

Bonded Labour in India – UPSC Notes

Bonded Labour is a system in which borrowers are forced to repay their loans through labour. Here, the employers give loans at very high-interest rates. As the loan amounts to be repaid are unreasonably high, the time required to pay off is very large, thereby creating a vicious cycle of generational inequality.

Bonded Labour is also known as **Bandhua Mazdoori** or **Debt Bondage** in India. At a global level, India was ranked in 4th position in the 2016 Global Slavery Index.

Bonded Labour in India - A Brief History

- Bonded labour was widely practised in rural areas of India as the agricultural industry relies on contracted, often migrant labourers.
- As per the Indian constitutional definition of forced labour, the persistent forms of modern slavery are bonded migrant labour, agricultural debt bondage, and child labour.
- There is a direct link between the agrarian structure and agricultural productivity.
- In areas where there was adequate rainfall and a very good network of irrigation facilities, especially in rice-growing regions in river deltas, there was a higher demand for intensive cultivation.
- In such areas, unequal agrarian structures were developed.
- The agrarian structure of these regions was characterised by a large proportion of landless labourers, who were often 'bonded' workers belonging to the lowest castes.
- The **Jeeta system** in **Karnataka**, the **halpati system** in **Gujarat** tied the working poor to landowners in 'hereditary' labour relationships (bonded labour).
- Due to lack of resources, the working poor depended on the landed class for political, social, and economic support, which made them bonded labourers.
- Legally the system of bonded labour has been abolished, yet they continued to exist in many areas of India.
- In the post-Independence period, especially in those regions that underwent the Green Revolution, many important transformations took place in the rural areas, concerning social relations.

- Hereditary relationships or traditional bonds between agricultural workers and landowners (known as bonded labour) weakened.

Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976

- To abolish bonded labour in India, the Parliament of India enacted the **Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976**.
- The District Magistrates were given the authority to enforce the Bonded Labour System Abolition Act of 1976.
- As per this act, trials for labour offences could be set up at local and national levels by the Indian Judicial powers.
- However, due to poor implementation of the law, there were almost 3,00,000 bonded labourers in India as per the figures put out in 2009 by the Ministry of Labour and Employment.

Minimum Wages Act - Prevention of Workers Exploitation

- Workers are paid very low wages by their employers or fair wages are denied by their employers as the workers are in dire need of work. This completely reduces the bargaining power of the workers.
- To prevent workers from exploitation, certain laws were made by the Government.
- Minimum Wages Act is an important law created for the prevention of exploitation of workers.
- As per the Minimum Wages Act, workers cannot be denied wages as this is wrong or illegal in the eyes of the law.
- The law on Minimum Wages ensures that the workers are not underpaid.
- The wages given by the employer to the worker should not be less than minimum wages. Every few years, there will be upwards revision of minimum wages.
- This law is meant to protect the interests of factory workers, construction workers, farm labourers, domestic workers etc.

Right Against Exploitation

- Right Against Exploitation is another important law framed in the Constitution of India to protect workers from exploitation.

- As per this law, no one can be forced to work under bondage or no one can be forced to work for low wages.
- No child below the age of 14 can be employed in a hazardous working environment. They cannot be employed in any mines or factories.

