

'We know the pain': freed India coffee workers lead way from bonded labour

Thousands of families are trapped by debts on plantations in south-west Karnataka, despite the practice supposedly being abolished in the 70s

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Saurav Kumar in Kodagu

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Nandini, left, and Ramesh, who were rescued from bonded labour, in the office of the Adivasi Hakkugala Samanvaya Samiti organisation. Photograph: Saurav Kumar

It was a chance meeting in the market that led to freedom. On his monthly trip to buy groceries, Ramesh bumped into a relative who asked him how his job was going.

Ramesh, 40, and his wife, Nandini, had worked at the Cauvery coffee plantation in Kodagu for 10 years, but they were not happy. Earning 100 rupees (£1) a day, for a 14-hour shift picking coffee, they were trying to pay off a 25,000 rupee loan they had taken out with their boss. Each month, they fell deeper into debt as interest rates increased. Meanwhile, they were trapped on the site. Ramesh had to ask for permission to be allowed to make the monthly outing to buy supplies.

The relative worked with Adivasi Hakkugala Samanvaya Samiti (AHSS) - the coordinating committee on tribal rights. Launched 12 years ago, it says it has helped about 1,500 bonded labourers leave plantations in Kodagu, one of India's largest coffee producing districts, in the south-west province of Karnataka. After six months of clandestine meetings at the market, it was the turn of Ramesh and Nandini.

The AHSS had gathered enough evidence to prove that the couple - who, like many in this region, use only one name - were exploited. It secured a court order demanding their release from the estate. On a sunny day in July 2020, the police arrived to escort the couple safely, their debt cancelled.

It was a glorious moment for Nandini, 35. "The day of rescue was surreal. Members of the AHSS accompanying the police reached us at the plantation and we left the place for ever. Freedom looked like an unbelievable gift to life," she says.



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📍 Former bonded workers at a meeting of the AHSS in Kodagu. Photograph: Saurav Kumar

Last year, **figures** released by the International Labour Organization showed how widespread bonded labour is in India, despite being abolished in 1976. With little access to formal banking systems, it is common for poorer people to borrow from their employers when they need money quickly, which can leave them at the mercy of unscrupulous bosses.

Some coffee estates have become a “vicious den of debt bondage”, says YK Ganesh, secretary of AHSS, whose 600 members are former bonded labourers. “I know the pain and I do not want others to undergo the same exploitation. Our organisation is trying to fight it.”

More than 200,000 people work on Kodagu’s plantations, which **produce** about 110,730 metric tonnes of coffee a year, about 35% of India’s total annual production.

AHSS believes more than 8,000 families in Kodagu are trapped in debt bondage, and Ganesh has criticised police and district administrators for not doing enough to protect workers. “Both have acted unsatisfactorily in rescuing people,” he says.



📍 An estates in Kodagu ... it is home to five families of coffee workers who are bonded labourers. Photograph: Saurav Kumar

Under Indian law, those held in bonded labour are entitled to compensation - money and a place to live. But, says Ganesh, this “happens once in a blue moon. Only about 100 families so far have received [financial] help totalling 300,000 rupees.”

Gouri, 60, works with her daughter on a coffee estate in the district to pay back the 30,000 rupees she borrowed in 2014. She says her boss keeps increasing the interest on the loan.

“When I proposed to pay back the debt, the employer arbitrarily increased the amount to 130,000 rupees and it was impossible for us to pay that,” says Gouri, who earns 150 rupees a day. She is hoping that AHSS can secure her release.



Gange, 36, is also working with the group. She’s been paying back a loan of 10,000 rupees she took out eight years ago to pay for medication. She earns 150 rupees a day. “After I recovered, I continued working for the



📍 Gange at the door of her room. She has been paying back a loan of 10,000 rupees she took out eight years ago for medication. Photograph: Saurav Kumar

owner to pay back the debt.”

Kaveri Amma, Cauvery coffee plantation’s owner, did not want to comment on the individual case but said: “We lost workers after AHSS alleged bad working conditions of coffee workers. The low wages were increased in the following years.”

Ramesh and Nandini have moved back to their home village and they now work on a smaller coffee plantation, earning about 400 rupees a day, with the freedom to come and go when they want. “AHSS made it possible,” says Ramesh.

“Having experienced life in bondage made us realise the meaning of dignity of labour with freedom,” says Nandini. “Restoring it to the lives of those still suffering is now our sole aim.”

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