

WOMEN IN BONDAGE

Voices of women farm workers in Sindh

Mehergarh: A Center For Learning

Islamabad, Pakistan

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FOREWORD

Mehergarh—a Center for Learning, is an organization that focuses on the development of active citizenship and leadership in social activism to eventually build a more humane, socially just, gender balanced and peaceful society. Among its other programs, where we build young leaders, mobilize youth and develop an appreciation for diversity, there is a Civil Action Program which takes up social issues and launches campaigns to get citizen's actively involved in addressing them. Through this program, in addition to other issues, Mehergarh has been actively working against Bonded Labour for the past several years.

The initiatives against bonded labour originate from our Hyderabad office. Veerji Kohli our coordinator in Hyderabad, has spearheaded this struggle with the support of the senior management of Mehergarh and other volunteers. We recognize and appreciate the work that other organizations are doing against Bonded Labour. Our contribution to this struggle comes in at three levels. We believe that the issue is still very local and the general public of Pakistan has not yet acknowledged the gravity or even the existence of the problem. Therefore, one level that we work on is to raise the awareness of this issue outside of Sindh. This is done through mainstream media and through producing materials for community awareness sessions.

Secondly, we focus on documenting women's perspectives on the issue. We want women who have suffered from bondage to participate and be actively involved in the overall debate on the issue and also contribute to its solutions. We conducted a session at the World Social Forum where women who have been freed from slavery shared their views as key speakers.

This booklet, documenting case studies of women who worked on agricultural farms in bondage, and the accompanying video documentary are also our contributions to this debate. We acknowledge other organizations that have made effective documentaries on the issue including National Rural Support Program, Interactive Resource Center and Green Rural Development Organization. We hope that Mehergarh's documentary will add to this material, especially by adding women's voices in the discussion.

Thirdly, Mehergarh helps individual families to get out of bondage. With limited resources we help as much as we can by filing cases for families who want to take the legal route. We raise funds from urban Pakistanis to help pursue these legal struggles.

Though we work on all of these levels, our emphasis remains on campaigning against the issue through media, research and developing research-based awareness materials. We hope that Mehergarh would continue to work in partnership with all the other organizations working on this issue and will make its modest contribution in areas that remain its strengths. It is this joint struggle that will make an impact on this major challenge that we all face.

Dr Kamran Ahmad
Chairperson, Mehergarh: A Center for Learning

GLOSSARY

Auttak	Place where guests of a landlord are entertained.
Bhil	An ethnic group among Hindus, considered quite low in social status
Charpai	Light weight bed
Chuni	Big veil to cover the head
Ghagra	Traditional skirt with heavy gathers
Hari	Farmers, usually referred to those who work for a landlord
Kamdar	Managers of a landlord
Kammi	The one who works with his hands
Kohli/kohlan	An ethnic group among Hindus, considered low in their social hierarchy
Lakh	Hundred thousand
Mazarey	Tenant labourers who till someone else's land
Roti	Round and flat bread
Rilly	A floor or bed covering made with pieces of coloured fabrics
Rupees	Pakistani currency 60 rupees = 1 US dollar
Sahib	Mr.
Wehshi	A cruel, wild person

INTRODUCTION

Bonded Labour is a term that has become somewhat known in Pakistan over the past decade. The issue, however, of poor farm labourers being coerced into a situation where they are so burdened with debt that they become slaves of landlords, has been a common problem in interior Sindh for a very long time. Other communities, socio-economic classes, ethnic groups and citizens in general have remained apathetic to the plight of these Pakistani slaves. The reasons for this social apathy stem partly from the sheer ignorance of our middle class to what happens outside of our cities coupled with the lack of empathy with the bonded labourers, who are mostly Hindu. However, although the Government is fully aware of the situation, the stranglehold that the Sindhi and Punjabi landed classes have over our Government makes it perilous for anyone to initiate action or debate that may offend or embarrass them.

Over the last two decades, a few groups have worked hard to gradually attract some attention to this issue. There are two schools of thought among these groups. One considers the landlords who use bonded labour as criminals and argues that the government should strictly implement the Bonded Labour Law of 1992. The other views the situation as a co-dependent relationship that will likely continue to exist in some form well into the future, but wants the relationship of land owners and farm labourers to be redefined so as to reduce the extremely inequitable burden on the labourers.

This booklet makes an attempt to bring a new perspective to this debate. Our purpose is to document women's experiences in bondage and, particularly, to bring their long struggles for freedom for themselves and their families to light. We believe the issues these women face have never become a part of the larger debate forums of this issue.

