



Patterns and dynamics of slavery and bonded labour in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh: Findings from life story analysis

Danny Burns, Institute for Development Studies,
Pauline Oosterhoff, Institute for Development Studies
Aruna Mohan Raj, Praxis Institute
Rituu B Nanda, Evaluation and Community Engagement Facilitator

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This report summarises the findings of the analysis of multiple life stories collected across the Freedom Fund slavery hotspot in North India by NGO representatives at the Collective Story Analysis workshop 13-16 May 2015. We outline the major findings and key system dynamics that emerged in the story analysis.

Life story methodology

NGO representatives were asked to collect many hundreds of life stories between them. The life story does not depict every aspect of a person's life, but rather important episodes and transitions in their lives that they want to talk about.

The aim of collecting life stories and analysing them together was to:

- Enable community and NGO researchers to arrive at a collective understanding of contemporary slavery and bonded labour issues in this hotspot in North India
- Understand the forms of slavery and agree on the categories and definitions that should be used in a prevalence study in this hotspot in North India using participatory statistics
- Inform areas and issues that will be explored in the Action Research
- Reflect on how the individual NGO programmes can most effectively respond to the issues and dynamics identified and how the whole programme can meet the needs identified.
- Identify possible gaps and reflect on if and how these might be addressed
- Stimulate and inspire NGOs about how to make their programmes and the hotspot approach more effective and relevant.

The stories enable participants to build a comprehensive picture of how people perceive their lives and the options they have had in the context of slavery and bonded labour in Bihar and U.P. The stories are not final historic records of a person but a here-and-now picture of how people in this context describe their lives to NGO staff and community representatives. They give insight into the ways people talk about and categorize the different types and forms of slavery as well as how they perceive its causes and effects. To understand the diversity in this context it was important that people in different situations across the hotspot told their story. The stories were NOT collected for advocacy purposes, to generate money from donors or for legal action.

Following a methodological training, field level NGO staff collected life stories in their project areas. The life story method has been used as it enables us to see the different causes and consequences of factors that lead to slavery and or perpetuate slavery during the life of an individual. It also allows the participant to initiate topics and talk about the things that are important to them rather than being guided by issues that are either explicit or implicit in researchers' pre-constructed questions.

Each NGO was asked to collect 11 stories in four villages; 44 stories for each of the eight NGOs. These were recorded as notes and written up in Hindi as full stories. NGOs were asked to select villages with a significant slavery problem. Assessment of this was based on anecdotal evidence or estimated prevalence of slavery. NGOs could use the rationale for why they selected this village for a program intervention, giving them an opportunity to reflect on their program choices. We estimated one story to take between 30 to 60 minutes to collect. A minimum of five stories were to be collected in each village to give enough data to indicate patterns in that village. The story collection teams were made up of two people - one from the NGO office and one a community mobiliser who may be from the NGO or from the community or perhaps a student. Community members would know best who to select due to their in-depth knowledge and NGO workers would have the skills to do the data collection in a systematic fashion and in line with the overall design. The final decision on the team composition was left to the NGO however. Story collection could be combined with working visits.

We proposed that most but not all stories should come from the people directly affected by slavery in a household- parents who send children to the city or children who went, or individuals in families in bonded labour, or adults who had been affected by trafficking. We proposed that of the 11 stories per village:

- 7 should come from people directly affected (people in slavery or their families)
- 2 former slaves with the same socio-economic and caste profile as the 7 who went into slavery
- 2 people who can provide a broad profile and are significant in the community (e.g.: teacher; PRI member)

We developed a protocol for the safe storage and coding of stories.

353 stories were collected, one more than planned. The collection of stories took place under extremely difficult circumstances just after an earthquake with several aftershocks that directly affected the villages where the NGO worked and the NGO staff and their families. This meant that most of the stories were collected by grass roots NGO workers rather than community representatives as originally planned.

The overall demographic profiles and characteristics of the stories collected by all NGOs were close to the planned sample. We found that 221 of the 353 (63%) were people directly affected (in slavery or their families); 44 (12%) had either not been in slavery or were former slaves, and 88 (25%) were people who could provide a broad profile of the situation.

The demographic profiles of the respondents of the individual NGO reflected their intervention and area of expertise. The sample had mostly women and very few girls. Prayas and MSEMVS contributed most of the stories of ex-child bonded/trafficked labourer outside community and MDC contributed most of the stories of trafficked sex-workers and women in the sample.

The demographic profiles of people directly and indirectly affected by slavery that NGOs found in the field were more diverse than the profiles in the original coding. Based on the stories we created new categories that could better capture the reality of slavery in the field. The categories were used to inform the design of the prevalence study.

Demographic profiles of narrators of life stories on bonded labour and modern slavery in UP and Bihar

Type of labour and relation to labourer	Adithi	PGS	MSEMVS	IDF	Centre direct	MDC	Nirdesh	Prayas	Total
Bonded/trafficked Labourer outside the community	2	1							3
Bonded Labourer within the community	5	20		12	11	12	3	10	73
Ex-bonded/trafficked labourer		4	15	5				3	27
Trafficked sex worker						28			28
Child Labourer within the community	3				2	1	25	1	32
Child Labourer outside the community	3								3
Bonded child labourer inside the community								1	1
Bonded/trafficked child labourer outside the community				1					1
Parents of child labourer in community	3							2	5
Parents of bonded or trafficked child labourer outside community	11	2			10			5	28
Parents of bonded child labourer inside community					4				4
Ex-child bonded/trafficked labourer outside community	2		7					8	17
Wife of an internationally bonded/trafficked labourer	1								1
Wife of bonded/trafficked labourer outside community	1	2		14					17
Wife of bonded labourer inside community		1			1				2
Panchayat leader and PRI member	1	1		3	6			9	20
Local opinion leader (community head, ex-PRI, Dalit leader)	2	6	2				8	1	19
Residents general *	7	1	16						24
Parent of child that avoided bonded labour				6	8		8		22
Service Provider/Professional (Teacher/social worker)	2	6	4	3	2	4		4	25
Parent of ex-child labourer within community	1								
Total	44	44	44	44	44	45	44	44	353

*Not ex-bonded/trafficked labourer or a child or a relative of a bonded/trafficked person

Collective analysis process

For the analysis of the stories, we invited NGO and community representatives to come to a workshop. Most of the participants were field level NGO staff working with communities, a few were more senior. We divided the stories amongst participants who analysed each story in pairs. We asked them to identify the central theme of the story; what was important about the story and why; and to identify the important factors in the story – what they were caused by and what were the consequences of them. The key themes were organised using a clustering technique. Each story had a code, which participants wrote on a post-it that was on the wall around the themes they identified. This clustering of stories revealed patterns and clusters of themes that emerged from the analysis.

