

Constrained Subjectivity: Narratives from Migrant Bonded Labourers in Bolangir, Odisha

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Abstract

The conceptual category of bonded labour has always attracted attention from scholars, who either term it a relic of the pre-capitalist mode of production or as one that perfectly coexists with the capitalist mode of production. Researches have focused their attention on the nature of the economy and the structural reasons responsible for the continuation of labour bondage. The questions of subjectivity and agency of bonded labourers are underemphasised in these accounts. The paper addresses this gap by examining the subjective experiences and perceptions of bonded labourers in all their contradictions. The analysis draws upon empirical evidence from interviews with brick-kiln workers in the district of Bolangir, Odisha. I argue that subjectivity is a vital arena that must be taken into account to understand the constrained and contradictory lifeworld of bonded labourers.

Introduction

“Thousands of unregistered bonded labourers go to work in brick kilns in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. They are like birds who fly from far away Siberia to the Chilika Lake. Some of them get killed by hunters, while many others simply vanish”
Dadan Rajya, Hota (2003).

These evocative lines draw our attention to the plight of bonded labourers in Odisha, known as *dadan* in the local parlance. The seasonal distress migration of labourers from Western Odisha to brick kilns in different parts of India has been the subject of stories, folklore, policy analyses, and academic debates. The story is no different in other parts of India. The continued prevalence of bonded labour in capitalist economies, including India, has generated debates among scholars (Brass 2008, 2011; Breman 2009; Das 2013; Srivastava 2009; Cresswell and De Neve 2013; Gurien 2013). In his chapter on Primitive Accumulation, Marx suggests

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that capitalism is characterised as freedom of labour in a dual sense: freedom from the means of production and freedom to sell labour power for a wage. In other words, free labour is one of the preconditions of a capitalist mode of production (Marx 1977). This analysis runs into problems when unfree labour is encountered in different parts of the world, in backward capitalist countries as well as advanced capitalist ones. If the brick kilns act as a space for unfree labour in countries such as India, the sweatshops and Seasonal Agricultural Workers Programmes (SAWP) act as spaces for unfree labour in countries such as US, Canada and many parts of Western Europe.

Even as feudal land relations and their constitutive labour regimes that were dependent on bonded labour have collapsed in backward capitalist economies, new forms of bondage have emerged that coexist with capitalist economies' free labour regimes. One such new form of bondage, called debt bondage by Breman (2009), is commonplace in countries of South Asia, including India. Debt bondage refers to a condition in which workers agree to work for the moneylender in exchange for money paid in advance. Debt bondage is a prime example of unfree labour and is prevalent predominantly in the brick kiln industry. In India, brick kilns have used the system of debt bondage to exploit workers by making them work under conditions whereby their options of entering and exiting the work contract are minimal.

In this paper, I focus on the migrant bonded labourers in the Bolangir district of Odisha, which is located in one of the poorest regions in Western Odisha. The districts of Bolangir, Koraput and Kalahandi are together known as the KBK region and considered one of the poorest regions in the world (Currie 2000; De Haan and Dubey 2005; Mishra 2016). The region is estimated to be sending migrants between 2 00 000–3 00 000 to different parts of India (Vijay and Sengupta 2015). While many migrants find work in construction and textiles, a substantial section of them migrates every year to the brick kilns in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. There is no dearth of literature on the working and living conditions of bonded labour. However, the existing literature focuses on the objective conditions in which bonded labourers work and live. In this paper, I examine the subjective aspects of the bonded labourers' lives and argue that it is essential to take into account workers' perceptions and worldviews apart from analysing the structural reasons responsible for the continuation of the bonded labour regime. This paper adds to the literature by talking about the subjective experience of the migrant bonded labourers working in brick kilns. An understanding of their subjective experiences and perceptions will help us understand the fragmented and contradictory lifeworlds of one of the most vulnerable subaltern groups in India.

