

Debt Bondage: A Sociological Study of Brick kiln Workers in Badhaber, Peshawar, Pakistan

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Abstract

The research paper investigates different facets around the problem of debt bondage at brick kilns in the vicinity of Peshawar. A sample size of 40 respondents was interviewed under simple random sampling in village Badhaber, a peripheral area of Peshawar. The study mainly focused on the nature of work, socio-economic causes and effects of bonded labor. The major findings reveal that work at brick kilns was hard, detrimental to human health and duration was more than internationally defined limit. Major causes encompassed illiteracy, faction and feuds in the past and low economic position. The impacts of debt bondage were observed in the form of lack of social contacts with relatives/friends, no mobility in social status, no progressive form of marriage like exogamy, no improved economic status, no access to health and some had diseases, and bitter socialization and education of children. The study recommends that the Government of Pakistan needs to take concrete step towards implementing 1992 Act, which is about the abolition of bonded labor system, to ensure stopping this inhuman practice.

Key words: Bonded labor at brick kilns, socio-economic causes and impacts, worst health

Introduction

The United Nations has defined debt bondage as “ the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services are not respectively limited and defined (ILO, 1993). The human bondage has been in different guises at different times in most of the countries across the world. In Pakistan, debt-bondage or bonded labor is known as Peshgi (advance) system. The United Nations has defined it a kind of

on bonded labor indicates its prevalence still at a great extent both in developed and developing countries. The bondage contract is normally indentured and in unwritten form, binding the workers in the worst form of earning. They are usually adult being compensated with little size of amount as loan for their services in advance by their employers or labor contractors. The nature of debt bondage appears in variable situations: from less severe and short span to severe and long-term. This inhuman contract does not allow them to do work somewhere else and usually the agreement also includes the services of their family members to pay off the loan in short time. Members other than direct victims such as women and children are put to work for low or no wages to repay the bonded debt (Hamid et al., 2008). The theory of Rousseau entitled ‘Social Contract’ also presumes that “man is born free and everywhere he is in chains” (Akhtar, H., Aslam, C., 1994).

Karl Marx has observed human servitude having its roots to feudal economy breeding socio-economic exploitation of slaves (Khalid, 1992). According to Karl Marx, Masters regarded slaves as their property and exploited them at maximum (Abraham, 1990). Ancient societies adversely usurped the act of slavery expanding the spell of bondage victimization to the succeeding generation, which was totally in contradiction to the charter of moral fabric, human values and human rights (Heady, 1966). Bonded debtors do not have access to basic needs and rights such as food, cloth, shelter, health and education etc. (Sharma, 1999). They are vulnerable to hazardous health, ignorance, no social contacts, bitter socialization of children and no ambition for tomorrow (SPARC, 2006).

As mentioned in the preceding lines, the practice of bonding the services of financially crippled people is still in progress without any sign of stoppage. Though the international law has outlawed it but its compliance to hinder this inhuman practice is still invisible. Data on bonded labor throughout the world cannot be relied as the concerned quarters have failed to give the exact figures and statistics on it. However, the International Labor Organization (ILO) in a report (1993) has approximated 12.3 million people

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as trapped in debt bondage whereas other sources have contradicted this data and have rather given an estimation of 27million people, with an abundance of examples from widely stratified societies of South Asian countries like India, Pakistan and Nepal. HRCP (2007) has mentioned 1.7 millions bonded laborers working at different workplaces in Pakistan. NCABL (2009) has based the research study of Bonded Labor Research Forum conducted in 2004 that there are more than 5,000 brick kilns (locally known as Bhatta Hasht) in Pakistan and 70,000 bonded laborers are working in these brick kilns.

In Pakistan, bonded labor can be seen in agriculture, brick kilns, carpet weaving, shoe making, fisheries, power looms, stone crushing and industrial units etc. (ILAB-Pakistan, 2009). Within Pakistan bonded labor is mainly observed at brick kilns in rural Sind and some parts of the Frontier province in spite of banishment under Article II (1&2) of 1973 constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan and Factories Act 1994 (Samra and Jilani, 1997). The Government of Pakistan has banned the practice of bonded labor through an Act in 1992, in the light of the Supreme Court's judgment, abolishing the bonded labor system in the country as well as extinguishing the outstanding against the victims (GoP, 1992). The present study has focused on the nature of bonded labor, responsible socio-economic causes and various impacts on their lives. The study also puts forward suggestions for the elimination/minimization of the problem.

Materials and Methods

Badhber village is situated on the Indus Highway at the distance of 7 KM from Peshawar on its south direction, on the north by Kaga Wala, on the West by Mashogagar, Shalman Khel and Sheikh Muhammadi, and on the East it is connected to Sorizai. It has two union councils: Mariam zai and Badhaber Hurizai. Badhber was selected for the study following the existence of a high number of brick kilns and prevalence of bonded labor there. The total brick kilns were 20 and almost all had the bonded debtors. A sample size of 40 respondents including 10 women was interviewed with the representation of two respondents from every brick kiln through simple random sampling. This sample size was sufficient enough for drawing out conclusion as a sample size not less than 30 and up to 500 hundred is considered the most appropriate and exact reference (Sekaran, 2003). Data were gathered through interview schedule, a well thought out tool encompassing all the vital aspects of the study.

