

## Families in bondage: Enslaved by Association



Living along the margins of their village in the Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh; Pradeep\*, Champa Devi\*, and their four children live a stone's throw away from the local government school. Their children, who are too apprehensive to even share their names, are not regular attendees at school. Two of their sons—two and four years old—are supervised by their six-year-old sister. Their eldest son, who is almost 20 years of age, is spending a few days at a relative's home in a neighbouring locale. The family belongs to the *Musahar* community, an extremely marginalised indigenous sub-caste belonging to Uttar Pradesh. Members of this community are commonly engaged and specifically vulnerable to bonded labour situations, most often working as labourers in brick kilns. Until two years ago, this family too worked under exploitative and hazardous circumstances at a local brick kiln. Pradeep, now a trolley puller, recalls the details of his family's experience at the kilns. "I must have been around 18-20 years old when I started working at the kiln. The owner called us there (to work). The kiln is 4 km away. I learned the work by myself. The work would start at 4 AM in the morning—we'd wake up by 2 or 2:30 AM. First, we used to clean, and then we used to mix the dust with the water. Then, we used to sort it and lift the bricks. This used to go on till evening, around 4 PM. After that we used to mix the clay again, and then rest. We could sleep for four or five hours at night."

Often, labourers are unaware of the oppressive working conditions within a brick kiln, and are caught unaware after they have been employed. By the time the struggle begins to register, they have already been consumed by the vicious cycle of debt bondage. "Nobody forced me to work there. They had promised to pay ₹300 per 1000 bricks, but they used to only give an allowance of ₹200 per week—to each of us. They had hired me for one season (6 months), but I then

spent three seasons repaying the amount.” The accountant who is responsible for supervising the labourers’ work, including counting the number of bricks made by each labourer, under-represents the quantity of work accomplished by them. This is done in order to manipulate unassuming labourers into believing that they have not made enough bricks to compensate for their weekly allowance. Thus, the accounts portray the false notion that the labourers must continue working in order to pay off their ‘debt’. This is known as a *‘toot’*—the payment to be made against the work done, which is misrepresented by the kiln owners. As long as the *‘toot’* remains, the labourer is obligated to continue working at the kiln. This is how debt bondage is established. This bondage is used to impose restrictions on the labourers, as in Pradeep’s case. “Because of the carried forward money, they even took away my cycle in the second year. We never got the ₹300 for every 1000 bricks, we only received the weekly allowance. We used to get one or two days off during the entire year (for festivals).”

Typically, bonded labourers are unaware of worker’s rights and the avenues of redressal available to them, and thus cannot acknowledge that they are engaged in bonded labour. Says Pradeep, “I used to find it alright at that time—I was just doing the work. Four of us used to work there—me, my wife, and our two children—one boy and one girl. My boy was five years old, and the girl was three years old. They used to sort the bricks. ” They also have a younger son (around two years old at the time) who lived with them but was too young to be put to work by the owners. “We worked eight hours a day, sometimes more. There were no facilities. If we spent the allowance of ₹200 on ration, and ate that food within four days, they would not give us more money for the remaining three days of the week. We lived in shacks. My back used to hurt. There was no toilet. People would go (defecate) openly. We had to buy our clothes ourselves. We were not allowed to go anywhere. If we fell ill, we had to get medicine, come back, and still work. They would not let us leave. I never tried (to run away). They said ‘Do your work, otherwise we will not pay your money.’ They took away my cycle (as collateral). We had to file a police case (an FIR, after which the cycle was returned).”

For Pradeep and his family, the turning point came when they were informed that their rights were being violated. Through monthly meetings in villages across five districts of Uttar Pradesh, ROSA (Rural Organisation for Social Advocacy)—a partner organisation of the Human Liberty Network—creates awareness regarding labour laws and worker’s rights amongst bonded labourers, former bonded labourers, and communities vulnerable to being exploited through bonded labour. The labourers are also provided sustainable income generating alternatives to support themselves and their families. At one such community meeting, Pradeep shared his predicament and was offered a trolley, which he could use to levy goods at the local marketplace. This provided an alternative source of income to the family, and they felt empowered to leave the brick kiln. The impact of this awareness is evident, as the family has remained liberated from the kilns for the past two years. Says Pradeep, “If we do our work, and don’t get money, that is fraud. After the season ended, they promised ₹150 for every 1000 bricks, but they didn’t pay us a single penny. The

accountant told us to go away. When I started feeling like they are cheating us, I left it. I got the trolley, and started earning through that for my children, and I left the work. I use the trolley to transport things like vegetables, etc. Now, the owner knows we don't work at the kilns, so they cannot approach us. They can't beat us up. We have a federation (of *vanvaasi* community members formerly engaged in bonded labour). We also have goats (provided by ROSA, to be used for livelihood support), medicines for our children. It has been two years now. We took our children to school one year ago." Besides the impact on their financial security, there has been a more valuable contribution to his awareness regarding labour rights and the avenues of redressal available to him. "I went to the DM's office (in 2017) to complain about the lack of cleanliness in our area. They (the kiln owner) came back to get us, they still bother us, (but) we told them we will not come. I was not aware (of bonded labour). When sir gave us the trolley, I found out about it. Now, I would like to drive a tempo, if we can get one (to increase their income)."