We decided not to come between these women and the readers so we have not attempted to analyze their issues. We have simply reported them as they were told and verified. They speak of the years of hardship and deprivation they have gone through and the pain they will carry in their hearts forever. **It is important to note here that the actual level of violence and abuse is much more than what is contained in the narratives. Informally, the women told of systematic rapes and sexual humiliation that continued for decades. We have only included in this booklet the information they felt comfortable in bringing out publicly. We have changed the names of the landlords to avoid any retaliation and possible violence towards these women. The women did not want their own names to be changed.**

So far the economic dynamics of the relationship have been at the core of the debate. The discussions revolve around how poor farm families seek their livelihoods, the way they are hired, the skewed input and income distribution between the farmer and the landowner and the way debt records are kept and, at times, changed to favour the landowner. Mostly, it is a debate about what percentage of contribution both parties make and what formula should be applied for income distribution.

However, what we have learnt from listening to these stories is that the entire power dimension of this problem needs to be considered. Regardless of how fair the distribution

formulas become, the extreme power and authority imbalance is an important dimension of the debate. Our society has allowed the landowners to continue to operate as feudal lords. Our society also bestows the lowest status and stigma to the “kammi” (the one who works with his hands), “mazarey” (the tenant labourer who tills someone else’s land) and “women”, who are still considered by many as second grade humans. When redefining the relationship between the landowner and the farmworker, abuse of power, violent crimes and threats against women should be as important as illegal bondage and inequitable income distribution. The high frequency of rape and sexual abuse reported by these bonded women requires this aspect to become a part of the dialogue on establishing a new form of tenancy relationship.

During this study, we confirmed what others have reported, that because of the lack of income generating opportunities, many men do not like to live in the camps created for recently freed labourers . However, it became extremely clear to us that, for women, the safety afforded by these camps was reason enough to stay in them. Although the camps are relatively safe havens, women did report abuse from those who operated some of the camps. Perhaps the power dynamics of the feudal mindset is not limited to landowners and their bonded labourers. Any abuse of women or their families by those operating under the pretext of aid should be immediately weeded out. In one person’s words “us waderey se to buch ke aa gaiy, yahan yeh humarey khair khua humen apney ihsaan jata jata ke aur uske badley men humarey gharon men aatey hen” (we have escaped the landlord, now these do-gooders, telling us that we should be indebted to them, come into our homes in exchange for their benevolence).

We hope that the voices in this booklet will help the Pakistani public to realize the importance of speaking up on various aspects of this shameful issue. We also trust that, after reading these stories, people who are already addressing the bonded labour issue will understand that women’s concerns and priorities are different from those of their men. It is important that these social activists modify the current debate format because it neglects a major part of the story. Perhaps these tales will also strengthen the resolve of those in Government who are already trying to help, enable courts to take a stronger stance and cut through the shield of power wielded by the feudal classes. Finally, we pray that some of the more progressive landowners will see that such cruelty is giving all of them a bad name and they will put social pressure on their friends to clean up their business.

Poni

We were living very happily in Nagarparker but the work was very demanding. We had to grind barley, bring water from far away, take care of cattle, cook and take care of children. When the drought came we, like many others, decided to move to the barrage area because I thought life would be easier there. I would get ground barley, water would be close by, and I wouldn't have to work so hard, but our luck was bad. We moved to a village near Sanjar Chang, Taluqa Chumber, District Tando Allah Yar. Unfortunately at the insistence of a relative we got stuck with a landlord, Chaudhry Jallal and his manager, Raziq who we gradually found were very cruel people.

In the beginning we didn't know how bad these people were but gradually Sughra, Majeeda, Niku Punjabi and Ganga, who were some of my neighbours, started telling me stories of their cruelty. They kidnapped Ganga, raped her for three days and then brought her back to her family. At that time Ganga was in very bad shape. Her family had such a heavy loan against them that they couldn't react. Besides the landlord threatened them that if they raised their voice they would be killed. No one had the courage to utter a word. Their family continued to tolerate his cruelties in silence.

I was very worried and told my husband that we should move away. The landlord owed us seven thousand rupees for our labour on his land by then. I told my husband to ask for the money they owed us and even if they didn't give us anything, we should still move to another farm and make a living elsewhere. When my husband asked the manager for the money, the manager told him to give him about three days to do the calculations.

During this time an unfortunate incident happened. The manager dragged a woman who was also called Ganga into the fields as she was returning from work and raped her for three hours. She was in a very bad condition when she was thrown back in her home. Her husband was out of the village on some task given by the landlord. Usually women victims are terrified and don't say anything in retaliation. But this woman was angry and vocal. She screamed like a wounded animal. She complained and threatened to take her case to the police upon the return of her husband. The husband was to return in three days. The landlords were worried that the woman might convince her husband to make a report against them so they caught him before he got home and killed him. The next day the police came, examined the crime scene, and left. Nothing happened after that.

Another woman whose name I don't remember also faced such a destiny. Her husband, Krishan Kohli, was run over by a tractor and killed intentionally. Everyone in the village knew but no one uttered a word. I became very afraid.

