

Education or Debt Bondage: Is Social Change Possible for the Arunthathiyar Caste in Salem, Tamil Nadu?

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Abstract

This article engages with the issue of debt bondage and analyses the role education can have in integrating formerly bonded child labourers into society. By exploring a particular scheduled caste prone to debt bondage in Tamil Nadu, a state of southern India, it highlights the potential and limitations of education for those who are released from bondage. During a two-month fieldwork period, in addition to village visits, observations, informal conversations and meetings with government officials, qualitative interviews were held with staff from a local grass-root organization and formerly bonded child labourers who mostly attend colleges. The key findings that emerged pinpoint the way debt bondage is tied to a broader social system that reproduces itself by maintaining the Arunthathiyar within a low social-cultural position by, amongst other things, undercutting their education. They also highlight the role education can have in integrating formerly bonded labourers by assisting them to gradually move out of their low caste position. This includes changing their mentalities, teaching them the official state language and providing skills to engage in the broader labour market.

Keywords: Debt-bondage, child labour, Scheduled Caste, Arunthathiyar,

List of Abbreviations

CWA	Child Workers in Asia
GoI	Government of India
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ILO	International Labour Organization
NCLP	National Child Labour Project
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SC	Scheduled Caste
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
ST	Scheduled Tribes
UPE	Universal Primary Education

1.1 Introduction

The following article explores the role education can have in integrating formerly, bonded child labourers into society by exploring a scheduled caste (SC) prone to debt bondage in Tamil Nadu, a state of southern India. It highlights the way debt bondage, as a social system, reproduces itself by, amongst other things, undercutting education. In light of this, education is seen as a means to assist formerly bonded children to gradually move out of this social position. It can potentially do so by changing their mentalities, teaching them the official state language and providing them with skills to engage in the broader labour market. This tension between bondage and education can be better understood in light of Giddens' Theory of Structuration (1984) which highlights the potentially transformative role of education. The article first provides, as a background, an introductory argument for the importance of studying more in-depth how debt-bondage and education relate. It then presents the methodology and analytical framework used for the study. The ensuing section presents and discusses the main findings against the backdrop of how transformations in rural Tamil Nadu can affect bondage prone castes. Lastly, some concluding reflections will be made on how Giddens' (1984) concepts of structuration can shed light on the issue.

1.2 Background

The value of understanding and furthering knowledge on how education can assist children and youth who were bonded can be argued for from the mere extension of this reality, what it entails, and challenges in eradicating it. Today there are likely to be 20 million bonded labourers in the world (Siddharth, 2012; Upadhyaya, 2004) of whom 5 to 10 million are likely to be children (HRW, 1996; CWA, 2007). This arises from a common practice of a person holding his or a family member's labour as a pledge upon a loan (hence the name debt-bondage) and the historical socio-cultural practices, such as cast-based division of labour, that have historically legitimized such practices (Upadhyaya, 2004; Srivastava, 2005). Underneath this credit relationship are deeper factors of social exclusion (Upadhyaya, 2004) and asymmetrical relationships between lower castes and the upper castes and classes based on differential access to natural, cultural, social and financial capital (Siddharth, 2012; Srivastava, 2005). Those who are bonded, for the most part, find themselves unable to pay the original loan leading to a *de facto* condition of slavery- understood as the lack of freedom in: movement; choosing different forms of employment; bargaining for wages; and accessing markets to purchase or sell goods and services (Bales, 1995, 2005; Anker, 2004; Upadhyaya, 2004). It also often leads to abusive practices, such as people being chained to their work stations, physical beatings and gender-based violence (Siddharth, 2012; HRW, 1996). The physical damages caused by labour at a young age and at such intensity can also render bonded labourers unemployable in general by their thirties, leading them to be in the same position as their fathers were: i.e. forced to bond their own children (HRW, 1996; Siddharth, 2012).

There are various legal frameworks and government schemes aimed at tackling the issue of bonded child labour in India. The *Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976* declared bonded labour relations illegal, declared all bonded labourers as free and exempt from debt and ordered State governments to economically rehabilitate former, bonded labourers (CWA, 2007). The *1997 Supreme Court in Union for Civil Liberties vs State of Tamil Nadu*¹ directed the National Human Rights Commission to supervise the implementation of the *Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976* (CWA 2007)². The *Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986*³ in its turn prohibits work of children under 14 in hazardous occupations and regulates work in non-hazardous occupations. The *National Policy on Child Labour 1987* which was set in motion to enforce the act⁴ led to the National Child Labour Project Scheme (NCLP) which works, amongst other things, to identify child labourers and mainstream them into formal education through its own bridge schools, or through state run bridge schools under the Indian flagship program for universal primary education (UPE), the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Despite these legal frameworks and programmes, child debt bondage remains a complex social phenomenon which, as the International Labour Organization (ILO) notes, is highly invisible, extremely difficult to engage with and tends to be neglected by policy makers (2010). A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report on the silk industry in Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh also remarks that bonded child labourers tend to fall between the cracks of the existing policies and, in many cases, have not benefited from educational programmes (HRW, 2003). The Child Workers in Asia (CWA) Task Force on Bonded Child Labour (CWA, 2007) has suggested that much more understanding is needed on the connections between education and debt bondage to improve rehabilitation of former child bonded labourers.

