

## **Concept Note on Eradication of Bonded Labour in Karnataka**

### **Bonded Labour – What it is and its Incidence in Karnataka:**

Bonded labour is a way of exploiting labour of very poor persons, mainly from dalit (the untouchables) and tribal communities, by making use of their very vulnerable condition in life. Bonded Labour system is that form of forced labour wherein, people are made to work for long hours without weekly, seasonal or even annual breaks, for very little wages, much lower than the statutory minimum wages, and without the freedom to seek employment with someone else till they have cleared their debt. Often the bondages are passed on to the next generation. Bonded labour is found very much in agricultural occupations and in other occupations in the unorganised sector like brick kilns, stone quarries, hotels, garages, silk industry, domestic work and so on. Hence dalits and tribals in villages who are landless and working as agricultural labourers are the easy victims of bonded labour system.

Bonded labour is intimately linked to caste system. Bonded labour in India is not just an economic issue or an issue of poverty but it has very much a social dimension; it is part of the caste system in India. Eradicating bonded labour strengthens the efforts in abolishing caste system or the fight against caste system to be effective must also involve fight against bonded labour. Most of the bonded labourers being dalits (and wherever tribals are found, tribals), working for bonded labour means working for the most marginalised section of the society in India.

According to a survey conducted by National Sample Survey of India in 1992, about 6% of the agricultural labour is bonded. According to the 2001 Census (provisional), Karnataka had a total population of 52,733,958. The total number of workers among them was 23,521,533 (44.6% of total population). Of these, the agricultural labourers were 6,209,153 (26.4% of total workers). The 6% among them would be 3,72,549! If bonded labour in other categories of work is included, then the total number of bonded labourers in Karnataka may be five lacs or more. The survey conducted by JEEVIKA in 1995 in 45 taluks had revealed 18,992 bonded labourers in agriculture. The forces of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation seem to make the life of landless agricultural and other unorganised workers from dalit and tribal communities harder and reduce more and more of them to conditions of bondage.

### **Vimukti Trust and its Involvement on Bonded Labour:**

Vimukti Trust has been in existence for over a decade with the sole purpose of eradicating bonded labour in Karnataka. It has been undertaking a number of programmes and activities with that one aim.

VT follows a rights based and also a holistic approach. It combines a variety of strategies in tackling bonded labour. The Constitution of India prohibits, as a Fundamental Right, traffic in human beings, *begar* and other forms of forced labour and the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 effective since 25 October 1975 contains a number of radical provisions for the elimination of bonded labour. The fundamental right of a

person is violated when she / he is made to work as a bonded labourer. The law stipulates punishment of the offender and rehabilitation of the victim in such a way that the person does not relapse into further bondage. But because of the caste and class biases of the implementing authorities, many of who are from the so called 'higher' castes and landlord families, hardly anything is done under the Act. And because of the rampant illiteracy and ignorance of dalits and tribals who were forbidden any education for ages and the sophisticated system of justice in India, a majority of the bonded labourers are unaware of the constitutional provisions on their behalf and the statutes protecting them.

VT seeks to implement the Act and other relevant statutes by lobbying and advocacy with the government and its various agencies on the one hand and by mobilising, conscientizing and organising bonded labourers together with landless agricultural workers. Towards this end, a union of bonded labourers and agricultural workers is formed and registered in 1997 under the Trade Union Act. Through the unionisation, a number activities for conscientization are also carried out. Further, as a strategy for effective community mobilisation, all the activists recruited by VT are from dalit communities. These activists so far from 20 taluks of 8 districts are capacitated to form and register their own societies. Another 300 or so informal groups of dalit youth are promoted since the end of 2005 in all the districts and taluks of Karnataka except the two coastal districts, Dakshina Kannada and Udupi and the coastal taluks of a third district, Uttara Kannada. (Karnataka has 27 districts and 176 taluks). These independent bodies came together in September 2006 and decided to be part of a network already formed in 1993, called JEEVIKA (Jeeta Vimukti Karnataka = Bonded Labour Liberation Front in Karnataka and the acronym, Jeevika, itself is made to signify Life Free of Bondage = Bandhana Mukta Jeevana) with a new Vision and Mission Statement.

Other strategies used include training and cultural action; accessing government welfare and developmental schemes and promoting self help groups; networking and the use of media; reflection and inculcating scientific outlook; study, research and documentation.

In the initial stages in the mid 90s, extensive surveys were conducted all over Karnataka to identify bonded labour, i.e., in 45 taluks representing the different regions in Karnataka. Concrete involvement was carried out only in a few taluks, depending on the availability of financial support. VT / Jeevika has gone through the dark stage of denial of bonded labour continuously by the Karnataka Government till 2000, though initially, in 1990, its advocacy and lobbying efforts had met with some success by the acknowledgement by the Minister concerned of the existence of bonded labour and the commitment on behalf of the Government to take action according to the law. A process was initiated to identify bonded labour. Only in 2000, the Government did make a firm resolve to identify, release and rehabilitate bonded labour wherever it existed and whenever it came to light. The efforts at identifying, releasing and rehabilitating bonded labour from 2000 to 2004, however, reveal that those processes have taken place almost entirely where VT / Jeevika has been active in the 20 taluks. In the rest of the taluks of the state, the Government officials did not report any bonded labour! This brought out the need to extend the efforts of VT / JEEVIKA in other parts of Karnataka, apart from

consolidating its earlier involvement. At the same time, the networking efforts since 1993 of Jeevika with other organisations have shown that almost all the NGOs in Karnataka exhibit reluctance in taking up the issue of bonded labour.