Participants examined and discussed the relationships between these factors through the construction of a collective system map. The map was colour coded to indicate positive and negative trajectories and arrows were used to indicate the direction of causalities. Participants were instructed that they could only put on factors that were in the stories. They could put their own experience or questions on the map but only on sticky notes. Once complete we asked participants which were the strongest relationships and thickened some of the lines accordingly. The map allowed us to see how factors identified from the experience and views of the respondents in the hotspot were interlinked – and allowed us to see the chains of causalities, and to see the whole in one view. This is different from mapping at a village or an NGO level as it allows us to look at patterns and causes across the hotspot. The patterns of the clustering tell us a lot about what is going on. The causal chains tell us about how that is happening and why.



Once the drawn map was finished we carried out a further exercise in which we asked NGOs to place markers on map which denoted where they had activities. Each NGO was given three sticky notes in bright pink which showed where they had large programmes and three sticky notes in Orange, which showed where they had other programmes. Therefore, they were able to show their top six areas of work on the map. While some do have other areas of work these are clearly much lower down their list of priorities and or on a much a smaller scale.



For the write up of this report, we checked and analysed the individual stories that participants identified as illustrating the key dynamics and themes clustered on the map during the joint analysis of the workshop.

Limitations

- Teams collected the life stories immediately after the earthquake. This could have changed people's perspectives on their lives.
- The sample has very few girls, highlighting the need to pay explicit attention to gender, age and kinship dynamics in these slavery hotspots.
- Most of the people who collected and analysed the stories were NGO staff.
- We did not speak with self-identified traffickers, moneylenders or slaveholders. Based on the results of our scoping and anecdotal evidence we know that these people have many different roles in a community, may hold positions of authority and self-identify as the holder of that position.
- A qualitative in-depth analysis of each of these stories by social scientists could show additional themes or relations. However, the purpose of this exercise was to get a field level analysis and to carry it out in a way that enabled a collective view of the whole data set in real time.

Findings

System dynamics which keep people in bondage

What follows are some of the key dynamics that can be distilled from the maps. Short quotations are used to illustrate the issues. Fuller stories are referenced as for example LS 2, 4, 6 meaning Life Stories 2, 4 and 6. These can be found at the end of the document. The table below shows the dominant issue in each story and the frequency with which these issues occurred. Some categories are actually bigger than indicated because they are also embedded in others. For example, the loans/ Advance category also includes loans triggered by health crises.

Primary categorisation	Number of stories
Sickness	54
Education	32
Loan/Advance	22
Caste-based discrimination	18
Deceit	15
Violence	15
Drug addiction and alcoholism	14
Poverty	13
Government services	12
Positive deviance stories	12
Domestic violence	9
Lack of awareness	8
Responsibility	7
Generational bondage	7
Death	6
Migration	5
Large family	4
Lack of livelihood	4
Early Marriage-	3
Disability	3
Gambling	2
Orphan	1
Mental trauma	1
	267

We refer to the above table in the text that follows:

Critical life incidents trigger need for risky loans

Perhaps the single most important factor identified in the system maps was that life incidents trigger a demand for loans that cannot be met by means other than borrowing from the local moneylenders through local middlemen. The amounts that are needed to get through these crises is much greater than the amounts that people living with this level of poverty can save through small scale local saving schemes. The self-help type loan schemes can provide enough money to get livelihoods kick started, but they are not large enough to carry people through a major life crisis such as an illness that requires money for services or cover the costs of major event such as a marriage. The middlemen are also the most convenient source of loans because they are local and because banks will not easily lend to people in these villages.

The biggest critical life incident identified was a health crisis related to either illness or accident. In the clustering exercise of 267 stories, 54 were identified as primarily about health. This reflects a general dynamic that people living in poverty often have poor health and vice versa. In this context, health crises lead to risky loan taking and reveal a failing public health system. (See LS 1, 3, 6)

The number is in fact slightly higher because the 'loan' category also has a few which identify loans for sicknesses, as does the disability category. The central position of health is particularly striking given that the stories have been elicited through open-ended prompts with no reference to sickness (or any other issues)

"I tell my husband to rest in this illness to get better soon but he doesn't agree. He is so scared from within that he does not want to talk about it. Today he said to let him go and repay the loan and then he could stay at home. Now you tell me, the person who cannot walk properly, how can he do work at the stone minefields. But fear can make one do anything. We are in constant fear that don't know when the contractor's men will come and force them to give money."

Wife narrating the story of her husband who is a bonded labour in the village, Allahabad District

"He got work at a sports factory and had to put in 12 hours of work a day. Due to poor living and eating conditions he fell sick but he still had to work and when he protested he got beaten up. There was no line of treatment and his health started deteriorating and he became weak. There was no way to contact his family but when one day he finally got in touch with them they forced him to return cause of his ill health. 'When I was treated at home I got to know I was suffering from 'kala zahar'"

Boy, child labour outside the village, Village Pararia, Bihar

Of course, accidents and illness also make it harder to pay off the loans once they are made, because people who are sick cannot work. Therefore, there is reinforcing spiral of decline in the relationship between loans and illness and failure to access public health services.

A number of the stories with a primary categorisation of loans related specifically to loans for marriage: Letting your girl child go with the trafficker is also a way of avoiding paying dowries. Other triggers included drug addiction and alcoholism (LS4) and gambling.

