

## It's a national shame that bonded labour still exists in India

Last week, 25 bonded labourers, including children, were rescued from farmlands in Rajasthan's Baran district. The rescued workers said they were lured from Madhya Pradesh with loans between Rs 500 to Rs 20,000 and the promise of work. But they were made to work on the fields without pay. Bonded and forced labour - where a person is made to work through the use of violence or intimidation or more subtle means such as accumulated debt - are some of the oldest forms of slavery in the world. According to the 2016 Global Slavery Index, India has the most slaves in the world. There are an estimated 46 million people enslaved worldwide with more than 18 million of them in India, the survey added. Unfortunately, the Indian government cannot verify these figures. But the labour ministry has drawn up plans to identify, rescue and help bonded labourers by 2030.

In reply to a [Lok Sabha question](#), minister of state (independent charge) for labour and employment Bandaru Dattatreya, said that the Centre has adopted a three-pronged strategy for the abolition of the bonded labour system: First, the Constitution prohibits forced labour. It enacted the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, which empowers executive magistrates to exercise powers of judicial magistrate of first or second class for trial of offences. Vigilance committees at the district and sub-divisional levels have been prescribed to identify and rehabilitate bonded labourers. A centrally-sponsored plan --- Scheme for Rehabilitation of Bonded Labour --- is under implementation since 1978 under which the Centre and states contribute Rs 10,000 each for cases of rehabilitation.

Unfortunately, despite these measures, India has such large numbers of bonded labourers, thanks to poor enforcement of the four-decade-old bonded labour law, its under-resourced police and judiciary, and deep societal and economic inequities that still exist. The only way to reduce bonded labour is taking a preventive approach, by reducing the conditions that perpetuate bondage-like conditions by promoting decent work, and by removing possible elements of bondage and coercion in the worker-employer relationship. It also involves inter-state coordination mechanisms for migrant workers, including workplace improvements and linking them to social security schemes. Above all, efforts must be made to create a database of bonded labourers. It is not an easy task but would be first step towards their liberation and rehabilitation.

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