

Bonded labour and trafficking of girl-child among the Kolta: A case study

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to understand the modus operandi of the trafficking trade and the prevalence of the bonded labour system among the Kolta of the Jaunsar-Bawar and Rawain-Jaunpur areas of Uttaraanchal. There is enough documented evidence on bonded labour and the sale of the girl-child from these areas. A commission for the rehabilitation of bonded labourers was established by the Government of India in 1976 which after working for nine years and spending over 55 million rupees declared 14,844 Kolta as having been fully rehabilitated. The findings of the present study, however, contradict this, as considerable evidence of bonded labour and girl-child trafficking was gathered during the study. The present report provides a brief history of intervention along with evidence of bonded labour and trafficking among the Kolta in the year 2002.

"The songs of Uttaraakhandi women down the ages have been 'Khuded' songs - sad songs, songs of longing, songs of loneliness, songs that tell of waiting and sadness. How long will it stay like this? She will have to ask herself this question one day. After all, it was she who wove this garland of sadness, now she has to learn to thread into it beautiful songs of hope and joy. She has both the ability and the patience to change the mountains only she doesn't know that carrying their weight is harming them both, her and her mountains. She hasn't realized that one smile from her will make the mountains laugh with joy. But this is also serious business, a test of responsibility which will be successful when she is both soldier and commander of her mountains."

GLOSSARY of terminology used in the paper.

Uttaranchal: Following a long agitation by the hill people, Uttaranchal, the 27th state of the Union of India was formed on the 9th of November of 2000, by the carving out of the mountain areas of the erstwhile state of Uttar Pradesh.

Location: The catchments of the Yamuna and Tons rivers. The area falls in the districts of Dehra Dun, Tehri and Uttarakashi in the recently formed mountain state of Uttaraanchal, India.

Kolta: Considered the original inhabitants of the area, the Kolta is a landless community, which resides in the catchments of the Yamuna and Tons rivers.

Maaldaar: Rich upper caste landlord or forest/construction contractors.

Maat: A prevailing traditional practice in the study area whereby one can guarantee his/her survival by taking a loan and working as bonded labour or if one is wealthy, the other way round!

Chakla: Brothel, the other option of survival for the Kolta. .

IYM & IYE: International Year of the Mountains and International Year of Eco-tourism. (Since the Kolta aren't aware of these events, there isn't any discussion on these two important issues. They are here because of the exposure hangover of the authors who themselves are not Kolta.)

Table 1 & Table 2 below: The stuff people (who matter) are usually interested in i.e., Statistics

Prologue: Mr. Rabindra Nath an IAS probationer of the 1975 batch wrote in his dissertation that even a Patwari (a front line revenue department functionary) from Jaunsar regularly visited brothels in Delhi to extort money from the prostitutes of his area. Some ninety years ago Gunati, a Kolta woman went with her husband to Shimla, the summer capital of the British Raj. It is said that in Shimla, she became a prostitute and on her return she showed the jewelery and money she had earned to her fellow Kolta women. This incident triggered a process, which eventually turned into a mass exodus of Kolta women to brothels all over north India. The reason behind this was simple; the money earned from prostitution was much better than from the drudgery of the Maat tradition they faced at home.

Genesis: It is a long story that goes back to the medieval period when various communities were migrating to safer regions to avoid conflict and religious persecution. The communities migrating from the plains were powerful and better equipped than the native inhabitants and in some places they achieved total hegemony over the areas they settled in. In Jaunsar, they consolidated their domain by institutionalizing under a religio-political system whereby an oligarchic structure of SYANACHARI was established. This system formalized the status of the Kolta as lower castes (untouchables) with no rights to land, to enter temples, wear gold or even ride a horse. In 1883 two important documents were compiled by the then collector of Dehra Dun, Mr. A. Ross to understand the rights and prevailing traditions in Jaunsar. Entitled 'VAZIB-UL ARZ' and 'VAJIB-UL-AMAL', these documents sort of legalized the prevailing socio-political system.

In view of the gravity of the situation of the Kolta, the Uttar Pradesh State Government formed a committee in 1959 under the Chairmanship of renowned freedom fighter Baldev Singh Arya. The committee submitted its report in 1960. However, it remained unnoticed till 1976, when during the emergency the government decided to launch a project for the rehabilitation of the Kolta.

