Of Human Bondage in Baran, Rajasthan

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In the shadow of India’s growing economy, labour bondage continues for many Sahariya labourers in Baran district, Rajasthan. Some of them, however, have rebelled against their masters and attempted to break their shackles. This article presents the findings of a recent investigation of their living conditions as well as of their struggle for freedom.

Even imagination, audacious though it may be at times, has limits. While dazzling rates of economic growth have won India wide acclaim, there exist within its boundaries citizens not just mired in poverty but bondage, at the mercy of oppressive jagirdars (landlords), some for decades. What may be dismissed as an aberration by those who believe that even remnants of feudalism no longer exist in India is actually a sombre ground reality in no less than 16 states of the country.1

Baran district of south-east Rajasthan is one such region where this pernicious and immoral labour arrangement is still alive in two of its eight tehsils – Kishanganj and Shahabad. Locals point out that the practice is not new, and has been continuing for a long time in the form of the hali system. Typically, in such an arrangement a labourer – called hali – enters an annual labour contract with the landlord, often in exchange of money taken at the start as loan. In scholarly literature, such a labour arrangement is known as debt bondage.

Area and People

Baran district has had a distinct administrative identity since 1991, when it was carved out of Kota district. Located in the south-east of the state, bordering Sheopur, Shivpuri and Guna districts of west Madhya Pradesh, Baran, named after an old town of the same name that is now its headquarters, has another distinctive feature: it is home to the Sahariya adivasis, who are concentrated in Kishanganj and Shahabad. In these two tehsils, demarcated as Shahabad subdivision, there are 21,000 Sahariya families (approximately 1,00,000 people).2

Baran, a largely rural district, has a significant proportion of its population living in rural areas. But even though it is a region that is not too remote considering that it has a fairly good road network and is well connected by rail, and despite heavy central and state government funds that have been coming into the region for the development of the tribals, in real terms one does not see much qualitative change.

Baran remains one of the more deprived districts of Rajasthan. In 2001, only 31% of adult women were literate, 23% of children were fully immunised, and 67% of children were underweight – in this and other respects, Baran’s social indicators are worse than the corresponding averages for Rajasthan, and much worse than the all-India averages (Table 1, p 160).3 There have been recurrent stories of starvation deaths in Baran, notably in 2002-03 when a wave of starvation deaths was reported among the Sahariyas and the survivors were subsisting on wild grass.4 Deaths of three Sahariya children below the age of five in October 2011 were also attributed to malnutrition.5
Sahariya Adivasis

Sahariyas are one of 75 indigenous groups of India officially known as “primitive tribal groups” (PTGs). Though the conceptual category “primitive” is questionable and needs revision, it nevertheless draws our attention to the deprived living conditions of the Sahariyas. This is due, in part, to the degradation of their natural environment: the traditional occupations of the Sahariyas (e.g., selling mahua and tendu, or making baskets) are heavily dependent on forest resources, which have disappeared rapidly in eastern Rajasthan in recent times. Even the forest resources that were not degraded have often been appropriated by vested interests.

Land that the Sahariyas owned has over the decades been alienated or usurped by local dominant castes and communities and those who migrated into these regions, mainly Sikh farmers from Punjab (locally referred to as “sardars”), who over the decades became legal owners of large tracts of land, their prosperity ensuring that they acquired not only economic power but also political power. As a result, when Sahariyas try to reclaim possession of their smallholdings illegally occupied by such elements, their efforts get mostly frustrated by local government functionaries, such as the patwari (revenue personnel at the panchayat level) or those in the forest or police department, who typically side with the occupiers, thus only compounding the misery of the Sahariyas. Despite reservations, the Sahariya leaders have not emerged as a strong political force that may have effectively represented Sahariya interests or safeguarded their rights. The two main political parties in this region are the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); party politics has ensured that loyalty to the party and personal political ambition gain precedence over the interests of the community they are expected to represent.

The Practice of Bonded Labour in Baran District

Any visitor to the area is likely to first come across the sahara, as the Sahariya settlement usually located outside the main village is called. There are local histories about how the Sahariyas had to move to the fringes, sometimes due to cultural or natural causes (such as floods in the Banganga River as in Sunda-Chenchpur village), but also due to the oppressive circumstances they endured when they lived in the main village. In these parts, it is interesting to note that amongst the dominant castes and communities are a large number of Sikh farmers who migrated to the area four or so decades ago. The influx may well have some linkage with the political turmoil of those days in Punjab, not unlike the in-migration during the time of Partition, besides other reasons such as the usual desire for upward mobility. There was already a large Sikh settlement in regions such as Kota, and spilling over to Baran (then part of Kota) must have seemed a natural extension just as these farmers are now expanding to Shahabad district. Moreover, over to enterprising farmers from Punjab, land in the tribal tracts must have seemed an irresistible attraction. Though most of these lands were under cyclical cultivation (since the Sahariyas were nomadic, practised shifting or slash-and-burn agriculture and subsisted from hunting and gathering forest produce), this was often invisible on paper in the absence or near-absence of land surveys and up-to-date “records of rights” that were, as they are now, always lagging behind actual physical occupation and cultivation. While a more systematic study is required to inform us regarding the story of land in these parts, there is no doubt that Sahariyas are indeed indigenous people of this region – the etymology of “Sahariya” also relates them to the jungle as well as to animal life within.

As has been mentioned, the Sahariyas are the poorest people of Baran, they have few resources and find basic survival a challenge. Even as corridors of power are abuzz with perfunctory concern about the “primitive”, “backward”, “malmournished” and “poor” and huge funds continue to be ear-marked for Sahariya “development” in the shape of many a scheme, the most crucial areas related to their well-being have not been addressed. These are concerned with assured access to their basic resources: land, forests, and labour arrangements that respect the law. Sahariyas have had to contend with uncertainty and insecurity in each of these aspects and the same government that is so enthusiastic about “schemes” turns lukewarm and lethargic when it comes to recovering the lost lands of the Sahariyas, ensuring that they retain occupation, and taking punitive action against those who transgress. Sahariyas have been able to survive only on the strength of their labour, which has been ruthlessly exploited by the upper caste/class landed gentry. While the situation of those who work as halis is abysmal, those who are engaged in khuli majduri (unattached labour) do only marginally better.