The article is organised in the following way: In the first section, I examine the existing literature pertaining to debates on free and unfree labour and the regime of bonded labour that is intertwined with such discourses. In the second section, I outline the spatial context and the research methods used in the study. In the third section, the subjectivity of bonded

labourers is delineated by drawing on interviews. The fourth section examines attempts to collective action and provides a summary of the findings.

Free and Unfree Labour, Bondage and Capitalism

There is no dearth of literature on bonded labour as it is embedded in a region's larger socio-economic structures. The nature of free and unfree labour and its relation to capitalism is a highly contested theme. Brass (2006) insists that a fully functioning capitalism is very much compatible with unfree labour. Whenever it is in the economic or political interest of capital, it dispossesses the labour of its freedom. Brass argues that free labour is not a necessary condition for the functioning of capitalism, noting how advanced capitalist countries use unfree labour in various economic activities (Brass 2011, 50-51). Das (2013) offers a critique of this position by contending that a dialectic principle of quality and quantity must be applied to the role of unfree labour in capitalism. He further elaborates that unfree labour does not characterise the majority of the workforce in a country like India. Lerche (2007) opines that it is necessary to understand the social structures, place-based labour practices, and region-specific political economy to make sense of the persistence of bonded labour. Srivastava (2009) draws our attention to the high prevalence of bonded labour among migrant workers and in the informal sector of the economy. There is a consensus in the available literature that bonded labour relations are structurally linked with the rise of seasonal migration, the role of labour recruiters, and the high level of indebtedness and poverty (Breman & Guerin 2009; Srivastava 2009). Drawing upon the empirical experience of Tamil Nadu, Gurien (2009) notes that conditions of debt bondage are accompanied by delayed payment of wages, especially for migrant workers who work in rice fields and brick kilns. Wages are depressed in this work regime, and the most vulnerable sections of the society are affected the most for want of employment and livelihood opportunities (Mishra 2016).

Apart from brick kilns and rice fields, bonded labour also exists in sugarcane fields (Gurien 2013, 15), the diamond industry (Kapadia, 1995) and the weaving and textile industry (De Neve 2005). While migrant labourers have been freed from bondage in many of these sectors, bondage conditions are still being reproduced in the agro-industry and construction sectors. In a study based in rural Tamil Nadu, Gurien et al. (2013) show that brick making and sugarcane industries have emerged as the major spaces where labour bondage conditions are getting reproduced. In addition, these conditions perfectly align with the logic of capital, which is to depress wages and reproduce existing caste hierarchy by hiring the lower rungs of caste society. Breman (2009) terms debt bondage as neo bondage as it is solely profit-driven and not used to defend political status or guarantee a rent. Migration, and specifically seasonal migration, is a crucial element of neo-bondage. These forms of bondage exist through labour intermediaries or contractors and are often for a short period.

In contrast to the feudal forms of bondage that are tied with heredity and caste status, the new forms of bondage are constitutive of accumulation in a capitalist economy where labour is exploited for low wages. Extending the debates on bonded labour, Guerin (2013) opines that mere theoretical reflections provide only a limited understanding of bonded labour. Instead, the conditions of bondage must be understood in terms of a continuum of labour relations, as degrees of unfreedom vary greatly. Also, bonded labour should be examined in specific spatial and historical contexts as labour relations vary according to the broader socio-economic conditions at different places (Gurien 2013, 407).