Results and Discussion

Gender based Distribution of Sampled Respondents on Marital, Educational and Family Status

Table1 shows that the sampled respondents included 25% women who also rendered the bonded services at brick kilns. Such working women were not separately paid inspite of the hazardous nature of work apart from their domestic activities. They worked for more than eight hours and the nature of work was very much harsh particularly in the sizzling heat of summer weather. It was a negation to the labor law devised in the light of (ILO, 1993). They did not receive anything extra either in the form of overtime or as a tip of kindness from the creditors. They were denied access to facilities like health and children's education. Majority of the advance recipients (72%) were married and had a reasonable number of dependent members. It generated a constraintful situation for bonded people, as they were not only to feed themselves but also to fulfill their children's requirements. The physical and ecological characteristics of the target area did not support them to look for some other alternate earning sources and going into such hazardous contracts was the only option with them. Moreover, their illiterate status did not let them lit the candle of bright future because most of sampled respondents (70%) were illiterate. Majority (62%) had nuclear families with lower number of earning hands.

Influencing Factors Behind Bonded Labor

There are various socio-economic reasons behind entering into such inhuman contract and Table 3 presents the important ones. A considerable number (37%) mentioned their previous familial enmity in the area as a responsible reason behind their existing status. It is a fact that the rural areas were previously ruined by the personal or familial homicide, and now the growing trend towards education is on the route to dismantle such ugly pictures of society. Majority of respondents mentioning this reason have shun their differences in the light of conciliatory efforts of Jirga (elderly people of locality). However, the adverse effects of their tense relations in the past cannot be set aside and their present position as bonded debtors is the resultant phenomenon. It is true that frequency of factions and feuds has started mitigating in the area but decrease in bondage contracts does not seem at the same pace. Table 3 further indicates the non-cooperative role of close relatives or friends, as they did not prove contributory in extending financial assistance to their families. Pukhtunwali (Codes of life of Pukhtun) has the component of multi-faceted cooperation by the relatives and even close friends in rainy days, and incompatible attitude to it follows a silent criticism in community. Given such local tradition the bonded people are justified to have this

kind of annoyance of their relatives/friends but some times they are themselves not sound economically to cooperate with them in terms of finances or they do not have the spirited relations with one another. All respondents (100%) thought critical economic position as a pushing cause behind their debtors' status and Table 2 indicates that majority of them (60%) had a meager amount of Rs. 5, 000 as monthly income coming out from the bonded debt. The present study clarifies that economic phenomenon is not the only reason but one of the major reasons pushing the people to enter the bondage. This could be in contrary to the Marxian view quoted by (Akhtar et al., 1994) that economic condition is the solitary reason behind any kind of dialectical relation at workplace. The local habitat was also not conducive to provide them with labor activity in view of no remarkable agricultural land, no trade opportunities or industrial units, which could accommodate them at respectable position. All respondents had such feeling.

Socio-Economic Impacts of Bonded Labor

The practice of bonded labor has greatly affected the socio-economic life of people undergoing the rigid terms of bondage. Table 4 shows that mostly the respondents (93%) and their adult children (92%) practiced endogamy, a traditional and conservative form of marriage. Bio-medically the practice of endogamous marriage is not appreciated, as it is a carrier of inherited qualities and hereditary diseases from generation to generation. Besides it confines people to an already existing circuit of relation, not furnishing them opportunities to spring up from the status quo. On the other hand, it delimits the choice in mate selection and does not encourage marriage with spouses of superior status, which could mobilize their family status as well. The prevalence of endogamy among them followed many reasons including critical economic position, illiterate status and low prestigious position in locale. "One respondent wept out and told that how he could meet the requirements of dower (Haq-e-Mahar) and dowry (Jahez) when he is in the vicious circle of poverty." Same was the feeling of others. In such circumstances it was not a bad decision because unsuited/mismatched marriages have mostly proven unsuccessful.

Table 4 further indicates the worst state of respondents' children's education, figuring out 83% of them to have remained deprived of education. The parents referred to the worst form of their economic status as a hindrance in the way of children's education. However, a little number of laborers has started sending their children to educational institutions now. This positive gesture has appeared because the provincial government has made primary

level education free by providing textbooks, notebooks and little educational stipends to students at government schools, irrespective of financial status of their families. The other reason behind non-schooling of children was the absence of literacy culture in the coal-sustained environment of brick kilns where they have opened their eyes. Rather the terms and conditions of bondage contract required them to participate as workers in the hazardous work and so their tiny mind was exposed to the modern slavery in the shape of debt bondage. It becomes clear that the ignorance of children is further reinforcing the prevalence of human bondage, and such situation looks forward to the government and civil society to pay heed toward this crucial problem. Sharma (1999) has also pointed out in his study the denial of access of children to educational institutions as a major reason of entering into the bondage contract.

