

Debt Bondage in the Sandstone Quarries of Rajasthan

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With both the government and business refusing to even acknowledge the existence of the practice of bonded labour in stone quarries of Rajasthan, quarry workers in the state, it seems, are committed to a life of servitude.

The mining and quarrying sector of Rajasthan brings both fame and infamy to the state. Quarries of Rajasthan have provided stone not only for historical monuments of India, but German graveyards, British pathways and Belgian shopping malls are also embellished with sandstone exported from the state. An estimated 900 million tonnes of sandstone deposits are spread over an area of about 34,000 sq km, covering parts of Bharatpur, Cholutpur, Kota, Jodhpur, Sawai-Madhopur, Bundi, Chittorgarh, Bikaner, Jhalawar, Pali and Jaisalmer districts.[i] About 10% of the sandstone sold in the international market—in the form of cobbles, tiles, slabs, steps, paving stone/flagstone, garden accessories and sometime even raw stone blocks—is quarried from Rajasthan.[ii] The districts of Kota and Bundi alone account for more than 90% of the total sandstone production in the state.[iii]

Debt Bondage: A Background

While serious efforts are being made to promote domestic and international trade in natural stones, the abysmal working conditions of labourers in stone quarries are hardly being addressed.[iv] If someone could brave the dusty sandstone quarries of Rajasthan, she would come across hundreds of miserable stories. A familiar story would be that of a runny-nosed grandson and his tuberculosis afflicted grandfather working together for the repayment of an age-old debt, which is largely impossible to clear. It has now become an established tradition that when worsening tuberculosis forces the worker to retire, his immediate kin replaces him. This transferring of debt from generation to generation ensures cheap and perennial supply of labour.

Debt bondage is not new to Rajasthan and has been there for centuries. When feudal lords deceptively acquired tribal lands and began cultivation, hundreds of people were alienated from the land and were forced to become tenants and agricultural workers. In the course of time, in order to ensure that labour was available throughout the agricultural season, advance payments were made to workers. These loans, which were virtually impossible to pay back, were then used to control them. As a result, generations of workers were born in penury and died in penury, transferring their debt to the next generation.

The issue of labour bondage was seriously taken up in independent India. In the case of Rajasthan, the Sagri System Abolition Act (1961) was the first legislation that challenged the traditional practice of bonded labour. This Act stated that advancing loan and debt bondage was illegal and made provisions, at least “symbolically”, to free and rehabilitate bonded labourers. But it hardly had any impact on the age-old agrarian bondage that was in practice for centuries.[v]

When stone quarrying was introduced in the neighbouring states of Rajasthan, it was looked upon as a viable option to escape from bondage in the agrarian sector. A few workers managed to free

themselves from the clutches of their landlords, by repaying their debt.^[vi] In Rajasthan too, the workers were attracted to stone quarries. The timely payment of wages, especially in cash, in quarries helped agricultural workers to meet their immediate needs, and clear their existing debt obligations. But in the process, the workers got trapped into debt bondage yet again, but this time in stone quarries.

As time passed, more and more land in Rajasthan was brought under quarrying. The process of acquiring tribal lands for mining purposes also began. People were evicted from the acquired land, and some were inducted as quarry workers. Labour migration to quarrying areas also took place, and advance money was readily made available to all sorts of workers. And in some cases, a few big mining companies initiated some labour welfare measures as well.

Problems Confronting the Workers

The construction boom in India and abroad in recent decades initiated a new wave of demand for natural stones. The mining policies of the government facilitated the development of this sector. Illegal mines and quarries began their operation in Rajasthan with the connivance of the government. The existing labour standards in this sector, which were already poor, were further undermined, as hiring labour on a contract basis and payment of wages on a piece rate basis became the norms.

The quarries were confronted with the problem of a floating workforce. Workers in quarries did not stay there for long, as the working conditions were harsh. Further, there was no work during the rainy season. And even if there was work, the workers were not ready to give up their agricultural work during the monsoon season.

