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<https://www.adivasilivesmatter.com/post/the-irula-tribe-still-surviving-as-slaves-while-we-celebrate-75-years-of-independence>

The Irula Tribe Still Surviving As Slaves, While We Celebrate 75 Years Of Independence

Modern forms of slavery like bonded labour and serfdom have enslaved the Irulars of Tamil Nadu for over 30 years now. Yet their voices remain unheard and their situation unseen. Adivasi Awaaz creator Thennarasu, who is also the secretary of Integrated Centre for Tribal Research Resource and Rehabilitation (ICTRRR), talks about this sensitive and urgent, yet neglected issue in the following article.

Slavery has been one of the worst forms of human degradation in the past. While explicit forms of slavery have been abolished, in modern times, we still witness its reminiscent. From serfdom to bonded labour, slavery, over the years has been practiced in various forms. Slavery was associated with owning humans as properties, where the owner had total control and right over the slave. In practices such as serfdom and bonded labour, technically humans are not owned. However, the reality is far from this. In both these practices, people do not have a say over their lives, they are 'slaves' to their 'masters', they live a life without dignity, are treated as commodities and have no independence or freedom. Debt slavery is common even today. It is the most common form of modern slavery. But while all these forms have been acknowledged, 'slavery' of the marginalized communities remains unseen. Marginalized communities have been accustomed to modern forms of 'slavery'. Their enslavement has been normalized, so much so that their exploitation is not even perceived as slavery. Socialization has molded, reshaped and reformed slavery to suit the needs of the power owning sections, and has simultaneously inducted marginalized sections into the structures exploiting and enslaving them, by prohibiting them to become conscious of their own realities, identities and rights. Lack of consciousness creates a lack of self worth and dignity.



Forced Labour at Brick Kilns; Source: Thennarasu

The Guardian (2019) reported that slavery affects over 40 million people worldwide. Poverty, conflicts and crises have fueled the growing global slave trade, as men are forced to work in factories, farms, etc., while women and children are forced into sex markets, forced labour, etc. (<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/which-countries-have-highest-rates-modern-slavery-and-most-victims>). "North Korea, Eritrea and Burundi are estimated to have the world's highest rates of modern-day slavery, with India, China and Pakistan home to the largest number of victims." (ibid). The United Nations (UN) has been establishing various regulations and laws at the global level to combat the situation. Since 1956, it has been involved in the abolition of serfdom. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has enacted various laws against human rights violations of workers, children, and women. Some initiatives taken by the UN include the ICCPR Convention 1966, Convention on Rights of Child 1989, Abolition of Forced Labour Convention 1957, Conventions on Trafficking, CEDAW, etc. However, there is a long road ahead, as the poor and marginalized sections still live as slaves.



Slavery During the 1800s; Source: <https://www.antislavery.org/development-abolitionist-movement-history/>

In Tamil Nadu India, serfdom is still practiced in the rice mills, brick kilns and agriculture. Additionally, different types of slavery are practiced in the Sivagasi, Tanjore, Coimbatore, Tiruvallur, and Kanchipuram districts of Tamil Nadu. Most of the people affected due to these practices are the Irulars. Irulars belong to the ancient tribe Irular. It is an ethnic group living in the North-Eastern part of Tamil Nadu. Traditionally, they have been dependent on the forests for their survival and basic needs. But due to neoliberalism, capitalist market structures and globalization, they have been driven out of their lands and forests. Their livelihood has been affected and they have been thrown into a vicious cycle of taking loans from moneylenders, who usually belong to the upper castes. When they are unable to repay the loans, these moneylenders who also own lands, ask them to become agricultural labourers on their fields. This form of forced labour does not end with the person who had taken the loan. The same practice continues with the descendants of the person who had borrowed money. This implies that the enslavement of one Irular means the enslavement of the next generation as well, and maybe also the next and the next one. This is how the Irulars have been subjected to slavery for the past 30 years.



Source: Thennarasu

Although the Government of India introduced the Abolition of Serfdom Act in 1976, the system was not completely abolished. The Irulars have been subjected to mental, physical and sexual harassments/assaults constantly under the pretext of 'agricultural labour', which in reality is forced labour. Shockingly, the Irular children have also been tortured. There have been multiple cases of death at the workplace. The Irulars do not have basic amenities like food, shelter, education and protection of the law. Lack of educational opportunities implies a lack of employment opportunities, which could have provided a chance for living with dignity. Despite various laws and policies, such as Bonded Labour (Abolition) Rules 1976, The Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986, Contract Labour (Regulation & Abolition) Act 1970, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012, The

Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, Maternity Benefit Act 1961, Equal Remuneration Act 1976 (Rule 6), Minimum Wages Rules 1950 (Rules 25 & 26), etc., the condition of the Irulars has not improved and they are still pushed into forced labour because the laws and policies have never been implemented properly. Government officials rarely visit areas inhabited by the Irulars. They avoid field surveys and hence are unaware of the ground reality. The situation is so dire that in some cases where Irulars are rescued by the government from forced labour, they often get trapped into it again. This is because even after rescue, they face the same economic problems as rehabilitation facilities are inadequate. So it is not enough to rescue them. Proper rehabilitation must be ensured.

The Census of 2011 revealed that there were 1,89,661 Irulars in Tamil Nadu and almost half of them are 'enslaved'. This is an unfortunate situation and requires immediate attention of the government. Even after 75 years of independence, the indigenous population of India is being socio-politically and economically exploited. They still lead a life without dignity. The Irulars were once known as the snake tribe because snake charming was their traditional occupation and for generations this is how they earned a living. They depended on the forests for food and their basic needs. Gradually, they started being inducted into the mainstream and had to adjust to alien economic scenarios, as their traditional occupation was dying in the fast paced capitalist world and the forests were being lost. So they started working for the 'zamindars', the land owning class which mostly comprised the upper castes. Rather they were forced to work for the zamindars, losing their independence, freedom and dignity. History has been harsh to the Irulars and the indigenous populations in general. This urgently needs to change.

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