When my husband approached the manager again for his wages he was told that not only did they not owe us anything, according to him, we owed them money and could not leave unless we paid up our loan. We were shocked but could not do much in the presence of their armed guards. I became certain we would not be able to escape the landlord's prison and abuse. We felt like we were trapped in hell.

One day I was working in the fields when the manager, Raziq, came and threatened me that if I did not behave I would bear the consequences. I was not sure what he was saying but knew that he was putting pressure on me and scaring me. He kept making such verbal threats frequently after that. I was terrified of him.

Another day I was coming out of the field after cutting the grass. He stopped me and told me I had hidden a sugar cane in the stack of grass. I assured him that this was not the case but he made a fuss about it and in the pretext of searching me took me into the fields at gunpoint and started to rape me. When I protested, he said, 'Haven't you seen what the other women faced? You better be quiet otherwise we will do the same thing to your husband and children.' He raped me, and I was not able to do anything. I begged him for mercy but he was brutal.

He continued raping me like this in the fields for two and a half years. The pain of humiliation was killing me but I was afraid they would kill my husband and children so I couldn't do much. I cried so much in those years that even my tears dried up. The manager wouldn't even let us leave the village. He had special people who kept an eye on my husband and me.

One day when we were coming back from work, the manager and his men stopped us. Some of them went after my husband and beat him up badly and some dragged me to one side. There, they raped me brutally. I kept screaming 'don't beat my husband, leave him alone' but they didn't listen to me. They let both of us go eventually. We both were exhausted and in terrible pain. This time I had to deal with not only my own pain and humiliation but also the pain of seeing my husband being beaten up so badly. He was also traumatized seeing them humiliate me in front of him. We both were so desperate and tired of the abuse that we gathered the courage to somehow get away from that hell.

It was July 4th, 2006. We left all our belongings, took our children and ran away from this prison. We did not care about the consequences of being caught any more. What more could they do to us? They could kill us but death would have been better than the painful life we were living.

We came straight to the office of Mehergarh in Hyderabad and with their help filed a case against the landlord and his manager in the session court. Now it is in the hands of the court. We will see what fate brings to us. I really miss my Tharparker. I miss my home. I wish I could turn the clock back to when we lived in our Thar. We faced hardships, but we lived with dignity.

Marvaan Kohlan

Marvaan was tying her two goats in the shade as she reflected on her life. *I was very happy when I got married. I cared for my husband Paro very much. The other family members were also happy with me and I with them.* She pulled out a rilly from her hut and spread it on a charpai. She herself sat across from it on a mud mound, next to a water pitcher. *My husband and I liked working hard and making our own living. We would do agricultural labour in other people's farms. Preparation of land, sowing, weeding, cotton picking, whatever work we could find. We made wages and lived off of them happily. Our income was not much but we were both happy with our lives. We thanked God for it. We were not haris with any particular landlord. We kept shifting to wherever we found work with good wages.*

It was in 1972 that we started working as haris for Nila Khan Mangrio on the insistence of a relative. At that time I did not have any children. The arrangement was that the landlord would give us food and wages. We moved to his land, made our huts there and started work on his fields. We did get food regularly but somehow we were never paid full compensation in the early years. We were concerned about him not paying us full wages but we thought it would be more like a saving for us. We were sure the landlord would eventually pay the remaining wages all together. No one abused us really. Once in a while, his people would give us, women, a hard time, which we didn't like and complained to our husbands about. As time passed the situation gradually started deteriorating.

One day my husband went to find out how much money the landlord owed us. After dodging us for days they finally shocked us with an exorbitant amount that we owed him. After we came back to our senses we sat together and realized that the landlord was playing with us. He had tricked us into being his slaves. We could never pay off a few hundred thousand rupees that he said we had to pay. We could never ever pay that kind of money. Besides he was the one who owed us but who could we go to for justice. We sat together late that night and wondered how we got stuck in that situation and how we could ever come out of it. We could not come up with any answers.

After breaking this news their grip on us suddenly became tighter. Two of the landlord's manager were very scary. The landlord got all his dirty work done through them. Their atrocities increased with time and we were totally enslaved.

There was a high fence around our huts, leaving only one way to get out. This is where the managers used to sit. There were separate managers for men and women. Our manager used to get all the women from their houses at 6:00 am and would bring us back at 6:00 pm. He would tell us that while we worked, we were all his wives. During the day if any of us really got tired and sat down to take a break, the manager would kick us and tell us to go back to work.

Our children who were old enough to work would go with us to work while the younger ones would stay behind. My mother was the only woman who did not work, as she was too old. She would stay behind and take care of the children. Every morning I would take

out my milk in a bottle and give it to her so that she could feed my children with it during the day. The children were used to that lifestyle also.

We had started believing that this was our fate now; that there was no hope for freedom. We didn't even try to run away, because we had nowhere to go. All the officials were friends with the landlord and if we were caught running away, they would kill us.

