

INDIA: Slavery a way of life and death

DEBT BONDAGE – the redeeming of a debt through labour – is one of the forms of contemporary slavery recognised and defined by the United Nations in 1956.*

More bonded labourers live in India than in any other country. Estimates of their numbers vary; Delhi admits to only 160,000, but the Bonded Liberation Front conservatively estimates that there are 5,000,000 in two economic sectors alone: agriculture and brick making.

The London-based Anti-Slavery Society gave an international platform this summer to India's foremost campaigner against debt bondage, Swami Agnivesh.



Report by
Alan
Whittaker

The Swami, religious leader, member of Haryana state legislature and chairman of the Bonded Liberation Front, was in London last July and was included in the society's delegation to the August sessions of the Working Group on Slavery, which is a subsidiary of the Commission on Human Rights and meets annually in Geneva.

Historically, most bonded labourers in India worked in agriculture and that is where most of them may still be found today.

Typically, an illiterate, poverty-struck and asset-less peasant living in a remote rural area agrees to pay back a loan and its interest by working. The "agreement", when there is one, is commonly verbal and the amount of interest and the repayment period are often inexplicit.

But Indian debt bondage is not a simple economic problem of poverty compounded by usury; it is complicated by religion and brute force. The borrower, almost inevitably a member of a scheduled caste or

SLAVERY 1984

INDIA and the United States are trying to gag a United Nations committee that has accused their governments of complicity in slavery.

The two countries have proposed the disbandment of the UN's special working group on slavery, and their move looks like succeeding.

The working group meets each year before the annual session of the UN Human Rights Sub-commission, providing a platform for such organisations as the

London-based Anti-Slavery Society.

At the last meeting, evidence was submitted on bonded labour in India and the use of between 400,000 and 1m children in agriculture in the U.S.

The need for this working group is emphasised by the Anti-Slavery Society's chairman, Jeremy Swift, who says: "There are more slaves in the world today than there were in the days of Wilberforce."

Governments have been slow to act on allegations,

including the U.S. government. According to one Democrat Representative in Washington (George Miller, California), Federal officials responsible for investigating complaints of slavery in migrant camps have not been doing their jobs.

So serious is the problem in the U.S. that a Catholic nun, Sister Adele Delle Valle, told Congress last September that she had established a makeshift "underground railroad" in Virginia to help migrant farm workers

escape. Other countries are afflicted with inhuman exploitation that has its direct roots in the monopoly of land – in South Africa, for example. According to Robert Ross: "At least in the countryside, the dominance of the landowning class has remained unbroken, as has the oppression of its labourers. Into the 1980s the violence of master against servant, and the bias of the legal system in favour of the former, have

remained."*

In this survey, *Land and Liberty* writers spotlight a problem that has not been banished and which needs more – not less – publicity; which needs supra-national organisations to cooperate in investigating the reasons why, 150 years after the death of William Wilberforce, civilisation is still afflicted with slavery.

**Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983.



● Bonded labourers: their faces betray their misery and dejection

scheduled tribe, is somebody fore-ordained for menial work; the lender is frequently, but not always, a high caste Hindu landowner.

IN 1928 a Royal Commission on Agriculture said of the Indian labourer:

He is born in debt, lives in debt, and dies in debt. Land to him is no more than an instrument for obtaining credit. He looks upon life as a life-long mortgage to forces beyond his control and even beyond his comprehension.

Land reform is essential if debt bondage is to be effectively remedied, but so is control of credit systems, the

provision of loans to the uncredit-worthy and bureaucratic will.

During the 1975-77 Emergency, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi specifically outlawed debt bondage – it was already illegal under the con-

● Turn to P.13

Photo: PAN/anti-Slavery Society

UNITED STATES After the slavery

WORLD ATTENTION is fixed on involuntary and debt bondage in the Far East. This evil system flourishes in the United States today.

The U.S. fought a civil war, which it formally ended through constitutional amendment. Human bondage, however, has not been wiped out in practice.

● The Department of Justice secured 15 convictions arising from the violation of laws against involuntary servitude during 1983.

● The criminal justice system received 28 complaints now under investigation.

● The FBI has pending 31 cases of involuntary servitude, which is a condition of enforced, compulsory servitude of one to another.

By Paul Knight

Last August a Florida Federal judge convicted Willie Warren and others on charges of conspiracy to enslave. Federal prosecutor, Susan M. Callahan, called the evidence "a story of debt bondage, despite the fact that it was outlawed in this country in 1865."

