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**Newsletter from India**

**No:1 May: 2015**

This electronic newsletter from **PEACE TRUST, INDIA** is addressed to NGO's, Social Activists, Media, Opinion makers, Leaders and Bureaucrats shows interest in skills for youth for addressing social issues like modern slavery, child labour, migrant labour, unemployability of youth. Officials on the Migrant issue. We send this to people who we believe are involved in impressing the migrant's conditions. You are welcome to unsubscribe yourself, if you so choose,

**-EDITOR**

Peace Trust is Non Government Organization working on Child Labour and Bonded Labour issue since 1984. It has also focused on Migrant workers rights issue since 1999.

Skills for Freedom is an answer to Modern Slavery in Tamil Nadu. It is a joint effort for enhancing the employment opportunities of rural youth in Dindigul, Karur, Tirupur Districts.

SPSC Vocational Education & Employment Facilitation Centre provides Access to vocational education and employment facilitation for rural poor youth in Nagapattinam, Thiruvarur District Tamil Nadu and Karaikal District, Puducherry.

Peace Trust also provides training for Quality Teacher Education and gainful employment to young women from resource poor families in Dindigul and Karur District.

The views expressed are not of the donors but a compilation of field realities for the purpose of sharing and action.

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**1.CHILD LABOUR:**

**Child Labour Bill must be passed in budget session: Kailash Satyarthi**

#### Apr 10, 2015

**Hyderabad:** Child rights activist and Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi on Friday demanded the government to ensure a complete ban on child labour up to the age of 14, saying that the Child Labour Bill should be tabled and passed during the second half of the Budget session in Parliament.

"An amendment to the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act will lead to a total ban on all forms of child labour up to the age of 14 and ban on worst forms of child labour involving hazardous work up to the age of 18," Satyarthi said in Hyderabad.

The proposed amendments will synchronise with existing laws of the country--Right to Education and Juvenile Justice Act he said, adding that complete ban on child labour up to the age of 14 will ensure that it can be matched with Right to Education Act (2009), and banning all worst forms of child labour upto the age of 18 can match with the existing law on Juvenile Justice.



*"An amendment to the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act will lead to a total ban on all forms of child labour up to the age of 14 and ban on worst forms of child labour involving hazardous work up to the age of 18," Satyarthi said.*

"Towards this end, we have been struggling on bringing amendments for the past six years right from the previous government. I am thankful to Labour Minister Bandaru Dattatreya, who too had recently assured on this. But that should not remain a lip-service. My demand is that this amendment has to be brought in the next part of budget session. It has to be first tabled and then passed," Satyarthi demanded.

"Indian law does not prohibit all forms of child labour. It prohibits only the hazardous forms of child labour. It is an irony and shameful to say that India has enacted two new progressive laws Right to Education and Juvenile Justice Act," he noted.

0"We are also demanding that those children freed from child labour should be entitled for rehabilitation benefits under government schemes," he said, adding that "I will be satisfied if the government and the society would own it that this our responsibility to put an end to child labour in all its forms."

He further said that 179 countries have ratified the International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention to combat the worst forms of child labour.

**HBO goes to trial over alleged 'hoax' child labour report**

**Monday, 13 April 2015**

Mitre, which is owned by the London-based Pentland Group, has called the report a "hoax" and a "hatchet job," aimed at tarnishing the reputation of a company at the forefront of global efforts to eradicate child labor.

Jury selection began on Monday in a trial in which [Home Box Office](http://www.dnaindia.com/topic/home-box-office) Inc faces libel claims over a report linking British sporting goods company [Mitre Sports International](http://www.dnaindia.com/topic/mitre-sports-international) to child labor in India. The trial in federal court in Manhattan is the culmination of years of litigation over the report on "Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel," which first aired in September 2008.

US District Judge George Daniels told potential jurors that the trial was expected to take up to four weeks. Mitre, established in 1817, is the world's oldest manufacturer of soccer balls. The company says it does not use child labor and firmly opposes it.

It has said some children depicted in the HBO report as stitching Mitre soccer balls in India for five cents per hour or less were induced to pretend on camera that they were child laborers. Some children shown in the report were also described as victims of debt bondage and child slave labor.