Although a vast amount of literature is available on the theme of bonded labour in India, very few look in depth at the relationship between this phenomenon and education. Mishra's (2002) vast annotated bibliography of some of the major works published over the decades of the 1970s to the 1990s highlights the predominant themes and approaches which can be categorized as: 1) analyses of debt bondage as a phenomenon; 2) the legal approach to tackling bondage; 3) and the rehabilitation related issues. Much focus of the literature looking into rehabilitation is on its economic dimension and the shortcomings and ineffectiveness of government programmes and provisions.

¹ For the full Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976 see:

<http://www.humanrights.asia/issues/right-to-food/jurisprudence/india/bonded-labour-system-abolition-act-1976.pdf/view>

² For the full 1997 Supreme Court in Union for Civil Liberties vs State of Tamil Nadu see:

<http://supremecourtindia.nic.in/outtoday/3922.pdf>

³ For the full Act see: <http://labour.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/Divisions/childlabour/act.pdf>

⁴ See the Ministry of Labour: <http://labour.gov.in/content/division/child-labour.php>

They tend to add recommendations for improvement, including some form or other of educational provision, such as training for adults and free compulsory education for children (Chandolia, 1979; Dogra, 1987; Hamilpurker, 1989; Kulkarni, 1988; Mishra, 1987; Muthurayappa, 2001; Nainta, 1997; Pais, 1987 all cited in Mishra, 2002).

Though education is seen as part of improving rehabilitation of formerly bonded labourers, under what terms and to what extent it can actually do so is not explored. The same observations can be made of newer works by Siddharth (2012) and Srivastava (2005). Other recent literature by Guérin (2013), Guérin et al. (2013), and Carswell and De Neve (2013, 2014) focus instead on contemporary rural changes and the transformation of debt bondage.

1.3 Methodology and Analytical Framework

To build a better understanding on how bondage and education relate, a case study (Yin, 2003) of a local grass-root NGO working with a community prone to debt bondage was undertaken in the district of Salem in the state of Tamil Nadu, South India. The state is likely to be one of five, in India, with the highest concentration of bonded labour (the others being Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa, and Uttar Pradesh) and has been at the forefront of systematically identifying, releasing and rehabilitating bonded labourers (Srivastava, 2005). Salem has been classified as a child labour endemic district by the NCLP, which is in charge of identifying child labourers, including bonded child labourers, and mainstreaming them into the formal education system. Situated in the town of Taramangalam, the local NGO concentrates its work primarily in the Taramangalam Block, but also in adjoining ones, and focuses its effort on the Arunthathiyar Caste; one of the three main Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu⁵. It has been running since the early 2000s with most of its beneficiaries residing in villages on the outskirts of the town.

The organization undertakes surveys continuously to identify bonded labourers and child labourers and presents these as cases to government officials. It also advocates for the released labourers to receive the kind of rehabilitation they are entitled to from the government, such as land, housing, 20,000 rupees per person, and educational assistance primarily in the form of bridge courses to mainstream children into formal schools. It also directly assists 75 villages spread throughout the area by establishing night tuition centres in partnership with AID India, which is a large NGO working to improve the quality of education in rural contexts. The NGO also offers a six months tailoring course for women at its centre and in three surrounding blocks, helps them to get government provided tailoring machines, and supports them in finding work. Until now, it has trained 560 women and girls. It also helps establish and facilitate women's self-help groups that access loans from the government for income generating activities.

Data collection included interviews and informal conversations with four NGO staff, observation of the organization's main activities, village visits, and figures regarding those who were identified bonded labourers. Of the staff, two belong to the Arunthathiyar caste, one being a former bonded child labourer and founder of the NGO while the other a former child labourer who benefitted from the NGOs assistance when younger. Sixteen youth who were all formerly bonded in various occupations and currently studied at colleges or had just completed their college education were also interviewed. In addition, three district level government officials who work with bondage or education, one government advisor from an international organization who works with child protection, and one teacher from both a local SSA and a NCLP school were interviewed.

Findings which emerged from the data collection process were further analysed using some key concepts from Giddens's theory of structuration (1984). A fundamental dimension of the scholar's approach is the aim of explaining the reproductive character of social activities. This is primarily understood as a process whereby agents reproduce the conditions that enabled their activities in the first place. They do so because they draw upon rules and resources – or structures – in their social action, reproducing them as a paradigm for their action across space and time. A general definition of rules is the “techniques or generalizable procedures applied in enactment or reproduction of social practices” (p. 27). They are the frame of reference for social practices which, according to the scholar, are understood at a more profound level of “practical consciousness” and not necessarily accessed at the level of “discursive consciousness”, and are part an individual's stock of knowledge. They are further characterized as modes of signifying and of normative sanctions or legitimation.

⁵Arunthathiyar is the umbrella term used by the state government for positive discrimination and includes within this scheduled caste the following: Arunthathiyar, Chakkiliyan, Madari, Madiga, Pagadai, and Thoti castes (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2009). These share the same origin, language, traditional social role as leather-workers, and extremely low socio-economic position.

