to Nyaya Pathrika.



1. What were some of the unique features of the recent rescue?

The case was unique for a few reasons. For one, it had a strong trafficking element. More than 560 labourers had been trafficked from several districts of Odisha with over 200 of them being children. The labourers had been subjected to long hours of exploitative labour and their basic rights had been denied. One lady was not allowed out of the facility to deliver her baby, while another was not allowed to attend her spouse's funeral.

While these details were disturbing, what I found most disturbing was that this was the second large scale operation being carried out at the very same brick kiln. The first rescue operation in 2011 had freed over 500 labourers, also from Odisha. This time, the numbers were even higher. This shows that the owner had absolutely no fear of consequences.

2. The owner already had a bonded labour case against him. How do you think the crime could have been prevented?

Both bonded labour and trafficking are against the law. However, owners employ bonded labourers because of how profitable the practice is and because they have no fear of consequences. In 2011, the owner escaped penalty. If the legal consequences had been deterrent the first time, the owner would have feared similar stringent action and he may not have repeated the offense a second time.

3. How do you think Section 370 will strengthen the fight against bonded labour?

Many bonded labour cases, like this one, have elements of trafficking. The legal consequences of trafficking are much more severe than that of bonded labour. I believe that Section 370 when applied to relevant bonded labour cases can create a strong culture of deterrence.



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