Mitre, which is owned by the London-based Pentland Group, has called the report a "hoax" and a "hatchet job," aimed at tarnishing the reputation of a company at the forefront of global efforts to eradicate child labor. "The evidence will show not only that this television show was false but it was told with HBO's clear knowledge of its falsity," said Lloyd Constantine, an attorney representing Mitre.

"Virtually everything in the show is false and HBO knew it at the time it was telecast." HBO says it stands by the report, alternately titled "Childhood Lost" and "Children of Industry." Ray Stallone, spokesman for the Time Warner Inc subsidiary, has repeatedly dismissed the libel case as "without merit." The premium channel is better known for entertainment than news. But HBO also has a reputation for producing top-notch news documentaries and that reputation could take a hit if it is found guilty of "staging" any part of a news report.

"The accusation that HBO or its Indian (news) stringers fabricated footage is false," Stallone said on Friday. Constantine declined to detail the damages Mitre is seeking. But the company's lawsuit, filed on Oct. 23, 2008, said the amount would total "tens of millions of dollars." "Mitre has suffered and continues to suffer substantial damage to its name, mark, business and reputation," the complaint said. It cited a decision by Wal-Mart Stores Inc to remove all Mitre Cobra soccer balls from its shelves after the report aired as one example of that damage.

Judge Daniels, in a written opinion clearing the way for the trial to proceed last year, made the point that "substantial truth suffices to defeat a charge of libel" under New York law. That principle is likely to be a pillar of HBO's defense in the case, since it has argued in court papers that its report was "substantially true." Child labor is pervasive in India and HBO contends that children in the country are involved in the manufacture of soccer balls, including Mitre-branded balls. But Daniels also gave Mitre an apparent advantage in the case by ruling - in a move protested in an amicus brief filed by leading media organisations - that Mitre was hardly a household name and cannot be considered a "public figure."

The protest centered on concerns about press freedom and the protections traditionally awarded US journalists in reporting about public officials and public figures. The ruling means that Mitre does not have to prove "actual malice" on the part of HBO, a tough standard in libel cases.

Instead, Mitre only needs to convince the jury that HBO was grossly irresponsible in matters such as fact-checking and editing. Kevin Baine, a defense lawyer for HBO, said Mitre still faces a tough court battle. "Mitre has the burden of proving that HBO said something about Mitre that was false, and that HBO was grossly irresponsible in its reporting. HBO's position is that it was responsible and careful in its reporting, and that what it said about Mitre was true," Baine said. The case is Mitre Sports International Limited v. Home Box Office Inc in US District Court, Southern District of New York, No. 08-09117.

**CHILDREN IN INDIA ENGAGED IN THE WORST FORMS OF CHILD LABOUR:**

Observing that children in India are engaged in the "worst forms" of child labour, US has asked the Indian government to establish a minimum age for employment in hazardous and non-hazardous jobs consistent with international standards.

"Children in India are engaged in the worst forms of child labour. Most work in agriculture producing crops such as rice and hybrid seeds. Children who work in agriculture may carry heavy loads and apply harmful pesticides," said US Department of Labour in its 10th annual Congressional mandated report that provides information on the efforts of certain US trade beneficiary countries to eliminate the worst forms of child labour.

"Children in India also work in dangerous conditions, quarrying sandstone and other materials, breaking stones and polishing gems as well as in manufacturing," said the report, according to which India along with Bangladesh and the Philippines lead the world in the number of products made by child workers.

"We believe that every child has the right to an education and a childhood free from exploitation. We believe that God-given potential is present in every child born into this world - no matter how poor, and no matter his or her race, class, or geographical origin," US Labour Secretary, Hilda Solis, said at the release of the report "Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labour".

Giving a detailed account to practices of child labour in countries across the globe including India, the US report asked the Indian Government to establish a "minimum age for employment" in non-hazardous and hazardous occupations consistent with international standards; and expand the scope of the act to cover children working in family enterprises.