Resources in turn are characterized as domination. Giddens (1984) therefore characterizes structures as Signification and Legitimation (the rules) and Domination (resources). Though they are set apart logically and analytically, they imply one another in reality. According to Giddens “resources are focused through signification and legitimation” (p. 29); and the signification or making of meaning is tied to legitimation and domination. It is important to note that signification is set in agents’ interpretive schemes which are used in social interaction particularly through communication, while legitimation is found in agents in terms of norms and manifests itself in interaction through sanctions (p. 29). Domination can be seen in social interaction through power and is understood as the condition for the existence of codes of signification. In fact, Giddens suggests that frames of meanings incorporate the differentials of powers and that normative sanctions also express structural asymmetries or domination. Furthermore, this third structural property can be broken down into two dimensions of resources or what Giddens considers typologies of resource mobilization: 1) allocative resources - “forms of transformative capacity by generating command over objects, goods and materials”; and 2) authoritative resources - “types of transformative capacity generating command over persons or actors” (p. 33). These, however, only become “resources” when they are actually incorporated in the way systems are structured through signification codes and normative sanctions. This leads Giddens to suggest the following distinctions: 1) “structures as rules and resources which are properties of social systems”; 2) “social systems as reproduced relations between actors or collectivities, organized as regular social practice”; and 3) “Structuration as the conditions governing the continuity or transmutation of structures and therefore the reproduction of social systems” (p. 25). Through the use of these, debt bondage can be understood as part of a relationship between lower castes and upper castes: a social system of reproduced relations and regular social practices. It therefore takes part of definite structures (rules and resources) and conditions that lead to its continuity or transmutation, influencing also the way a community interacts with education, as will be argued below.

1.4 Findings and Discussion

The way bondage and education affect each other is partly tied to broader changes that the rural landscape of Tamil Nadu has been undergoing through its rapid industrialization and increased reach of social policy. The former has led to a modified rural and agrarian economy, an increased urbanization and the expansion of communications and transportation into villages (Djurfeldt et al., 2008; Guérin et al., 2013; Heyer, 2013). These changes have affected castes in different ways (Heyer, 2013; Harris-White, 2002), particularly through the reduction of agricultural labour and the increase of opportunities provided outside of villages (Djurfeldt et al., 2008). However, new employment opportunities are increasingly fragmented and segmented along caste lines (Harris-White, 2004; Guérin, 2013) leaving SCs and scheduled tribes (STs) to the most degrading forms of employment, the most bonded types of labour and in casual agricultural labour (Guérin, 2013). Furthermore, in the category of SCs, labour opportunities have become more differentiated, with some being able to avail themselves of new opportunities and achieve mobility while others transition into new forms of bondage (Guérin et al., 2013).

Debt bondage, having been predominately part of the rural world, is also under transformation. Its existence in agricultural labour has decreased particularly with the expansion of industrial labour, affirmative action and social policy (Guérin, 2013). It has changed from a monolithic agricultural feudal system by being integrated into the capitalistic agro-industries, rural industries and urban industries and structures itself in a continuum of oppressiveness and restriction of freedom (Bremner, 2006; Guérin, 2013). These new forms of bondage are however tied to specific historical contexts of caste based relationships and how these define social roles within economic change and new opportunities. This can be exemplified by De Neve’s (1999) case of the tailoring industry in Western Tamil Nadu. Many of the former landlords from the upper caste moved out of agriculture and entered this booming industry. As they did so, they introduced the agricultural practice of attaching labour through advances and began with those who were traditionally bonded to them. In another study, Carswell and De Neve (2013) highlight that this process of bonding workers exists to control labour and is brought about by creating or maintaining dependency. To this end, they argue that rural dependency relations are simply re-configured through advances and debts and extended from the traditional village world into the industrial rural world; which explains why bondage continues to occur along caste lines. This is all possible because, as Guérin (2013) notes, bondage is grounded in existing social hierarchies, continued discrimination of SCs and STs, and because of the highly unequal power relationships and the acceptance of these relationships.

As stated by Guérin (2013, p. 415): “present day bondage relationships arise only in communities where the verticalized ties of subordination, historically and socially rooted in both employers’ and workers’ consciousness, are still sufficiently strong to make subordination acceptable”.

On the other hand, state social policy – including for education, health and nutrition - can also support access to new opportunities as they lessen the dependency of lower castes on other castes, as Heyer has argued (2000, 2012, 2013). In the scholar’s village study in from the 1980s to 2000s, she focused on transformations for the lowest SC group, the Chakkliyan. In 1981/82 members of this caste were working within the village economy, under a high degree of subordination with many being bonded labourers. There was little support from the state government which led to high dependence on upper caste farmers for loans and other forms of security while children started working from the age of 10 or 12, instead of going to school (Heyer 2000).

