



CHAINS REFORGED: THE GHOSTS OF SLAVERY IN MODERN INDIA

Diya Sarah*

ABSTRACT

This essay traces the shifting faces of slavery, from chains and debts to algorithms and ambition, arguing that while bondage may have changed its form, it has not vanished from India's social, economic, or moral landscape. Drawing from Rousseau's and Marx's reflections on freedom and alienation, it explores how slavery represents the ultimate negation of humanity: the reduction of personhood to labour. Beginning with historical systems of bonded labour and the delayed legal abolition of slavery in India, the essay examines how caste, poverty, and social hierarchy continue to sustain modern servitude. It highlights persisting forms such as ritual slavery in the Devadasi, Jogini, and Mathamma traditions, where women are sanctified into sexual and economic bondage, and extends this analysis to the corporate world, where white-collar workers experience "time slavery" through relentless overwork and alienation. Despite a robust legal framework, the Constitution's Article 23, the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, and various protective statutes, implementation remains fragmented and ineffective. Institutional apathy, poor coordination, and low conviction rates reveal the gap between principle and practice. The essay calls for a reimagining of abolition: one that enforces laws with sincerity, addresses structural inequalities, empowers survivors, and redefines the dignity of labour itself. Ultimately, it contends that the fight against modern slavery is not solely legal but moral, a demand for empathy and collective conscience in a society that mistakes exhaustion for virtue. True freedom, it argues, must be reclaimed both in policy and in spirit.

Keywords: Slavery, Bonded Labour, Caste Hierarchy, Modern Servitude, Dignity of Labour.

*BBA LLB, FIRST YEAR, RAJIV GANDHI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LAW, PUNJAB.

INTRODUCTION

“Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.”

- (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 1762)

In *The Social Contract* 1762, Jean-Jacques Rousseau asserts that “*To renounce liberty is to renounce being a man.*”¹ Deprived of personhood. Commodified. Robbed of autonomy. Dominated. Stripped of humanity. Enslaved. Where is humanity when one becomes the property of another? When one cannot make their own decisions but rather is subject to the will and whim of another mortal, they must view it as a lord? Slavery and systems of bonded labour, world over, are glimpses of humanity at its most depraved. They are manifestations of man’s ability to stoop so low as to cease to view a fellow human being even as human at all. It is a demonstration of an apathy so blatant that it does not hesitate to violently snatch another’s identity, kinship, community, freedom, thought and even his basic sense of self, all to make him an object, a machine, a voiceless worker. Slavery involves the surrender of rights and freedoms to the point that, as Karl Marx emphasises in *Capital, Vol 1*, 1867,² the distinction between labour and labourer is shamelessly erased.

BONDED LABOUR

Historically, systems of bonded labour and slavery have existed in almost every major civilisation, justified by religious scripture and laws of the times. While regulations on slavery and different forms of bonded labour have existed and emerged in various religions and civilisations, the first known legal abolition of slavery happened as recently as 1793 in Haiti³ During the Haitian Revolution (1793-1804).⁴ In India, there was no formal abolition of slavery or bonded labour until the Indian Slavery Act of 1843 and then the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976. While slavery was declared illegal in India in 1843, it is important to note that bonded labour was still legal up till 1976.

¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Maurice Cranston tr, Penguin Books 1968)

² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol 1 (Ben Fowkes tr, Penguin Classics 1976)

³ Constitution of Haiti (1805) art 2, reproduced in *Constitution of Hayti* (compiled at St Thomas University) <<https://wp.stu.ca/worldhistory/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/07/Constitution-of-Haiti-1805.pdf>> accessed 5 November 2025

⁴ ‘Haitian Revolution’ *Encyclopædia Britannica* (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2 October 2025) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Haitian-Revolution>> accessed 5 November 2025

Bonded labour, also referred to as ‘debt bondage’, is a system in which a person is forced to work to repay a debt or advance. However, the conditions and remuneration of work here are often disproportionate, ambiguous, and highly exploitative, even extending across generations.⁵ Bonded labour thus is a double-edged sword involving, as Dr. Jan Breman elaborates, “*not simply an economic relation, but a system of social control- where the creditor dominates the very life of the debtor, not only his labour.*”⁶ In India, this problem is even more extreme, as described by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in his book *Annihilation of Caste, 1936*,⁷ as it is compounded by a distinct caste angle where the system is not just contractual but congenital. At birth, the only purpose assigned to a certain class of people is to be a source of labour for another. Twenty-first century morals that hold the individual and his rights in the highest regard are entirely repulsed by this idea, and the inherent savagery of it all invites scorn, disgust and condemnation from ‘civilised’ society. One can easily be caught saying something along the lines of ‘but oh, who would do such a thing?’