"Every child has potential. And it is our common responsibility to ensure that every child - everywhere in the world - be given the opportunity to tap it," Solis said.

The Government of India is tackling child labour through a "Convergence Model" strategy, which integrates a range of social protection schemes to aid families of child labourers and to help prevent and withdraw children from hazardous child labor, the report said.

According to the report, children in manufacturing make matches, bricks, carpets, locks, glass bangles, fireworks, bidis (cigarettes), incense sticks (agarbatti), footwear, garments, hand-loomed silk, leather, brassware and other metal goods.

"Children embroider (zari), sew beads to fabric and stitch soccer balls for the domestic market. Many children manufacture goods in the informal economy, increasingly in home-based production. In addition to working long hours in cramped spaces under poor lighting and inadequate ventilation, children in manufacturing may be exposed to harmful chemicals and dangerous machinery and tools," it said.

Service industries that employ children include hotels, food service and tourism. Children work on the street vending food and other goods, repairing vehicles and tires, scavenging and rag picking.

"This may expose them to dangers including severe weather and criminal elements, and may lead to their involvement in traffic accidents," the report said.

It said forced child labour occurs in India. Children perform forced or indentured labor in domestic service, gemstone cutting and quarrying as well as at brick kilns and rice mills.

Children also work under forced conditions producing hybrid seeds, garments and embroidered textiles.

The federal police stated that an estimated 1.2 million children engage in prostitution; the report said adding that India remains a source, transit and destination country for minors trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor in domestic service, agriculture and activities such as begging and making bricks.

**2.MIGRANT LABOUR**

## Vietnam’s migrant labourers

### Going to debt mountain

# Working abroad is no bargain

Feb 14th 2015

BROKERS’ billboards outside Tan Lieu, a poor rural community in northern Vietnam, advertise “Labour Export”—jobs abroad. Vietnam’s youthful population of 90m adds up to 1.5m each year to the growing work pool. But economic growth, at 6%, is not fast enough to keep all of them employed. Dreaming of fortune, young Vietnamese are pouring overseas as maids, builders and factory workers.

Than Thi Hang is a daughter of Tan Lieu farmers. She flew to Taiwan when she was 18. Assembling mobile phones on 12- and 16-hour graveyard shifts was “easier than farming”, she says. Yet to finance the trip, her family borrowed close to $5,000 to pay a labour broker. Ms Hang spent more than a year nervously working off her debts.

* [Mufflerman triumphs](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21643221-voters-grow-more-demanding-opposition-party-sweeps-delhi-mufflerman-triumphs)
* Going to debt mountain
* [Pet soup](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21643231-mans-best-friends-are-under-fire-pet-soup)
* [Malaysia’s dark side](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21643227-jailing-anwar-ibrahim-setback-whole-country-not-just-opposition-malaysias)
* [Knightmare disorder](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21643234-tony-abbott-has-survived-party-rebellion-has-suffered-heavy-blow-knightmare-disorder)
* [Showdown](http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21643232-long-running-struggle-over-new-military-base-coming-head-showdown)

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Once, Vietnamese sought to work in the Soviet Union and its satellites. Today the prime destinations are Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia and South Korea. Since 2005 the number of Vietnamese working abroad on labour contracts has nearly doubled, to about 500,000. The $1.6 billion that migrants send home each year helps a bit to bridge a yawning wealth-gap between rich and poor provinces.

Official migration channels are surely safer than illegal ones that facilitate the movement of sex workers across Vietnam’s northern border to China. Yet of the many Vietnamese who migrate legally, more than a third of them women, some end up being exploited. A report on trafficking last year by America’s State Department concluded that Vietnamese have among the highest debts of all Asian expatriate workers. As a consequence, they are “highly vulnerable” to debt bondage and forced labour. A survey in 2013 by CSAGA, a Vietnamese NGO, found that nearly a third of over 350 interviewees felt they had been cheated, deceived or exploited.

Poor treatment encourages some workers to break their contracts and look for better work, often illegal. It became such a problem in South Korea that in 2012 its government cancelled its Employment Permit System for Vietnam. Permits were later issued again on a trial basis, but Vietnam’s labour ministry said in January that South Korea would close the gates again unless the share of illegal workers among Vietnamese declines from 40% to 30%.