While it is imperative to understand the structure of a labour regime, more often than not, its agential and subjective aspects are either missing or at best underemphasised in the literature. There are notable exceptions, however. In a study on women migrant workers in the Bolangir district, Agnihotri and Majumdar(2009) examined how women migrant workers, often hidden as a mere analytical category in the migration literature, negotiated with both migration and the conditions of bondage at home as well as at destination sites. The accounts provided in this study are more about how migrant workers become a part of the debt bondage system and its reproduction than about the multiple and ambivalent ways in which they view their own conditions. Similarly, Carswell and De Neve (2013) show the transformation of labour bondage and the change in former bonded labourers' status in the powerloom industry in Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu. The question of whether bonded labourers took an active part in this transformation is overlooked. Instead, the focus is on the changes in the economy of the powerloom industry and the changing caste dynamics that led to the transformation and ultimate demise of labour bondage. What is missing in these accounts is bonded labourers' subjective experiences and how they negotiate with labour bondage. In addition, everyday resistance and attempts at collective action are under-represented in studies on bonded labour. The current paper brings to focus the subjectivity of bonded labourers by highlighting how they negotiate with the conditions of labour bondage, their everyday resistance, and collective action. The condition of labour bondage provides a useful vantage point through which the question of subjectivity can be examined in all its complexity and contradictions even as this subjectivity is constrained. In this paper, I follow Coe and Jordhus-Lier's (2010) concept of "constrained agency" which refers to the limitations workers face while undertaking political action against capital. In our case, constrained subjectivity refers to the subjectivity of bonded labourers that is embedded in the material conditions in which they reproduce themselves. In the course of such reproduction, they also articulate views and present narratives that are not entirely controlled and determined by the conditions of debt bondage. However, the conditions of debt bondage also constrain the articulations of subjectivity of bonded labourers in a number of ways. We call this contradictory state of subjectivity as constrained subjectivity which is both limited by materials conditions while trying to articulate narratives and views not completely determined by those conditions.

Spatial Context and Methodology

The bonded labour system primarily exists in one of the world's poorest regions—the KBK region. People from this region have been historically migrating to different parts of India, including Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu. The early phase of outmigration from the Bolangir district began in the 1960s and 70s when many workers migrated to different parts of Raipur in Chhattisgarh mainly to escape caste-based oppression. Bolangir, along with the other two districts, is drought-prone and home to some of the most vulnerable sections of the society, belonging mostly to Dalit, *adivasi* and OBC categories. The migration pattern is seasonal, with labourers migrating to brick kilns for more than six months under distress conditions. In addition, most of these migrations are family migrations. The migrants are recruited against monetary advances by local labour contractors, known as *Sardars*, who traffick them to far off places in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Seasonal migration has become a coping mechanism for the labouring poor to deal with the social and economic distress existing in these parts of Odisha. There are three constitutive elements of the debt bondage system in Western Odisha. First, taking advance money limits the choices of bonded labourers. Not honouring the contract invariably results in violence against the person who had taken the money and his family members. Second, the wages to be paid are not specified and are given once a week. Third, seasonal migration is distress-driven; in the absence of employment and livelihood opportunities, labourers are forced to surrender to debt bondage (Mishra 2016, 285).

The empirical data used in this study are based on select responses from twenty-six semi-structured interviews that were conducted between July and August 2018 and in October 2019. The respondents comprised seventeen labourers, five labour rights activists, three trade union representatives, and one labour lawyer. I used the method of snowball sampling (Morse and Niehaus 2009, 65) helped me secure interviews with workers. The interviews were conducted in the villages of Tureikela, Kantabanji, Kapsapali and Khaprakhol in Bolangir district.

Constrained Subjectivity

In this section, I analyse several distinct aspects of the subjectivity of bonded labourers. Because of space constraints, I will only highlight the most significant findings and these will be illustrated through select quotes from interviewees. Attention is given to the various ways bonded labourers make sense of their poverty, their hopes and despair, the ethical questions inherent in their situation, and their everyday resistance.

Incurring Debt

While most of those migrating to work in brick kilns are from the Dalit and tribal communities, some also belong to the OBC category. Low agricultural productivity, crop failure, and drought are the main reasons for outmigration in the region (Mishra 2016; Vijay 2015). In addition, distress individual/family migration to the brick kilns also occurs because of two reasons. First, those who have land, mainly small farmers, borrow money from the *Sardars* to cultivate it. In the event of crop failure and lower productivity, many of these farmers incur debt to sustain themselves, given the absence of employment opportunities in the region. Second, migrants also fall into debt due to a wedding in the family or due to healthcare expenses, which force them to go to the *Sardars* for advance money, and eventually take the route to the brick kilns to repay the loan. The migration process starts during the *Nuakhai* festival, months before the actual migration occurs in September and October. Usually, the advance is given to a household group known as a *pathuria*, comprising of a man, wife, and young children. The amount ranges from Rs 8000-10000 per person. The advance varies from year to year and from family to family. Apart from cultivating their land, the labourers used the advance for paying off old debts, fulfilling social obligations like marriages and the construction/repairing of houses. Rarely is the advance money spent on productive assets like buying land or bullocks or agriculture-related implements (Mishra 2016, 278–83).