For twenty-two years we worked as haris for this brutal landlord. Marvaan started to cry. She covered her face with the veil and sat there sobbing for a long while.

There was a woman named Lali who lived and worked with us. The men in her family somehow escaped. They went to Lahore and filed a case against the landlord. When the landlord found out, he really tightened the security. As a punishment, all the women were made to work naked and we were told that this was what happened when some one tries to run away. A few days later police came and took the rest of Lali's family members away. The manager told us that they were only going to the police station to have their comments recorded and would come back in the evening and then they said we would all see how they would be treated for reporting against the landlord. We were all terrified. When the police approached us and wanted to get our statements we refused to talk to them. Later we found out that those who went with the police all were freed and went to live in the hari camp. The managers of the landlord had lied to us and we got tricked by them. I felt very resentful. I wish I could have gone with the others from Lali's family.

One day Lali's family came to visit us. The managers got furious and they beat up my husband so bad that he could neither get up from his bed nor eat anything. I was devastated! I didn't know what to do. We didn't have any medical help. I did not have permission to take him outside our area even if I had any money for the hospital. On the eighth day he passed away. I didn't know how to handle a shock of this magnitude. I had his murderers in front of my eyes and could not do anything.

The day my husband died, I decided that no matter what, we had to leave that place somehow. After killing my husband the landlord was weary of what we would do in reaction. These people are very smart. He anticipated trouble. I guess he suspected that we might try to run away. He might have suspected that I would contact the police regarding the murder but I am not so sure. He had very good contacts with the police. In anticipation he sold seven of us, besides me, my married son, his wife, my two daughters who were 14 and 6 and two sons who were 12 and 14 years old. He sold us to another landlord, Khalid Mohammad Ijjar for Rs.50,000/-. There we did not know any one and stayed close to one another as we worked. We felt very vulnerable and lost.

One year went by. The level of abuse and brutality was less but our movement was severely restricted. We didn't get anything other than basic food. My eldest son, by this time, had become a big support for me. He understood my sorrows and gave me courage to live on. Unfortunately he fell ill. I asked for permission to take him out for some medical help but could not do much. To my horror, he died. I was left helpless. I had not recovered from this trauma in my life when his daughter also fell ill and passed away.

This was the third death in my immediate family. There was no time to grieve as I had to go through the daily routine of work in the same manner every day, as if nothing had happened.

Our old Landlord Nila Khan Mangrio visited one day and brought us back to his lands. We were not sure what his deal was with the second landlord. He told us that we owed him hundreds of thousands of rupees and he was now going to sell my daughters to other Muslim landlords to get his money back. I did not say anything to him, but decided in my heart that there was no way I was going to let him do that. I had to get them out of this place. I quietly started waiting for the right time. I was gathering courage in my heart and kept telling myself that I had to be brave for my children.

My daughters and I would make small mounds of mud and pretend as if they were the graves of the landlord and his managers. Then we would pray to God for their death. I had seen so much trauma in my life that I used to wonder how much more could I go through.

One day, someone had died and all the managers had gone to the funeral. I had been waiting for such an opportunity. I was mentally prepared and so were my children. We slipped away quietly and walked as fast as we could away from that area. We walked fast for hours and finally were able to get on a bus. We went to the hari camp where Lali was living with her family.

Fortunately she was there and she and her family were able to help us. I was relieved that we finally were out of the prison of the landlord but my heart was still afraid. As soon as I settled down I took care of my most important responsibility. I got my daughters married off. Now I am very happy and will live the rest of my life thanking God that we are free.

Bajho

Whenever some one visits Bajho's house, she shows them a picture of her daughter with a sigh and then shares her story with the visitors.

For two years we worked as haris on the lands of Nadeem Khwaja in Tando Mohammad Khan. His manager, Adil Mallah, was very abusive towards women. Whenever he saw a woman alone in the fields, he would go and rape her. When my daughter turned sixteen, he started following her. I asked the landlord and his brother Raees Khwaja to keep their manager under control. I even requested some of the neighbours to talk some sense into him. One day as I was going to work, he came and grabbed me. He was furious and threatened me that because I had been going around talking to everyone about him, he would kill my daughter. I was very scared. I knew that one of Nadeem Khawaja's relatives was a police officer and because of his protection, the manager had the freedom to do anything he wanted—beat up people or rape women. Everyone knew about it. Sometimes people would even file a complaint at the police station, but nothing would really happen. I knew that there was no way of stopping him. If he had made up his mind to kill my daughter, he would do so.

The manager increased the guards around us. We were not even allowed to visit our relatives. One day I was able to run away with my daughter to some relatives in another city. There I got her married off to Veer Ji in a rush and returned home, leaving her behind with her husband. The manager found out about my daughter's marriage, but he did not say anything. Four months passed and he never mentioned my daughter. I thought that maybe he had forgiven us.