Vietnamese authorities say they get the message. With support from international aid donors, they have opened a handful of offices where prospective migrants can learn about their rights. Vietnam’s press also makes much of police busts of lawbreaking labour recruiters. Yet changes are mainly skin-deep. Futaba Ishizuka, a researcher at the Institute of Developing Economies in Japan, says the government lacks the political will to regulate the labour agencies, which are often unlicensed affiliates of state-owned enterprises.

For all the tribulations, rural Vietnamese, especially from northern and central provinces, are still eager to go abroad. The fruits of migration are clear. In Tan Lieu, 64km (40 miles) from Hanoi, slender concrete homes, financed by remittances, are rising next to the paddies. Ms Hang says she has already saved the $3,200 needed for the renovation of the family home.

Labour was right not to leave the hundreds of thousands of Poles and other eastern European citizens hidden in the black labour market after 2004 ([How immigration came to haunt Labour, 24 August](http://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/mar/24/how-immigration-came-to-haunt-labour-inside-story)). Ryanair and easyJet were flying back and forth to main Polish cities well before 2004, as Poles replaced the Irish as cheaper labour, well before EU accession. The Labour government decision at the time of a booming, full-employment economy meant any incoming workers paid national and local taxes and national insurance, rented property legally, started their own small businesses such as shops, and some joined unions.

Most other EU member states which applied a seven-year transition period on labour-market access after 2004 quietly shelved it, as people could travel freely and simply worked in the black labour market. Italy and Spain have more than 750,000 Romanian immigrants, but Poles, thanks to a dense network of Polish communities in the UK since 1945, headed here. The decision not to continue the black labour market in 2004 was the right one. I sat in the cabinet committee and it is to the honour of [David Blunkett](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/davidblunkett) and the then cabinet minister, Andrew Smith, that they opted for the sensible economic and tax-generating decision rather than surrender to populist anti-foreign prejudice.

However, what might have made a difference would have been the adoption of the EU agency workers directive, which would have stopped employment agencies coming along offering cheaper labour to firms if they got rid of staff and hired agency workers without rights. However, the Treasury opposed tooth and nail this or other measures such as social-partnership training obligations, which would have helped British workers. The awful BNP slogan of “British jobs for British workers” should have been replaced by EU workplace rights for British workers, but, sadly, the Treasury team were opposed to such measures.

The Guardian

**Domestic workers: 47 million people worldwide denied basic labour rights**

Millions of domestic workers are forced to work up to 22 hours a day, unprotected by laws governing minimum wage, maternity leave and other rights

An estimated 53 million people – the vast majority of them women – are employed as domestic workers around the world. These workers are an increasingly powerful economic force: worldwide, they account for nearly 4% of all wage employment and 7.5% of female employees.

Yet, though critical to the functioning of national economies, 90% of domestic workers – around 47 million – do not have the same basic labour rights as workers in other sectors. A quarter of all domestic workers are not afforded any legal rights at all. They are effectively invisible, isolated behind the closed doors of private households.

[Global ILO data](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_157509.pdf) shows that more than 21.5 million domestic workers do not benefit from minimum wage regulations covering other types of work, and have no protection against being paid whatever their employer decides. A further 3 million are entitled to a minimum wage, but one that is less than that set for other workforces. The overwhelming majority of domestic workers in Asia and the Middle East are entirely ignored by minimum wage laws.

More than half of all domestic workers – about 30 million people – are also excluded from laws setting out normal working hours and almost half (44.8%) are not entitled to rest periods in the form of days off or holidays. When it comes to maternity rights, domestic workers are also significantly discriminated against, with more than one-third of female domestic workers left with no rights to maternity leave and almost 40% with no entitlement to maternity pay.

In countries throughout the world, human rights campaigners have [documented accounts](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/mar/17/global-plight-domestic-workers-labour-rights-little-freedom-abuse) of domestic workers being abused, beaten, forced to work up to 22 hours a day, and not being given food or paid for their work. When domestic workers are so systematically denied the basic labour rights afforded to other workers, employers cannot be held accountable for the mistreatment of those working in their households. Workers themselves also have no way of protecting themselves from exploitation.