Having incurred debt, labourers are both forced and feel obligated to migrate to the brick kilns. Before taking debt, the labourers are aware that once they accept the money, they would be forced to migrate for work. However, this knowledge does little to stop them from accepting the money. For Sudama Majhi, participating in the nine-days-long *Nuakhai* festival in July is important, so he borrowed money from the *Sardar* in order to buy new clothes for himself and his family of six, eat non-vegetarian food and buy alcohol. He says:

“ ... Nuakhai parva [festival] comes once a year. How can we not celebrate this festival? My family was looking forward to this festival since we returned from the brick kilns. This is the only time in the year when we get to buy new clothes, and celebrate with friends and families. The celebration is incomplete without non-vegetarian food and alcohol. I could not save anything from work in the kiln last year, so I had to go to the Sardar to ask for money. Muna [Sardar's name] is the only one who gives us money in the village ... the owner was not good [where they worked previously] but how can I say no to Muna bhai? I will go with my family wherever he sends us.”

Two distinct positions emerge from the above account: the significance of a festival in the bonded labourer's life and the feeling of obligation to the *Sardar*. While the celebration of festivals is a common practice in working-class lives (Chandavarkar 1996; Chakravarty 1989; Gooptu 200), its importance increases manifold for labourers who work under conditions of debt bondage. Celebrations help misery more bearable for these workers, and Sudama

was not alone in making this point. Rama, a labourer who had worked in a kiln near Vishakhapatnam, says, “this is the only time we feel good and meet all our relatives and friends. We drink together and dance. Before our journey to the kilns begins, we want to enjoy life ... all this [happiness] will be over when we reach the kilns.” Feeling obligated to the *Sardar* for the advance money is not uncommon among labourers even though they are aware that would be forced to work for less in the kilns. Rama continues:

“I had borrowed 40,000 rupees from a Sardar last year, and in order to repay the debt, I along with my family of four had to go to a brick kiln in this village ... I do not remember the name ... it is in the Ranga Reddy district [situated in Telangana]. The owner always abused my family and me and paid me less money [he could not recollect the approximate amount] but what could I have done? I had given my word [to the Sardar] that I would complete my work in the kiln before going back...”

Borrowing money to celebrate festivals even in conditions of abject poverty, and “giving the word” to a *Sardar* who does not miss an opportunity to exploit labourers, may seem irrational acts but such actions and thoughts reflect the deep contradictions in the material lives of these labourers. However, not all labourers face a moral dilemma—one they might or might not be conscious of—concerning debt. There is a clear recognition that accepting advances means going to the brick kilns, and here they neither invoke the benevolence of the moneylender nor talk about their “promise” to the *Sardar*. In the words of Lala Majhi:

“I wanted to build my house, and for that I needed a lot of money. Nobody gave us money, so I went to the Sardar in my village who gave me money but in return asked me to work for him in a kiln somewhere. I did not have any options as I had to build this house. Had I run away to some place to work after accepting the money, his men would have beaten me or killed me. What could I have done? I had to go...”

The ambivalence present in Sudama and Rama’s responses was not seen in Lala Majhi’s response regarding the *Sardar*. The conditions of bondage were intimately tied with debt and violence in the case of Lala Majhi. Some labourers prefer incurring debt and working in the brick kilns to working in the fields of farmers with large landholdings where productivity depends on how good the monsoon is. Migrant workers prefer regular employment opportunities to stay back in the villages. The 100-days rural employment scheme Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the distribution of subsidised provisions through the Public Distribution System (PDS) have not succeeded in stopping outmigration. Most of the workers migrate to repay the debt. Migration to brick kilns is the less preferred option and given a chance, they would work in other sectors, but the debt bondage forces them to seek work in the exploitative and oppressive brick kilns.

