

The debt trap

TO mark International Peasants' Rights Day, the Hari Welfare Association launched its report The State of Peasants' Rights in Sindh in 2018 at an event organised by the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research in Karachi last week. While outlining the problems faced by the peasants of Sindh, the speakers pointed to how the agriculture sector continues to practise the worst form of labour exploitation, encouraging slavery in the shape of bonded labour. According to the Global Slavery Index 2018, there are over 3m people working as bonded labourers in Pakistan. While many laws have been enacted to combat this societal and economic evil since the Land Reforms Act of 1977, little has changed on the ground. Despite the National Assembly passing the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1992, the system of entrapping the desperately poor through debt bondage continues to exist due to the lack of innovation in agriculture, a deeply entrenched feudal setup that is protected by the ruling landowning class which occupies parliament, and urban apathy towards the suffering of those outside the ruling elite's limited worldview. Additionally, millions of children toil in the fields and kilns as bonded labour, inheriting their parents' and grandparents' misfortune. Despite laws against child labour and the constitutional right to an education, most never get to attend school, continuing the cycle of poverty.

Since the passing of the 18th Amendment, the province approved the Sindh Bonded Labour (System) Abolition Act, 2015, but, again, there seem to be no signs of its implementation. According to the law, district vigilance committees were to be formed to monitor the abuse of power, but there is a glaring absence of their operation. There is also the problem of the lack of agriculture-specific laws. For instance, the Sindh Industrial Relations Act, 2013, mentions agriculture in passing, but does not even specify the rules of business for registration of agricultural workers, which deprives them of forming their own unions. Pakistan cannot progress until it introduces revolutionary land reforms that entitle its most marginalised classes to a certain acreage of land along with the required paperwork that formalises their ownership. Secondly, the laws that exist need to be made operational. Lastly, the majority of the bonded labour force consists of landless members of the scheduled castes, who are often shelterless as well. There should be no room left for caste-based discrimination and marginalisation in the 21st century.

Editorial