"My brother in law died 7 years back. He was used to eating and drinking and he used to sell his house belongings for his drinks. Due to too much drinking he used to stay unwell most of the time and he ignored his ill health because he was too much involved in drinks. His liver was damaged cause of drinks and because he did not pay attention to his health he eventually died after a few years. After her husband's death my sister's family's economic condition was very bad." (This sister feeling helpless due to the economic condition finally agreed to send her minor son with the contractor to work in a factory in Jaipur)

Woman sharing a story of her nephew, child labour outside the village, District Samastipur

"My mother was a sex worker and she had two daughters and a son. She somehow caught the bad habit of drinking and whatever she earned, she spent maximum of it on drinking and we brother and sisters lived in poverty. It was due to her drinking habit that she had to join this trade. She had got us also engaged in the helping roles in her trade. While she remained engaged with her customers, I used to bring wine, cigarettes and condoms for them. Later, she became mentally deranged and my Mauasi spent some amount on her treatment." (It was her mother's sister who forces this young girl into sex work)

Adult female sex worker, sex trafficking, Muzzafarpur

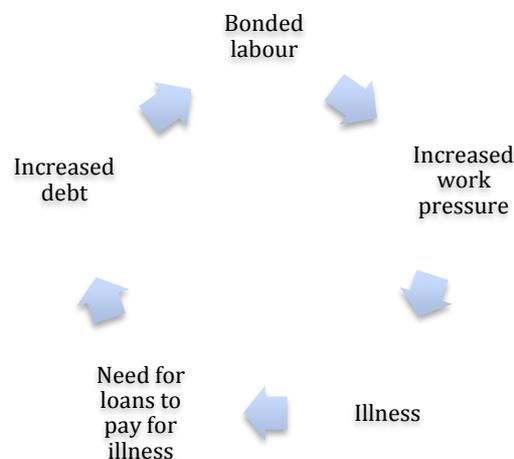
“It was at this point that he was convinced by his friends to push me in the flesh trade, so that I could earn. When I declined to do that, he started beating me badly. Several of his friends did the same thing and they were living upon their wives’ earning. I was fed up with taking the beating on a daily basis. Moreover, I was also compelled by the condition of our children. Ultimately, I agreed to his pressure and became a sex worker.” (Husband due to alcoholism takes on large amount of debt and then forces his wife into sex work)

Female adult sex worker, District Muzaffarpur

Death in the family was also a trigger because it leads to funeral costs etc. It was also a time when people were vulnerable. Other relatives who don’t want the burden of the child will sell them to the middleman.

Savings can help to pay off loans, to support a business, or help children get into school but they do not meet the costs of these huge spikes in need for cash. It is also worth noting that loans which help some members of the family may keep others in bondage. One woman, for example, describes taking loans to pay the high school fees of her child. Many respondents explained that they had multiple loans.

Just as the cliché goes “wealth generates wealth” so bonded labour re-enforces bonded labour. In other words, once you are in it is very difficult to get out, because all of the systemic factors re-enforce the status quo. As we have seen, for example, bonded labour can lead to a much higher level of stress on the body, and this can lead to illness, which in turn may lead to more loans to pay for health care, which means that the person perpetuates the bondage. This is a simple cycle.



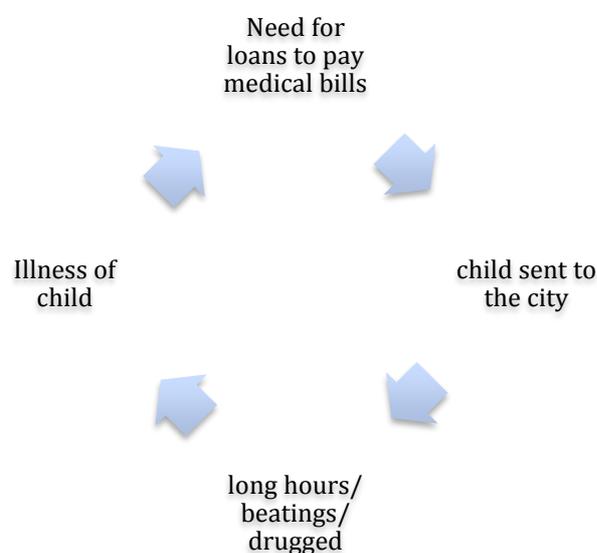
Children made to work as slaves to pay for bondage debts

Because bonded labourers earn less than subsistence wages by definition they don’t have money to pay for loans. So if they are forced to take loans in response to crisis then the only way they can pay for them is to turn back to the employer for a further loan – once again giving their or their children’s labour in return. The trap becomes even worse when there are large families (LS 5, 6), and it becomes acute when, as above, life events trigger new large loans. The debt can very rarely be paid off through wages, as people have no surplus income. Sometimes, the only way that the loans can be paid is to send the children to the city (LS 5). In one of the scoping study villages, virtually every male child above the age of 12 and some younger had been sent away to the city. Children may be physically abused, work long hours, and be given drugs to keep them awake. Some get ill (LS 10) and some die. Similar

conditions of abuse apply to children who are forced to work locally on the landowner's land (LS 8). This puts further burden on the family to pay for health and funeral expenses, which can then lead to the next child being sent to the city and so on.

"The mahadalit woman's husband was sick and the mahajan wanted him to reap the potatoes in his fields. The mahajan forcefully went to their house and took him out of the house and tried dragging him for work. The woman was crying hysterically and said he should let him go now because her husband was sick. She assured him that once he was well he would definitely go to work. But the mahajan's son refused to hear anything. The mahadalit lady said that they have given their 10-year-old son instead of the loan they have taken so what more they want? To which the mahajan abused and said that her son only eats and doesn't do any work."

Woman ward member (local government elected member) narrates a story of bonded adult male labour and child male labour in the village, Muzzafarpur



It was also noted that the majority of those that are sent away through the traffickers are boys and the oldest boys within each family are the most vulnerable to trafficking. This is a very important pattern, which will be explored in more detail in the action research.

Children who are sent away or are otherwise bonded under threat of violence often accept their situation because they are trying to help their families to survive. They often feel responsible to help so that the family can have a better life (LS4, 6, 10). Sometimes they leave voluntarily to help their families but later go missing:

"Now it has been six years since my children went out to work. I tried my best to find them but have not been successful. I also filed a complaint with the police but they have not been able to find the children."

(A lady took loan for marriage of her daughter. To repay her loan, she was forced to send both her sons outside the village to work but now her sons are missing.)

Father narrates story of his minor son who was trafficked, Sitamarhi district

Early marriage, bigger families

Early marriage leads to bigger families, which require more money, which increases the vulnerability of these families to taking out risky loans. As well as simply needing more money for food and daily expenditures, early marriages multiply the risk of exposure to disease etc. Early marriage leads to a range of health issues such as malnutrition, maternal death and trauma, which result in costs that families cannot afford. Lack of awareness feeds into this. It is evident from the stories that many adolescent girls and boys have little knowledge on sexual health and family planning.