Situation in the Villages

In Kishanganj tehsil of Baran district, there are 213 villages and 32 panchayats.\footnote{The following account is based on a visit to three villages and in two of them (Ganeshpura and Sunda-Chenchpur) we were able to speak to the labourers as well as the landed, and in one (Iklera) only to the labourers.} The following account is based on a visit to three villages and in two of them (Ganeshpura and Sunda-Chenchpur) we were able to speak to the labourers as well as the landed, and in one (Iklera) only to the labourers.

Ganeshpura

This is a medium-sized village of 140 households in Kankhra panchayat. Besides Ganeshpura there are 10 other villages in this panchayat; all villages are located within a radius of two kilometres. Sahariyas represent 95% of the total population of the panchayat; the remainder is made up of other castes such as Gujar, Chamar, Ahir, Aud and Sardars.

The 100-odd Sahariya families of Ganeshpura are distributed over three mohallas (hamlets). A little over half of them...
(60 families) live in the Sahariya sahrana in Ganeshpura proper. The rest are distributed over two mohallas: Danda (12 families) and Joi (25+ families). The 35 families of the sardars, as they are referred to by all including themselves, live in the main Ganeshpura mohalla. The prevailing inequality becomes evident when we observe land ownership patterns in the village for agriculture and homestead purposes as well as differences in the living conditions of the two segments of the village population.

**Everyday Insecurity**

Sahariya existence is marked by everyday insecurity. They do not even have legal titles for homestead lands. While families of Danda mohalla had received land from one Chaudhari as *bhoo dan* many years ago, they did not have any papers. Enquiries in the Bhoo dan Board office have been futile. “No titles are given for bhoo dan land”, they were told. The Joi mohalla families said that their houses were constructed on *jung lat* (forestland) and so they had no papers either. Similar was the situation of the Ganeshpura Sahariyas who said that their houses were also built on forestland. They recalled that more than a decade ago they used to get tax notices and had paid the taxes for around five years, but after that they stopped receiving the notices. Except five sardar families whose homes are also on bhoo dan land, all others have titles for homestead land.

Sahariyas of Ganeshpura are either completely landless (as is the case of the inhabitants of Danda and Joi mohallas) or marginal farmers with small landholdings (roughly 2-3 bighas each). In contrast, except two sardar families who are landless, all the others had *khate-vali jameen* (land with legal titles). For instance, the *up-sarpanch* (vice-sarpanch), Keshvant Singh's father owned 70 bighas – the largest holding in the village – that is now divided between his brother and himself. Besides, Keshvant also owns 10 bighas in Hathwari village (near Kelwada) where the water table, he said, was good.7 Jasvinder Singh alias Sabi's family has also been doing well; he said that his father and uncle together cultivated 250 bighas, out of which 70 bighas was private land in Ganeshpura, and the rest was land taken on lease in different villages.8

Keshvant informed us that aside from five sardar families who owned more than 30 bighas, eight had 15-20 bighas while the larger majority of 20 or so farmers owned 5-10 bighas. Sardar farmers of Ganeshpura grew wheat, rice, mustard, soyabean, bengal gram (chana) and red lentils (masoor). After keeping what they needed for home consumption, they sold the rest in Kota and Bundi mandis. “However, it was not as though the sardars were uniformly well off – many had to also do labour work under *MGNREGA* last year in order to survive – you can check the muster rolls”, he maintained. Rainfed agriculture was not always possible and not all could afford to dig bore wells.

However, while the sardar families may have to reckon with a lean year now and then, for the Sahariya families, most years are bleak – their small landholdings yield little even in a normal year. Most of the land they own is of poor quality and all of it is rain-fed. In the absence of land, basic education, or other sources of income (we did not come across any Sahariya who owned a cow or buffalo), it is only on their capacity for labour work that their lives rest. Their dependence on the local sardars for work therefore has been total. It is only recently that Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (*MGNREGA*) works have emerged as a viable option, besides the odd Sahariya who may offer himself as a *hamal* (load carrier) or similar work in the town or work for a contractor in brick kilns, road works, etc.

It is interesting to note how the sardar families came to own and occupy land in these areas – similar stories can be heard in other villages (like Sunda-Chenpur below). Keshvant, now in his mid-40s, was born in Ganeshpura. He said that the sardar settlement in Ganeshpura owed its existence to five sardars who came here around 50 years ago including his maternal grandfather who had migrated from Bikaner. These five farmers initially gained control over 200 bighas. Keshvant's father moved to this village after his marriage. Subsequently, his brother also followed. They worked hard on his grandfather's land and received 17 bighas from him as reward. Slowly they expanded and at the time of his death a few years ago, his father owned 70 bighas.9

Anandi, an elder, explained how the Sahariyas became condemned to a life of servitude and forced servility: *Sahariya ne mar-mar kar sameen banai. Bana-bana kar di. Us samay se hali ban gai. Unka khet badhta raha. Hum mazduri kar ke khatai rahe mar-mar kar zameen banai. Bana-bana kar di. Us samay se hali ban gai. Unka khet badhta raha. Hum mazduri kar ke khatai rahe* (Sahariyas nearly died making the land cultivable. They made the land and gave it to them). We became halis since then. Their land kept expanding. We continued to labour – and survive. *Hali mai zindagi nikal gai* (our lives were spent as halis).

Hali thus became a source of minimalist survival and the bane of their existence. Until a couple of years ago, one or two members from each Sahariya family was working as halis. A closer look into the life of even one hali gives us a better understanding of the workings of such a labour arrangement and how engaging in such a practice determined the contours of the limited lives that the Sahariyas were forced to lead.

“I started work as a hali when I was 7”.

Ashok of Joi-mohalla in Ganeshpura knows the hali-system well. Now in his mid-20s, he has already worked as a hali for 17 years. He started early with his older brother, Anarsingh, then 12. Their first job was as goatherds for a Banjara farmer who lived in Hoshiarpur village, around 20 km from their home. Their employer agreed to pay Rs 3,000 for their service for the year and by so doing earned rights over them as he did over the 15 goats they were supposed to look after. Every morning they headed with their charges to the forest, guiding the goats three-four km inside the sometimes treacherous terrain. Those days their father was working as a hamal in the local bazaar and mother as a *khuli* (unattached labourer). A younger brother and sister stayed at home; no member of Ashok's family is literate. At the end of the year, they were told that they owed Rs 6,000 for a goat that had died in their care – even though she had died due to illness. So a thousand rupees were deducted (from Rs 3,000) and the rest was stated as *karja* (debt).
After that both brothers returned home and worked as halis for two years there. They were paid at the rate of Rs 1,500 per boy annually. Their earnings allowed them to clear the debt they had incidentally incurred for the dead goat, that turned out to be double their combined earnings that year!