Migrating to the Brick Kilns

Outmigration in the region is not confined to the brick kilns: labourers also look for work in the construction sector in metropolitan cities such as Hyderabad, Bengaluru, and Chennai and cities with textile industries such as Surat and Tirupur. While the young migrant prefers this to work in the kilns, brick kilns have served as the only destination for older migrants. Years of drought, absence of work throughout the year, and difficulty getting loans through institutional means have forced labourers in the region to fall back on intermediaries or *Sardars*. Furthermore, the established and elaborate networks between the *Sardars* and the brick-kiln owners have ensured a more stable migration route to the kilns.

The migrants start their journey to the brick kilns after September and come back in the second or third week of June at the onset of the rainy season. However, some of these migrants work as loaders and start late, in December, and stay in the kilns until July. They come back to do some work in the agriculture field. Some of the labourers have small patches of land which they rent out for sharecropping. Most of the time, seasonal migration involves family migration, and they even take their pregnant wives along with them. The preparation for migration begins right after the Nuakhai festival in August. Entire families migrate, including older parents and younger children, though sometimes children are left with the older parents, and only the husband and wife migrate. There is much variation, but the usual pattern is that the entire family migrates, including younger children. When asked why they take their young children along with them, Dhanei Majhi from Tureikela village said:

“My husband borrowed money from the sahuakar [moneylender] for treating me in the hospital in Bolangir. It was a lot of money which we could not have paid back had we stayed in the village ... when they give money to us, they count the number of members we have in our family and give money accordingly. If we do not take our children along, how can we repay the entire amount? We need more people from our family¹ to work in the kilns ... jete hatha, sete paisa (more hands, more money)...”

The inability to pay back the debt forces the migrants to take their families along as it ensures that more members will work to repay the debt. This is a practical consideration on the part of the migrant labourers regardless of their awareness of the kilns' working conditions. Dolamani says, “I wanted my children to go to Surat for work but what could I have done? My wife and I cannot make enough bricks to repay the debt of the *Sardar*, so we take our children along.”

The Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 makes it mandatory for labourers to register in the Panchayat office before migrating to the destination areas. However, bonded migrants deliberately avoid doing so in order not to attract hostile attention from the *Sardars*. Registration will mean giving the details of intermediaries, employers at the destination, the duration of work, etc., which could expose the criminal networks established in the region for long. It also jeopardises the labourers' chances of getting advance money in the future. Escaping the legal framework is a reasonable choice for workers who risk their own and their families' well-being for easy access to debt in the future. Danaki Majhi says:

“We will be loyal to those who give us money ... why should we give all the details of people who give us work, give us money. There must be a reason why they do not want [us] to register before leaving as they know better. The government or the unions [in the region] do not come to our rescue when we need money, why should we listen to them ... yes, sometimes dadans get beaten but not all of these people are bad. Some of them are good ... they give us money.”

The unions operating in the region lament the fact that labourers do not register before leaving. They do not leave any information about which kilns they go to or who the intermediary is who gives them advance money. Trilochan Punji, a labour organiser with the *Shramik Adhikar Manch* (SAM) says that registrations with the Panchayat are the only way they can establish the migration route and the identities of the intermediaries and brick-kiln owners. Without this information, they are severely handicapped in their union activities. Sometimes the migrants leave the village in the middle of the night so that no one knows or gets to ask about their destinations. In the absence of any official record, it becomes difficult to fix responsibility and rescue workers from the kilns when a labourer goes missing or is beaten up by the brick-kiln owner or the *Sardar*.²