Intergenerational bondage and violence from the landlords

Many respondents described how the bonded labour of their parents caused them to be in similar situations (LS7). They try to find alternatives themselves but these do not work out and result in violent responses from landlords. This results in a sense of helplessness – which may manifest itself as passive behaviour- but can be distinct from accepting inequality or abusive power relations as a normal way of life. People can feel they have no rights because they are inferior; their families have always done this work so they will continue. People conform but do not agree with the social norms that produce these inequalities.

Being prevented from doing other work as a result of violence is a key theme (LS3). The problem is not that there isn't work. Throughout the stories there were many examples of young people who had escaped to work for other local employers who paid higher amounts (200 rupees per day). So the issue seems not to be that there isn't alternative work, but that people are stopped from taking it because of the boundaries placed on them by bondage – reinforced where necessary by violence. Often when they do take new work this places them at the risk of further deceit reinforced by violence (LS 1).

Caste

It is clear from the stories and the demographic profiles that caste is a main factor in vulnerability to slavery. Out of the 353 respondents 226 belonged to the scheduled caste, 67 were Muslim and 46 were from the other backward castes. Those who belonged to the category "other" were all people in some position of leadership. We can also see from a number of the stories above that people accept their situation as being a result of 'sins in a previous life'.

The role of the middlemen

The role of the middlemen is crucial. Middlemen are usually connected to the communities that they work in, and often live within them. They work openly and are regarded by many (in these particular contexts) as a solution.

Key to the process is deception (LS 2). Middlemen make up stories about how much money the family will be paid for the child and the conditions that the child will be working under. Once the child is taken, middlemen and slaveholders enforce a prohibition on communication with the family (LS 9). This means that it can take a long time before the family realise that something is wrong.

"When we asked them to let us talk to our family members, he would simply decline and abused us. On one of rare occasions, when I was allowed to talk, in very brief, to my mother, she informed me that she had received no money from our factory owner. On it, we asked the factory owner to allow us go home, who said that the man who reached us there had taken money from him and unless that money is repaid with our labour, he would not allow us to leave."

Boy trafficked outside the village narrates his own story, Samastipur District

Because the middlemen are embedded in the community they are highly alert to the vulnerabilities of people and are more or less immediately on the scene. Sometimes those that act as middlemen may be family members. How to prevent middlemen preying on these vulnerabilities is an issue that needs to be explored further in the action research.

“After some while, my uncle came out of that room and told me to wait there for him for a while, until he came back to me. When he did not return even the next day, I was so very upset and began to cry. Then that woman (let us call her Anamika) told me not to be perturbed saying my uncle would come back soon. She asked me to live there comfortably and eat what I liked. After some days, she informed me that my uncle had sold me to her in Rs. 50,000 and he would never return to take me back home.”

Female sex worker narrates her own story of child sex trafficking, Muzzafarpur District

The relatively large numbers of stories on the deceit of the middlemen suggests that the strategy of information campaigns and general education on the issues is a good one – although it is hard to measure the direct impact of this strategy.

Pathways out of bondage identified through the story analysis

Education

Some children do not go to school because their parents perceive the quality of school is poor, because they don't get food at lunch time, and because lower caste children in particular are abused, beaten and made to sit at the back. This makes it hard for parents to see the value of school and there is no incentive for the child to stay.

Many children are forced into work. Some, feeling responsible to support their families, choose to run away to work despite the conditions. Lower caste families are typically landless so need the labour of their children in order to pay for the daily household expenses. As described above the children are taken into the city to pay back the loans that ultimately derive from bondage. Often parents are given an 'advance' on the labour of their child but they never see the rest of the money that they were promised. Also children are simply forced into bondage and there were some examples of where the landlord basically did not pay the children because they were seen as working for their parents (helping their parents to receive a non-subsistence wage) – backed up again by threat of force.

Nevertheless, on the positive side education was identified by the stories as the most important way to protect children from bondage. This was because they were to some extent protected when they were in school, and because they were able to learn of some of the dangers that they faced etc. There were eight examples of parents who had acted with determination to keep their child in school. This usually happened after a bad experience where their child was trafficked. As one said 'time taught us' or where one child has been taken away and they try to protect another. However, typically even where this protection happened it was only possible for a younger child of the family

Rescue is one of the many steps needed for children to get out of bondage. After rescue children may go out for work again, continue to work inside the village or go to school.

Legal declaration of bondage

We learned through the scoping study that there is little incentive for people to declare themselves as in bondage because local authorities are not enforcing the law and providing certificates and associated benefits. A strategy needs to be developed for ensuring this.

Repaying loans through savings

There were a few examples of where the moneylenders' loans were paid back as a result of income generation but these were rare.

"One day, my maternal uncle came to meet us. I somehow met him stealthily, while hiding this from Malik and fled away with him to his home where from I went to work at a brick kiln. Though, there also, the payment was not sufficient, but at least, I was not beaten up there. There I was paid @ Rs. 150/thousand bricks and the kiln owner had even done some manipulations in the accounts, too. But, at least, I was paid regularly. When I returned from there after two years, I sold our goats and added it up to my savings to repay the loan."

Male adult narrating his story of child labour outside the village, Muzzafarpur district