Heyer (2012, 2013) highlights that from the 1980s to 1996 and again in 2008/9, changes in the rural landscape meant that urban and industrial opportunities became available to all villagers which began to weaken the caste-based system of exploitation. None the less, in 1996 the Chakkliyan were the least able to benefit from these new opportunities as they had the weakest position outside the village and their condition of dependency and subordination hampered what they could actually do. According to the scholar (2000), they were unable to own land, did not have access to higher wages, could not access certain types of credit or gain independent access, i.e. unmediated by the upper castes, to state benefits. Moreover, their lower level of education meant that they had less experience and knowledge of what could facilitate their transition to non-agricultural work. Their historical socio-cultural position in the village, therefore, constrained their ability to take advantage of new opportunities. However, when Heyer returned in 2008/09 (2013), SCs were employed in better non-agricultural occupations, there was little agricultural bondage with practically no child labour, there was an increased access to education and a deeper penetration of social welfare. Dependency on the elite in the village was reduced with social policy playing a key role in facilitating integration into the industrial economy that was booming (Heyer, 2012).

Transitioning out of being prone to new forms of bondage and accessing other opportunities seems tied to the degree that changes can lessen or transform traditional relationships of dependencies. In this regard, education appears to have a potential role to play as it can facilitate the move into different types of labour, as will also be argued further below. The government of India and that of the State of Tamil Nadu have been increasingly pursuing the universalization of primary education by particularly increasing access to vulnerable groups. Since 2000, the expansion of primary education to reach UPE (grades I-VIII) has been promoted particularly under the Central Government Scheme of the SSA. This aims particularly at bridging social gaps by reaching disadvantaged groups, such as SCs, STs, out-of-school children and girls so as to increase their access and retention in primary education (GoI, 2004). There is a strong emphasis on mainstreaming out-of-school children through bridge courses, remedial courses, and camps which assist in getting them back into the formal system. The state of Tamil Nadu appears to ensure a high participation of SCs in education, also beyond the primary level which is due not only to the push for UPE under the SSA, but also to specific policies that were set in place. The State has provided free public education up to lower secondary level since 1964 and for upper secondary level since 1978 (Kajisa & Palanichamy, 2009). It was the first State to make schooling compulsory in 1993 (Gold & Harris White, 2004) and, as Kajisa and Palanichamy (2009) note, policies implemented in the 1980s, such as midday meals (1982) and free uniforms and books (1985), helped reduce the costs of primary and upper primary education to almost its opportunity costs. Therefore, income and resource endowment have become less of an issue for families when investing in their children’s schooling, likely increasing its availability for traditionally dependent castes. However, for the community of this study, its dependency appeared to hamper to a great extent its educational opportunities. The Arunthathiyar, as noted earlier, are part of one of the three main SC groups of Tamil Nadu. Historically, castes within this SC grouping, such as the Madari, appear to have been the most dependent and least able to achieve some form of mobility (Beck, 1972; Cederlöf, 1997). From interviews, this also seems to have characterized the reality of the Arunthathiyar in Taramangalam.

The beneficiaries of the NGO live on the outskirts of the main town near agricultural fields and, according to respondents, on land they do not own, which are traditional dump sites. Only a few beneficiaries come from villages that are more strongly incorporated into towns. Debt bondage is present amongst them in varying forms: some are still bonded in agriculture, while others in rural businesses, such as brick kilns, rope making and power-looms. Others are bonded through recruiters as migrants in the stone cutting industry of Bangalore.

Besides casual agricultural work (coolie), labour opportunities consist primarily in scavenging, cleaning hospitals through government programmes, and construction work. Most formerly bonded respondents indicated that their parents worked for daily agricultural wages or were still bonded.

The community's access to resources or opportunities was presented by respondents from the NGO as key to understanding its reality; its proneness to debt-bondage and educational deprivation. Members of this community do not have ownership or direct access to resources that enable opportunities in life. The Arunthathiyar's inability to own land, get an education, access reserved government jobs and to engage in political participation led it to be characterized as unable to find mobility, even with the availability of state provided education: NGO Worker - *Least of all castes is Arunthathiyar, they can't even come up in their life. These people are really down on the floor. They don't have even enough food to eat. So in all these problems they never think of their studies, so they never go for their studies.*

Instead resources and opportunities are mediated by upper castes through a structured relationship of dependency and bondage. By controlling land and employment they are able to mediate these through insecure forms of labour, such as daily wages and credit for debt bonding. This enables a high degree of command or power in controlling a person's labour, as the following quote highlights. NGO Worker - *Those who are high people, the rich people are thinking of those low category scheduled caste: 'these people can be treated like handymen'. So they are given more work and less pay. They will give some credit, like 10,000 rupees but the interest is doubled. They collect more interest, interest, interest but the main amount is theirs [the borrowers]. But they collect only interest. Lifelong they [low caste] spend their time there [working]. [They are] not able to [get a] proper education. Not able to [have proper] food also. They [referring to upper caste] are thinking that they are slaves. They are made as slaves. After that they are beaten, [receive] kickings.* College students concurred that bondage meant losing their freedom and experienced it as a slave-like condition, as this female respondent noted: Female Youth - *[...] it's like slavery, it's like buying a person's life. By giving an advance and taking everything of theirs. And putting them through all this misery and pain. I've been through that, I don't want to see anyone else go through that.*