Ashok's next nine years were spent working as a hali for Gyaniji. His work would begin before 6 am and end at around 7 or 8 pm. During the course of the day he was required for different chores – getting fodder for the cattle, diesel for the engine, operating the mill, etc. He was paid Rs 1,500 the first year, with a raise every year. In his ninth year, he was earning Rs 14,000 annually that was paid to him in advance. However, this was far from sufficient to meet his own expenses leave alone contribute to his family's. Moreover, his father disapproved of his late hours and they had regular arguments about this. Ashok decided to quit. But he was not a free man yet since he learnt that he owed Gyaniji Rs 7,000 for expenses (food, medicine, etc) that he had incurred on him. They agreed that this would be cleared the following year.

Mandip Singh hired him at Rs 20,000 (per year). At the end of the first year, Ashok was able to clear his debt to Gyaniji. He stayed for another year with Mandip and then left to work for Janak Singh (of “Thakar” Rajput caste) in Sunda-Chenpur village, where he worked for three years.

The first year with Janak started with Rs 12,000 as advance. His boarding, lodging and other miscellaneous expenses were borne by Janak, who also maintained the accounts, as did all landlords. At the end of the year of full-time work, Janak told him that he owed him Rs 20,000 (including food and other charges).

I did not have money, so continued to work for him, and cleared the debt (Rs 20,000) the following year. So that year I was left with no money. So I continued to work for him for the third year. At the end of that year, he said I owed him Rs 30,000. I was now quite desperate. That is when we heard about the developments in Iklera. We heard that a girl had been raped there. We also heard about the efforts of the sanstha (organisation) who took up her case and were fighting on her behalf. A few of us decided to meet the sanstha people. We went there and met Vijay and master-saab (teacher; reference here is to Motilal) and told them our story.10

I became active in their campaign and started participating in the dharnas (sit-ins). We went twice to Jaipur. One was the do sau din yatra dharna (where the demand for 200 [labour days under manrega] was raised). The second dharna was about the bandhaka (bonded). I liked being in the dharna. We spoke about our situation to the government officials in Jaipur and to the collector. Phir hum chute (then we were released from bondage!). In our village 32 halis were released (nine from Danda and 23 from Joi mohalla).

“Aab hamai mukti mil gai hai. aab bandhak mai nahi jaiga. Badi mushkil se chute hai (Now we are free. Now we will not go for bonded work. We have been able to secure our release with great difficulty.)

However, even though these 32 labourers were released or declared themselves as free more than a year ago, only five of them have received the mukti praman patra (released from bonded labour certificate) – four in Joi mohalla and one in Danda mohalla; Ashok has also not received it. And none has received the full rehabilitation package. This is very serious since the certificate is the first step of the rehabilitation process. As we have seen in Ashok’s case, being in bondage means being caught in a cycle of indebtedness. These labourers and their families do not have any back-up, whether it be property, savings or wealthy relatives and friends. Any delay in their rehabilitation only pushes them one step towards accepting a labour arrangement where the terms of employment are exploitative. So far, in order to make ends meet these labourers have been taking up daily-wage work (at Rs 100 per day), which they have been able to get only in the last few months, or travelling to Baran or Kelwada to work as casual labourers. But none of them have gone back to their former employers.

During the year, government officials came once and took the testimonies of the 32 bonded labourers as well as their employers. But after that there has been silence from the government quarters and the ex-bonded labourers have had to fend for themselves without any official help or support.

Sunda-Chenpur village, in Khandela panchayat, is widely acknowledged as the bastion of Sikh landlordism (even by the sardars of other neighbouring villages such as Ganeshpura).11 It is a small village of 53 households (45 of Sahariyas, seven of sardars and one Rajput). The Sahariyas live in one sahrana – known as Chenpur – though some of their houses are dispersed. The Rajput household is adjacent to the Sahariya sahrana, facing the road beyond which flows the Banganga River. Beyond the river are lands which belong to sardar families. The sardars have made individual houses on their farms and the farm size of each is so large that, as you drive through, you see only large expanses of green fields and only from time to time get a glimpse of a house or a roof top. These houses are large, built in the typical farmhouse style one sees outside Delhi or in plush parts of Punjab.

If a visitor to these parts were to meet Pravin Singh alias Bitta (grandson of one of the seven sardars who first came to Sunda), of somewhat dubious fame, and soon after (or before) also meet Matralal, a Sahariya elder, as we did, the local history and politics of this village and region – the past, present and what happened in between – would not be so difficult to surmise. Even their appearance and the circumstances of their everyday life speak volumes of the reality of their existence – as oppressor and oppressed.

“This land was our own”.

Matralal does not look like it, but is said to be 90 years old. A thin reed of a man, he comes doggedly holding his bamboo shaft. Devilal, an articulate ex-bonded labourer, had insisted that if we wanted to hear their story from olden times, then he was the man to meet. But Matralal had other things on his mind. His indignation almost palpable, pointing at a half-built stone structure close to where we were sitting on string cots, he said:

The junglat people [forest department] came yesterday [11 January] and forcibly stopped the construction, alleging that the land on which it was being built was forest land. We wanted to build a grain bank, so that in time of need, grain can be provided to the needy and we do not have to go to the landlords for help. Why did the junglat fellows stop us, when this land belonged to our forefathers – when it was our own?
Since many Sahariyas of Sunda-Chenpur had become free a year ago this was a crucial venture for ensuring their self-reliance. All the people in the sahariya had contributed towards the cost of the building. Devilal explained that the Sahariyas were upset because their grain bank occupied less than a bigha of land but it had been stopped while that of three sardar farmers who had for long occupied over 10 bighas of land across the road — visible from where we were sitting — as chakkas (threshing floor) had never been questioned, leave alone hindered.

"This is the kind of official discrimination that we face regularly here", said Pappu (ex-bonded labourer of Balbir Singh) and Kishore (ex-bonded labourer of Paramveer Singh). Sadly, their bondage has become the principal marker of the identity of the sahariyas in these villages.

