

TODAY'S IMPORTANT CURRENT AFFAIRS

UPSC MAINS

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BONDED LABOUR

Source: The post is based on the article published in “The Hindu” on 01.05.2025.

In News: India's shame - the trap of Bonded labour

Syllabus: Mains – GS I (INDIAN SOCIETY - BONDED LABOUR)



Bonded labour

The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 defines a bonded labourer as a person who incurs, or is presumed to have incurred, a bonded debt and is forced to provide labour or service to repay that debt. This includes situations where the labourer:

- ❖ **Works without wages** or for nominal wages (less than the legal minimum or prevailing local wage)
- ❖ **Forfeits freedom of employment** or movement

- ❖ Is unable to sell or appropriate the product of their labour
- ❖ Is forced to work due to a **surety arrangement**, where a family member's debt binds others to labour.

The Act **abolished the bonded labour system** and made it illegal to employ or keep anyone as a bonded labourer.

Causes for Bonded Labour

Bonded labour persists due to a combination of economic, social, and structural factors:

- ❖ **Poverty and Indebtedness:** Poor individuals take loans for emergencies (medical, weddings, religious ceremonies) and, unable to repay, are forced into bonded labour.
- ❖ **High Interest Rates:** Employers or moneylenders charge exorbitant interest, making it nearly impossible to repay the debt.
- ❖ **Caste and Social Inequality:** Lower castes and marginalized communities are disproportionately targeted and trapped in bondage due to social discrimination.
- ❖ **Lack of Education and Skills:** Illiteracy and lack of marketable skills limit employment options, making vulnerable populations easy targets.
- ❖ **Weak Law Enforcement and Corruption:** Poor implementation of laws, corruption, and delayed justice allow the practice to continue.
- ❖ **Lack of Alternative Livelihoods:** In rural areas, absence of alternative employment opportunities forces people to accept exploitative terms.

How Bonded Labourers Are Affected

Economic Impact

- ❖ **Low or No Wages:** Bonded labourers often work for little or no pay, perpetuating poverty and making it impossible to break the **debt cycle**.
- ❖ **Perpetual Debt:** Additional loans for basic needs lead to ever-increasing debt, sometimes **passed down generations**.
- ❖ **Lack of Asset Ownership:** Labourers **cannot accumulate assets** or savings, keeping them economically vulnerable.

Social Impact

- ❖ **Social Exclusion:** Bonded labourers, often from marginalized communities, face **discrimination and lack of social mobility**.

- ❖ **Loss of Freedom:** Restrictions on movement, **choice of work**, and association.
- ❖ **Intergenerational Bondage:** **Children** of bonded labourers are also **forced** into labour, perpetuating the cycle.

Political Impact

- ❖ **Lack of Representation:** Bonded labourers are often **voiceless**, unable to organize or demand rights due to fear and lack of bargaining power.
- ❖ **Weak Legal Protection:** **Poor** access to **justice** and ineffective implementation of laws.

Educational Impact

- ❖ **Denial of Education:** Children are forced into labour, missing out on schooling and skill development, resulting in low human capital.
- ❖ **Limited Opportunities:** Without education, future employment prospects remain bleak, continuing the cycle of poverty.

Health Impact

- ❖ **Hazardous Working Conditions:** Exposure to extreme heat, chemicals, and dangerous environments leads to chronic health issues (musculoskeletal problems, respiratory diseases, infections).
- ❖ **Lack of Healthcare:** Inadequate access to medical care worsens health outcomes.
- ❖ **Mental Health:** Persistent exploitation and hopelessness can lead to depression and, in some cases, suicide.

Government Measures to Abolish Bonded Labour

- ❖ **Legislation:** The **Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976**, legally abolished bonded labour and criminalized its practice.
- ❖ **Rehabilitation Schemes:** The Central Sector Scheme for **Rehabilitation of Bonded Labourers** provides financial assistance for rescued individuals-₹1 lakh for adult males, ₹2 lakh for special categories (children, women), and ₹3 lakh for extreme cases (transgender, severe deprivation).
- ❖ **Release and Rehabilitation:** Rescued bonded labourers are issued **release certificates by the district magistrate** and are entitled to rehabilitation support, including housing, education, and healthcare.

- ❖ **Awareness and Enforcement:** Government and NGOs conduct awareness campaigns and work to enforce the law, though implementation remains inconsistent.

Why Bonded Labour Still Exists

Despite legal abolition and government measures, bonded labour **persists**, including in states like **Maharashtra**, where recently some of the members rescued.

- ❖ **Weak Enforcement:** Laws are poorly implemented, and offenders are rarely prosecuted.
- ❖ **Corruption and Delays:** Corruption in the bureaucracy and judicial system hampers rescue and rehabilitation efforts.
- ❖ **Underreporting and Data Issues:** Official statistics often undercount the true number of bonded labourers, masking the scale of the problem.
- ❖ **Economic Vulnerability:** Continued poverty, lack of alternative livelihoods, and social discrimination keep people trapped.
- ❖ **Social Acceptance:** In some regions, bonded labour is normalized due to tradition and lack of awareness.

Recent Statistics and Parliamentary Data

According to recent parliamentary statements, there are an **estimated 1.84 crore** (18.4 million) bonded labourers in India, but **only 12,760 have been officially rescued and rehabilitated**. This stark gap reflects the challenges in identification, rescue, and rehabilitation, as well as the persistence of systemic issues.