Social contacts of bonded people with friends/relatives outside brick kilns were almost non-existent. Table 4 reflects negation of social contacts by 77% sample respondents. This situation indicates that there was a greater deal of social exploitation on the part of creditors who put them only to work and work, and did not provide them with opportunity to keep intact their relations with relatives and friends outside the kilns. They had a sort of robot life not meeting the requirements of human personality. Human personality is the total sum of social interaction, and even the Aristotelian philosophy regarding man to be social animal is mainly sustaining on the social proximity averting numerous mental worries. Abraham (1990) has also pointed out social alienation of workers and considered it a form of exploitation of the working class as presented by Karl Marx. He has further observed that in such situation a worker sinks into work and gets detached from the social world.

The sampled respondents failed to have economic assets in the area as the debt bondage covered the services of affected families' members also. A big majority i.e. 87 % of respondents admitted that the compensation for bondage contract was meager that could not suffice their needs and requirements. It was observed that a considerable number of respondents did not have their owned houses; they were living in the houses of contractors and jumping out of their shuttle was looking impossible; and generation-to-generation continuity of bondage life was apparent on the disappointed faces of the affectees. Besides, all respondents had miserable living standard with no opportunity to improve life style; they did not educate and socialize their children; and they did not facilitate their children as well as materialize their other ambitions/wishes etc.

The continuous work and unhygienic environment of brick kilns have created many diseases to workers and their family members. Majority of the respondents (65%) were suffering from various diseases like diabetes, tuberculosis, hepatitis, asthma and developed frequently some acute disease like fever, cold, cough and flue. The creditors did not provide any health facility in case of both acute and chronic diseases, rather they managed themselves approaching doctors and purchasing medicines on rare occasions. At brick kilns, no safety steps for bonded laborers were seen. The findings of the study carried out by (Sharma, 1999) are also in consonance to the findings of the present study, indicating no accessibility of workers to health facility and vulnerability to different diseases of bonded laborers at workplaces.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The data reveal that the debt bondage included the services of bonded amount recipient people as well as of their children and women. They did hazardous work and failed to have an easy access to basic needs

and rights. The major reasons behind entering the inhuman bondage contracts included the illiteracy, critical economic condition, scarcity of agricultural land, non-availability of industrial units, and personal/familial enmity in the past and no other alternate earning source.

The bondage adversely affected the lives of bonded people by not encouraging children’s better socialization and education, social contacts with relatives/friends, social mobility in their status, social change in their life patterns, movement from endogamy to exogamy, improving economic position through other earning activities and access to health facility. The study recommends the strict implementation of 1992 Act regarding the abolition of bonded labor system in Pakistan and infliction of penalty on those violating the said Act. Social security scheme under the charter of International Labor Organization (ILO), ratified by the Government of Pakistan, needs to come into effect at brick kilns also.

Table 1. Gender Based Distribution of Sampled Respondents on Marital, Education and Family Status

Respondents		Marital Status		Education				Family Pattern		
Gender	No	a	B	c	d	E	F	G	h	i
Male	30	22	08	18	10	01	01	10	03	17
Female	10	07	03	10	-	-	-	-	02	08
Total	40	29 (72%)	11	28 (70%)	10	01	01	10	05	25 (62%)

Source: Field Survey, 2009

Denotations: a. Married b. Single c. Illiteracy
 d. Primary e. Middle f. Matric
 g. Joint Family h. Extended Family i. Nuclear Family

Table 2. Monthly Income, And Earning and Dependant Members

Status of Family Members						Monthly Income			
Earning Members	No	%	Dependent Members	No	%	a	B	c	d
1-2	18	45	1-2	16	40	16	2	1	-
3-4	12	30	3-4	10	25	8	3	1	1
5-6	7	17.5	5-6	08	20	-	3	1	2
Above 6	3	7.5	Above 6	06	15	-	-	1	1
Total	40	100	Total	40	100	24 (60%)	08 (20%)	4 (10%)	4 (10%)

Denotation: A: below Rs. 5, 000 B: Rs. 5,000-10,000 C: Rs.10, 000-15,000 D: Above Rs. 15,000

Table 3. Influencing Factors behind Bonded Labor

Causes	Yes	% age	No	% age
Conflict n=40	15	37	25	63
Non-Cooperative Attitude of Relatives n=40	23	57	17	43
Critical Economic Status n=40	40	100	-	-
No other Income Source n=40	35	87	05	13

Table 4.: Socio-Economic Impacts of Bonded Labor

Socio-Economic impact	Yes	% age	No	% age
Endogamy Practiced n=29	27	93	02	07
Endogamy by Children n=12	11	92	01	08
Children's Education n=29	24	83	05	17
Social Contact n=40	31	77	09	23
Economic Assets n=40	35	87	05	13
Miserable Living Standard n=40	40	100	-	-
Effects on Health n=40	26	65	14	35
Specification of Effects n=40	TB 4	Fever 13	Hepatitis 03	Diabetics 06

Source: Field Survey, 2009

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