The committee reported that there were three distinct categories of Kolta:

1. **KHANDIT-MUNDIT**

The Kolta who are associated with a particular family and receive money and grain for the work they do. However, the money given is written as a loan against them. They too are expected to shave their heads if a member of the master's family dies.

2. **MAAT**

The Kolta who have lost their freedom to moneylenders. According to the Baldev Singh Arya report, most of the Kolta come under this category. The committee found a number of cases where someone's forefathers had taken the loan and even after working for so many generations, the loan remained unpaid.

3. **SANJAYAT**

Meaning 'collective property', the Kolta of this category work for the entire village. They work as agricultural help, in organizing different chores and as messengers. Often they work for different families and receive grains after harvest.

Long before this awakening of the government, there was a sustained indigenous reaction against the exploitation of The Kolta. Acharya Vishwambar Dutt Chandola, editor of the only regional paper the 'Garhwali' raised this issue and was instrumental in rescuing some of the women from brothels in the late thirties.

In the early forties an organization ASHOK ASHRAM was established near Kalsi in the district of Dehra Dun, by few veteran Gandhians to spearhead social reform in the remote rural areas of the Himalaya. Action against trafficking was one of the main objectives of Ashok Ashram besides extending education to marginalized sections of the society. Dharam Dev Shastri of the Ashok Ashram along with a local opinion leader Daulat Ram Ranwalta made several attempts by visiting brothels and persuading women to return to their native place. They even tried to develop facilities for the rehabilitation of these women at Ashok Ashram. But without changing the vicious socio-economic cycle at the grass roots level the attempts were futile.

With the expansion of the trafficking menace came the formal structure of the trade. Pimps, men and women, and ex-prostitutes ensured the rapid expansion and sustained supply of adolescent girls and women to the brothels of north India. There were specific markets for the women of different areas. For instance, the network, which developed with the help of local pimps, established a specific trend

whereby the Kolta women from Purola, Naugaon and Lakhamandal were supplied to Delhi, from Barkot to Meerut while women from Jaunpur areas went to Kanpur. Some were even able to form their own brothels. The Kolta Inquiry Committee report of 1960 stated that there were women from 91 Jaunsar villages and 104 from villages of Rawain-Jaunpur, who were in the brothels of Roorkee, Saharanpur, Meerut, Delhi and Kanpur at that time. During 1971, the situation became so obvious that a sensitive officer Mr. Krishna Kumar Pant, SDM, Purola, raided the brothels at G. B. Road in Delhi and rescued 132 women of the area. Another SDM Mr. Subhash Bahukhandi raided the brothels of Saharanpur, Meerut, and Jwalapur and rescued several women.

The 1976 rehabilitation measures for The Kolta were made as an appendix to the Janjati Vikas Pradhikaran, (Tribal Development Authority) as the 'Bonded Labour Rehabilitation Project'. In the initial phase 8055 bonded labours were identified for rehabilitation in the blocks of Kalsi, Chakrata (District Dehra Dun), Thatyure, (District Tehri) and Purola, Mori, Naugaon, Dunda and Chinyalisaur (District Uttarkashi). The intervention strategy involved the material distribution of various items leading to economic development of the Kolta. At the time of its completion in 1984, the list of beneficiaries swelled to a figure of 14,844 with a utilized budget of 55 million rupees. The situation however, remained the same. This can be best summarized in the words of Bhagat Das, a scheduled caste person from the area "Those who were earlier SAYANAS are now Pradhans of the village, so where is the change in the system?"

The System: While linking the problem of trafficking with the bonded labour system, the Baldev Singh Arya committee report concluded. 'In all likelihood, the history of the world will not reveal a more comprehensive example of cruel and heartless exploitation. The roots of such an exploitative system are historical and the crux of the problem revolves around the basic question of land holdings. In spite of various land settlements the dominance of oligarchy insured that the Kolta remain landless as per tradition. Even though during the emergency, the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi allotted 10 Nalis (One Nali= 250 Sq. Yards) to each Kolta family but the Nou-Tod tradition enabled the upper castes to acquire prime land and the Kolta got unproductive land and steep hillsides. Thus without any significant land holdings and no historical experience of off-farm activities the survival option for the Kolta remained the same, i.e. to accept Maat! ("Maat" also means defeat in Hindi.)