In addition to their unabated passion for agriculture, there were several other reasons due to which workers hesitated to stay on in quarries. Firstly, these quarries were remotely located and had no civic facilities like transport, drinking water, electricity, housing, health centers, etc.,

Secondly, although the workers were paid in cash, the wages could only partially fulfill their requirements and could not provide them with a sustained income or social security. There was no provision for provident fund, pension, leave with pay, extra wage for over time, etc.

Moreover, the wage was calculated on piece rate basis. Those who were physically strong, particularly the workers in their teens and youth, could produce more pieces and thus earn the minimum wage or more. All others had to remain as helpers. Women, children and elderly people depended upon the labour of workers in their twenties. Entire families were involved in stonework; children and their mother helped the father, and thus the family was collectively able to earn the "living wage". It is a truism that families without young male workers cannot survive in the stone sector.

Finally, stone quarrying involves physically taxing and hazardous work, which soon starts affecting the health of a worker. Between the ages of 35 and 40, symptoms of tuberculosis or asthma begin to appear. If there are no children to take up the work, the family has to look for other alternatives. Therefore, stonework is never a preferred option. But due to acute poverty and lack of other livelihood options workers are forced to undertake it.

Three Categories of Workers

The stone quarry owners or contractors, who were not willing to provide adequate wages or any basic civic facilities, therefore, had to innovate ways to retain workers in quarries. Ideas were naturally borrowed from the agrarian sector. Advance money was given to workers at the time of need. This loan in the course of time, developed into family debt.

The strategy of advancing money to workers and making them work for low wages created a significant number of families virtually dependent upon stone quarries for their livelihood. As debts were transferred to the next generation, the number of indebted families expanded, and the wards divided their father's debt among themselves.

As of now, three categories of workers can be seen working in stone quarries. Firstly, there are descendants of the first generation of stone workers. Most of them are migrants from other states, uprooted from their homeland, and are third or fourth generation workers. They work in different quarries and their debts vary from Rs 50,000 to 2,00,000. They stay on the site or in surrounding areas or temporary sheds. These families cannot escape from quarry work, and even if they want to do so, all their kith and kin would have to move out together. This means that 10 to 15 families working in different quarries will have to move out simultaneously. Otherwise, the debt of one family will be transferred to the other. Even during the off-season, these workers do not undertake any other work, but hang around quarries.

The second category of workers are from surrounding villages. They are basically agricultural workers who have shifted to stone work due to various reasons and still work in their fields during the monsoon season, when no work takes place in quarries. They also represent the third or fourth generation of workers involved in stonework, who have inherited the debt of their ancestors. As the quarry owners know their villages and are familiar with their kith and kin, these workers are free to move to their villages when there is no work in quarries. Their debt is relatively small and varies from Rs 20,000 to 80,000.

The third category of workers are those who have recently started working in stone quarries. They are either from nearby villages or are from various other districts in the state. They are working here not because of any debt they owe to the quarry owner, but due to family pressures, including debt incurred in their villages back home. Their debt cycle is in its early stage, and they owe quarry owners amounts up to or less than Rs 10,000. These kind of workers sometimes abscond from quarries without repaying their loans.

One can also find workers who do not owe quarry owners any money. Their debt free status could be attributed to the fact that these workers are either new or they are relatively young and so far have not required advance payments to meet family expenses. Then there are a few workers who are quite conscious about the perils of taking loans. They have paid back their small loan and try hard to keep themselves debt free.

The fact is that both workers and owners know that the debt cannot be settled. Owners do not have a problem as long as the workers work in their quarries. If the worker falls sick or meets with an accident or dies, his wife, children, or close relatives will have to take the responsibility of repaying the debt. They must work in the quarry or pay back the money. If this does not happen, then the owner will attempt to seize the property of the worker or his immediate relatives.

Workers can sometimes exercise their freedom to move from one quarry to another. If they are not comfortable with one quarry owner, they can move to another quarry, asking their new owner to settle their debt with their previous one. They are now bound to the new owner and in due course

will have to repay him.

A few conscious workers have not trained their children in stone work, but instead have sent them to learn skills like tailoring, driving, etc, so that they can earn extra to help them repay the debt. The cleverest among them are the ones who have managed to escape the hold of quarry owner without repaying their debt—a luxury enjoyed by only a few.