Usually, the migrants are not aware of their destinations beforehand. The verbal contract of the *Sardars*, made at the time of advancing money, does not indicate which brick kiln the labourers will migrate. The labourers come to know about their destination just a few days before starting the journey. Most of the workers board the train at Kantabanji and Khariar Road railways stations. In connivance with the local police and railway officials, the intermediaries' agents make the labourers board overcrowded unreserved coaches. Before boarding the train, the labourers are promised food and expenses for the journey. However, once the labourers board the train, they are not looked after by the agents or their men. The agents of either the *Sardars* or the brick-kiln owners maintain surveillance on the train not to let any labourer run away. The perilous journey is also marred by organised extortionists demanding money from the labourers at specific railways stations like Rayagada, Bobili, and Visakhapatnam.³ Labourers have corroborated such instances. In the words of Dina Majhi:

“We are treated like animals throughout the journey ... they put so many people in the train that we cannot even breathe. Before I left my village with my family, I was told that I would get food and some money till I reach the kilns. But the agent who gave us tickets did not give us either food or money. I had very less money, so my wife and I remained hungry to buy food for children.”

Deba Sabara adds, “We are abused, slapped for small mistakes in the train. On top of this, *gundas* (goons) ask for money at different stations. We already have so less money, what can we give them. They beat us if we do not.” The perilous journey to the kilns adds to the precarity of the already vulnerable workers.

Unsafe and Violent Workplace

Upon reaching the railway stations, the labourers are taken to different brick kilns by their agents. Most of these kilns operate illegally, without the license; hence, the owners keep a strict vigil on labourers. Once they reach the brick kilns, unwillingness to work no longer remains an option. The gruelling work schedule involves working for 12-16 hours a day without any payment for overtime work. The migrant labourers, along with their family, live inside the compound of the kilns where women workers do both brick-making work and domestic work. Labourers work without any protective gear and enjoy none of the benefits that informal workers are entitled to. Accidents are common in these kilns.

Labourers live in small homesteads without any of the necessary facilities. The women workers face regular sexual harassment by the supervisors and kiln owners (Agnihotri and Majumdar 2009). Because of the punishing work schedule, labourers do not get the time to interact with other labourers from the same kilns or nearby kilns. The only time these workers talk among themselves is during work or during trips to the weekly markets where they go to buy vegetables and groceries. However, even while shopping in the weekly markets, the labourers are kept under surveillance for fear that they could contact or be contacted by labour organisations and human rights organisations. The weekly wages that the labourers get are well below the daily-wage rate fixed by the respective state governments. The workers are exhausted by the end of the migration season. It has severe negative impacts on their health.

A common refrain among workers is that life in these kilns is degrading, and if they had any other option, they would not have come to the brick kilns to work. Violence is the most ubiquitous feature of these kilns, and no one is spared from this violence, not even women and children. Tamia Suna narrates an incident in a kiln in Andhra Pradesh:

“One day I was not feeling well. I had been down with fever for three days but was still working. Not working was not an option for me. On the fourth day, I could not do it and requested the supervisor to give me a leave for one day. He got angry and told me that if he gives me leave, then all other workers will ask for leave and no one will work ... become lazy. I was scared but could not still work. He came to my room and started abusing my wife and me. When I resisted, he started kicking me in my stomach. He also slapped my wife and my six-year-old son. I was helpless and was only praying to God. We are not humans, we are just dadans...”

There are many such instances of the violence that bonded labourers go through in the kilns. The despair they carry right from the beginning of the journey reaches its culminating point at the brutal kilns. The conditions of debt bondage force these labourers to keep slogging in these brick kilns year after year without any end in sight.

Everyday Resistance

Resistance by bonded labourers to the power structures, which in our case involves a network comprising the *Sardar*, recruitment agents, brick kiln owners, and the local-level bureaucracy, seems impossible under the given circumstances. However, as theorists of everyday resistance have shown us, resistance can take many forms. Not all of these forms aim to transform the power structure; some work with the modest aim of making life a little more livable. The practices of everyday resistance manifest in many ways, such as taking the advance and running away to a different place of work, making less number of bricks, gossiping behind the back of the kiln supervisor, and running away from the kiln at opportune moments.