Maat: If asked openly, nobody will accept the prevalence of Maat in the area. But if further probed about the ploughing of the Maldaar's fields these days, the answer will be 'they are either doing it themselves or are hiring labour'. However, in the majority of cases the terms and conditions of hiring are the same, those of Maat. The continuance of poverty in the region and the pathetic condition of the Kolta make the vicious cycle complete as without any other option they themselves approach the Maldaars for loans. The Maldaars too are accustomed to this form of labour because it is a cheap and reliable method of ensuring labour in this intense

agricultural zone. The terms and conditions of Maat depend on the amount of money taken as loan. If the amount of the loan or grain is small, the person has to work for a certain number of days for the Maldaar. But those who take small credit to avoid whole time slavery often take loans from more than one Maldaar, and they eventually end up working for more than one master.

The labour done is not accounted for as repayment of the loan but is accounted as payment of the interest. For instance three years ago Mangat and Finchya of Dhora Village took a loan of Rs. 2000/ each from Liya Ram of Lawdi Village, and now they work for 25-30 days annually as agricultural labour. If the work involves sowing paddy, then Finchya's wife has to go. Thecheki Devi, Finchya's wife says that by working at least the principal amount is not increasing. In case they fail to go, the amount will increase and then they are finished. So, apart from Finchya and his wife, sometimes his son and daughter-in-law also go to work to avoid the loan amount getting larger.

The accounts of Maat are always brought forward with the demise of one generation. Shepherd Sumit Lal (21) is mortgaged to one Brahmin, but it wasn't Sumit but his late father who took the loan from the preacher. Similarly, 35-year-old Bhimchali is dutifully performing the responsibilities of her late husband Haryia Lal, who took a loan of Rs. 3000/ from a Maaldaar. He died working some 6-7 years ago and now Bhimchali goes to the field of the Maaldaar. But Fajitu and his son are trying to play safe. Fajitu doesn't want to repeat the story of Chanku Lal (40) who took a loan to marry off his son and now works for the Maaldaar. In fact Fajitu and his son have started working in advance for the Maaldaar so that Fajitu can get the loan on easy terms during the marriage of his son. Devoid of any income generating activity, the Kolta families are always in need of money. The occasions for taking loans arise routinely; it could be for a house, death, birth, marriage, medical problems or sacrificing a goat during winter, they follow their traditional route to the omnipresent Maaldaar. See table 1

"I started working for Ranveer Singh at the age of 18. My ordeal was over with the death of Ranveer's grandfather Hukum Singh; I was 42 at that time. It was Ranveer's father Bhazan Singh who brought a bride for me, and my two brothers. So we, all the three brothers spent our life with them. Out of our eight generations in this village, seven went doing Maat only".

Kripalu (52)
Village Kid

One may question what the government was doing all this time? But there is an inherent problem in raising this question. One has to first define the government itself! Further in this liberal age it is not the issue of questioning the government alone, the 'NON' type of governments of the civilized society too needs to be questioned. In fact both the government and non-governmental organizations were

active in the region. The so-called 'informal governments' active in the region opted to skirt the issue probably considering it too risky and focused instead on areas like education and agricultural development. The irony of the situation is that the 'poverty profile' of the region which makes the heart of the donor agencies bleed is basically produced by their untargeted population, majority of them being Kolta and other scheduled castes. Avoiding fundamental issues and strengthening the upper layer without any concerns for equity, they ended up becoming a part of the problem. As far as the Kolta are concerned, the formal governmental schemes weren't assuaging either. The reason for this is the lack of representation and the beneficiary mode of schemes where the pie is shared by a long chain of political and government functionaries.