Hiring on a Contract Basis

At present, both business and government do not accept the involvement of bonded labour in the stone sector. The government has no knowledge about various modern forms of bondage and tends to reject the fact that “advance-money” leads to debt bondage. Adopting a similar line, business argues that workers borrow money and disappear; therefore, they actually lose money by advancing loans.

Sandstone quarrying today relies heavily on the system of advancing loans to retain workers. Expect a few skilled labourers (supervisor, accountant, machine operators), all others are recruited on a contract basis. No facilities are provided to these contractual workers. The stone workers have to spend a considerable amount on their health, and their remuneration is low. Hence, the stoneworkers do not prefer to work with a quarry owner who is not willing to provide loans.

To retain workers, quarries and processing units have two options: either they provide facilities including proper wages, housing and health care or they provide loans. The owners prefer the second option, since it is seen as a long-time investment which will bind the workers to quarries and processing units.

Even the few big established companies, who have been in the quarrying business for several decades, have gradually switched over to hiring on contract basis, thus abdicating their responsibility to provide workers their due benefits. A stone worker opines:

If it is a big company, like the one earlier, there is a possibility for organised functioning. Workers can demand assistance in the case of an accident or any other problem. But in this system, the work is segmented. The workers are divided. Workers under one contractor do not know what is happening under another. A huge chunk of stone for both national and international markets is produced by these methods. Contractors at the beginning give advances to retain workers. Once the borrowing reaches a certain point, they will neither give advances nor allow the workers to leave. They have their guards everywhere for surveillance of the workers.[vii]

Conclusions

The existing legislations and implementing agencies remain ineffective in comprehending the dynamics of debt bondage in sandstone quarries in Rajasthan. Shockingly, the state denies the existence of bonded labour in districts where stone quarrying is a major activity. Even the Review Commission set up by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) was not able to identify the elements of bondage, although it made some insightful suggestions in this regard. [viii]

The crucial issue is that various contemporary forms of debt bondage, especially in the non-agrarian sector, have not been taken seriously by both the central government and state governments as well

as by other agencies. Despite having a reasonably exhaustive definition of bondage, the Bonded labour system (Abolition) Act 1976, enacted by the central government, has only been successful in abolishing the remnants of the medieval agrestic bondage. It has not been that effective in addressing the issue of bondage in industrial sectors like natural stone quarrying.

Rajasthan has perhaps been successful in abolishing the Sagri system (bonded labour system), but it has yet to recognise the existence of debt bondage in quarries. There have been a number of studies and reports which have pointed out the grave issue of bondage in stone quarries, but the state continues to ignore them all. Therefore, there is an urgent need to evolve a comprehensive legislative mechanism and a special institutional set-up to liberate bonded stoneworkers from bondage. It is also high time that the state should reconsider its promotion of international trade in non-renewable natural resources like sandstone, since the lands where the quarries are located are vital for survival of local communities.

Notes/References

[i] Centre for Development of Stone, available at <http://old.cdos-india.com/NerveCenters/Rajasthan.html>

[ii] Moody, Roger (2009): "The destruction of construction", Infochange Agenda, April, available at <http://infochangeindia.org/agenda/occupational-safety-and-health/the-destruction-of-construction.html>, accessed on 30 July 2014.

[iii] Information gathered from interviews with officials of Centre for Development of Stone, Rajasthan, conducted by the author in June, 2008.

[iv] This note is based on ethnographic field work carried out by me in sandstone quarries of Rajasthan during 2010-13. The Anti-slavery International and Centre for Education and Communication, New Delhi initially supported this research. I express my thanks to J John and Anish R for their inputs in writing this note.

[v] Patnaik, Utsa and Dingwaney, Manjari (eds) (1990): *Chains of Servitude*, Sangam Books, p 331.

[vi] Shankar, Kripa (1996): "Bonded Agricultural Labour in India of 1996: Case of Hallia Block in UP", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 17 August, p 2216.

[vii] As told by a quarry worker to the author during his field work in the sandstone quarries in the Bundi district of Rajasthan in June 2013. The name has been withheld keeping the worker's safety in mind.

[viii] Report of review of the pace and progress of activities pertaining to implementation of Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 and Child labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act, 1986 for the

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