When national laws ignore the rights of millions of employed people, the message that these are not “real” workers filters down, adding to the vulnerability and abuse experienced by domestic workers. Unless this changes, there is no way truly to hold those responsible to account. Child trafficking in India: 'It was only after a few years I realised I had been sold'

Thousands of children are being trafficked from India’s remote rural areas and sold into work in cities, often as domestic staff for wealthy families

Thousands of children are being trafficked from India’s remote rural areas and sold into work in cities, often as domestic staff for wealthy families

**3.MODERN SLAVERY**

Tuesday 28 April 2015 07.00 BST

Anti-slavery activists say thousands of children are going missing from some of India’s remote tribal areas as human traffickers respond to a surge in demand for domestic child labour in booming urban districts.

Between 2011 and 2013, more than 10,500 children were registered as missing from the central state of Chhattisgarh, one of India’s poorest states. The majority are believed to have been trafficked out of the state and into domestic work or other forms of child labour in cities.

“Trafficking for sex and other purposes has always existed in India, but trafficking children for domestic slavery is a relatively new development,” says HS Phoolka, a senior advocate at India’s supreme court and a human rights lawyer and activist. “This is due to rising demand for domestic maids due to rising income in urban areas and widescale poverty … in rural areas.This traffickingshows the rise of massive inequality in [India](http://www.theguardian.com/world/india).”

The missing children in Chhattisgarh represent a small percentage of the estimated 135,000 children believed to be trafficked in India every year. Yet the rate at which they are going missing from remote villages in the south of the state is causing alarm. I worked from 6am until midnight. I had to cook, clean, take care of the children and massage the legs of my employers

Last year, the supreme court expressed serious concern over the number of missing children in Chhattisgarh. The state responded with legislation, India’s first attempt to regulate the growing number of employment placement agencies, which are often conduits for children being trafficked into domestic servitude and other forms of exploitation.

Activists say more needs to be done to tackle the problem. “The state has become a big source area for children because of a lack of law enforcement, civil unrest, large-scale poverty, illiteracy and the remoteness of the villages,” says Bhuwan Ribhu, an activist working with the [Bachpan Bachao Andolan](http://www.bba.org.in/) (Save the childhood movement). “These are places where the protection of the state does not reach. Trafficking in this region has become deeply engrained.”

In the village of Kunuri, Deepti Minch, 19, describes her experience of being trafficked into domestic servitude in northern India’s Punjab state. A village agent had visited her family and promised her mother 5,000 rupees ($79) a month if she sent Deepti to work in Delhi. Once she reached the capital she was sold off to a family.

“It was only after a few years I realised I had been sold,” she recalls. “I was extremely hurt and was in tears. My life was tough. I worked from six in the morning until midnight. I had to cook meals, clean the house, take care of the children and massage the legs of my employers before going to bed. If I didn’t do my job well, they used to scold me.”

Deepti eventually managed to run away and make her way back to her family – yet thousands of other children remain unaccounted for. One of them is Salmaet, who went missing from Sihardhar village in Chhattisgarh’s Jashpur district six years ago, when she was 11. “I thought she had gone to a neighbouring village, but when she didn’t return I got worried and started asking around,” says her father, Thibu Ram. “I still have no idea where she is. I hope she’s safe.”

Salmaet’s disappearance is part of a disturbing trend of children going missing in the area. Fear and distrust of the police and officials mean children are rarely reported missing for months, or even years, after they disappear. Although Salmaet went missing in 2008, her family didn’t go to the police until this year. They say the police have done nothing to look for her. Rishi Kant, one of India’s leading anti-trafficking activists, says trafficking is still considered a peripheral issue among law enforcement agencies, especially in rural areas such as Chhattisgarh. “The response of states across India to this problem is very poor,” he says. “In states such as Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, law enforcement is too busy fighting the armed Maoist insurgency or civil unrest.[Human trafficking](http://www.theguardian.com/law/human-trafficking) is not a priority.”