Yet, it would appear that this self-proclaimed, almost self-righteous, ‘civilised’ society remains blind to the overwhelming reality of modern slavery. According to Walk Free’s 2023 Global Slavery Index, the estimated number of people living in modern slavery in India is 11,050,000, the highest estimated total globally. This translates into roughly eight in every thousand people being subject to bondage under someone else’s direct and complete control. Forced labour in garment manufacturing, brickmaking, tea production, illegal mica mining, textiles and agriculture remains to this day a dark reality for many in India.

India scores fifty-six out of one hundred on the assessment scale for vulnerability, under this same index.⁸ Vulnerability is a matrix event of sorts, emerging from the interplay of factors ranging from climate change and marginalisation of minorities to gender discrimination and national conflict.

⁵ Anti-Slavery International, ‘What is bonded labour?’ (Anti-Slavery International) <<https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/bonded-labour/>> accessed 5 November 2025

⁶ Jan Breman, ‘Indebtedness as Labour Attachment’ in *Capitalism, Inequality and Labour in India* (Cambridge University Press 2019) chapter 8

⁷ BR Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936)

⁸ Walk Free. “Modern Slavery in India.” *Global Slavery Index Country Studies*, Walk Free, www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/country-studies/india/. Accessed 12 October 2025

MODERN SLAVERY: A BROADER UNDERSTANDING

If we were to expand our frame of reference beyond the textbook definition of “modern slavery”, our eyes would open to the shackled masses that, in Sisyphus-like fashion, trudge ever onward. From ritual slavery to time slavery; freedom in India today proves to be a fragile illusion, a glittering ideal that remains confined to the yellow pages of the Constitution of India and to utopian thought.

RITUAL SLAVERY

Ritual slavery in India, perpetuated through systems such as Devadasi, Jogini, and Mathamma, remains a harsh reality even today despite formal abolition. Women dedicated to these practices are born into a status that cannot be fully cast off, bound by religious and ritual sanction that legitimises their subjugation. Stripped of autonomy and denied economic independence, they live in conditions closely resembling bonded labour, where servitude is sustained not by formal contracts but by deep-seated social and cultural coercion. The exploitation is compounded by a sexual dimension: these women are barred from entering regular marriages or forming families and are instead made sexually accessible to men designated by religious or community hierarchies. Under the guise of devotion, their bodies and labour are appropriated, perpetuating a cycle of gendered and caste-based oppression.⁹ In effect, ritual slavery represents one of the most enduring forms of modern slavery, where religion, patriarchy, and poverty converge to reproduce servitude under the veneer of sanctity.

CORPORATE TIME SLAVERY

Looking even further beyond, we arrive at bustling urban city centres, the heart of India’s corporate machinery. Glass towers and humming offices house an entirely new kind of bondage. We call it ‘hard work’ when young men and women spend twelve hours a day, trapped in offices, in front of glowing screens, their worth reduced to that of a machine. Human beings are treated as mere functional pieces along an assembly line, their sole purpose being to work and continue to toe the corporate line. In the process, they are constantly working, quickly replaceable, relentlessly driven, and easily exploited. We wear ninety-hour work weeks like badges of honour, never counting the cost of all that is lost along the way, including time, rest,

⁹ Anti-Slavery International, *Women in Ritual Slavery: Devadasi, Jogini and Mathamma in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh* (2007) <www.antislavery.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/women_in_ritual_slavery2007.pdf> accessed 4 November 2025

relationships and even that quiet sense of self. Karl Marx's theory of *alienation* rings true in this regard, echoing hauntingly through history. Workers are robbed of their connection to nature, society, themselves and the world they helped create. Labour, once a means of self-expression, is hollowed out into mere survival. The individual no longer holds any intrinsic value but rather is simply a cog in the much larger invisible industrial machinery. In the pursuit of corporate goals that are never truly their own, they become modern-day serfs of time, bound not by chains of iron but by the quiet tyranny of metrics, ambition, and fear.