"We have brought the stay and can continue to cultivate".

We could appreciate Pappu's remark better when we went to Bitta's house, where we could see for ourselves the results of "official discrimination". His house was less than 2 km from the Sahariya saharna but what a world of difference it was. While the Sahariyas lived in small-sized kuccha or semi-pucca houses and could boast of only a few quality household items like a cot, steel utensils, a goat or two, landlord Bitta's house was like a palace in comparison — a two-storeyed building with a high compound wall in pale green, with a few vehicles parked outside (a couple of jeeps, tractors, motorcycle), dogs, and Bitta himself, perhaps in his 40s, his rounded pink cheeks reminding one of apples in a Kashmiri orchard. While one wished Bitta good health, one could not help contrasting the circumstances of the two sections of the population.

Bitta's family is said to own thousands of acres of land (4,000 acres, according to one estimate) in many different villages. According to the ex-bonded labourers who have worked on his land, his grandfather owned 1,300 bighas of land in this village alone, which are now under the joint ownership of Bitta and his brother Rampi, who lives and works in Kota.

Besides, a large parcel of Chenpur land (450 acres according to Bitta) that belonged to the Bigoda cooperative society (registered in 1969-70 by a group of sardar farmers and a couple of token Sahariyas) has been under the illegal control of his family. Labourers informed us that Umraon Singh (father or grandfather of Bitta) also sold society land (e.g. 85 bighas to Kulwant) as though it was his private land. The society was advantageous in other ways since, as Bitta informed us, government loans for agricultural purposes are more easily available. Sahariyas inevitably have patkar, nalla, khada (land unfit for cultivation) as their share, while the landlords get the more fertile land. I used to cultivate that land, but now that land is lying fallow for the last two decades.

Devilal owns 10 bighas adjacent to Babu's land. He said that one bigha of his land was under Bitta's occupation.

Mukesh, Ramsingh, Mohan and Pappu (sons of Gopal) own about 12 bighas of land. They cultivate 8 bighas. The rest is under the occupation of sardar farmers, in all likelihood under Paramveer's occupation since his field is adjacent to theirs.

Bitta, of course, denied having occupied any parcel of land that belonged to the Sahariyas; we could not meet Paramveer to check what he had to say.

That Bitta's family members should be in prominent roles in local political postings did not come as a surprise. Some sardars indicated that one reason why the bonded-labour story gained prominence recently was because of the intra-sardar community tension that resulted after Bitta's mother accepted the BJP offer and switched over from the Congress, the party favoured by the sardars so far, in order to be made the chairperson of the mandi. The general criticism of the Bitta family that followed this transgression of loyalty included other anomalies that were hidden so far — glossed over by the sardar kith-kin network.
There are not many quarters from where the Sahariyas can expect justice. Even though the sarpanchs of both the panchayats we visited were Sahariyas, and the up-sarpanch a sardar, it was understood that sardar domination and influence over the panchayat prevailed.

As one Sahariya labourer mentioned: *zamindar gram panchayat par havi hain* (landlords are dominating the panchayats). Indeed, if most local institutions of governance are dominated by those who are locally powerful, what hope for justice can marginalised and vulnerable groups like the Sahariyas have?

Iklera Village

Iklera village made history of sorts in late 2010. It is from here that the rebellion started. Sixteen halis of the Sahariya sahara of the village decided to break free and paved the way for many other halis, from far and near.

Iklera, our driver informed us, was off the main road, on the way back to Baran. It was almost dark by the time we left Sunda. The roads become quiet soon after dark in these parts. As the jeep sped on the tarred road, we saw few signs of life in the arched light of its headlights. Our silence, somewhat meditative at this hour, was broken at the sudden leftward lurch, as the jeep left the road and plunged into the dark fields. A few more bumpy minutes and we had reached – it seemed to us – nowhere. It took us a little while to discern the faint outline of huts, most of which were immersed in darkness. Sand and other building material were piled here and there. A single solar street lamp stood downcast at a distance. We headed towards it, and as our driver had predicted, people soon started assembling.

And there, sitting on a hurriedly brought string cot, with the help of a torch light, we wrote our notes while the labourers sat and stood around. It was cold and one could see how ill-clad they were – their appearances, like their stories, were heart-wrenching.

This settlement, still in the making, was made up of rebels – those who had already quit, some recognised by the government and some still waiting to be recognised as a “bonded labourer”. Such recognition would make them eligible for the government rehabilitation package – much sought after, yet little more than crumbs, as we were soon to discover.

It is important to note that 11 Iklera landlords who had employed the 16 halis were not Sikhs, as in the case of Ganeshpura and Sunda, but from local dominant castes and communities, including Dhakad (Chandravanshi Rajputs, known by their surname, Nagar) and Muslims. Dhakads and Sikhs are officially recognised as “backward” and included in the Other Backward Class list in Rajasthan.

The stories of Kanhaiya and Prakash below are representative of the general pattern of servitude in the area. While Ashok’s story showed us the relationship between livelihood and bondage, as well as the cyclical relationship between indebtedness and bondage, and how children, youth and entire families may get trapped for years, the stories below reveal the causes that may compel somebody to “choose” this labour arrangement. Further, we also begin to see similarities between the hali practice and slavery as we know it elsewhere in the world.

“I needed twelve thousand for my son’s marriage”. Kanhaiya (son of Hiralal), in his mid-30s, is landless and has eight members in his family. He said that he became a hali because he needed Rs 12,000 for his son’s marriage. The next three years of continuous work on landlord Roopnarayan Nagar’s fields however did not reduce the loan but increased it to Rs 20,000, even though, according to Kanhaiya, no expenses had been incurred on him except a small amount of up to Rs 100 for medical expenses. “My lunch would come from home and on days when food could not be sent, I had to work without food”, he recalled.

All else applied in his case as was the practice in the region: there were no work timings – he could be required early mornings or late evenings as per the requirement in the fields and the convenience of the landlord. On days he was absent (naga), double the “wage” due to him was deducted in the landlord’s ledger.

He was also a hali for Jagdish Chotulal (of Mina tribe) in Aalampora village for one year, after borrowing money for his daughter’s ceremony (*bacchi ke baal nikalne ke samay*). One day when he was irrigating the fields which were at a distance of 4 kos from where the well was located, the engine stopped. The landlord came and beat him up for being careless. “That night after work I ran away and came here. Aalampora is 15 kos from here and it took me one day and one night to reach here.”