**Aradhana Singh, head of anti-human trafficking unit, Jharkhand state**

In neighbouring Jharkhand state, Aradhana Singh, head of the anti-human trafficking unit in Khundi district, says the police lack both the funds and the will to tackle the problem. “We simply don’t have resources,” she says. “Our phones don’t work; power cuts are so frequent that we cannot use a computer or a fax machine. There is not even office space to offer counselling services. Most [police] don’t see trafficking as a crime. They just see it as poor children migrating for a better livelihood and don’t take these issues seriously. They think I’m dealing with a petty issue.”

The impunity enjoyed by those running trafficking rings in these tribal areas is increasing the power and influence of local criminal gangs. “The situation has become so grave that in these areas it is the traffickers who wield the power,” says Prasanta Dash, head of Unicef in Chhattisgarh. “Even if cases are filed against them, they are able to pressure the families to change their statements or threaten them. Because they earn a lot of money, they are well off and act as muscle men. Trafficking in this region is very deep.”

**GIRL WORKERS PHYSICALLY, SEXUALLY EXPLOITED, REVEALS SURVEY**

A study on the health status of adolescent girls working in the textile mills under the controversial ‘Sumangali Scheme’ or ‘Thirumagal Thirumana Thittam’ has revealed that most of them working in hostile working conditions are being physically and sexually exploited.

On studying the case of 193 girls from the district, including 44 girls still working in textile mills in western Tamil Nadu under ‘Sumangali Scheme,’ ‘Vaan Muhil’, a Palayamkottai-based NGO, believes that collective intervention by various arms of the government alone can stop the poor adolescent girls from being physically and mentally preyed upon by employers and their subordinates.

Under this scheme, girls from poor families are approached by brokers of textile mills, who lure the parents with the promise that the girls would be given a lump sum of Rs. 30,000 at the end of the contract period of three or four years besides the daily wages, boarding and lodging. However, the young workforce, mostly in the age group of 13 to 18 years, is forced to work in hostile working conditions for longer duration.

A total of 193 girls from 34 village panchayats in four blocks, eight schoolteachers, eight village health nurses, nine parents, eight local body representatives and eight self-help group members were selected for the study conducted between October 2014 and February 2015. “Since all girls employed under this scheme are being forced to work for more than 12 hours a day without any safety gadgets, they, who did not have any ailment before joining work, are now suffering from menstruation and respiratory problems, ” said M.A. Britto, director, ‘Vaan Muhil’.

Narrating the problems they had to encounter at the workplace, a couple of girls said they would be compelled to work for longer duration amidst sexual harassment by male supervisors. “Sanitation, food, shelter, workplace, etc., will be at its worst to make the life and health of the hired girl workers’ life miserable. The verbal and sexual harassment the girls face in textile mills cannot be narrated in words,” they said. “Whenever raids were conducted we were dumped in a dark basement for hours together.”

Mr. Britto suggests that textile mills should be compelled to strictly follow the labour welfare laws while the official machinery should ensure alternative livelihood for these girls.

**AFTER DEVASTATION, INCREASE IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING FEARED**

*May 05 2015 : The Times of India (Chennai)*

With the poor interiors of Nepal devastated by earthquake, fear of human trafficking for child labour and prostitution has begun worrying authorities in the Himalayan republic and India. On Monday, SSB rescued four children from Raxaul border while they were being trafficked.

“We're verifying their antecedents. Although they say they're Indian we're checking with Nepal. Given the situation in Nepal, we fear an increase in human trafficking. We've alerted our intelligence wing and stepped up vigil,“ SSB DG BD Sharma told TOI.

In Nepal, authorities are equally worried.“Village after village has been wiped out. Those living in the hills are very poor.

Several have lost earning members. We have information on many missing from villages.We can't yet say all of them are being trafficked. But we can't rule it out either,“ a Nepal army officer said. It's easier said than done given that the Nepal administration is overstretched with relief work. Much of it's being done by the Nepal army. Almost 90% of the army is engaged in rescue and relief.