The recent "We are not corporate slaves" protest in March 2025¹⁰ in Bangalore, by nearly seven hundred IT and ITeS workers, is indicative of how prevalent this issue is. This protest was not merely an outcry against long hours; it was a collective refusal to be dehumanised. The major demands of this protest revolved around the proper enforcement of labour laws, regulation of working hours and a "Right to Disconnect". Coming in the light of a proposed amendment on extending work hours, this protest highlights the silent coercion that underlies white-collar labour in India today.

Though wrapped in the language of choice and ambition, this too bears the marks of bondage. Like the bonded labourer of the past, today's digital worker is trapped by invisible debts, not of money, but of obligation, insecurity, and the unending pressure to perform. They surrender their time and autonomy to systems that equate worth with output. This is modern slavery in corporate disguise: a world where the chains are intangible, the overseer is an algorithm, and exhaustion is worn as proof of virtue.

In the midst of such glaring bondage, packaged in aspiration or pushed beyond society's peripheral vision, we are forced to ask what the government, that is supposedly the orchestrator of welfare and protector of rights, is actively doing to break these chains.

LEGAL PROVISIONS AGAINST SLAVERY AND BONDED LABOUR

As of now, in India, there are several provisions that exist towards the abolition of bonded labour and slavery in India. Foremost among these is the fundamental right of 'prohibition of traffic in human beings and forced labour' as encoded in Article 23(1) of the Constitution of

¹⁰ Pavan Kulkarni, "'We Are Not Corporate Slaves': Indian Tech Workers Fight for Dignity' *Peoples Dispatch* (11 March 2025) <<https://peoplesdispatch.org/2025/03/11/we-are-not-corporate-slaves-indian-tech-workers-fight-for-dignity/>> accessed 4 November 2025

India.¹¹ This is the foundation for India's anti-slavery framework. It directly prohibits bonded labour, human trafficking, and forceful, unpaid labour in any form, namely *begar*. This has been upheld and interpreted in several judicial pronouncements, including the landmark *People's Union for Democratic Rights v. Union of India* (1982),¹² where the Supreme Court held that non-payment of minimum wages amounts to forced labour under Article 23 and *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v. Union of India* (1984),¹³ where the Court expanded the meaning of "forced labour" to include economic compulsion, in the form of poverty, helplessness, or social constraint that forces a person to work. Article 23 in India now has a wide scope, encompassing even subtle or "voluntary" labour under coercive conditions. The abolition of these oppressive systems of bondage and exploitation is further written into law within the following provisions. *The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976* stands as a solemn declaration that no human being shall toil under the shadow of debt or servitude. It emphasises that every chain forged by poverty or caste is, in the eyes of the Republic, broken.¹⁴ Alongside it, a constellation of other laws gathers to guard the dignity of labour: the *Minimum Wages Act*, ensuring that work earns at least the price of survival;¹⁵ the *Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act*, seeking to regulate invisible hands behind industries;¹⁶ and the *Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act*, offering protection to those who wander far from home in search of livelihood.¹⁷ The *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act* acknowledges what history has too often denied: that bondage and caste are twined together, that to be born into oppression is itself a kind of servitude.¹⁸ In the Indian Penal Code, the crime of trafficking and forced labour is named and punished,¹⁹ while the *Child and Adolescent Labour Act* protects the smallest hands from exploitation.²⁰ Taken together, these statutes form a moral architecture. It seeks to lift the weight of centuries and remind the nation that freedom is not granted once but must be protected each day.

¹¹ *The Constitution of India* 1950, art 23(1)

¹² *People's Union for Democratic Rights v Union of India* (1982) 3 SCC 235

¹³ *Bandhua Mukti Morcha v Union of India* (1984) 3 SCC 16

¹⁴ *Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act* 1976

¹⁵ *Minimum Wages Act* 1948

¹⁶ *Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act* 1970

¹⁷ *Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act* 1979

¹⁸ *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act* 1989

¹⁹ *Indian Penal Code* 1860, ss 370–374

²⁰ *Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act* 1986

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS TO ABOLISH SLAVERY AND BONDED LABOUR