“He sold me for twenty thousand to Chotman”. Prakash (son of Prahlad, 30 years old) was also seated with Kanhaiya and others. He said:

We were landless and were bandhak with Chotman [Chothmal Nagar] and Hansraj Dhakad. I worked for Hansraj. I worked there for five years. At the end of five years, Hansraj told me that my *karja* had become 15,000. Bees hazar mai usne mujhe Chotman ko bech diya (Hansraj sold him for Rs 20,000 to Chotman). I had worked for Chotman for five years. My daughter fell ill and was hospitalised. I donated blood in order to get blood for her. After that I felt weak, and for four-five days I stayed at home. Then Hansraj came and said that Chotman was calling me. Hansraj took me with him to Chotman’s grain store and both of them beat me up severely. I started bleeding from my nose and mouth. They also pulled my hair and beat my head against the wall. They continued to do so until Chotman’s wife intervened and said “*itna mat maro nahi to mar jaiga* (don’t beat him) so much, otherwise he will die. I was then told to stop crying and clean the cattle shed. For the next two hours, I was made to fill around 40 *tagar* of cow-dung and pile it up in one place. They instructed me that after this task was over I should go to the fields and irrigate the fields. Having given this instruction they set off for Kishanganj. As soon as they left, I ran home and told my wife [Gita-bai] all that had happened. We decided to file an FIR. But at the police station at Kishanganj, the thanedar refused to register one.

Finally, his testimony was taken down but not his signature. He was told that the miscreants would be arrested by the evening. When no action was taken during the next five days, he and his wife decided to go with the members of the Jagrut Mahila Sangathan who were going to attend the dharna at...
Jaipur. There, they related their story as well as the circumstances of the other halis.

This issue was then taken up in a major way by the dharna participants with the higher government officials including the chief minister. He then summoned the collector. On their express instructions the sub-divisional magistrate and the tehsildar went to Iklera and conducted an enquiry. The following day the collector also visited Iklera and talked to the halis.

_Pehle kisi Iklera ke kisi Sahariya ke pass ration card ya job card nahi tha_ (before, no Sahariya of Iklera had a ration card or job card). After their visits, we [45 Sahariya households] got them. Fourteen of us got the praman patra. _Rukbeer aur Kalulal ko muki nahi mila_ (Rukbeer and Kalulal were not freed [they were refused the certificate]).

On the day of our visit, we found that it was a matter of much consternation amongst the labourers that Kalulal and Rukbeer had been refused recognition as bonded labourers and denied the _mukti praman patra_ (Table 2). Their claim that they had worked as halis for two and four years, respectively, after which their initial debt that was to be adjusted against the wages due to them for work during that period was shown by their employers to have nearly doubled, was ignored by the authorities. Instead, erroneous conclusions were drawn on grounds that do not hold any water. In Kaluram’s case, in the meeting that was held where the certificates were distributed (attended also by the district collector), he was asked by the _sdm_ if he knew the name of his employer’s grandfather. He did not know and this seems to have been used against him. “Why was he asked this question and how did knowledge or ignorance about this matter?”, asked Kaluram and his friends, “why was he asked this question and how did knowledge or ignorance about this matter?”

In Rukbeer’s case, the _sdm_ informed him that he had been excluded from the list because of lack of “proof”. The labourers recognise this to be unjust because now that they have understanding the law they know that it stipulates the onus on the employer rather than the labourer to provide such a proof.

Raherbation Package

Fourteen others who obtained the certificates received the rehabilitation package two months later (on 6 January 2011; see Chronology of Events, p 166). This rehabilitation package from the central government includes cash and material worth Rs 20,000. Of this, Rs 1,000 is paid when the certificate is given. The remainder is paid in kind. The beneficiaries mentioned that each of them received 10 goats, and one male goat which had to be shared between two families. They had also received two small quilts that did little to ward off the cold, they said; two tin sheets and measly food items (10 kg rice, 10 kg sugar, 5 kg jaggery, 2 kg oil, 2 kg lentils, 100 gm tea leaves) that included nothing for infants. Most of them had sold their goats after two died due to some illness in the first week. Besides the package, they were also given job cards and ration cards.

We had taken a small sample from one of the quilts. It did not seem like wool to us but we thought we would check with a more knowledgeable person. This we did when we met the principal secretary (labour) in Jaipur. He promptly confirmed it to be _kachra_ (waste).

The rehabilitation package is far from adequate. It was first designed in 1978 when assistance of up to Rs 4,000 per bonded labourer was approved. This was raised to Rs 6,250 in 1986, Rs 10,000 in 1995, and Rs 20,000 in 2000. It has not been enhanced since.

Struggle for Mukti

The struggle of the Iklera labourers had now started making waves in the area. Many labourers started coming to Iklera. The “Chronology of Events” attempts to capture the main developments of the first few months of the struggle from October 2010 onwards. According to a list prepared by Jagrut Mahila Sangathan and Sankalp, as of late January 2012, 151 labourers had applied for their release, of which 44 were confirmed by the government to have been bonded labourers and had received their certificates – only 14 however had received the full rehabilitation package. Out of the 151, most were from Kishanganj (112) and Shahabad (19). Table 3 (p 167) includes details of 14 labourers whose applications – amongst others – had not been heard until 12 January 2012 when we met them. Fresh applications keep coming in.

What we saw in Iklera convinced us that despite sporadic relief from the district administration, no systematic arrangements had been made for the safety and “just and proper resettlement and rehabilitation” of the released bonded labourers.

### Table 2: Details of Bonded Labourers Whose Claims Were Rejected in 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Original Village of Labourer</th>
<th>Employer and His Village</th>
<th>Years of Bondage</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Other Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kaluram Mangilal Pipalda</td>
<td>Babulal Nagar (Mishai)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>He had taken Rs 15,000 at the beginning of the first year. At the end of the second year after full-time work he was told that he owed Rs 28,000.</td>
<td>His muki praman patra is reported to have been brought by the SDM but taken back. Labourers suspect foul play.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rukbeer Matralal Subakra</td>
<td>Ramkrishan Nagar (Iklera)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>He moved to Iklera since his sister is married in this village. At the beginning of the first year, he had taken Rs 8,000. At the end of four years of full-time work, he was told that he still owed Rs 15,000.</td>
<td>When he enquired, the SDM told him that he had been excluded from the list because of lack of “proof”.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both labourers are residing in the Sahariya sahrana of Iklera village with other ex-bonded families (recognised and as yet unrecognised by the government). Unless otherwise mentioned, names of all villages mentioned are from Kishanganj tehsil.