Collective Action

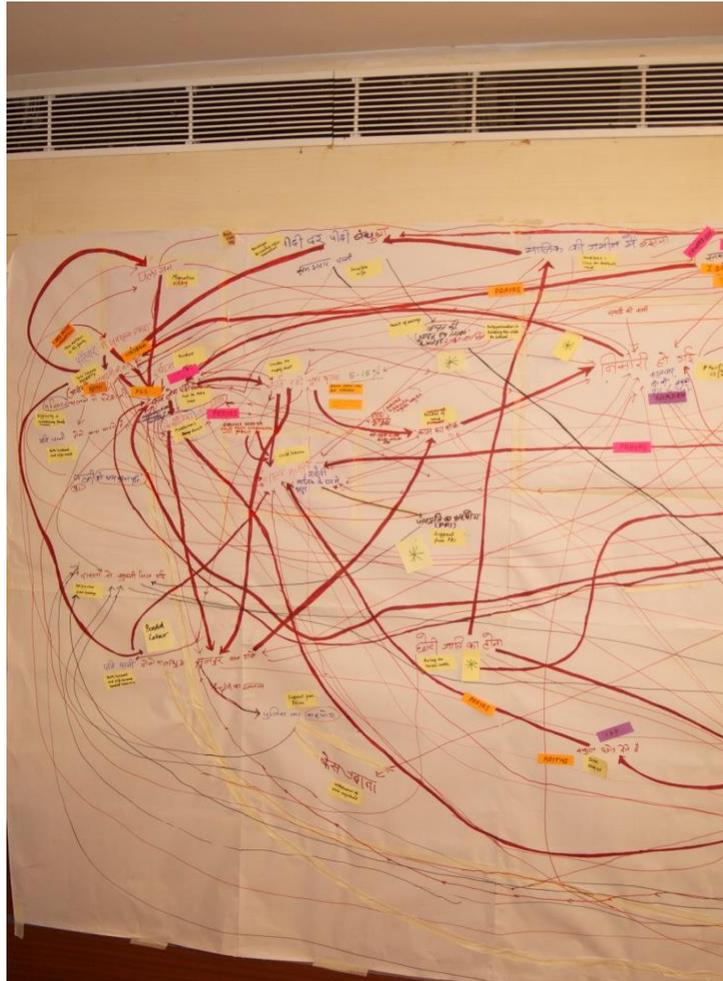
There are a few examples of bonded labourers getting support to challenge the landowners (LS11). The most significant of these involved a resistance which ultimately led to those labourers leaving the village. So although they were empowered to break free from the coercion of the landlords to enforce their continued work for them, they did not feel strong enough to stay in the same place and take them on. There are economic alternatives being built such as the co-operative brick kiln supported by MSEMVS and there was one example of a major resistance to the landlord from young people. The problem with both is that they have not changed the dynamics of the village itself. People have moved to work in the new brick kiln and those young people involved in the conflict eventually moved away collectively. While the individuals are liberated, it does not represent a sustainable solution to the village problem if the landlords are able to draw new people into bondage, although in this case there have been rescues in surrounding areas which has impacted positively on power relations. The collectively owned brick kiln is an interesting development, which shows some promise. However, given that, as we noted above, work at higher wages might be available. It is not an easily replicable model and it might be hard to compete and make it sustainable in a market based on low costs due to slave labour. On the other hand, this was the workers' sense of what would work for them and what they wanted to do.

Where there was support from the Panchayat members this could lead to positive outcomes but from the accounts this seems to be extremely rare. So while work with the PRI's makes sense, at this point there seem to be few examples of success. Those that are documented have made a change for an individual not for the community as a whole. This suggests that a great deal more learning needs to go into the ways in which this strategy can be made more effective.

Distribution of current NGO activities and services

Once the system map was produced we asked people to map their activities against the key system dynamics on the map. Pink stickies on the map denoted that the NGO had a large programme on these issues, orange stickies denoted that they had some work there but it wasn't substantial. Almost all of the pink sticky notes with main current NGO activities were clustered in three areas of the map:

- 1) Lack of awareness and the information and advocacy that goes alongside that.
- 2) Community collective action
- 3) Access to government schemes



These are generally useful activities. However, there are several places on the map where NGO's could take action against slavery but where relatively little is happening. The part of the maps which held most of the strong causal links centres on the factors that triggered and re-triggered loans. Many NGOs support credit and savings groups, which have rotating loans but these are usually insufficient to cover the expenses of a critical life crisis, accidents or death. It was agreed to set up an action research group on the triggers to loans which will identify and test ideas about how to respond to the loans issue. At a programmatic level the evidence suggests that programmes specifically dedicated to loans to meet crisis – either through enhancing the work of existing NGO's or supporting new ones need to be made a priority. A lot of investment is going into small loans for building livelihoods. Given the availability of work outside of the bonded villages, this may have significantly less impact than loans to meet crises. While we would hesitate to suggest activities these might for example include negotiating with banks; ensuring that hotspot interventions should not only focus on the loans that result from health problems but also on health itself. While working on access to government schemes can include health, this area should be prioritised. It may be worth considering specific health care interventions or partnerships with other funders and NGOs that might target the hotspot.

A small cluster of orange stickies indicated some NGO work on addiction which is important and not covered in the primary health system – but it is a complicated problem that requires specific expertise and it is important that the programme ensures that this expertise is available to the NGOs engaging in this work.

There are also some considerable pockets of work where projects are working on issues which are not seen to be a priority within the big picture. Work on the raids is important from a human rights perspective but it may not be the best way to change the lives of large numbers of people. Similarly, a PRI member helping an individual is always a good sign, but it won't solve the underlying problem. Efforts targeted at PRI members need to spark a culture change which puts pressure on elected representatives to enforce the law.

Conclusion

The life stories have created mutually agreed and context informed categories for the prevalence study in this hotspot. They have also helped to identify the critical factors that cause and maintain slavery. These will be tested in a larger sample through the prevalence study. A deeper analysis, alongside the development and testing of solutions will be carried out through the action research process. In the meantime, we suggest that the programme re-orient its direction of travel in the direction indicated by the findings above.

Life stories

The stories below often illustrate multiple issues, which is why we have not located them under particular thematic headings. Readers will be able to see how the conclusions drawn above are reflected in the real life stories below.

(The names below are pseudonyms)

Life story 1

I have three sons but the eldest is suffering from tuberculosis from childhood itself. I am worried about him a lot. I sold my jewellery and got him treated but there was no benefit. I also got him treated at the government hospital but there was no benefit. I asked money from the landowner but he did not give any.

We took Rs. 5000 from the mahajan at Rs. 12 % interest and showed to a private doctor at Muzaffarpur but there was no benefit from it. There was starvation in the house for everyone. The situation got worse in the rainy season. There was no work in the village and what work we did for the owner we hardly got paid for it. When we told anything he beat us and abused us and told us to vacate the land. We just used to be quiet.

We got to know that a broker from Silchar for Brick and kiln factory had come to the village. They gave advance money to people and took them to Silchar, Assam. My husband and me also went to talk to him about this. He said my husband would be kept for coal work and would be paid Rs. 8000 monthly. They said he would get overtime money separately. They said if we agree then we can take Rs. 2500 advance money and then can go after 'chath'. We thought it's better to go there than work here without any money. We also had a lot of loan due on us and this way it can be repaid.