More importantly, NGO respondents suggested that in order to maintain this power over the Arunthathiyar, upper communities purposefully bond children in order to also curtail their education. This aims to keep the community under the same conditions of dependency and prone to bondage: NGO Worker - *And people from the other castes are like: "oh if they get educated we are going to suffer" so they keep them down and keep this thing going. They need labourers and servants and since these people don't have the means they get them the money [loan] [...] fathers and mothers too old so they take the boys and girls; mainly the boys and girls.* This "keeping down" is much in line with what has historically characterized the relationship between low SC castes such as the Madari and high castes in western Tamil Nadu (Cederlöf, 1997). One study in Andhra Pradesh (NLI rural wing, 1977 cited in Burra, 1995) also argues that child bondage explicitly happened at the expense of education. According to the owners of bonded labourers in that study: "Once, they are allowed to come up to an equal level; nobody will go to the fields. Fields will be left uncultivated everywhere. We have to keep them under our strong thumb in order to get work done (op. cit., p. 542)." College students expanded on this point. They indicated how bondage was an "enclosing" experience that constricted them to the world of work at the detriment of understanding the wider world, developing their potential, and accessing other kinds of employment outside of bondage and precarious forms of labour, such as daily wages in agriculture. This, in turn, means cutting them off from having a better, or a different life from that of their parents, as this male and female youth suggested: Male Youth - *In the law it says it is illegal, because if children are working, then their future will be spoiled, [Since] they don't know or gain any general knowledge, the children will always work. So they don't have knowledge of worldly things; instead they concentrate on their work, and there is no opportunity for them to have a good life.* Female Youth - *I was helping my parents [in bondage], but I was really hurt, I want to study, I want to be like everybody else. From small I wanted to study and come up in life. I wanted to change the way my family is, the work that they do. I wanted to bring about a change in my family and that is the reason I always had an interest to study.*

While upper communities purposefully pursue bondage, aspects of the Arunthathiyar mentality allow for it and sanction their dependency at the cost of education. The community's horizon for engaging in the world is structured by traditional social roles and is an essential part of reproducing their social position as, amongst other things, it frames the way education is understood and evaluated. This leads the community to explicitly accept bondage and deprivation of education, particularly as the former is a means to access resources.

As one NGO respondent explained: *We have done awareness on education, [caste-based] discrimination but nothing seems to be working. These three things they [members from the community] only know how to do, probably: being a bonded labourer, they can clean toilets and all that, or they can burn dead bodies. These are the only jobs they can do properly. Parents are like “as long as we get money, we are happy we don’t mind doing anything, whatever they [owners] say we are ready to do, we have got our money, this thing this money has helped us in this way, these people are giving us money”. So the parents are not able to talk to the people who have given them money, they are not able to question them. Nothing. All they have to do is “good morning Sir, what do I have to do today”. Even if their children are sexually abused, they can’t ask, even if his wife has been sexually abused he can’t say anything.*

With regards to education, parents view it as beyond their children’s grasp, as it was outside of their own. College students and NGO members underlined that parents were first of all unable to value the future benefits that education could bring because their mentality is tied to the immediacy of basic existence. Second of all, because for many generations none have gone to school, it is seen as outside of their way of being. These views are also reinforced by children’s learning difficulties, particularly due to the community’s mother tongue which speaks Telegu and not the official State language Tamil. This language barrier becomes a factor of exclusion and push-out through potential teacher abuse and by causing children to resist continuing in school because of frustration and the low perception of their abilities. This in turn can encourage parental mentality that children are incapable of learning and therefore better off working; as this NGO worker noted: *[...] most of the children they don’t understand Tamil and they get homework and don’t know what to do. The next day when they go back to school the teachers are beating them stating you are useless you haven’t done your homework. Because of that most of the students stop going to school, because [they think]: “I haven’t done my homework, I don’t understand the language”. So they loiter about and that is how they get caught for child labour and bonded labour. [...]the parents think: “My child can’t study, the child is useless”. Because they are not able to study in Tamil and the parents think: “My child is useless my child can’t study” and gives them to all these bosses and child labour happens.*

The bondage of children, in its turn, helps reproduce the same sort of mentality. It shapes children’s interpretive frame because it prevents them from gaining a deeper understanding of their world and how to be in it, as noted earlier above. Today, this is more likely for those who were bonded at a very young age, such as those in silversmith or stone breaking. For them, the closure of bondage seems to be fuller given that their horizon of experience and opportunity was almost completely tied to the world of work. As one respondent working in a stone quarry noted: *Male Youth - When I was breaking rocks, which was my world. I didn’t think outside that, I didn’t know what life was going to be outside that. Now that I’m out of breaking rocks, it’s like a totally new world for me. A totally different place, now only I realize this, so much in this place. The difference in my life is, if I was still working there, I would feel that that was nice; I would feel that that was my life. Now that I’m out of it I feel that there is so much more to life, apart from breaking rocks [...] From a small age I was with them, I didn’t go to school, since I was with them I did not know what was going on, so I just continued working.* In contrast, those bonded at an older age, such as those working in spinning mills, already had educational experiences and a larger opening to the world. This most likely creates a continuum where older students who are bonded have a wider and deeper horizon than a student who was bonded when in standard two. In these cases, bondage is not only an issue of labour but also of having one’s engagement in the world constricted compared to the wider horizon already acquired. In any case, children and youth were, characterized by NGO workers as having the same mentality as their parents. One NGO worker added that bondage was exacerbated by village life and closure from wider experiences. This constrained their understanding of the world and their wider engagement with it: *NGO Worker- [They were] not able to think that much when they were rescued out of [bondage]. Their world is there [...] they are staying home, they are staying in their village, and they won’t come into the city or some other place. They are living in a small circle. That is a problem. They don’t know the outer world. They are living in the same place. They are linked with themselves, inside, they are locked. They are not able to come out; they are not willing to come out.*

