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Q1(e)

Despite the efforts of the government, bonded labour still continues in India. Discuss.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 2 · 10 marks · Systems of Kinship in India

Systems of Kinship in India: Lineage and descent in India; Types of kinship systems; Family and marriage in India; Household dimensions of the family; Patriarchy, entitlements and sexual division of labour.

Core demand of the question

- State the legal abolition and the social fact of continuance
- Explain debt, caste, migration, weak inspection, and contractor systems
- Use the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976 and contemporary sectors
- Do not treat continuance as mere official failure; show social structure

Revision summary

The 1976 Act abolished bonded labour in law; **neo-bondage** continues in kilns, farms and migration streams.

Advances and contractors tie Dalit, Adivasi and other poor households season after season.

Breman's **neo-bondage** is market unfreedom, not only old agrestic serfdom.

Rescue without credit and work leads to re-bondage.

Informal capitalism and caste together explain why government effort has not ended the practice.

Introduction

The **Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976** declared bondage void, freed bonded workers, and promised rehabilitation. **Article 23** already barred begar and similar forms. Yet brick kilns, quarries, agriculture, handlooms, domestic work and trafficking corridors still produce **debt bondage**. Continuance is a social structure, not only a gap in policing.

Body

Why the Act does not empty the field

Bondage in India is typically an advance (peshgi) that ties a worker or a family to a contractor (sardar, thekedar) for a season or years. Caste organises who can be tied: Dalit and Adivasi households, and some extremely backward peasant groups, enter kilns and fields with fewer exit options. **Jan Breman** described **neo-bondage**: not a lifelong serf on one master's land, but a renewable unfreedom through labour-market intermediaries. Child labour and women's unpaid help on the same site deepen the tie.

Government efforts-surveys, release certificates, NHRC orders, Central Sector Scheme for rehabilitation-assume a detectable master-servant pair. Contract chains, interstate migration, and cashless advances hide that pair. Employers call workers 'free' because they may leave

after the season; leaving without clearing the advance is not free. Panchayats and local police often share the employer's class or caste world. Rescue without land, credit or a job produces **re-bondage**.

Sectors and the wider economy

Agriculture after land reform still uses attached labour in pockets. Construction and kilns around cities feed on seasonal Bihar, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan streams. The informalisation noted in industrial class structure is the same story: the organised citadel outsources risk to a bonded margin. Trafficking and the Juvenile Justice and child labour laws overlap this field; they have not closed it.

Continuance therefore sits at the junction of **caste, credit, migration and informal capitalism**. The Act remains necessary. It is not sufficient without cheap rural credit, enforceable minimum wages, contractor licensing that works, and rehabilitation that includes housing and work rather than a one-time stipend.

Flow diagram

Debt advance -> Bonded labour
Caste and landlessness -> Bonded labour
Contractors and migration -> Bonded labour
Weak rehab -> Bonded labour

Conclusion

Bonded labour continues because debt, caste and labour contracting still produce unfreedom after legal abolition. Government schemes treat cases; the structure reproduces workers. Release plus livelihood is the sociological test, not the existence of a 1976 statute.

Facts & figures

Bonded Labour Act 1976

Void the bonded system, frees labourers and provides for identification and rehabilitation.

Article 23

Constitutional ban on traffic in human beings and begar.

Neo-bondage

Breman's term for debt-tied migrant labour under contractors rather than lifelong village serfdom.