My husband went to Silchar with the broker after 'chath'. The owner came and told us many things and abused us. I tolerated everything and whatever is written in the fate happens. After the chimney, work got over the owner there cleared their accounts with the rate of Rs. 4000 monthly. There was no money for overtime. They even cut money for the food they had provided. My husband pleaded a lot in front of the chimney owner but he was merciless and didn't listen at all. He did cheat on us.

When my husband returned he was very weak. I got him treated and gave him medicines. I have returned some money and some of it is still left.

Life story 2

"I am Sunita, aged 35 and I was born in a poor Musahar family. When I was quite young, I lost both my parents that left us in great difficulty in meeting the ends. We were two of us - brother and sister. Both of us worked to earn our livelihood. I grazed our goat and cooked food, while my brother cut wood. Whatever he got from his wood-cutting, was the only income for us to run our household.

"When I was about 14, my brother got me married with Kari Manjhi of Ghurghura and I came over to live with my husband. The economic condition of my husband's household was also not good. Four-five years after my marriage, I gave birth to our eldest son. Gradually, we got two more sons and a daughter. We are so poor that it often becomes difficult to have two square meals. My husband is a labourer on a tractor and his wage from it is the income that sustains us all. He gives me Rs.300-400 on every 3-4 days and I have to run the household within this limit.

"The elder brother of my husband is no more. His wife remarried and went away to live with him. They had a daughter who lived with us, in whose marriage we had to borrow Rs. 20,000 on Rs.4% monthly interest. My husband repays the loan, but how much has he repaid, I know not. After this marriage, my mother-in-law died, and again, we had to borrow Rs. 8,000 from the moneylender on Rs.5% monthly interest.

"My eldest son, Shyam, was not taking interest in his studies, so we sent him to work with the contractor in a hotel. The contractor took him with him assuring us a monthly wage of Rs. 1,000 but, four years have passed and he has not given a single paisa to us. He had given us Rs. 1,500 while taking my son with him. My son works in Sundar Mithann Bhandar in Parihar and has not come even once in these four years. Whenever we go to the hotel owner to demand money, he assures us to give it, but he never gives it. The dues on him over these four years have accumulated to be a large amount for us, and had he given it to us, all our loans would have been repaid.

"I, too, go to do wage labor in the fields for sowing, weeding and harvesting. If paid in kind, I am given 5kg of cereal and, if in kind, it is Rs.100. My husband also goes for sowing. In our village, there are only a few farmers and a large number of labors resulting in low wages. I have taken a goat for rearing from its owner. When it would give birth to kids, the price fetched will be divided half-half between us both. We do not have our own land. Our hut is on Government land.

"Only if we had the money earned by our son, we would have been far happier."

Life story 3

Five years back my husband died. I have 5 daughters and one son. Out of my 5 daughters, 3 are married and 2 are unmarried. My son who is the reason behind my life has gone out to work. I don't know anything about him as to where he has gone. I work in the fields in the village to earn money. I used to get Rs. 80 / 100 daily. This was not enough to run the house but I was still happy. My son also send money to us sometimes.

Meanwhile my daughter started keeping unwell. I took money from a few places and then got her treated and got to know that my daughter's kidney was not working. I needed more money for her treatment so I took Rs. 5000 from the mahajan and I started getting my daughter treated for her illness. Because of my daughter's ill health and the running around I too got sick and I also had to take money for my treatment. Even after so much of treatment, there was no improvement in my daughter's health. I again went to the mahajan's house for more money but he refused to give and said the previous money I have taken I still have not returned so how can I hope to get the other loan. ...

When I heard this, I cried at the mahajan's feet and said that I will return all your money but right now I need some or else my daughter will die. The mahajan then gave me Rs. 3000 and said to come with my other daughter and work at their place. This way I will be able to return some money at least. I agreed to the mahajan's advice, took money from him, and came around to work for him from the next day. I got my daughter treated further from that money. My daughter and I had to work for 7 / 8 hours at the mahajan's place and many times on festivals etc., also I had to work for late nights. Our state was getting bad every day. The Rs. 50 we got from the mahajan was not enough to run the family. We hardly managed 2 meals from it. On top of it, there was an ill child at home. She is not able to get better despite so much money being spent on her.

The doctor says that it is urgent to get the kidney's operation done soon. This requires Rs. 50,000 or so of money for the operation. I am so poor that I cannot manage even Rs. 500 or so of money. We cannot manage so much money. Nobody will give me money now so that I can get my daughter treated soon.

Whenever I tell my owner that I can repay your money by working somewhere else too so let me work anywhere else. If I work anywhere else, I would get Rs. 150 or Rs. 200. The owner then abused us and said when we have to take money we work well and whole-heartedly. He said I used to say I will earn money at your place and repay the loan. So what has happened now? He said that until I earn money I would have to stay there and work at his place.

My state is such that even if I want I cannot change my condition. I am just somehow spending my life miserably and cannot change my condition. Even if I want, I cannot do anything for my daughter. My son who can work and give us money does not find out about us and has nothing to do anything with us.

Life story 4

I am doing this business since 6 years. My father used to drink a lot, was drunk all the time, and used to beat me and my mother and brother. My mother used to work at other houses and the money she earned he spent it all in his drinks. If he were denied the money, he would beat us all. Because of the family being big there was always a shortage of food in the house. I also started going for work at some places. I met Punit. He told me to come along to get him some work. So I went with him. He forced me into things and finally left me to a contractor for work. The contractor lived with his wife and kids. I started working there.

One-day the contractor's wife went with her children for a wedding. Getting an opportunity and seeing me alone he forced me into things. He even called his friends and all of them drank and forced themselves on me. When I said I would complain in my locality he said he would throw acid on me if I do that. He also threatened to kill my brothers. He also said he would not pay me for any work and would take me out from my house and would not give me any work. She started crying saying this. I was scared and I had to accept his whims and fancies and agree to all his demands.

When my landlady returned he told me to go away and said I am not needed there now. He told me stay anywhere else now, rented a flat for me and made me stay there and do business. When I objected he threatened me and even beat me. I could not tell this at home also. My father was drunkard and I did not want to bother my mother for this. She was anyways worried about my father's poverty. I kept suffering the tyranny by him all the time. One day my father asked me for money and when I refused, he beat my mother and me. He drank heavily that day, returned home that night, and tore my clothes. He even raped me then.