The community is therefore in a position where it naturally reproduces its dependency and proneness to bondage. Besides its lack of resources, its mentality accepts its dependency at the cost of education. This in turn ensures that the community’s mentality is reproduced by closing the horizon of children and youth to the village world and their typology of labour.

This also limits the possibilities of participating in new opportunities and finding some form of mobility out of this position. This becomes clearer by the way the NGO and formerly bonded youth valued education.

Sustaining access to education has become the NGO's strategy not only to help individual children or youth who were bonded, but to address the roots of the community's proneness to debt bondage. Education is understood as the key to breaking these self-perpetuating conditions by, in the first place, helping students secure employment outside of dependency on upper communities. In achieving this, those who are no longer bonded offer examples of the value of education and its potential, encouraging changes within the community by expanding their horizon of engagement. Formerly bonded labourers who are currently college students likewise see education as essential to get "good jobs" or "high jobs" and a better life. To them, there is no other way to "grow up" or move out of conditions that lead to bondage. Because it tends to reproduce itself, bondage is an enclosing reality, which has characterized the community. But education means access to different kinds of employment or "good jobs". Its positioning role, in the sense of enabling access to labour markets outside of bondage is, therefore, paramount to breaking out of the community's social position; as this youth noted: *Male Youth- Education is very important because, [my] parents are bonded labourers. In bonded labour we cannot find a better, good life, so if you want to have a good life, you need to study more, well; and through this education you will get a good life. If you have a good education then only will you have a good job. Even if you go out, if you have good education they will offer you a job.* For the NGO, if this is achieved, it has the potential of setting an example for the community on "how to work", not in subjugation or "under". Attaining positions through education transforms both parental views of what it can offer and children's views that have been structured by caste: *NGO worker - The reason why he is doing that is because there are a lot of people, especially SCs, that have been treated badly from small, they are not... like they are scared of everyone because of their caste. When they try and study, when they educate them, when they start working in a higher position, it changes. If one person changes, he can change everyone else and that is the reason why they work on them and try to concentrate on education and college.*

To ensure these changes, the NGO focuses on education of children and youth up to college level. College education is seen as increasing the probability of better employment as it is a must to overcome caste-based labour market discrimination. According to one of the NGO respondents, the Arunthathiyar need to have higher levels of education in order to compete for jobs which other castes are able to compete for with lower levels of education. This was corroborated by college students who believe that they must "position" themselves as high up as possible through higher levels of education to compete with other Castes. The NGO also believes that discrimination in the local surroundings can potentially be overcome by migration. This is more likely with a college education since graduates have better English language skills than if they had only secondary education; as this respondent explained: *NGO worker -If you finish grade 10, they are not giving jobs. In my community, we finish our degrees and we don't get jobs. Other communities finish grade 10 and they get jobs. We finished our degrees and we don't get jobs. So [the NGO] we send them far to like Bangalore where they can get jobs. They have a degree, go get a job. [They] know some other NGOs, and tell them "this person has a degree" and they get them jobs.* Related to the idea of migration, college education is also considered by the NGO as a way to help broaden students' mentality and aspirations to move away from the village setting. It also provides better protection from the risk of re-closure into the village world for female respondents. This is tied to early marriage and the loss of the usage of the State language, Tamil, falling back instead on the use of Telegu.

Paradoxically, coming from one of the lowest castes in Western Tamil Nadu and from extremely deprived and vulnerable conditions, formerly bonded youth find themselves pursuing the highest levels of education possible to attempt to overcome their background. Many aspire to continue their education up to a Master level to access a wider range of employment opportunities, higher forms of employment and additional government and civil service positions. Unless they are able to position themselves through higher levels of education, they continue to be in a very fragile and bondage prone position. As some pointed out, without secure employment, they are at risk of becoming re-bonded; even more so if a currently bonded parent becomes sick and they have to assume their debt. While these considerations point to potential benefits of having an education, it appears that it has already broadened the youth's horizon on how to be engaged in the world. The simple experience of being in school and receiving an education opened students up to an understanding of its value and role in society. This included the simple fact of seeing how it can help secure better type of work outside of bondage. But it also brought about the knowledge of different employment opportunities and how to position themselves for these. This included knowledge of what further education was necessary for particular sectors of work.