In several villages TOI visited, families don't have enough to eat. Men have ventured out to find work. Women fend for themselves and children. Given the desperate poverty in the villages, Nepal has for long been a hunting ground for traffickers, targeting children and women for forced labour and prostitution. The Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) compiled by the US State Department rates Nepal as Tier 2, the explanation for which is, “The government doesn't fully comply with minimum standards for elimination of trafficking. However, it's making significant efforts to do so.“

Sex trafficking is rampant within Nepal and to India, with as many as 5,000-10,000 women and girls trafficked to India each year.

**SHACKLED TO WORK**

Even as Tamil Nadu accounts for the largest number of bonded labourers identified and released since the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act was passed in 1976, Tiruvallur and Kancheepuram districts continue to top the list in the State every year, often releasing migrant labourers from Andhra Pradesh and western Odisha.

According to information obtained through the RTI Act by M. Devasitham, a research scholar in Bishop Heber College in Tiruchi, between 2005-06 and 2013-14, Tiruvallur reported the release of 1,250 labourers and Kancheepuram 698.

“The total number of bonded labourers rescued between 2005 and 2014 was 3,776. There has been an increase during last year with 940 releases, the highest in the last 10 years,” says Mr. Devasitham.

There was also an increase of 20 per cent in releases between 2005-06 and 2009 (1,529) and 2009-10 and 2014 (2,184). Krishnagiri, Villupuram, Vellore and Tiruvannamalai districts are other districts were major releases were reported.

Taking huge loans for emergency expenses, industrialisation in Tamil Nadu and poor economy in other States have largely been the reasons why workers end up as bonded labourers with their families.

“Mostly, they borrow money when they face emergency situations like a funeral or accident, promising to repay the loan by working, but end up as bonded labourers,” T. Kuralamuthan, Director of Research and Partnership at International Justice Mission (IJM) says. The debt is passed on to the children and it goes on until it is paid. More often, the employers keep the workers confined and would not let them contact anyone in the outside world.

There is a need to establish a State-Level Action Plan to consolidate all the efforts of the State government to tackle the issue, he adds.

“Tamil Nadu is a highly industrialised state with many cities like Madurai, Trichy, etc apart from Chennai. Since they accept low wages and limited facilities, workers from other States end up here as bonded labourers,” says Professor S. Irudaya Rajan of Thiruvananthapuram-based Centre for Development Studies (CDS).

A Supreme Court Bench order in 2012 directing fresh surveys to be conducted periodically once in three years in all the States is yet be complied with.

**4**.**SKILLS FOR FREEDOM**

**MORE POWER TO SKILLED HANDS**

Handlooms are the one area where India leads the world in skill, creativity and expertise. The Handloom Reservation Act must be strengthened, not repealed

Last month, Gajendra Singh, a farmer, hanged himself in New Delhi. His death attracted massive attention as it happened so publicly, in front of the hundreds of people gathered there for Aam Aadmi Party’s rally against the Land Acquisition Bill. Such attention is rare, given that rural India mostly goes unnoticed, despite comprising 60 per cent of the country’s workforce.

Also going unnoticed is another pending disaster that could affect millions of rural Indians — there is a plan to repeal the Handloom (Reservation of Articles for Production) Act, 1985, which has been protecting traditional handloom weaves, especially sarees, from being copied by machine-made and powerloom competitors. It is a small, but important, protection for handloom weavers, who otherwise struggle to survive in a market where their yarn, designs and markets are all under attack.

When someone threatens to raze the Taj Mahal to build a temple, we are angry, but we are also confident that such madness will never happen. Yet, when another piece of India’s heritage is threatened, most of us don’t even know about it. This is because handloom weavers attract few TRPs or a rightful share of government attention and investment.

**PROTECTING WEAVERS**

The powerloom lobby has been agitating rather successfully for the Handloom Act to be withdrawn. Meetings and consultations have been held, largely without the inclusion of handloom sector representatives. Even their queries and concerns have gone unanswered. A spirited intervention in Parliament by BJP MP Kirron Kher brought a hurried assurance from the Textile Minister that the Act would remain, but there has been no subsequent government confirmation of this. Meanwhile, an online petition, ‘Save Handlooms — Don’t repeal the Handloom Reservation Act!’ has received 15,000 signatories in less than a week, demonstrating that even the urban young on social media care for handlooms, belying reports to the contrary.