Bank alias Government Maaldaars: In order to expedite the local economy, a chain of rural banks was opened all over the mountain region. Known as the Ganga-Yamuna Grameen Bank, services of this rural financing agency are available in most small townships and marketing centers of the region. As a development agency they too were asked to finance the local population including the marginalised sections of the society. But why should a Kolta family need a loan? The idea of starting an enterprise is probably not even in their dreams. They need money to survive or for the repayment of earlier loans. Thus to fill up the development quota, the bank extended loans on fictitious projects. Though temporarily, the situation was beneficial for both parties - the banks and their beneficiaries. Jhanpuliya (42) of Benai village also availed of this opportunity. He took a loan of Rs. 8000 from the Hudoli branch of the Punjab National Bank and a loan of Rs. 4000 from the cooperative bank. As time passed, the interest accumulated on the loans along with the principal amounts became 22000 rupees. Last year he was arrested by the revenue department along with another defaulter Sakal Chand. While they were being taken to Purola Tehsil, he escaped and went straight to Yamnotri to work as a porter. How long can he hide?

On the other hand, the other defaulter Sakal Chand was jailed in Purola Tehsil for 14 days. Later his brother paid his dues but also took one of his fields. Fifty-five years old Luyia simply doesn't understand the complex arithmetic of repaying a loan. He took a loan of Rs. 3500 from the Ganga Yamuna Grameen Bank. By March 2002 he had already paid an amount of Rs. 6500 but was still arrested in March and sent to Kalsi Tehsil along with other defaulters of his village. In Kalsi he found himself in a dingy cell in the company of 16 other Kolta. They weren't given food for three days, till their families sent money. Kali Ram in fact sold his house and fields to repay the bank loans and finally left his village (see table: 2). The problem is the Kolta don't have any economic standing of their own. If they have any option for survival it is through the unofficial Maat only. The other infamous route they are forced to adopt leads straight to the brothels.

Chakla: Chakla is the Hindi word for brothel. The mention of the word 'brothel' may invoke different images for different people but among the Kolta it simply means a source of livelihood. One may also conclude that beauty is a curse in this natural

paradise, perhaps because there isn't yet any system to burglarize the mystery of nature, which produces such beautiful people. Beauty has become a product for Kolta.

Modus Operandi: The socioeconomic condition of the region is the most favourable indicator for the operators. They are constantly in search of needy families with a young daughter, sister or wife. Sometimes the needy family approaches them directly and the deal is made. Advance money is given and installments are decided in the presence of a local pimp who plays middleman and gets a cut from the deal. The 'product' goes to the brothel for a particular period of time and the deal is re-negotiated. The social acceptability of the trade is high amongst the Kolta and after coming back there isn't any stigma attached to the women.

It is not that every family or village is into the trade nor are family members involved in every case. The generosity of this innocent community has been continuously exploited by outsiders. Local transport, mainly buses which ply between Saharanpur and the area are also a major route for trafficking. Over the years, a special perspective towards the locals has developed among the outside market operators. For them, everything in the region is a commodity. They often lure women or forcibly abduct them. In addition to this, pimps also propose to marry girls and all the intended brides are sold to brothels. In May 2002, a couple from Naitwar boarded a bus for Saharanpur to consult a doctor. The driver and conductor got acquainted with the couple and offered to help them find a doctor. In Saharanpur the husband was thrashed and told to run away while his wife was abducted and repeatedly gang raped. The husband returned to Purola and luckily found local support to lodge a complaint. After few days the bus was seized, the woman was rescued and now the case is in the court.

The brothels are not only a workplace for women they also provided work opportunities for the men to work as pimps (BHADUAA). The job involves washing clothes, negotiating and doing errands for customers. In brothels they learn the art of luring girls into the profession and make frequent visits to the area to replenish the supply. Interestingly there aren't many police case histories on the issue of trafficking. There are two typical police structures in the area. One is the formal police and in the remote areas the revenue official 'Patwari' manages law and order. A symbiotic relationship exists between all the players. They often exploit the 'product' of the area themselves. Incidentally, this is not limited to these two agencies only.

Bearings: Like a pampered child the Yamuna River descends towards the plains from these mountains. She slowly turns into a sewer as she approaches Delhi, the capital of the Union of India. There is a complete analogy between the Yamuna and the community that lives along her banks that considers her as a mother. Their voice too gets muddled in the power politics of caste and class.