I would ask the neighbours, that if my daughter were to visit, would he still harm her. None of them ever responded. One day I went up to the manager, Adil Mallah, and asked him directly that my daughter had been married for six months and if she came to visit us now, would he leave her alone. He said that he would not say anything to her. I sent a message to my daughter and asked her to visit us on Eid. On my request, my daughter came to visit us on December 16, 2005. We were very happy; the whole family was very happy to see her.

When we slept at night, my daughter's bed was right next to mine. Around midnight a scream woke me up. As I opened my eyes, I saw the manager Adil Mallah standing next to my daughter's bed. I started screaming, but that vicious beast shot her twice with his revolver and left our hut. I put her head in my lap. My husband and all the children gathered. We did not know what to do. We were totally in a state of shock. She struggled for her life for a few minutes and then passed away. She was four months pregnant at the time.

I was very angry. I asked my husband to accompany me to the police station in Tando Mohammad Khan and we both told them what had happened. The police officer said that they would come over in the morning. The next day, the police went to the landlord's house and returned from there, without stopping by our house. I went over to the landlord and begged him to help us. He was very angry because I had gone first to the

police for help and not to him. He said that he did not want haris like us around who created problems for him. He also said that we owed him Rs.40000/-, which we should pay back and then leave the village. I came home disappointed and told my family what the landlord had said. We were all trying to figure out what to do when the manager came and said that he was taking our buffalo in lieu of the loan and that we had to leave the village by the next day. I tried to stop him from taking our buffalo, but he pushed me so hard that I fell. He also threatened us and said, 'Just wait and see what I do to you now'. This buffalo was the only thing of value we had and he took it away. Not knowing what else to do we left the village and went to Hyderabad.

In Hyderabad I contacted all the social welfare and human rights organizations and asked them for justice. It has been a year now; we have spent more than Rs.3000/-. Whatever we earn, most of it is spent on transportation, going to all these organizations, but nothing has happened yet. I don't know what to do anymore. Now the purpose of my life is to seek justice and have the landlord and his manager punished, even though I don't know how I will accomplish that. Whoever I go to for help, asks me for money. I don't even have enough to feed my children. I have four daughters and four sons. Only one of the daughters is married and the other seven live with me. I strongly believe that some day God will do justice and the people who hurt us so much will be punished.

Wakeelan Rajput

When we asked Wakeelan Rajput to share her life with us, she asked, *Where do you want me to start?* She stared into space and one could see the pain on her face as she went back in time.

My parents moved from Khanewal to Umer Kot to look for livelihood. They stayed with some relatives. My father was a barber and now my two brothers have the same occupation. I was born in Umer Kot. We were five sisters and two brothers. I was very young and don't even remember when my father, Nawab, died. After his death, we were very vulnerable, economically. We could not even take care of our basic needs for survival. It was a very difficult time for us and that is when my mother decided to marry off her daughters to lessen her burden.

I was only seven years old at the time and was unfortunately married into a very poor family. I moved from the poverty of my mother's house into more poverty of my husband's house. This was compounded with enormous hard work and responsibilities of an adult. Sometimes when I see young girls playing, I think to myself that I didn't even have a childhood. My in-laws worked as agricultural labour. They used to move from one landlord to the other, depending on whoever had work available. We continued living like that for years.

Some years ago we moved to the lands of Ashiq Pathan for work on his fields. We thought that we would work there as we did elsewhere; work hard on his fields, get our wages and move on when he did not need us any more. We had no idea what sort of a person he was or of his ill intentions. We had no idea of what we were getting into. For cultivation, he used to give us land with water logging problems. That alone was a challenge. Regardless of hard work it was very difficult to grow anything on it. It would sink in rains and the loss of the crop would be written in our records. He told us that we solely were responsible for those losses. He gradually got us trapped into a web of loans.

Ashiq Pathan was not a big landlord. There were only five families working on his land. Our families also included the family of my sister, Husna. The other three families were Bhil. Ashiq was very close to another very big landlord of the area and that is where he drew his power.

All the women and men worked very hard, day and night. I used to get up at 4:00 every morning and work at home till daybreak. I would finish cooking and do all the housework. Then we would go to the fields for the rest of the day.

We, women, were told to soften the land around the crops, remove the weeds and dig irrigation channels. My sister and I were the only Punjabis. The rest of the families were all Bhil. They spoke Marwari while we spoke Punjabi. They were Hindus while we were Muslims. We did not understand each other at all in the beginning, but we worked together for so long that I now speak their language fluently. I have almost forgotten my own language. She shook her head and smiled at the assimilation of the suppressed.

I would sometimes ask my husband if we were going to spend the rest of our life there, and he never replied. How could he reply! Between Husna's family and mine, we had a loan of three hundred thousand rupees within two years.