One powerloom lobbyist at a meeting allegedly said, “We have progressed from the firewood chula to gas and electric stoves. If we hang on to technologies from our grandparents’ times, it is a mark of regression. Our children will laugh at us”. Another claimed that “customers prefer cheaper powerloom sarees”. This is factually incorrect. Obviously, the market has shifted from rural to urban, but handlooms are growing, and there are figures to prove it. And it is noteworthy that the growth is despite enormous problems faced by weavers in yarn procurement, credit, and market access.

Over the last five years, the demand for handlooms has actually increased. Sales figures and footfalls at handloom expos and exhibitions organised by Dastkar, Sanatkada, Dilli Haat, and the Crafts Councils bear witness to this. A weaving group in Bihar comprising former bonded labourers now sells several crores worth of handloom tussar saris annually. Its only problem is the lack of a regular source of tussar silk cocoons. At the other end of the spectrum, designers like Ritu Kumar, Abraham & Thakore, and Sanjay Garg, and stores like Anokhi, Bandhej and Bailou have all built hugely successful careers on handloom.

Fabindia consumes 11.2 million metres of handloom fabric a year, 10 lakh metres a month at a total value of Rs. 112 crore. It generates 100,000 man-days of employment and creates over 86,000 jobs, compared to 34 jobs for 24 lakh metres in the mill sector. There are an estimated 20 million handloom workers (this includes pre-loom and post-loom processes), compared to three million in the IT industry. Globally too, as understanding of the eco-friendly attributes and design virtuosity of handweaves grows, more buyers are looking to India. Given this, it would be tragic if, instead of investing more, we seek to destroy a sector that promises not just revenues but also jobs in the rural sector. All India needs to become a global handloom hub is infrastructure, investment and planning.

**STRENGTH, NOT WEAKNESS**

Handlooms are dismissed as cultural dinosaurs — primitive technologies irrelevant in a modern economy. This view ignores that Indian handlooms are not just the largest source of employment and income generation after agriculture, but also the one area of skill, creativity and expertise where India is way ahead of the world. In the 17th century, Francois Pyrard de Laval wrote “Everyone from the Cape of Good Hope to China… is clothed from head to foot in the product of Indian Looms”. At that time, five million yards of cloth were dispatched annually from just one port in Coromandal. India grew fabulously rich on the proceeds. Handlooms are India’s strength, not weakness.

Besides, handlooms have a low carbon footprint, as they require minimum infrastructure, technology and power.

***CULTURAL SYMBOL****: “Indian handloom is more than a potential global economic force; it is also our identity.” Picture shows handloom weavers at work in Thiruengoimalai near Thottiyam in Tiruchi district, Tamil Nadu.*

To say that we don’t need handlooms because we have powerlooms is like saying we don’t need tandoors because we have microwave ovens. It is absurd because each serves a distinct purpose. The handloom creates distinctive weaves and designs that no powerloom can replicate. As one person who signed the online petition wrote, “Handloom is like wearing your culture, why would we want to let go of that?”

The Handloom Act is toothless and seldom enforced, but it is still a deterrent. Rather than repeal it, we should be trying to give it more teeth.

At one Dastkar bazaar, someone asked an 80-year-old Manipuri woman wearing handloom if she didn’t feel cold. She replied, “I’ve spun this out of my own hands; my mother and sisters have woven it. My mother learnt it from her mother, and her mother from hers, and her mother from hers. The warmth of so many hands has gone into this. Generations of my family’s women enfold me. How can I be cold?”

Indian handloom is more than a potential global economic force; it is also our identity. As another young petitioner put it, “How we treat our craftspeople represents our values. For a party that claims to speak for Indian culture, perhaps this should matter more than who eats beef or who reads what book.”

If we remove protection and incentives for handloom weavers, we would be left bereft of our past.