Source: Interview, Sahariya sahrana, Iklera, 12 January 2012.
Breaking free from the old patterns of servitude and leaving their employers without any preparedness whatsoever had not been easy for them. However, as one of them said, not knowing where their next meal was coming from was bad, but worse was the constant fear of retaliatory persecution from their former employers. There had already been a few instances when a former employer had come to the settlement and raping abuses at his one-time hali had dragged him back.

Such belligerence, the labourers felt, could be checked only if the police and administration took firm action. Despite their tribulations, the residents of Iklera had hope. They had borne their earlier distress with fortitude and now too it was their own serves of strength and solidarity that sustained them.

Who Is a Bonded Labourer?

Despite all the direct evidence that we got to see and hear, as mentioned above – and the full reality is likely to be certainly worse – oddly enough, there is still confusion in the minds of landlords as well as some of the officials we met regarding who should be counted as a bonded labourer, and whether the traditional and widespread hali system could be included in the category? One official, we were surprised to hear, said: “According to the criteria laid out in the Act, all the labourers of Baran are bonded labourers!” Others pointed at the benefits of the system that ensured regular employment for the labourer and regular availability of labourers for the farmers. Instances of malnourishment-induced starvation deaths were brushed off as exceptions. A general view regarding the root cause of Sahariya impoverishment was put at their propensity towards drink and laziness.

If there is indeed such confusion that comes in the way of official stringent action in this arena, then this subject calls for a public debate, so that farmers and their supporters (also in public positions) understand the criteria, that is the standard bearer internationally, of what construes “free” and “bonded” labour. Salient features of the Act can be appreciated from the Box:

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**The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976**

The Act defines bonded labour as a system of forced or partly forced labour whereby debtor has or is presumed to have entered into an agreement with the creditor to the effect that

1. In consideration of an advance obtained by him or by any of his lineal ancestors or descendants (whether or not such advance is evidenced by any document) and in consideration of the interest, if any, on such advance, or
2. In pursuance of any customary or social obligation, or
3. In pursuance of an obligation devolving on him by succession, or
4. For any economic consideration received by him or by any of his lineal ancestors or descendants, or
5. By reason of his birth in any particular caste or community, he would –
   - Render, by himself or through any member of his family, or any person dependent on him, labour or service to the creditor, for the benefit of the creditor, for a specified period or for an unspecified period, either without wages or for nominal wages, or
   - Forfeit the freedom of employment or other means of livelihood for a specified period or for an unspecified period, or
   - Forfeit the right to move freely throughout the territory of India, or
   - Forfeit the right to appropriate or sell at market value any of his property or product of his labour or the labour of a member of his family or any person dependent on him, and includes the system of forced, or partly forced, labour under which a surety for a debtor enters, or has, is presumed to have, entered, into an agreement with the creditor to the effect that in the event of the failure of the debtor to repay the debt, he would render the bonded labour on behalf of the debtor.

The Act recognises as illegal all such practices and vests powers with the District Magistrate or any officer designated by him to uphold the provisions of the Act including initiating inquiries into whether such a system is in practice in the district and if so, eradicate it and rehabilitate persons or families affected (Sections 10, 11 and 12).