While giving an account of his life in a brick kiln in the Ranga Reddy district, a labourer says:

“... Once the supervisor abused us by using our lower caste status and said that we are destined to die in the kilns. There were twenty-five workers in that kiln, but only some of us got angry. Many said we cannot do anything and may be the supervisor is right! But I was very angry; I abused him behind his back. I shared this news with other workers how the supervisor was slapped by the brick kiln owner once ... we had a good laugh ... this man [the supervisor], he is a dog of the owner, how dare he abuse us...”

Deriving such psychological consolation is a common feature of many acts of everyday resistance. In another instance, Daria Suna, who had borrowed 20,000 rupees from a *Sardar* during the Nuakhai festival, had agreed to go to a kiln in Andhra Pradesh. However, just before making the journey to the kiln, he bought a ticket to Surat and ran away with the money. He took his wife and a four-year-old son with him. This story was narrated by an activist as follows:

“... It is not that the workers are always right ... for instance, Daria Suna who lived in a small village near Patnagarh did not honour his contract with the Sardar and ran away with his money to Surat. How can we say that this criminal act is right? If you have taken money, you have to go. There is no point in complaining that the Sardar beat us and abused us if they did not do what was right. After all, it is also their hard-earned money ... he is not alone. Many other people do the same thing. How can we save them, if they act criminally...”

The impression that labourers run away with the money came up often during conversations with workers and activists. Ironically, not much was revealed as to what happened to such labourers once they came back home. Interestingly, ethical considerations of the “good” and the “bad” are embedded even in the oppressive conditions of debt bondage. Madhu Sahu makes this point clear in no uncertain terms when he says:

“... there was a dadan in my village who did this [ran away with money]. The Sardar came looking for him and beat his brother, who did not know this ... such behaviour is not good. Who is going to give us money and work if people behave like this? This is not right ... God will not forgive us...”

The presence of phones in migrant workers’ hands has changed the situation somewhat, but technology only works under the constraints imposed by existing social relations. Labourers make videos and take photographs of their kilns and send it to their friends or any organisation they are aware of. It helps in carrying out rescue operations. However, these acts may inform the rescue team but achieve nothing beyond that. Once they go back to the village, they are held accountable by the *Sardar*, who had given them the advance.

Collective Action: the Case of Shramik Adhikar Manch (SAM)

Organising informal workers has been an uphill battle for trade unions in India (Aggarwala 2013). The difficulties increase manifold when it comes to organising brick-kiln workers. The migratory status, the scattered nature of brick kilns, the multiple layers of recruitment agents, *Sardars* and owners, make it difficult for labour organisers and trade unions to organise migrant bonded labourers. While central trade unions are mostly concentrated in the formal sector, several local and place-based unions have been trying to organise bonded labourers in Bolangir. The *Shramik Adhikar Manch* (SAM) is a prominent union formed to register migrant bonded labourers at the Panchayat level. At the source area, a committee has been formed to raise the issue of bonded labour. The committee is known as the Solidarity Committee for Brick-kiln Workers.

The SAM is working on developing a labour-recruitment model based on the well-known Mathadi Act of Maharashtra, in which the recruitment of workers is mediated through a tripartite board involving employers, workers and the labour department in the concerned states. The initiative intends to replace the current mode of work with a system whereby the advance amount is gradually reduced and eliminated while the workers are paid regular wages as stipulated by the Minimum Wages Act. It seeks to bring employers in direct contact with the workers, doing away with the exploitative layer of intermediaries. A key hypothesis of the initiative is that workers will be willing to engage in the work without a huge advance and the mediation of *Sardars*. Meetings have been organised to bring the workers and employers together in the presence of the labour department. This is a move towards introducing the ILO-mandated decent work in the brick-kiln industries. The SAM also makes appeals to the administration to ensure safe migration of the bonded labourers and runs awareness programmes for the workers regarding the rights they are entitled to.