Migrant workers from Mexico and Central America are the targets of slave raiding and their heartless crew leaders.

● The landless poor are being driven through Miami and other cities in single file during the winter season, on their way to the hard work and little money.

● They cross the border into Mexico in search of work, only to be driven to exploitation.

IT WOULD BE bad enough if slavery was an informal practice, but one reporter has now exposed the Federal Government of "abetting slavery in America" by providing a brokerage service that helps crew leaders who are in violation of the law.

Mimi Conway published the results of her investigation in *The Washington Post* on September 10, 1983.

Debt bondage: a problem of economics, religion and brute force

Nations cannot prosper if land monopoly survives

I FAILED to think of anything that could be compared with the grasping hand of the land monopolist.

I then had to decide whether it was necessary to accept the whole of Henry George's idea.

I began to think again of my half-acre, and of how the scheme for handing over to the community the rent I could get for it would affect me.

It was obvious that its selling value would practically vanish. In that sense I should certainly be a loser. I should also have to pay £25 a year to the community for the privilege of being able to call my half-acre my own.

'I do not dispute the claim that land value belongs to the community'

I was anxious to see how Henry George would meet this case. This is how he deals with it:-

"Take now the case of the homestead owner - the mechanic, storekeeper, or professional man who has secured himself a house or lot, where he lives, and which he contemplates with satisfaction as a place from which his family cannot be ejected in case of his death.

"He will not be injured; on the contrary, he will be the gainer.

"The selling value of his lot will diminish - theoretically it will entirely disappear. But its usefulness to him will not disappear. It will serve its purpose as well as ever. While, as the value of all other lots will diminish, or disappear in the same ratio, he retains the same security of always having a lot that he had before."

You see how ingenious he can be! And he goes on:-

"He is a loser only as the man who has bought himself a pair of boots may be said to be a loser by a subsequent fall in the price of boots. His boots will be just as useful to him, and the next pair of boots he can get cheaper.

"Other things considered, he will be much the gainer. For, although he

IN 1930 a distinguished British journalist decided to investigate the reason why so many people devoted time and effort to advance an idea - the taxation of land values.

He approached his enquiry as a sceptic, but became increasingly convinced that he had stumbled on a solution to so many of the bleak economic problems that confronted the world of his day.

While struggling to resist the central thesis, which was expounded in Henry George's *Progress & Poverty*, he nonetheless decided to itemise on paper a list of what appeared to be the injustices of the existing system. One of these was:

That there should be over 2,000,000 unemployed while many thousands of acres are going out of cultivation largely because the prices and rents of land are too high, and because landowners can keep sites vacant and land idle, or make it an exclusive pleasure-ground, and pay nothing or only a trivial sum in taxation.

The results of his enquiry were published anonymously in London as a six-penny pamphlet. It was called *Light On The Land Question*. We publish an extract as a reminder of the parallels between the 1930s and the 1980s.

will have more taxes to pay on his land, he will be released from taxes on his house and improvements, on his furniture and personal property, on all that he and his family eat, drink and wear, while his earnings will be largely increased by the rise of wages, the constant employment, and the increased briskness of trade.

"His only loss will be if he wants to sell his lot without getting another, and this will be a small loss, compared with a greater gain."

Was I convinced? Was I as completely convinced, I asked myself, of the justice of this proposal as of the injustices of which I had made a list?

I could not dispute the claim that land value belongs to the community, nor the view that it is wrong to tax houses or anything else produced by labour; but how about the idea that land values would provide all the revenue necessary for public purposes?

'Free the country from the throttling grip of land monopoly and we would at once breathe more freely'

I DOUBTED if Henry George, if he were living now, would insist, as he did in 1879 and till his death in 1897, that the whole of the expenditure of this country, both local and national, could be met by land value taxation.

At the time he wrote, the world was a comparatively reasonable place.

● It had not slaughtered ten million men or blown thousands of millions of capital into the air.

● It had not piled up huge national debts.

● There were no expensive unemployment insurance schemes or old age pensions.

● Armies and navies were comparatively cheap. No country had to raise a national revenue, as we have to, of over £800,000,000 - to say nothing of another £180,000,000 of local revenue.

His world was quite a different one, and I found it difficult to believe that he would have suggested raising the whole of this revenue by land value taxation alone.

No doubt the value of the land of this country has increased considerably since he wrote - but has it increased enough?

To make it possible to raise the whole of the revenue by merely taking the annual value of the land, the true economic rent would have to be £1000,000,000. Is it so much?

'Tax the land, not trade and industry'