For example: Male Youth – *If I would have been in the bonded labour, I would not have had knowledge of education in the sense that there are different areas. If I study this one, I can get this type of job. But after going to school and getting knowledge, if I study this particular study then I will get this particular job. This kind of knowledge I got.*

Knowing about one's world and society and having access to information about it is also crucial to broadening frames of meaning and enabling participation in society. Many college students noted that, unlike their parents who were ignorant of the world around them, education enabled them to reflect, exchange ideas, seek information via newspapers and analyse their own reality. It has opened them to a world beyond their traditional village and bonded reality. Education has also led some to continue seeking deeper knowledge of their world, whether through newspapers, books in libraries or by continuing college education: Male youth - *If I am in my work place [bonded labour], I only know the work, I have no chance to learn other things apart from the work I have. But in school I have the chance to learn, to read newspapers, the chance to discuss with friends, many chances to think about other things. So education, learning will improve my life.* Education has also increased the formerly bonded youth's independence thanks to the acquisition of Tamil. This has enabled them to be connected to urbanized centres, reducing their isolation in villages, and to access financial services and government schemes on their own. It has also allowed for political participation as most, if not all respondents, have become aware of their role in choosing leaders for the country through voting. Those who had received their voting certificate would use it in the upcoming elections⁶. They all indicated criteria for choosing candidates based on what these had done, particularly for the poor or low communities.

Lastly, becoming educated can potentially assist formerly bonded labourers overcome caste based low status ascriptions and change behaviours and norms which reinforce them, lessening the social legitimacy of bondage. Being educated and/or achieving a good "position" is now seen by youth as a means to achieve respect or "recognition" from upper castes and from within their own community. This was suggested by many as a way to overcome their being regarded or treated as slaves - bondage being the epitome of non-recognition; as these female youth explained: Female Youth- *If there is no study, there will not be any respect. If you have good education, people will respect you... If you have a good position in life, people respect you. If you don't have a good position or reputation, then people won't respect [you]. In order to come up in her life, she chose study to get a position in society. If she doesn't study, the people will not give any respect to her and think she is a slave.* Female Youth- *Her caste is SC, so normally people never respect the SC. That made her move forward in her study, because if she studies, goes for further education, people will respect her, she will get a good response from people and she will get a good position.*

Respect or recognition can also be more quickly pursued through a gradual transformation of behavioural patterns and norms associated with the Arunthathiyar's low caste status. For example, education has assisted respondents in social interactions with the wider community, particularly in communicating with upper castes. College students pointed to the socializing aspects of what they learned in school in terms of how to behave, communicate and "give respect". The key issue for respondents was the need to be decent, respectful, to know how to address different groups of people, to control one's language and to not drink. Male Youth- *After going to school I learned how to talk with people in society respectfully, if someone is coming to us, how we should talk to them politely. After getting knowledge, an education, people realize that this guy is educated, so while speaking with others they will come to know how well an education he has. Education, it teaches how to talk, how to obey and behave, give respect to others.* The value of learning these social skills can be understood against the backdrop of this particular caste. NGO members noted five commonly held characterizations of the Arunthathiyar by the wider community: their language is uncivilized and vulgar; they are prone to alcoholism; their families are dysfunctional; their children are uneducated; and their wives are mistreated by husbands and sent into prostitution. Behaving properly, therefore, helps respondents overcome caste prejudice and stigmatization. As the NGO noted, if students are well kept and clean these are less likely to be spotted as a SC. Mingling and interacting with upper castes could potentially change upper caste prejudices. More importantly, to overcome low status ascriptions, education can also provide awareness of the injustices of caste treatment and that instead castes should be viewed as equal and subjugation should not be accepted. As such it offers the potential to "break" the mentality of earlier generations that has accepted debt bondage.

⁶The 2014 Indian general elections for parliamentary constituencies.

As the two following female youth exemplify, in contrast to parents who are enclosed in their world of work and bondage, respondents have been able to understand or become aware of the (mis)treatment they underwent as “caste based”. The first youth was able to locate her experience within the wider cultural caste system and understand the tendency for her community to always be mistreated. This represents a deeper understanding of the social world within which she is located. The second respondent highlights how education has enabled her to have confidence and to not “put herself under” upper caste communities in contrast to the traditional village mentality: *Female Youth 1- Her parents don't know about the world and society and how people will behave because they don't have good knowledge and education. She has come to know about the society and community, how she should respond and behave, through education [...] Her parents have not come out of the place where they were working, so the owners will, if her parents ask for some water, then they will give some like how we would pour the water for the dogs. So they treat [you] in such a way. Even she faced a lot of problems. But when she came out from that place, for studying, then she understood the people, the society behave like this [...] now she got some knowledge about society: Those people will always treat this kind of caste [Scheduled Caste] very badly. So this system is in work. These people are following this culture, this system. [...] When she went back to the place where she was working, they will not give proper respect, she understood this community, society will behave towards us, treat us very badly. That is where she learned it.*

Female Youth 2- [...] And they are very afraid, my parents very afraid of upper community persons, because they are having more money, like that we have to go under them, like that they are thinking. They are taught that also. But I know in studies also, we are learning more about under community person, so I can face them. Straight forward, I can face them. I don't have fear. If they are having money, they are only going to get the benefits. Why I have to fear? But my parents thought, it is not like that. They are simply thinking they are more money persons; we have to go under them. From tradition my parents' thoughts are like that, in the village also, from the start itself, from my grandfather's generation. But because of my education I study only that. [...] We are studying social science, lots of laws, awareness about laws, awareness about people, about independence, self-respect. Everything I studied in social science. [...] Child labour, Sir, she don't know particularly that law, but she knows law does not allow any bondedness. Our teachers also taught that everyone is equal; in society everyone is equal, because we have school uniform and everything is the same for upper community and lower community. From that we can know.