There have been instances where bonded migrant labourers have become organised. In the Dundigal area near Hyderabad, bonded labourers joined hands with the local rescue teams of the SAM and other human rights organisations and raised a demand for minimum wages in the year 2011-12. The struggle continued in 2013, with public meetings being organised to demand minimum wages. It led to a violent reprisal from the brick-kiln owners on activists investigating a complaint at a brick kiln in the Thukuguda Mandal of Ranga Reddy district. However, the struggle was successful, and the bonded labourers were paid minimum wages that year in the Dundigal cluster. Such success stories are, however, seldom repeated in these clusters.⁴

The association of migrant bonded labourers with the SAM is conflict-ridden. In the source areas, labourers participate in union activities, protests and demonstrations but refuse to register with the organisation or even with the Panchayat office. They do not divulge information about the *Sardar* they get money from. However, if they face difficulties in the brick kiln or face violence and abuse from the kiln owners or supervisors, they contact the members of SAM in Bolangir or the rescue team in the destination areas. This creates a classic dilemma of collective action for the organisers and hinders any attempt at sustained unionisation activities among the migrant bonded labourers. This position was justified by a labourer when he says, “We go to the unions when we need them ... we cannot do everything they ask us to do. We definitely cannot register with them before going away for work. If we do that, the *Sardar* will get angry.” Upon asked when and why they contact the union, Tiki Sabara said, “Contacting the union is only a matter of the last resort. We reach out to them only when life and work become unbearable in the kilns, only when the supervisors and owners become very violent.” Labourers choose their path of struggle and resistance in a manner that appears rational to them, but such behaviour and actions go against their interests when examined objectively.

Conclusion

The analysis of the subjectivity of bonded labourers reveals several important aspects of the perceptions, lifeworlds, and decision-making of bonded labourers. First, any analysis of migrant bonded labour will be far removed from the ground realities if it does not take into account the subjectivity of labourers. Accounting for this subjectivity draws attention towards a limited sense of autonomy the bonded labourers inhabit. Second, migrant labourers undertake actions based on what they perceive to be in their best interests, even though sometimes it means losing sight of their long-term class interests. This clearly manifests in the decisions they take – from incurring debt to engaging in individual everyday resistance or collective actions. Third, a consistent theme emerging from the interviews is that ethical considerations play an important role in labourers' choices and decisions. These considerations emphasise on morality and are reflected, for instance, in the commitment given to moneylenders despite being exploited and oppressed by them. However, the ethical considerations have a rational basis: the fear that not honouring the contract might result in a loss of advance money and a possible loss of work in the future. In this case, material constraints condition ethical considerations.⁵ The literature on the nature of labour regimes and debt bondage, and the debates on free and unfree labour in capitalism, must also pay attention to the subjectivity of bonded labourers in order to understand the contradictory world these migrant labourers inhabit. Such an understanding will help in forging common strategies for the abolition of bonded labour, which has rightly been termed as modern slavery. Having an understanding of this subjectivity will also help labour organisers and trade unions in formulating a strategy to organise bonded labourers while keeping in mind the material dilemmas they face in partaking collective actions.

Notes

1. Having more employable people in the family was preferred by bonded labourers, including female labourers. The generational divide among women might produce a more complicated picture about having more children. The present study did not examine this aspect of women labourer's subjectivity. The subject demands a treatment of its own in future research.
2. Interview with Trilochan Punji on 13 October 2019
3. Interview with Golap Niala on 31 July 2018; telephonic interview with Susant Panigrahy on 30 March 2020
4. Interview with Trilochan Punji, Golap Niala, Vishnu P Sharma on 5 August 2018

5. The interactions between reason and rationality and between popular culture and consciousness of the subordinate classes have generated debates in Indian historiography. For instance, Pandian (1990) brings out the ambiguities and heterogeneities in what is popularly perceived as rational (read modern) and religious and popular (read traditional), while highlighting their contradictory elements.

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