Beyond the statutes and their solemn declarations lies an intricate web of institutions meant to bring them to life and stand on guard, at least in spirit, against the endurance of slavery. These are the institutions and policies through which the State extends its promise of justice. The National Human Rights Commission, with its Special Rapporteur on bonded labour, watches over the nation's conscience, issuing notices, directing district magistrates, and urging rescue where freedom has been denied. It sits at the centre, vested with the task of ensuring that the freed remain free, that every rescued labourer finds not just escape but dignity. District Magistrates and Vigilance Committees are meant to breathe life into the 1976 Act, identifying victims, securing their release, and rebuilding lives from the rubble of servitude. The Ministry of Labour and Employment runs rehabilitation schemes that promise not just release, but renewal through a modest sum of money, a patch of land, or the fragile hope of a new beginning. Anti-Human Trafficking Units operate in most districts, often understaffed yet still carrying the burden of a vast and unseen struggle. A network of hotlines hums quietly, including the CBI's 24/7 line for trafficking, the child helpline 1098 and others, each one a lifeline thrown into the dark. At the centre of it all, the Ministry of Women and Child Development leads an inter-ministerial effort, coordinating the scattered arms of government, often in dialogue with civil society and international partners.

REALITY

Yet, even as the laws stand tall, their promise often flickers dimly in the fields, factories, and quiet corners where old hierarchies survive under new names. On paper, the structure is sound: a map of compassion and vigilance. But in practice, such mechanisms creak under the weight of their own insufficiency. They remain tragically underfunded, understaffed, and overburdened.²¹ They exist like scaffolding around a crumbling house, noble in intent but unable, by themselves, to hold the edifice upright. Legal provisions lose their force against the weight of neglect, under glaring and persistent implementation gaps on the ground. Their noble intentions fade into bureaucratic lethargy and apathy. While the law exists, it tends to rot in silence: reduced to nothing more than ink on paper, while enforcement remains inconsistent and half-hearted at best across states. The statistics that lay bare the reality of modern slavery

²¹ 'Unveiling the hidden chains: Human slavery in Indian urban areas' *The Times of India* (ReadersBlog, 7 June 2023) < <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/theintersection/unveiling-the-hidden-chains-human-slavery-in-indian-urban-areas-54843/>> accessed 4 November 2025

in India stand in cruel contrast to the vanishingly low conviction rates in India. What unfolds, then, is a story not of absence, but of abandonment. Not only is modern slavery a pressing and pervasive issue, but it is also not being adequately addressed under existing provisions. The system appears to clearly recognise injustice yet fails to uproot it. Modern slavery is not merely pervasive; it is poorly pursued, tucked beneath procedural complacency and moral fatigue. Convictions falter, acquittals rise, and the gap between principle and practice grows wide enough to swallow justice whole.

Within this labyrinth of institutions and statutes, coordination falters. Each department seemingly moves to its own rhythm like a symphony out of tune. There exist multiple Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), each crafted for a different kind of exploitation: one for trafficking, another for child labour, yet another for bonded labour. They overlap, contradict, and often collapse under their own complexity. No single thread binds them together; no National Referral Mechanism ensures that a survivor, once rescued, finds their way through the maze of welfare and justice. In this fragmentation, people are lost, not just metaphorically, but literally. A freed worker might be recorded by the police, ignored by the labour department, and forgotten by the welfare board. Paperwork replaces empathy; procedure takes the place of care. The result is a system that acts in pieces: a hand that rescues, another that releases, but none that holds. Without a unifying vision, the promise of rehabilitation disintegrates into scattered efforts, leaving survivors adrift between ministries and memories of bondage.

Walk Free's government response rating for India is forty-six per cent. This is indicative of the fact that although several crucial steps like the establishment of a 24/7 human trafficking hotline, government-funded support services, a government-run child helpline, shelters, rehabilitation services, and the initiation of inter-ministerial partnerships have been undertaken, there still remain several glaring gaps in the system.²² In its implementation, inclusivity and equality must be the cornerstone of outreach and support programmes, reaching not just the convenient but also the social outliers, including adult males, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, differently abled persons, and economically disadvantaged persons. There is an imminent need for a better quantitative understanding of the extent of the problem as well, necessitating the drafting of comprehensive national guidelines for the identification and rehabilitation of survivors and victims.