It is for reasons such as these that education is valued by members of the NGO and that it has played an important role in the life of college students who were once bonded. It has helped change students' mentality and provided aspiration to change the way they engage in the world as compared to earlier generations. It is an opportunity to position oneself for resources through access to labour market opportunities outside traditional social roles and can provide greater integration into Tamil society by breaking from the village world. If education will be able to fully guarantee mobility out of this position of dependency and proneness to bondage, is yet to be seen. It does however appear to be the only means of attempting such a transformation which also explains why bondage is pursued at its expense. Understanding bondage as a social practice that reproduces itself through Giddens theory of Structuration (1984) can provide a helpful insight into this tension.

1.5 Conclusion – Transformative Potential of Education

From the findings, and broader literature (Carswell and De Neve, 2013, 2014; De Neve, 1999; Guérin, 2013, there is every indication that bondage is tied to the way resources are distributed to the Arunthathiyar through Signification and Legitimation. The sampled community continues to be engaged in the world primarily through precarious employment and bondage because of its structured relationship with upper communities and its reproduction. The relationship is based on a high degree of power asymmetry given that the allocative resources are all distributed to upper communities which have huge authoritative resources as they mediate the latter and set conditions by which the Arunthathiyar engage in the world. All of this is set within a frame of meaning which structures how the Arunthathiyar envision and carry out in practice their engagement in the world: as daily wage labours in agriculture, bondage or scavenging. Moreover, as many have not gone to school and since they do not have the resources needed for schooling, education is seen as outside the possibility of their children. They therefore tend to reproduce the structures or frames of social interaction which characterized their own positioning for resources and life chances. This is reinforced by upper communities' desire for the perpetuation of this system, and their push for child bondage at the cost of education.

This is also tied to the broader caste system which legitimizes differentials in resources and opportunities and the caste's ensuing exploitability and exploitation, including sanctions in forms of discrimination in social settings, such as temples and even in education. This can be interpreted as a punitive mechanism reinforcing the position of dependency and bonded labour proneness.

Education appears to have a role in changing these structural principles. It is, for one, an opportunity that is unmediated by upper communities and can lead to the expansion or diversification of resource mediation through employment outside of bondage. It also provides the opportunity to challenge the signification and legitimation dimensions, changing mentalities in terms of caste and how one should position oneself in the social world. Education is in fact valued by the NGO under these terms: providing change at the level of resources, signification and legitimation.

However it is through students' interaction with education that a change can come about in the way this caste interacts with the wider social reality, or other social systems other than bondage. If youth from the community can position themselves and engage the labour market based on credentials and acquired skills, finding "secure" jobs could lower their dependency on upper communities and change the way of accessing resources. This would lessen the upper communities' allocative power over their own. This also explains the former's resistance to their education as this would translate into a loss of cheap and readily available labour. Just as important are the changes that education can begin to bring about in relation to signification and legitimation. As noted, parents accept bondage as their plight, are willing to be under exploitative conditions and submit children to the same at the cost of their education. Youth respondents who are educated have expanded their horizon of engagement in the sense of both understanding that education is a possibility and a must for them, but also that there are other occupations outside the traditional caste-based ones. The way one should be engaged in the world, or be socially active, is no longer framed in terms of advances and bondage, but in terms of education as a route to employment. This is also tied to understanding caste-based issues and overcoming legitimation and sanction based aspects, recognizing, for example, the equality of castes and not being "under" the upper communities. Education can also assist in overcoming some of the sanctions in terms of discrimination and social distance by providing a degree of respect and changing some characteristics associated with low caste status. More importantly, education provides the necessary knowledge to engage in the world beyond the village; lowering social distances structured in geographical and linguistic terms. In particular, the acquisition of Tamil and English allows for a deeper social integration by enabling access to services such as government schemes, banking, public transportation, access to different sources of information and greater political participation. This could likely entail gradual transformation of the structural principles that have made this community prone to bondage.

The actualization of these changes, and the possibility for long term social change in the principles that frame the Arunthathiyar's social reality are not a given however. It does not seem likely that caste identities, sanctions in forms of discrimination, and the fragmentation of the labour market along caste lines are overcome through higher levels of education and within one generation. Not finding employment is a stark possibility, but attempting to do so because of education is none the less a start. Changing the way the community engages in reality, no longer through bondage but through education, might produce results in the long run and move the community out of its position and enclosed situation. For formerly bonded labourers this appears to be the only option to pursue: greater integration through education against the permanence of vulnerability to reproduced social roles of precarious employment and debt bondage.

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