One day my sister Husna came to me, outraged with the behaviour of the landlord. She said he was teasing her in a humiliating manner. I got very upset and discussed the matter with my husband. We decided to talk to the landlord about it. My husband went to him and told him that even though we were indebted to him, we were working very hard, day and night, for him. He explained to him that it did not give him the right to humiliate our women. The landlord was quite shameless and instead of backing off he declared loudly that we should either pay back his three lakh rupees or he would sell us to another landlord to get his money back. He was a very wicked person. He suggested that there was one way for us to get out of it. If we married my younger sister to him, he would forego our debt. He pushed us to get Husna a divorce from her husband and hand her over to him. We were shocked at his proposal and felt very helpless.

We came home and kept thinking about what to do in such a complicated situation. Husna's husband was very worried and angry with the landlord but he could not do much, as we all knew we could not pay off our debt. We had not yet responded to the landlord's offer when he went ahead and sold us to another landowner. This was Asad Ali, a close friend of Ashiq Pathan and I think they both worked as a team. The first landlord still kept bothering Husna. He did not let go and kept insisting that we get Husna divorced and give her to him.

As I told you, we were like slaves that they had purchased. They treated us very badly. I cannot even tell you how we suffered. They used to do whatever they felt like to us. She started to cry. Controlling her tears after a while, she said, we also did not even have enough food to eat, let alone any medical help. We were only given enough food to keep us alive. If we died, they would lose their labourers and the work would stop. So they barely kept us alive, as slaves.

She wiped her face with her veil and spoke with a decisive voice, cruel people have no religion! It is wrong to say that only Hindus are being persecuted; it is the poor who are the victims, whether they are Hindus, Muslims or Christians. Cruel people have no religion; they are only 'wehshi'

One day I was digging a water channel when Punnu Bhil, who was working close by, said that he knew someone called Shahu Bhil who lived in a hari camp in Hyderabad and who might be able to help us escape from this landlord. I told him that at night I would talk to my family and he should talk to his. This was a very big decision and we were afraid of the consequences, in case the plan did not work. But we were so tired of the brutalities that we thought we would take a chance. Finally, all of us in the five families, decided to go ahead with the plan. We sent Punnu Bhil to get help from Shahu Bhil and register our case in the court. Initially we got some news that Punnu did get some assistance, especially from Mohamad Qaim khani, a lawyer, and was able to register a case in the High Court of Hyderabad for our freedom. But that was all.

I cannot tell you how we suffered as we waited for Punu. It was taking very long and we were not sure what was happening. We found out later that the court case was being dragged. Then one night Punnu came in a Datsun van. He parked the vehicle five kilometers away from our huts. He came quietly and woke us up. We got up, surprised, and ran the way we were. We just took our children along. We didn't even pack. We ran for five and a half kilometers and reached the Datsun. From there he took us to Salauddin Camp where we stayed initially for a while.

Now we are living in Aazad Nager Hari Camp. I feel very relieved. We get very little wages but we live with dignity. No one is there to rule us. We spend what we earn. My husband works as a labourer and I take care of the children and sometimes go for seasonal fieldwork. We are doing all right. I have six children. Three are older and have missed the school age. The other three are young and they do go to school. I like living without fear of those men.

Veeru Kohlan

Veeru Kohlan was picking cotton near Gunjo Takar Camp. Life's sour experiences had stamped her face with lines. Some of the experiences were very evident in her expressions, still weighing heavy on her. Though only forty years old, she seemed at least ten years older than her age. Initially she was not very willing to talk about her life, not wanting to remember all that she had tried to bury deep inside. However, she felt when she shared her sorrows with others and cried with them, it made her feel a little lighter. When asked about her story, she sighed deeply. She was not sure where to begin. She sat down by the edge of a cotton field where she was working and told the other women to continue their work while she talked to us.

When I was 16, I used to live in a village called Syed Alladino Shah near Jhudo. I loved my father, Umido, very much. A smile ran across her face. He also loved me a lot and really liked taking care of me. He and I were very close. Though we didn't talk much he was always concerned about my wellbeing and happiness.

I got married to the person my parents selected for me. That is the tradition of our people. Like other young women I also dreamt of happiness, a loving husband and a good life. I went with my husband to my in-laws in anticipation of all my dreams coming true. I didn't really know what future held for me. My husband's family worked for a landlord. I was surprised to know that because of a loan, they were tied to him. From the way they would talk I could tell that he was not nice to them. I realized that they all could not even think of leaving that work. They were indebted to him and were helpless in the face of poverty and lack of opportunities to earn money. This was a bitter reality that dawned on me. All my dreams were shattered.

Time went by. We could not take charge of our lives. We just lived under the circumstances and accepted what fate had to offer. After 17 years of this struggle for survival we made our move to another landlord in Umer Kot. We thought that this might be the answer to our prayers and we might be able to get out of our unfortunate circumstances.