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**Chronology of Events (October 2010 – February 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 January</td>
<td>Malkhan and Roopchand (from Rampuriya-Lakhakhedi village) and Tejkaran (from Bhawadgadh-Premnagar) demanded to be freed from bonded labour. Ghasi, Malkhan and Roopchand’s father, had also been working as hali for one Chittarlal Meena for years. The SDO Kishanganj asked them to come on 18 January to present their testimony. On the same day Chittarlal Meena came to the SDO’s office and took them away. Malkhan ran away to Kota but Roopchand resumed working for Chittarlal again. A frustrated Ghasi said: “We are being asked for proof, what proof can we give?” Their testimonies were not recorded. Tejkaran’s testimony was recorded on 22 January but no action has been taken so far.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 January</td>
<td>A group of nine labourers from Sunda demanded freedom from bondage. They were all working as hali for Pravin Singh, Pratap Singh and Balvir Singh, for 6 to 15 years. Their testimonies were taken on 21 January. Three of them did not have a ration card and one did not have a job card.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 January</td>
<td>21 labourers from four villages of Kishanganj tehsil – Sunda (16), Khankhra (2), Khedla (2) and Acharpura (1) – came forward for their release. They had also been working as hali for sardar farmers. Seven of them did not have ration cards and four did not have job cards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 February</td>
<td>20 labourers from Ganeshpura, Khankra, Jawaipura and Girdhanpura (Kishanganj tehsil) gave their demand for release. In this group, some have been hali for 9 to 20 years. Four of them did not have ration cards and two did not have job cards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 February</td>
<td>Four labourers from two villages of Kishanganj tehsil – Sunda (3) and Jawaipura (1) gave their demand for release.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 February</td>
<td>Five dalis from Muhal village (Shahabad tehsil) who had been working as hali for farmers of Kirad caste, demanded their release. After giving their testimonies, they are at home. These were the first cases of non-Sahariyas in bondage who came forward for their release.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 February</td>
<td>In the first half of January, a group of 14 hali from Alampura (Chabra tehsil) had escaped from their oppressive landlords and come to Iklera on hearing about the released bonded labourers through a milkman. Amongst them were women who had been sexually harassed and a relative of one labourer had also been raped by their employers. On 29 January, their employers came to Iklera and threatened to tie them up with ropes and drag them back. Finally, on 8 February the SDO of Chabra tehsil recorded their testimonies. None of them have ration or job cards.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This is an edited version of a chronology prepared by Jagrut Mahila Sangathan, Kishanganj.
Table 3: Details of 14 Bonded Labourers Whose Applications Had Not Been Heard (as on 12 January 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Original Village of Labourer</th>
<th>Employer and His Village</th>
<th>Years of Bondage</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Kalulal Ratanlal</td>
<td>Pinjna</td>
<td>Matralal Nagar (Anta tehsil)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>He had borrowed Rs 15,000 during the first year to repay a loan taken from somebody else that was taken to tide over medical expenses for a family member’s illness. After four years, he was told he had a debt of Rs 40,000. He left work a year ago, and applied for his release. But there was no response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Babulal Ratanlal</td>
<td>Pinjna</td>
<td>Kuldeep Sardar (Kelwada, Shahabd tehsil)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>He owed Rs 13,000 at the end of one year of work to a previous employer. Kuldeep paid those dues for him and asked him to work for him. At the end of two years Kuldeep told him that his debt had become Rs 21,000. Babulal and Kalulal are brothers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Raju Babulal</td>
<td>Pinjna</td>
<td>Bachan Sardar (Kelwada, Shahabd tehsil)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Raju had borrowed Rs 9,000 for treatment of his ill mother. One day when he was irrigating the fields, he left his work to go home for a little while to check on his mother and prepare food for her. However, Bachan's son came after him on his motorcycle and beat him severely saying that “my fields are overflowing”. He then took him to the centre of the village and beat him up again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Jagdish Daulatram</td>
<td>Rajpur Pahri</td>
<td>Ramesh Kamravati (Anta tehsil)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jagdish and Suman (mentioned below) are cousins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Suman Jagga</td>
<td>Rajpur Pahri</td>
<td>Ramesh Kamravati (Anta tehsil)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Ramkaran Shymal</td>
<td>Achrava</td>
<td>Parman and Seth Nagar (Achrava, Atru tehsil)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Kalulal Srilal</td>
<td>Achrava</td>
<td>Rameshwar Nagar (Merela)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Kalulal Nainkilal</td>
<td>Sakrauda</td>
<td>Shomaram Meena (Sakrauda)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>After two months of leaving work, Shomaram caught him in the bazaar one day; there were 10-12 others with him. Accusing him of stealing a gold chain. They subjected him to a severe thrashing – slapping him, hitting him, and kicking him. They then took him to the jungle and there he was subjected to another round of beatings. Kalulal’s relatives informed the police. Fortunately, they took prompt action and rounded up the culprits and took them to the police station, where an FIR was filed. Shomaram and his two sons were arrested. This incident occurred in the summer of 2011.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Jagdish Ramswarup</td>
<td>Rampuria</td>
<td>Hemraj Nagar (Merda)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Somat (alias Somchand Mangilal)</td>
<td>Kherona</td>
<td>Tinku Rajput (Nargod)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Girraj Kishorilal</td>
<td>Achrava</td>
<td>Akkr Nagar (Karjano)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Radhashyam Prabhulal</td>
<td>Narmada</td>
<td>Chandramohan Nagar (Nargad)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>He had borrowed Rs 4,000 at the start. At the end of the three years he was told that his debt was now Rs 15,000.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Lalaram Bansiram</td>
<td>Kushipur</td>
<td>Narendra Hiralal Gujar (Barauda, Chhabra tehsil)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Brijmohan Ghaisil</td>
<td>Kushipur</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above-mentioned labourers are residing in the Sahariya sahrana of Iklera village with other ex-bonded families (recognised and as yet unrecognised by the government). Unless otherwise mentioned, names of all villages are from Kishanganj tehsil. na: not available. Source: Group interview, Sahariya sahrana, Iklera, 12 January 2012.

Conclusions

The prevalence and continuation of bonded labour in Baran district represent a form of systemic injustice that has no place in a democracy. The fact that the practice is endemic in these parts speaks of the extent to which governments, past and present, have been ineffectual. Such historical injustice to the Sahariyas needs to be corrected by implementing the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act (1976) proactively. Following are some important steps that can be taken in this respect.

Identification and Government Functioning: First, a systematic identification of labourers in “bondage” is called for. The problem is deep and largely invisible. But for this to effectively happen, the agencies who have the responsibility of such identification must have a clear understanding of labour arrangements that fall under the ambit of the Act. They must also be free from hidden biases vis-à-vis tribal communities or other labouring poor, especially dalits, that obviate serious action. The last is more necessary than we think. Officials at the different levels of the government structure often do not have a historical and contemporary understanding of the tribal predicament in the country, especially processes related to the alienation of their basic resources and deprivation. For a better interpretation of the Bonded Labour Act in the Baran case, the hali system needs to be placed within that larger framework.

The government structure dedicated to these tasks needs overhauling. In Baran, the structure was not even fully in place. Three crucial postings in the labour department were vacant for the last five years: labour welfare officer, labour
inspector and lower divisional clerk. Personnel working on deputation came everyday from Jhalawar, 85 km from Baran. That little gets done is therefore not surprising. In order for the issue to be dealt with seriously, a separate cell should be created within the labour offices of identified districts, regular monitoring should be ensured, and there should be an active, approachable overseeing authority that takes appropriate action in cases of delay in the rehabilitation process.

Rehabilitation: Second is the question of effective rehabilitation. There are set norms already for “just and proper resettlement and rehabilitation” worked out in the context of those displaced (e.g., for the project affected persons of the Sardar Sarovar Project on the Narmada River). These norms should also inform the rehabilitation package for the erstwhile bonded labourer. To be meaningful, the package would need to take into account not only the labourer but also his family, especially dependent children and elders. It would need to be indexed with inflation and, in fairness, it would also need to compensate for past miseries and lost years during which the labourers and their families were forced to live a miserable existence because the state was not able to alleviate their circumstances. A set amount should be given per labourer (to be calculated according to the length of time in bondage) that can be kept as a fixed deposit in their names. In short, the rehabilitation package should be a generous one.

However, in the interim, the present rehabilitation package would need to be implemented efficiently. Inordinate and habitual delays would need to be worked on. As we saw, in Ganeshpura, labourers had not heard from the government agencies even after a year of “release” and were awaiting rehabilitation.

Measures to Ensure That People Do Not Slip Back into Bondage: Third, in order to ensure that people do not slip back into bondage, it is crucial that they have enough to tide over for some time. For this, not only should their debts be cancelled but care should be taken that their earning capacity increases, food security schemes are in place and they are beneficiaries of the same (i.e., all should have a ration card and there should be a functioning public distribution system). The long term strategy to fight bonded labour would therefore have to aim to decrease the labourers’ economic vulnerability, increase social security, and over time enhance their political consciousness so that they have a greater capacity for political participation and are thereby able to protect themselves from exploitation and greed of the dominant sections as well as guard their constitutional rights. Four interventions are particularly crucial in this respect for Sahariyas of Baran as well as other labourers in a similar strait.