So where are we? Perhaps it would have been much better if the Kolta themselves asked this question. There were and there still are elements in their community who could raise this question. Unfortunately indigenous resistance is seen as a threat by NGOs who are always eager to present themselves as the messiahs of the downtrodden. In fact various anthropologists, the media and other groups have written weird stories about the area but no attempt has ever been made to document the lost struggles and the people who fought the system. It is not the case of resistance among the Kolta alone, an entire generation of activists from the region has been completely marginalised (read wiped off) by such groups. Similarly, institutions like Ashok Ashram have lost their relevance in the changed situation of today. Even the small regional newspapers that earlier functioned as polarising agents on various issues have lost their bite. Now everything is managed and often driven according to the funding priorities of the donors. In a nutshell, the platforms for change and assertion have been taken over by elements dedicated to maintaining the status quo.

The issue of Kolta women is not an isolated case alone. In a subtle way it is linked with the 2nd October 1994 assault on the Uttaraanchal women at Rampur Teraha, and the total silence afterwards, it can not be isolated from the earlier practice of mass suicide among the women of Tehri, or from the rising incidence of female foeticide, actually it is a socio-political statement of how the ruling class looks at women. This is also evident from the term Pradhan Pati (meaning husband of the elected village head) which has evolved from the Panchayati Raj process whereby the elected women functionaries (often elected to meet compulsory one third quota requirements) in the local self government system remain mere puppets while their husbands pull the strings. This kind of hypocrisy also prevails among the 'non' governmental type of initiatives for the emancipation of women!

Epilogue: The issues of women are intricately related to the grass root development issues of Uttaraanchal. And women have always been in the forefront for raising these issues. Be it anti liquor, Chipko, the movement for a university or the struggle for a separate state, women have been the actual foot soldiers of all these movements. Over the time, the issues related to women have changed and expanded, they are diverse too. At some places even the profile of a woman has changed. She is educated and needs jobs, she is an entrepreneur, and who knows whether she would like the idea for her advocacy or not! But over the years the process for the advocacy of women has remained around the central theme of fuel, fodder and water. No doubt these are essential issues and will remain so, as also with the case of her health, but frankly these are comfortable issue to deal with. They don't require any confrontation with the existing system, which actually needs to be changed.

There appears to be a genuine need for redefining women's issues in Uttaranchal and accordingly the alignment of various groups along a central theme. The day women's groups start taking the lead in doing this it will be curtains for some of us.

Follow-up: There will definitely be follow-up action to the Kolta study. But we don't feel comfortable sharing it at this juncture!

Life Sketch of a Kolta Woman:

Mahipa is some forty years old. She lives in a village called Dhora, near Lakhamandal in Jaunsar, technically in the district of Dehra Dun. She was born and brought up in Dhounra. But there are years, which she didn't spend in Dhora. So many years that if they were put together they would become decades, two decades! The prime years of her life which she spent working as a sex slave in various brothels.

She was married early to one Ludru of the nearby Noda village. But the marriage soon ended with a divorce. She came back to Dhora to live with her parents where Dalebu, a pimp spotted her and offered her father some money to marry her. Grappling with acute poverty, her father accepted the offer and handed her over to the aged Dalebu. They spent some time together at Lakhamandal until Dalebu took her to Delhi on the pretext of taking her to a doctor at Chakrata. For the innocent Mahipa, it was her first long ride and though she knew Chakrata, she had never been so far from her village. At G.B. Road in Delhi, she was thrashed till she agreed to surrender. Her husband Dalebu kept a close watch on her and never allowed her to talk to her customers. After some time Dalebu took her back to his village. There she found that she was Dalebu's 22nd wife. There were still three or four of his wives in the house. As she was the youngest wife, her position was the most critical and she was not allowed to talk, laugh or venture out of the house. Once again Dalebu took her to Meerut and left her in a brothel. He used to regularly visit the brothel to collect the money earned by Mahipa. In Meerut, a person fell in love with her and approached the city magistrate claiming Mahipa as his sister-in-law who was forced into prostitution. The police raided the brothel and Mahipa was handed over to Yatindra Pal Singh Chouhan, her new lover. Yatindra took her to his native place in Bulandshahar, where Mahipa found that he was a married person with children her age.