This was a big landlord whose name was Saleem Bhatti. He had many workers who were bound by debt working on his land. To my surprise this landlord turned out to be the worst of them all. How could we tell? We thought changing circumstances would improve our lives. It's not written on someone's face as to what sort of a person one would be. One only finds out after interacting with him, but then it is too late to do anything. She lowered her head in despair.

It did not take too long for us to find out that Saleem and his managers were very dangerous and cruel people. But it was too late for us to get out of there. We, women, felt unsafe because of the guards around. They looked at us in a strange way. They stared at us all the time. You know how women can tell by the stare when men do not have good intentions? His men even threatened women. They would say, 'You better work hard or else...'. Their eyes would say the rest and make us shiver with fear. Sometimes they

would beat up our husbands in front of us on purpose to scare them. No reason! They just wanted to control our lives and kept us living in fear.

One day they crossed all the limits. When I was marrying my son to Radha, the land landlord stopped the celebrations, asking with whose permission were they getting married. Then he started beating the bride and the groom. We could not understand what was going on but faced with their authority and power we could not do much. I did scream and cried a lot but was simply pushed away.

The landlord and his men were very brutal and would beat up the haris without any reason. One day they started beating my son. I couldn't stand seeing my own flesh and blood screaming in pain, and I started hitting the manager furiously. My husband and the other villagers pulled me away. The whole family was afraid that my behaviour would have serious consequences. They told me that I should not have involved myself in the fight. 'It is not women's place to deal with these managers,' they said. I was feeling angry at them also for blaming me for my natural reaction. In anticipation of the reaction from the landlord I sent our son and his wife away the same night.

The manager of course told the landlord about the incident where I tried to beat him up. The next day the landlord came to our house and asked us to hand over my daughter-in-law to him. When we told him that she was not there, he turned red in rage. He ordered his manager, 'bring this woman, Veeru, to my auttak tomorrow'. I was very scared, but at the same time I was happy that I had saved my son and his wife. I was sure that he would make me suffer. I was mentally preparing myself for anything. Both the men had left with their guards and they were expected to come back for me any time

Then I had an idea; I thought of running away with my one-year-old daughter. The men were under strict guard, but women were allowed to go to work. The next morning, when the women were leaving for work, I accompanied them with the intention of running away. I escaped towards the road and got on the bus coming from Kanri. When we reached Goth Karam Ali Laghari, I ran out of money. I didn't know what to do or who to trust. I told my story to a man named Lal Bakhsh. I was not sure how he would react or what he would do, but he turned out to be a God-fearing man. He took us in his vehicle to Jhandu and also gave me the fare to continue my journey. From there we went to Maro Sharif where my brothers lived and where I had sent my son and his wife.

Only when I was in a safe place did I start thinking about the family members I had left behind in that prison. How could I help them get out of there? I thought to myself. I was determined to change our lives. I was sick and tired of the fear and abuse.

Our loan at that time was about Rs. 60,000/- rupees. My relatives were poor but at least they had their animals and enough food. They were not as poor as we were and had generous hearts. I collected Rs.60,000/- from my relatives and sent some people to the landlord with the money to get my family freed. To their surprise he said that we owed him Rs.800,000/- and if we could not give him that amount, he would sell the women and girls and get part of his money that way. When these people, I had sent to the landlord, returned, I was shocked and very disappointed. I was hoping that our troubles would be over.

I had to figure out a way to help my people. Some people told me that there was a hari camp in Matli and those people might be able to help me out. None of them was willing to accompany me though. They just informed me where to go and which bus to take. I took my daughter along and left for the camp to try my luck. Seven o'clock in the evening I reached Matli. I didn't even know where the hari camp was in Matli. I kept asking people for directions and finally reached the camp late at night.

There I met a woman named Jheemon. She was comrade Lali's mother. These people lived in the camp and were freed from similar prison-like circumstances that I had been living in. They referred to any one who was fighting actively for justice as a 'comrade'. I told comrade Lali's mother what I was trying to do for my family. She comforted me and told me not to worry. She said 'We are all with you and will help you get the rest of your family liberated'. I felt relieved.

I lived there for a month and kept collecting information on ways that people had come out of their bonded situations. Finally, I approached Shakil Ahmad Khan Pathan, who worked with an organization that helped people like us. It was called Human Rights Commission. He gave me a letter for Superintendent Police (S.P.) of Umer Kot and asked me to go to him. I was very worried; I had never done anything like this before. How would I talk to this high police official? What would I say to him? I was also afraid of running into the landlords people on the way to Umer Kot. I was very scared and kept asking the organization to send someone to accompany me, but no one agreed. They told me that they would call the S.P. and he would be expecting me there. Then I figured that it was my war and I had to liberate my family and therefore I would go alone. I even decided to leave my one-year-old daughter behind with some friends in the camp, because I did not want her to become a weakness for me in case I ran into some kind of trouble. I thought to myself that being afraid would only hold me back. Whatever was going to happen, would happen. So I overcame all my fears and left for Umer Kot.