When this happened with me and I saw my mother seeing me desperately not able to do anything I was devastated. After this, I contemplated suicide because I could not withstand things anymore. Then I saw my mother alone and brothers and felt pity on them. I thought what else is remaining with me as all my respect is gone so I finally moved into this business without any expectations. I made my brothers study so that their lives are not made hell like mine. I want them to become good human beings and lead a good comfortable life.

Life story 5

We belong to a very poor family and somehow manage to live through by working. We have a lot of children in the house. My husband got married at a very young age. Nobody is educated at my in laws' place nor is my husband. Though I had wished to marry an educated man it was not possible cause of my poor financial status. In fact, I had to marry a disabled person.

My husband was blind. I had a baby soon after I was married. When I told my husband not to have many children in this age of high costs he abused me. He forced things on me and I could not do anything as he was my husband and so with time I had 8 children. Once tired when I retaliated he beat me a lot I thought this is my life and tired I finally ran away from home and went to my parents' house.

Around two years I stayed at my mother's place. Finally tired from society's talks my husband brought me back. He remained the same and I had another child by him very soon. There was only one earning member in the family. He worked at the fields and earned whatever little money he got and we lived on it.

Around a year, back my husband fell sick. We had to borrow around Rs. 20,000 for his treatment. The mahajan took 5% for every Rs. 100. To repay that I used to work at the mahajan's house. He did not let me work anywhere else other than his house.

One day when my husband fell sick, I could not go for work. Next day when I went for work, he refused to take work from me saying that I work at other's fields. I pleaded a lot but he did not agree and took me out from work. He abused me a lot too.

Where would I return all the money from so I started sending one of my daughters to work in the fields. She earned Rs 100 per day. She does not want to earn but instead wants to study but if she does not work where would she eat from?

Around 6 months back, a contractor from Sonwarsa had come in our village. He had a chicken farm. He was taking a lot of children from the village for work. He came and talked to us too and said he would pay Rs. 2500 monthly and take my children and would keep them like his own family. He took my son and gave me Rs. 500. Some days later when I talked to my son he said he gets only Rs. 1000 monthly and he also made my son work at the alcohol factory.

Things are so expensive that I am forced to make my children work. My son cries a lot as he is just 9 years old. He often cuts his hand while cutting the chickens. I have to make my children work because of which we are able to survive.

Life story 6

I am Sanjay Rajkumar from Gyaspur Block, Sivan District, Bihar. I belong to a very poor family. My father somehow managed to provide for the family's subsistence needs by working in the village itself. My village is close to a river and so there are regular floods in the village. My village is extremely backward and has been left behind in terms of education. My parents are uneducated and hence, never had much interest in getting me educated. I am also illiterate. I was married at a very early age, which led to my wife and I having children early. I have four children. My financial condition worsened as the family size grew. My wife became very unwell one day soon after marriage. I had to borrow money from someone in the village and then took my wife to the doctor for a checkup. My wife got well but soon after, my father became ill. I had to take on a new loan of money even when I had not been able to repay the earlier loan. My father died due to his illness. I had to borrow money for his last rites too. I started doing hard labour in the village itself to be able to repay the loans and run my household. My old mother died soon after this. I had to borrow money for her last rites too. I had taken too much money from people and was very worried. Whatever I earned from labour in the village was not enough to provide for my family. People had started coming to me demanding their money back. I could not see a way out of this situation. My eldest son, who I somehow managed to get educated till Class 10th, saw me one day and said, "Babuji, don't worry, I'll work to repay all loans."

Many people from my village were leaving to find work and earn in Gujarat. My son started insisting that I send him with them. I needed the money, so I agreed. My son left with the 10-12 people who were going to Gujarat. In Gujarat, my son found a job in a construction company through a contractor. He sent money home a few times but this stopped after a while. When I asked the people he went with, they told me that the company extracts a minimum of twelve hours' work every day but does not pay wages on time. When I spoke to my son I told him to come home if he was finding it too difficult. My son returned in a few days' time. After his return, we started to work in the village or in the city to be able to run the household. We managed to be able to run the house but never managed to collect enough money to repay our loans.

The people we had lent money from started coming home to ask for the repayment. One man who we owed money came home and took our cow. We appealed to the Panchayat in our village and all five of them said that we had to repay the money we had borrowed any which way, be it doing hard labour or giving up our cattle. We have no choice; we have to work where they tell us to work.

No one is to blame for this. God is only punishing me for the sins of my previous life.

Life story 7

We have been 'bandua' (bonded labourers) to the fearless since childhood. We have faced their torment. I had seen first at my father's times and now am suffering it myself. My ancestral house is definitely Kohdaar but I have never been able to stay here. We were all small when my father came with us to Lohgara. We used to break stones at a fearless man's place.

Both my parents broke stones there and soon my sister and me also got along in breaking stones there. We were Bandua so there was no question of reading and writing. And on top of this the contractor came every June and forced my father to work and abused us. The contractor was such a tyrant that he took out the pistol in everything. My father said once a worker was late in coming for work so the contractor pulled out the trigger in the pistol and killed the man.

When the tyranny of the contractor increased we left Lohgara and came to our village Kohdaar. When 3-4 days passed one day my maternal grandmother came running and said the contractor could even come there so fearing it we ran away from there. There was tyranny of big people here too so 2 years back we again came back to Kohdaar from Chandi. This time we did not go to the village but instead we made a house at the mountains and have been staying here. Though we still fear the Lohgara contractor.

After coming here, we have been breaking stones at Sunder Lal. When there is need we have to take loans from him only. Meanwhile my father got sick so the loan money increased and it amounted to Rs 35,000 that time. Other than breaking stones I have been riding his tractor since 6 months. 2 months back an accident had occurred when the tractor was being taken out from the minefield. I got a fracture in the leg. For some days the contractor got me treated but he left later on. I have to now get myself treated on my own. I have spent many thousands so far. The contractor has added the money spent on the treatment in the loan money which has increased. My wife is about to deliver a baby at home now and a lot of money will be spent on that too. After getting hurt I am not able to work anywhere else.

We had run away from Lohgara from the tyranny of the contractor and if we run away from here sorrows would end but I feel now bad fate is never going to leave our side. Cause of my father being a bonded labourer it is difficult to lead our lives normally and if I too remain a bonded labourer my children's future too would be the same. But I have thought that once my leg becomes better I will go and earn money and repay the contractor's loans and will make my children study.