²² Walk Free, 'Modern slavery in India' *Global Slavery Index* (2023) < <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/country-studies/india/>> accessed 4 November 2025

SUGGESTIONS FOR REFORM

If modern slavery survives not only in law's blind spots but in the habits of our economy and conscience, then its eradication demands more than enforcement; it requires transformation. The first step must be reclaiming the dignity of work. This means enforcing existing laws: the *Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976*, the *Minimum Wages Act*, and the *SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act*. But this must not be done simply as a bureaucratic ritual, but as living guarantees of justice. Vigilance committees, anti-trafficking units, and rehabilitation schemes must be strengthened, funded, and made transparent. The State must ensure that freedom is not temporary: that every rescued worker is also restored, through skill training, livelihood, and social acceptance.

But law alone cannot untie every chain. We must address the root causes that keep people enslaved: poverty, caste, debt, and the absence of education. Economic reforms must be humane: ensuring fair wages, social security, and access to credit for the marginalised. Education, especially for girls, is freedom's first foundation. Awareness campaigns must reach not just villages but corporations, so that exploitation in any form, from brick kilns to boardrooms, merits the same moral outrage.

True abolition also means changing how we see labour itself. In an age where exhaustion is celebrated, there must be a Right to Rest, a Right to Disconnect, and a cultural rejection of overwork as virtue. Work should not consume life; it should sustain it. The corporate worker chained to their desk and the bonded labourer in a quarry are not as distant as they seem; both are trapped in systems that measure worth by output, not by humanity.

At the community level, collective empowerment is the surest defence against re-enslavement. Self-help groups, cooperatives, and survivor-led organisations, especially those of former bonded labourers, Devadasis, and migrant workers, must be supported and given a voice in policymaking. Grassroots rehabilitation, guided by those who have lived bondage, carries an authenticity the law alone cannot replicate.

Finally, the most enduring reform is moral. As long as convenience outweighs conscience, when cheap labour is celebrated, when overwork is admired, when suffering is invisible, slavery will simply adapt. Abolition must begin in imagination: in the belief that no human being exists to serve another's comfort. The end of slavery, then, is not a law to be passed, but a habit to be unlearned by society, by markets, and by each of us.

CONCLUSION

Even in a political climate where the language of rights is loudly proclaimed and the worth and value of the individual are endlessly debated and discussed, we cannot remain blind to the chains that hang heavy all around us. They glint not in the fields or factories alone, but in the corridors of glass offices and the quiet despair of overworked minds. The masses strive, study, and spend, vying for employment, crawling over the competition to reach the top; all to simply end up slaves at the end of the day. We chase freedom through labour, only to become enslaved by it; draping chains of ambition, insecurity, and the silent fear of falling behind, all over ourselves. The old masters may have faded, but their methods endure, reborn in contracts, debts, and hierarchies that look nothing like whips and shackles, yet wound just as deeply. In India, where the law proclaims the abolition of bondage, slavery has simply learned to disguise itself. It thrives in the rituals of rural poverty, where women are still dedicated as *Devadasis* and *Joginis*, sanctified into servitude under the weight of faith. It hides in the smoke of brick kilns and the dust of quarries, where families labour endlessly to repay debts that were never truly theirs. It flickers on computer screens in shining cities, where twelve-hour shifts and endless targets are worn as proof of worth. It sits quietly in homes, where child labourers fold, stitch, or scrub through the long hours of an invisible childhood. Modern slavery has not been abolished; it has been refined, made quieter, subtler, harder to name. Its cruelty lies not in its visibility but in its normalcy: in how we have come to accept exhaustion as virtue, obedience as professionalism, and exploitation as opportunity.

Modern slavery is not a wound of the past; it is the quiet pulse beneath our present, beating through factories, farms, homes, and offices alike. Its scope is staggering, sprawling across caste and class, gender and geography, binding millions in invisible chains of compulsion, debt, and despair. From the ritual servitude of rural women to the digital exhaustion of the urban worker, its forms are countless, but its essence is one: the reduction of human life to labour. We live in an age that speaks of progress but hides its foundations in exploitation; that builds its glittering towers on the bent backs of the unseen. To confront modern slavery, then, is to confront ourselves: our economies, our silences, our willingness to look away. The need for reform is no longer a matter of policy, but of conscience. The law must not merely exist; it must breathe, act, and protect. And society must remember that freedom, once won, must be defended again and again, until every form of servitude, however silent or sophisticated, is finally named, discussed actively and undone.