Land: The importance of land as a basic livelihood resource remains. Recognising this, in March 2011, the chief minister of Rajasthan announced: “Sahariya land under occupation will be freed and given back to them” (point 88.8). After the CM’s declaration, the district administration conducted a survey in Kishanganj and Shahabad. 980 cases (446 of Kishanganj and 534 of Shahabad) were identified where land of Sahariya khatadars (legal owners) was illegally occupied by others. Even though there were some errors (e.g., the Kishanganj list did not include 135 cases of Digoda and Chenpura villages) this is nevertheless a step in the right direction and needs to be followed up until fully implemented.

As noted earlier, a good number of labouring poor in Baran do not even own the land on which their huts stand. Their cases are a reminder of how the labourers tend to be not only on the brink of hunger but also homelessness. In order that they have this basic security, the state should ensure that such land – be it government, bhoodan or forest land – should be regularised in their favour. Government land is often under illegal occupation of dominant sections of society irrespective of government resolutions that stipulate that such land be distributed amongst the landless and marginal farmers for homestead and agricultural purposes; bhoodan land may have been given on daan but may still not be under the occupation of the recipients; and forestland, notwithstanding the provisions of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, has not for the most part, in Rajasthan and elsewhere, been regularised in favour of its tribal cultivators. There is also forestland that does not have forest cover that may be used by Sahariya or other poor for housing or cultivation purposes but is not regularised because it is “forest” land. Besides, Panchayats Extension to the Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, 1996, where applicable, should be implemented since it is the only means available in the hands of the tribal communities to check alienation of their lands and forests by powerful lobbies and mafias.

MGNREGA: Since mgnrega is crucial for the Sahariyas who have come out of bonded labour, it must be ensured that (1) all Sahariyas above the age of 18 have job cards, (2) 200 days of mgnrega work per year are guaranteed to them (as promised), and (3) wages are paid on time (within 15 days) and as the statutory rate. Delay in wage payments should not be tolerated, especially in Kishanganj and Shahabad, since Sahariya labourers cannot afford to wait – as it is, the deadline of 15 days for payment of wages under the Act is a long time for them.

If the payment of wages is delayed beyond 15 days, workers should be compensated under Schedule II, Section 30 of mgnrega (read together with the Payments of Wages Act). What is important is to ensure proactive payment of compensation without waiting for the affected workers to apply, since their ability to submit formal applications is very limited.14

Minimum Wages: After concerted pressure by movement groups, the Government of Rajasthan had also agreed to index the state minimum wage with inflation. However, this is yet to be done: even though the Government of Rajasthan did increase the mgnrega wage rate once after the dharna (from Rs 119 per day to Rs 133 per day), it was an ad hoc revision, and there is still no system to ensure automatic increase every
year in line with price increases. Such a system should be put in place without delay since it is a very simple matter.

Another long-standing demand of people’s movements is the payment of minimum wages to MGNREGA workers. It may be recalled that under Section 6.2 of the Act, the statutory minimum wage applicable to agricultural workers in a particular state is also applicable to MGNREGA workers. Though Section 6.1 seemingly allows the central government to override this provision and set separate wages for MGNREGA workers without being bound by the Minimum Wages Act, the courts (in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, separately) have declared that it would, in fact, be unconstitutional to override the Minimum Wages Act and pay MGNREGA workers anything less than the minimum wage. An appeal against these orders by the central government to the Supreme Court has been rejected. Therefore, MGNREGA workers in Rajasthan are certainly entitled to the statutory minimum wage. Further, the statutory minimum wage should be revised at periodic intervals through a fair and objective process, as per the provisions of the Minimum Wages Act.

In fact, the workers of India (and for that matter everywhere) are entitled not only to a “minimum wage” but also, as a natural right, to a “fair wage”. It is strange indeed that the official standard of aspirations for the (manually) working population does not move beyond the basic minimum requirement while all other sections of the population who are engaged in “service” of other kinds (be it government servants, teachers, doctors or others) deserve better. Such a situation gets stranger when we note that the market prices of all items are the same for everybody. These double standards conflict with the idea of natural human equality – that all men and women are born equal – as well as with the constitutional principle and equal citizenship.

**Punitive Measures:** Lastly, it is high time that punitive measures be taken against government officials and landlords who allow a reprehensible practice like labour bondage to continue despite its illegality and immorality – indeed, what use is there of a government if it cannot protect the rights and interests of its most vulnerable citizens?

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**NOTES**

1. See R Srivastava (2005) for a comprehensive overview of the incidence of labour bondage in India.
2. Verbal communication from the district collector, 10 January 2012.
3. While the table is helpful to understand the situation in the district as a whole, the situation of Sahariyas is likely to be much worse; however, in the absence of a large-scale systematic survey, their predicament can be understood only through writings by journalists and academics, though even these are few and far between.
7. Interview, 11 January 2012.
8. Interview, 11 January 2012.
9. The land ceiling limit applicable here is 48 bighas per person.
10. The reference here is to Sankalp, a voluntary organisation working in Baran district since 1983. Motilal is the secretary of this organisation. Sankalp has helped form local organisations of women (Jagrut Mahila Sangathan in 2002) and youth (Yuvaa Shakti Sangathan in 2003-04).
11. Besides Sunda-Chenpura, other villages in this panchayat are Amroli, Kerla, Halaudi and Koti Kheda.
12. The sarpanch of Kankhra panchayat (of which Ganeshpura is part) is Phulchand Sahariya of Kankhra village and the upasaran is Tejwant Singh of Ganeshpura. Likewise, the sarpanch of Khendla panchayat (of which Sunda-Chenpura are part) is Babulal Sahariya of Khendla and the upasaran is Sarabjeet Kaur.
13. This incident occurred between eight and nine in the morning of the month of Kartik (October-November) 2010.
14. Useful recommendations for this purpose are available in the report of the “Working Group on Wages” constituted by the Ministry of Rural Development (see http://mrga.nic.in/MCEGC/Wages.pdf). After the 47 days dharna (Muzdoor Haq Satyagraha) organised in Jaipur in October-November 2010 by Suchna Evam Rozgar Adhikar Abhiyan, the Government of Rajasthan had agreed to make arrangements to ensure that MGNREGA workers are paid compensation for late payments.

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