Life story 8

We don't even have a house of our own. For two to three generations we have been settled at our owner's land. I have four sons. I have married off my eldest son and three of my sons are still unmarried. My husband and eldest son work at a brick factory at Rohua. We have to work at our owner's place.

Once my middle son had kalazhar and to treat that I took loan from the owner at Rs. 12 interest monthly. The loan money amounted to Rs. 4000 and we have just paid half of it till now. Recently the owner has been pressurizing us to repay the money. He told us to repay the money or else send the youngest child to look after the cattle. I told him I have put him in the school and he cannot go so instead we will all work for him. He replied that if I come over then who would look after the house and said that my son can never become a collector after all those studies. He said if I want him to become a collector I should empty the land first.

A poor man is nothing and however much we didn't want we were forced to send our son to work for the owner. My 12-year-old son tirelessly works from 5 am till 8 pm at night. If ever he errs a little he is beaten up for it. One day he was getting tea when accidentally he broke the cup while getting it. The owner's son beat him with a stick and abused him for not seeing while walking and breaking such an expensive cup. He then pushed him from the porch so hard that he fell on the courtyard and broke his ankle and knee very badly. They were not even letting him cry. I was passing by and I told the owner's son why he beat a little boy so much for just 2 cups. He told me how can I talk back being a mahadalit and asked me to run away otherwise they would beat me up too. I couldn't do anything but soothe my son and then went back for my work.

I understood that being born poor, I was destined to bear all this. I don't know how to spend my life. I am somehow spending my own life but am worried for my children's lives. I just want to somehow repay the money so that we don't have to work anymore for him. I am not able to think how I will manage this.

Life story 9

"I can recount such a painful story of their compulsions. There was a 5-year-old very promising boy of a Dalit family in this village, who used to come to my AW centre as a beneficiary, daily without fail. He was intelligent and understanding and always remained in the forefront of every centre activity. After the Chhath festival, he was continuously absent for several days. So, I was a little apprehensive and, one day, I went to his hamlet to enquire about him. I saw the front door of his hut locked and enquired from his neighbours about the family. I came to know that the family had taken a rather larger advance from a brick kiln owner of West Bengal and, so, went with whole family to work for him.

"At the time of Holi, the family had come to the village for a week or so, but at that time, I could not go to meet them. They came again in the rainy season. Then, I went to see them. When I enquired about that boy, his mother said that the brick kiln owner kept that boy there with him. When she objected saying that the boy was very small, the kiln owner said that he would not take any hard work from him and kept him as a guarantee that they would return in the season to work for him. His mother was very sad while recounting the whole episode. When I asked if there was a mobile number of the kiln owner, she replied in negative and said that she had asked for it, but he would not give. I was stunned to hear that and thought what type of persons these people are, who did not even take his mobile number. When I expressed the possibility that her husband might have taken the number from him, she said sadly that where had he had time over and above of his inebriation to think and care about his children.

"I made them realize their mistake to leave their lovely son in the custody of the brick kiln owner without even taking the kiln owner's mobile number and prevailed upon them not to do that in future, and if somebody pressurizes for doing that, inform the local police station.

Life story 10

Jai Kumar is around 14 years old and he belongs to a very poor 'maha dalit' family...They just somehow manage to survive. He is second in line among seven brothers and sisters. His parents work in other's fields. Their income was just enough to make ends meet for the family.

Ranjeet had to go to Bangalore to work along with his brother for a better living. He got work at a bag factory in Bangalore. Talking about his working conditions he said he had to work for 10/ 12 hours a day and his eating and living conditions were pretty bad. He did not get the money on time.

After being released by the police, Ranjeet came back home. After staying for a few days at home, he again went to Delhi because his family's financial status still remained poor. He got work at a sports factory and had to put in 12 hours of work a day. Due to poor living and eating conditions he fell sick but he still had to work and when he protested he got beaten up. There was no treatment and his health started deteriorating and he became weak. There was no way to contact his family but when one day he finally got in touch with them they forced him to return cause of his ill health. 'When I was treated at home I got to know I was suffering from 'kala zahar'. Ranjeet said that if he didn't work his family would die of hunger. He said he would not go outside to work anymore but would instead help his father in his work along with his studies.

Life story 11

In our areas both the stone contractors and big tillers treat poor workers badly and take use of them. They make them bonded labourers. Many times it so happens that when one workers is released from the 'kaastkar' the contractor makes him a 'bandua'.

The worker's baba (grandfather) was working at a big tiller at our village. After him his father too was working there. After his father's death the responsibility of repaying the loan of people fell on him because he was the eldest among all brothers. The worker was bonded all 24 hours. From taking the animals to the fields in the morning till working late nights in the fields and whenever the tiller needed work to be done he called him. When there was more work needed in the fields other than the worker his brother and sons would also work and the house women did 'katai' there. The worker and his family got so less wage that they could just barely manage meals. It was known they bound with the tiller but there was no way out.

Meanwhile in the Kohdaar mountains mining work was started so the worker wanted to leave this work and go to the mountains for work. He talked to a contractor about this and he agreed to pay the amount which was due on them of the 'kaastkaar'. The tiller did take the money but got very angry with the worker and he said to go away but never to return to him if there is a need. The contractor too tortured the same way the 'kaastkaar' did. The contractor had given him Rs 10,000 loan and so now he and his entire family breaks stones at the contractor and gets them loaded and the contractor didn't even pay half the rate prevalent in the village that time for breaking stones. The whole family worked for 3 years for the contractor but his loan was the same as before. If there were any weddings ... they would be allowed to go only if the contractor gave them leave. Many times they were not allowed to go even when there were important weddings of close families.

The worker's family was internally suffering when working at the contractor's place. Meanwhile in the minefield in the village there was organized an event where the district's head was also present. Here the labourers talked about their being bonded labourers and told their state. They asked for some action to be taken against bonded labour. The district authority gave an order to lodge an FIR against two contractors. Those staying said now they will not be bound to him and if he forces they will also file an FIR against him.

After this incident the contractor stopped taking work from the worker and his family. Now whatever they earn they keep it with themselves. They break stones on their own, set rates on his own and sell the stones to people who give them higher rates.