Champa Devi, who worked the same hours as her husband, and simultaneously also fulfilled household obligations such as cooking for the family or cleaning their hutment, found the work environment equally strenuous and exploitative. "I got married very young (around 16). Two years later, we went to the kiln. The owner came here to get us. I went by my own choice. I used to work from 4 AM to 8 PM, making bricks. We were fine with the work, but we started facing problems when they started giving us loans. We used to work for six months a year, and six months we would spend at home. When we would return home, we used to build houses for other people (as wage labourers). I preferred doing that more, because we used to get money everyday (daily wages), and we could buy ration. At the kiln, we got allowance once a week. We used to get vacations if someone in the family was getting married or if there was a festival, (otherwise) we worked seven days a week. We just earned there; there were no facilities. Unless we got our money from them, we couldn't leave." As a female labourer working at the kilns, her experience presents a different set of threats and injustices—"We would hear abuses when we went to defecate. If I was alone, I would feel afraid. We were told that if we did not work for them, we would not be allowed to defecate in their fields. We would not get the allowance we wanted. If we asked for ₹500, we would get ₹400. Can we feed a family in that much? I would cook only after the bricks were picked up—sometimes at 8 PM, sometimes 9PM. If both the man and woman would work (for the same amount of time), only the man would get paid the money (allowance) for both. The kids used to fall ill, and if we asked for money (for treatment), it was not given. They used to threaten us, saying 'If you don't work, we will put you inside the kiln.'"

Champa echoes the sentiment that acknowledging their exploitation is what ultimately led the family out of the kilns. "When we didn't know (about our rights), we worked at the kiln. Now that we know, we can get our dues from them. The difference is that now we can work for anyone and earn food, we don't have to work for six months at the kiln only. We went for meetings (organised by ROSA)—I've been to three or four. When we go to the meeting, we share our problems. I did not have information before (about bonded labour). At the meetings, we would discuss it. After we left the work, we feel fine."

The Human Liberty Network is an informal network of grassroots level organisations working towards reducing instances of modern slavery in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. ROSA, which works towards rescue and rehabilitation of bonded labourers across 5 districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh, is a partner organisation of the Human Liberty Network. It was through ROSA's intervention and conscientious efforts that Pradeep and his family were rescued from the kiln owner's home. They were mobilised through awareness via monthly meetings in the village, and provided financial support to distance themselves from bonded labour. Mr. Shivshankar Singh (Project Coordinator, ROSA) elaborates on the methodology that informs the sustainable impact created here, "Firstly, we work through tip offs, when we are given information regarding bonded labour in any area. We also have community meetings in each village, through which people can tell us if their relatives or neighbours are engaged in bonded labour. We held a community meeting in this village, which Pradeep attended. He asked how he could sustain himself, so we provided a trolley to him, for carrying goods. They had not been given wages for their work, so they held a peaceful protest at the DM's office. The owner had to pay ₹4000 to each of them. The organisation submitted an application for them to be provided facilities by the *gram panchayat* (village council). Pradeep has also submitted an application for a toilet to be constructed near his home. We also submitted an application for the malnutrition prevalent amongst children here—one of the malnourished kids was Pradeep's son. He was malnourished while he was working at the kiln. Pradeep was also a TB patient, which is common at brick kilns. There is no protection against the dust they inhale. They were not allowed to leave the kiln, they were constantly afraid that the owner would come and hurt them if they did not work, they would eat and defecate in the same premises. The administration has provided guidelines for facilities to be provided at the kilns. They were discriminated against—they would not even be allowed to sit with the owner. There has been psychological, physical and economic exploitation." In order to combat this exploitation, the Human Liberty Network aims to create a framework for grassroots level mobilisation, awareness and stakeholder advocacy. ROSA, as a partner organisation, has successfully established 56 Community Vigilance Committees cum Self Help Groups, 28 children groups (to benefit former and current child labourers, and kids vulnerable to child labour), as well as 15 remedial classes (to integrate and retain children from the backward communities into mainstream government schools) and 49 adolescent groups (to provide vocational training to young girls from marginalised communities) across 60 villages in the Azamgarh District since December 2015. So far, 76 families in the district have been liberated from bonded labour.

India is home to the largest number of 'modern slaves' in the world. According to the Global Slavery Index, more than 18 million people—or 1.4% of the country's population—are engaged in various forms of modern slavery, most working as bonded labourers. Labourers at brick kilns often migrate from remote regions, along with their families, and begin living and working at kilns under hazardous conditions. Even when the kiln owner employs only one person in the family, the entire family is inevitably involved in the work being conducted at the brick kiln. With poor access to healthcare, no social benefits, restricted access to avenues of

social security, no labour inspection protocols and no knowledge of labour laws; marginalised families are increasingly vulnerable to exploitation in informal workspaces. No norms of payment—minimum wage, equal wages or individual wages—are established or observed, leaving family units at the mercy of their employers in what qualifies as a modern interpretation of slavery and confinement. Grassroots NGOs partnering with the Human Liberty Network ensure that survivors of bonded labour and other forms of human trafficking are given necessary knowledge to access justice systems, supported in securing identification documents, alternative income sources, bank accounts, housing assistance and social benefits that they can avail through the relevant government schemes and programmes. Efforts towards sensitising local and national stakeholders are also being made by the Network to encourage robust investigation and better implementation of law and policies.

**\*Names and locations have been changed to ensure anonymity**