

Approved by Ex. UGC  
Journal No. : 63580  
Regd. No. 21747

Indexed by : IJIF, I2OR, SJIF  
I2OR Impact Factor : 7.680  
ISSN 2277-2014

# *Research Discourse*

*An International Peer-reviewed Refereed Research Journal*

Vol. XV

No. III

July-September 2025



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*Published by :*  
***South Asia Research & Development Institute***  
B. 28/70, Manas Mandir, Durgakund, Varanasi-221005, U.P. (INDIA)  
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## Editorial

In May 1, as the world commemorates- International Labour Day to honour the dignity of work and workers' rights, the stories of millions in India trapped in bonded- labour cast a dark shadow.

Bonded labour emerges from a web of interconnected factors. Immediate triggers, such as medical emergencies, religious ceremonies, dowries, food shortages, or the sudden loss of a job or a breadwinner, may force an impoverished worker to seek a loan or advance from an employer or labour agent. However, deeper systemic issues amplify this vulnerability: discrimination and social exclusion based on religion, ethnicity, or caste; widespread illiteracy and a lack of access to information; employer monopolies over local financial and labour markets; and the dominance of social elites. These elements transform a simple economic transaction between lender and borrower into a mechanism of social control and exploitation.

India had abolished bonded labour in 1975. In 2016, the then Union Labour Minister, Bandaru Dattatreya, informed Parliament about the government's plan to release and rehabilitate 1.84 crore bonded labourers across the country as part of a 15-year vision extending until 2030.

Interestingly, in December 2021, when— parliamentarian Mohammed Jawed inquired about this target in Parliament, the government stated that 12,760 bonded labourers had been rescued and rehabilitated between 2016 and 2021.

The Minister of State for Labour and Employment revealed a harsh truth: of India's estimated 1.84 crore bonded labourers, only 12,760 have been rescued and rehabilitated, leaving approximately 1.71 crore still trapped. To meet the 2030 target of eradicating bonded labour, around 11 lakh individuals would need to have been rescued annually since 2021. Given that only 12,000 bonded labourers were rescued between 2016 and 2021, expecting lakhs to be freed annually is overly optimistic

In addition to bonded labour, crores of unorganised Indian workers, particularly migrants, endure forced labour in India, which closely resembles bonded labour. According to a National Sample Survey Organization of India report, the country's total employment across the organised and unorganised sectors was approximately 47 crore. Of this, only 8 crore workers were in the organised sector, while the remaining 39 crore were in the unorganised sector.

The International Labour Organisation's India Employment Report 2024 also states that low-quality jobs in the informal sector and informal employment are the dominant forms of work in India.

Unfortunately, unorganised workers, predominantly migrants in India's informal sector, lack unionisation, depriving them of collective bargaining power. Without unionisation, unorganised workers face exploitative conditions, lack formal contracts, and risk arbitrary dismissal. In the 1940s, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar championed labour rights, mandating trade union recognition and collective bargaining, including the right to strike. However, the Labour Codes of 2019-20 have undermined Ambedkar's legacy, eroding workers' rights and prioritising profit over people, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.

Since early 2022, investigations by this writer into forced labour across Indian industries have exposed a shameful reality: Indian industries thrive on the exploitation of forced labour, a blatant betrayal of India's workers. Interviews with hundreds of workers - mostly migrants forced from their villages by climate change, crippling poverty, and a lack of job opportunities - lay bare a system rigged against them. These workers lack stable wages, facing meagre pay, precarious conditions, and the constant threat of dismissal. This exploitation, a deliberate assault on their dignity, is perpetuated by a system prioritising profit over people, ignoring modern-day slavery. India's economy shamefully thrives on bonded and forced labour, profiting from its most vulnerable.

We express extreme gratitude to Dr. Praveen Tiwari, Dr. Rajiv Kumar Tripathi, Dr. Santosh Kumar Tripathi, Dr. Purusottam Lal Vijay, Dr. Mahendra Kumar Yadav, Dr. Abhay Pratap Singh and all other contributors who have contributed and devoted their essential insights and came up with their manuscripts for this issue which directly as well as indirectly is the contribution to the society.

We are very thank-ful to all the researcher and reader. We will be very happy if you give us or write up your valuable comments and suggestion.

**Editor in Chief**  
**Anish Kumar Verma**



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Vol . XV, No. III, July-September 2025, (ISSN 2277-2014)

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