

The Times of India

Title : Freed from bondage, life still hard labour

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Location :

Chennai:

Article Date : 09/10/2016

Securing Govt Assistance A Big Hurdle

Every time a group of bonded labourers is rescued, officials are feted, owners of the units are hauled and the hitherto faceless are given names. It doesn't take long for the workers to realise that freedom comes at a cost.

Without documents, land or entitlements, labourers freed of bondage find that little changes even after being rescued. A study by the department of social work in Loyola College and International Justice Mission, has thrown up a startling set of numbers: Around 50% of them had debts, 85% of them did not have access to a toilet, 75% didn't have water tap and 70% continued to toil on daily wages that were little more than received when in bondage.

The survey covered 208 workers in the districts of Tiruvannamalai, Tiruvallur, Vellore and Kancheepuram, most of them in bondage for up to 10 years. From 1997 to 2007, the state government rescued 13,500 bonded labourers, mostly from rice mills, brick kilns, agriculture and tree-cutting units. The actual number, experts estimate could be well over 10 lakh.

Gladston Xavier, head of the department of social work at Loyola College, said while the rescue of labourers receives attention, their rehabilitation continues to be poor. "Our study focused on two areas -relief gap and rehabilitation and trust in the public justice system. It wasn't a pretty picture. While their condition is definitely better in terms of freedom of mobility , it just isn't enough to survive," he said.

The first big hurdle labourers face is receiving the `20,000 the state provides to start their lives afresh. "The amount rarely reaches them.They have no papers, no land, no identities. They find themselves ineligible for even the entitlements like the free mixers and fans given by the state government," said Gladston, adding that while the laws related to bonded labour were stringent, implementation continued to be a problem.

LIVES ON THE EDGE

The study surveyed 208 bonded labourers from Tiruvannamalai, Tiruvallur, Vellore & Kancheepuram

WHO THEY WERE	HOW THEY WORKED	LIFE NOW
> 62% men, 38% women	> 34% worked as bonded labourers for 11 to 50 years	> 70% did unskilled work for ₹1,800 - ₹15,000/month
> 67% illiterate, 86% ST & 13% SC	> Wages promised: ₹80/day to ₹8k/month	> 46% had debts
> 40% children got married before they were 18	> Wages received: ₹20/day to ₹3,200/month	> 75% had no flowing water & 85% no toilet