Involvement on bonded labour in Karnataka for a little over 15 years by Jeevika and its predecessor, Jeeta Vimukti Sanghatane in one taluk of Anekal three years earlier to 1993, has made some significant gains in eradicating bonded labour. In all the taluks where VT / Jeevika has been active, the incidence of bonded labour has come down significantly. The challenge is to completely eradicate bonded labour in those areas in a matter of few years. It has kept the discourse on bonded labour alive in Karnataka. It has evolved a holistic approach to address the issue. It has promoted effective leadership among ex bonded labourers and agricultural workers to address the evil. It has shown a way of mobilising dalit youth from rural areas to become capable activists in the fight against bonded labour and related issues. The gains of the involvement must be nourished further and not allowed to fritter away.

### **Objectives:**

1. Seeing to the implementation of the statute on bonded labour in the processes of identification, release and rehabilitation of bonded labour and in making the statutory Vigilance Committee (VC)s function in all the 27 districts and 52 subdivisions mainly by seeing that the member organisations of JEEVIKA network get nominated to the VCs.
2. Seeing to the implementation of other relevant Acts and securing other rights that have a bearing on the prevention of bonded labour, like National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and right to work, Minimum Wages Act and right to equal wages, right to information, right to education and universalisation of quality primary education, right to food, right to drinking water and right to shelter, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act and right to equality and right to land through Land Reforms Act and through grants.
3. Promoting economic self reliance through accessing government welfare and development schemes and building up self help groups.
4. Making the union leaders politically active outside the political parties by making them take part in Panchayat Raj Institutions, making representative democracy work for people and working towards direct democracy.
5. Working for gender justice and empowerment of women.
6. Respecting cultural diversity including promotion of dalit cultures and opposing communal forces, questioning of superstition, adopting rational and scientific attitudes.
7. Promoting holistic health including conservation and promotion of the knowledge of herbal medicines, promoting awareness of diseases like HIV/AIDS and promoting the interests of the elderly and the differently challenged.

### **Activities**

A number of activities are proposed under each of the above objectives taking into account also the different strategies identified above.

**These objectives and activities will be achieved through:**

1. Strengthening the union of bonded labourers and agricultural workers in the earlier 20 taluks in 8 districts and in the areas of the 300 new informal groups in the rest of the 19 districts.
2. Strengthening the JEEVIKA network in the state by continuing the intensive works to carry out the various activities for each of the above objectives in the earlier 20 taluks in 8 districts and promoting it in the areas of the 300 new informal groups in the rest of the 19 districts through some typical activities to begin with.
3. Activating the Vigilance Committees in the districts and the sub-divisions.
4. Setting up a Resource and Study Centre.
5. Promoting advocacy studies, research and dissemination materials.

**It is expected that through this project:**

1. The present and ex bonded labourers and landless agricultural workers are organised and conscientized on their rights, constitutional guarantees and provisions on Bonded Labour Act and other relevant statutes and empowered to assert and secure their rights.
2. The JEEVIKA network in the 20 taluks and through other 300 new groups is strengthened to take up various actions to eradicate bonded labour.
3. The statutory Vigilance Committees in the 27 districts and the 52 sub-divisions in the state are reconstituted with persons involved with bonded labour getting nominated to them and thus made to function effectively to implement the provisions of the Bonded Labour Act.
4. The incidence of bonded labour is reduced with the effort of identifying bonded labourers and getting them released and rehabilitated by working out various welfare and developmental schemes and by promoting their own cooperative ventures through self help groups.
5. The Union and the network of Jeevika, aligning with other dalit and tribal movements, networks and organisations, will address the larger issues of dalits and tribals.

**The Cost of the Project:**

It is anticipated that the duration of the project would be 60 months and that the total cost would be 1,985,000 EUR.

## Relevance of the Project:

1. **Relevance of the issue in India / Karnataka:** Dalits in India continue to suffer various injustices and different dehumanising and exploitative practices. One among them is bonded labour system. Being illiterate and ignorant of their rights and entitlements, they easily give themselves up as bonded labourers and perpetuate misery and illiteracy for themselves, their families and their future generations. Putting a stop to the dehumanised exploitative system of bonded labour is a sine qua non for the full liberation of dalits and for building up a vibrant, vigilant and productive society.
2. **Problems to be resolved and the needs to be met:** Being illiterate and ignorant of their rights, poor dalits easily accept unjust conditions of bonded labour and rather regard them as the benevolent gestures of their masters for them. They lack effective organisation and leadership that conscientize them on their rights and entitlements and take up their struggles. The authorities mandated to implement the statute on bonded labour, due to their caste and class biases and for lack of any pressure from the people concerned, fail to implement the Act and other statutes that have a bearing on bonded labour. Therefore, bonded labourers together with landless agricultural workers must be conscientized about the provisions of the Act and other rights and entitlements. They must be capacitated to see that the Act is implemented and their other rights are secured. The administration and other wings of the government must be sensitised to implement the provisions of the Act and those other relevant statutes.
3. **Groups involved with:** The project will mainly encompass bonded labourers, landless agricultural workers and dalit youth. It will also enlist the cooperation of dalit movements and organisations. It will impact on state legislature, executive and judiciary, the National and the State Human Rights Commissions, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and the international community. It will directly impact on the 20,000 members of the Union and their families.
4. **The specific objectives and expected results are spelt out already above.**
5. **Multiplier effects:** The project will strengthen action in the 20 taluks. It will also promote action in a few selected villages in another 130 taluks. These initiatives will further lead to tackling bonded labour in all the villages in all those taluks by working as pressure groups on the administration at the taluk, the sub-division, the district and the state. The activation of Vigilance Committees will also ensure taking action on bonded labour on a continuous basis. The JEEVIKA network may inspire similar action in other states in the country. The Union and the JEEVUKA network will also take forward the issues of dalit movement by collaborating with dalit movement at all levels.

1 March 2007

kiran kamal prasad