Once again she was taken to Vikas Nagar, a township not far from her native village Dhora. At Vikas Nagar, Yatindra pal opened a shop and started practice as a doctor. After that they spent many years at Naugaon where Yatindra continued to practice as doctor. But during this period the years started showing on her and Yatindra lost interest. She was asked to go back to her native village Dhora and Yatindra shifted to Arakot where he lured a nurse to marry him. At present he openly practices at Selakui, not far from the capital of the newly formed state Uttaraanchal.

Mahipa is back in Dhora. She has her own ancestral house where she lives with her nephew, the son of her late brother. She has a place to hide, but shelter is not her only need. She needs food and clothes and she needs to educate her nephew. These are her basic needs and she doesn't know where to get the resources from. Like other Kolta women in distress the only path she is forced to learn from society, leads straight back to brothels. But for now Mahipa has somehow learned to resist the temptations.

Table 1. List of some persons found working under MAAT*

Borrower	Village	Money lender	Village	Amount borrowed	Date/period	Reason of borrowing	Duties performed	Present status
Sibba	Sainsa-Lakhamandal	Shyamlal	Bhankoli (D.Dun)	10,000	2001	To repay small loans	All household chores & ploughing	Still working
Chandru	Do	Surbeer Singh	Kamara (Uttarkashi)	Do	Do	Working in advance to get loan on easy terms.	Agricultural labour	Do
Jagtu	Do	An uper caste (Brahmin)	Rangeoo	20,000	1997	To pay penalty for abducting wife of Munna of village Dabla	Do	Do
Fajitu and his son	Pudiya	Kedar Singh/Sardar Singh	Pudiya	Amount yet to be borrowed	Do	For marriage of Fajitu's son	Do	Do
Bhadu & Bhaggu	Chhullaad	Attar Singh	Chhullaad	Not known	Not known	Not known	Do	Do
Ghepalu	Do	Mohr Singh	Do	Do	Do	Do	Do	Do
Lushkya	Do	Jawahar Singh	Do	Do	Do	Do	Do	Do
Mangatram	Dhora	Siyaram	Lawdi	2,000	1999	For household expenses	Do	Have to work in field for 25-30 days per annum
Phinchya	Do	Do	Do	Do	Do	Do	Do	Still working
Jagdishlal	Ponty-Naugaon	Teg singh Chauhan	Ponty-Naugaon	Not known	2000	Do	Do	Do
Chandrulal (35) s/o Jabu	Do	Bhandari	Do	Do	Last 4-5 years	Do	Do	Do

Chankhulal (40)	Do	Govindram Bahuguna	Do	Do	Last 10- 12 years	For marriage of his son Dinesh	Do	Do
Sutaru (35)	Do	Gulab Singh Rana	Do	Do	Not known	House hold needs	Do	Do
Gariblal (25)	Do	Natthi Aswal	Do	Do	Last one year	Do	Do	Do
Sumatlal (21)	Do	Raghawanand Bahuguna	Do	Do	Since his childhood	Loan taken by his father for unknown reason	Do	Do
Chandrulal (40)	Manjhkot	Girbeer Singh Bhandari (now his son Dharmveer Bhandari)	Manjhkot	Do	Last 22 years	Do	Do	Do
Bhimchali (35)	Do	Jaidev Rana	Do	3,000	Since long time	Loan borrowed by her late husband Hariya who died in service	Do	Do

Table 2. Some defaulters **

Borrower	Village	Amount taken as loan in Rupees		Bank	Repayment status
Jhanpulya	Binaai-Hudoli	12,000	8000	Punjab National Bank	22,000 of total loan
			4000	Dist. Cooperative Bank	
Sakal Chand and some others	Do	The Kolta detained as defaulters, details not known			
Luiya	Dhora	3500		Ganga-Yamuna Gramin Bank	6500 till March 2002
Gulabu	Do	The Kolta detained as defaulters, details not known			
Bachnu	Do				
Baburam	Do				
Kali	Do				

** The list presented is not a detailed one and was randomly compiled during the field study.

Notes to readers

The present report is an excerpt from two booklets (English & Hindi, in press) and exclusively prepared on the occasion of Celebrating Mountain Women Conference, 1-4 October 2002. Thimpu, Bhutan, and IYM 2002.

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