When I finally reached the S.P.'s office, I found out that he was not there. The brutal landlord knew everyone in Umer Kot, so I decided to stay in the police station until the S.P. returned to work. In the evening it was time for the offices to close. They told me to leave and come back the following day. I knew that the landlord's people could have killed me if I were to leave the police station, so I made it very clear to them that I was staying there until I talked to S.P. sahib. No one was giving me a proper answer as everyone was annoyed by my presence. There was a tap for water, which I drank out of and laid down to rest. However, I could not fall asleep the whole night. The next morning, the staff looked very surprised at my presence and one person asked me if I had eaten anything. I simply replied that I wasn't hungry. I waited and waited but the S.P. did not come. I began to believe that it must be a conspiracy of the landlord, Saleem Bhatti. I waited until it was dark again. I was now getting very tired of sitting and waiting. I kept asking the staff why S.P. sahib did not come. I made it very clear to the staff that I would rather die there than leave without seeing the S.P. I held on to the letter tightly. Seeing the S.P. and asking him for help was my last resort and I was not going to give up. I spent the second night there, without any food again. As the third day started, the staff was very surprised at me and was now beginning to actually believe that I would not leave without meeting the S.P. I was also feeling that now the staff was becoming softer towards me.

They said S.P. sahib was out of town for only two days. They were very sure that he would return that day.

It was around noon when S.P. sahib finally arrived. His staff told him about me. He called me in. I was the first one that he saw in his office after returning. I was exhausted and hungry but gathered enough energy to tell my whole story. I even told him about the difficulties I had to gather the money from my relatives, which I tried to send to the landlord to pay off my loan. Sahib listened to me carefully. He read the letter and asked me to stay put. He said he needed to get some work done and then he would come with me.

It was about two in the afternoon when we left the office to go to the village where my whole family was imprisoned by Saleem Bhatti. Kamdar and the guards saw us coming from a distance and fled. I thought to myself that those who roamed around like lions, treating us brutally, are now running away like mice. I felt brave. I was thrilled to see my children and other family members. They were shocked and could not believe how I had brought such senior police officers with me. They could never imagine that I would be able to mobilize support, much less such high level police support. There were eight members of my family and about 45 other individuals who had been imprisoned. I had given all their names to the S.P. in his office. S.P. sahib talked to the people and asked a lot of questions to make sure of what the reality was. All of them detailed their stories and told him about the brutalities. The S.P. was very surprised to hear every one's stories.

My daughter brought a roti (bread) for me. I sat on the floor close to the S.P. and ate it. S.P. looked at my roti with surprise and asked whether this is the kind of bread we ate. I said, yes. It was just a thick dry roti with nothing else to go with it. Sometimes we did take an onion or green chillies, but mostly it was only roti. I was eating after three days.

The S.P. interviewed people and took statements from three in the afternoon to late evening. Then S.P. sahib told us that he would send bigger vehicles the next day so we could leave this place. We could not believe that. I, along with others, blocked the way of his jeep and told him that he could not leave us behind; the landlord would either kill us at night or shift us to another place. We insisted that he had to take us with him. SP put our fears to rest. He said that he would leave half of his police force to guard us and then take us to a safe place the following day.

Everyone was awake all night. Police officers also stayed up with us and talked about our situation. No one of the landlord's men came close, but we were very afraid.

The next day the S.P. sent two trucks to get us. We were taken to another farm. There we stayed for three days, but the S.H.O., seemed to be after us. He kept talking to the landlord. We were so afraid that the SHO would either send us back to the landlord or allow him to somehow take us back. We were very suspicious of the S.H.O. I was very angry since the S.P. had been so supportive and took so much trouble to get us out of our captivity, then why was this S.H.O. stopping us from getting our freedom.

I had gained some confidence from talking to the S.P., so I became assertive and talked to the S.H.O. with a firm tone. He, in return, beat me with a stick three times. He was

angry and said that they have to take care of the legal process, which would take time; therefore, we all should stay put.

Then I bribed a tea boy and gave him a telephone number to make a telephone call for me. I wanted him to send out information that we were in police custody and could not get out of here. Upon this news, Shakeel Pathan came from Hyderabad himself. He talked to the S.H.O. and took us out of there. He took us to Matli camp. Once we reached there I sighed in relief.

During our stay in Matli camp, I worked with HRCP. When Ghazi Abbas Marree, a well-known landlord kidnapped his people and took them back from Matli camp, we left the camp in fear. We, then, moved to Hosri camp, Hyderabad and tried to find some peace in our lives.

I was now determined that I would contribute to somehow making this problem go away. I felt strongly that this kind of abuse of poor farming labour was too much. Though most of the people suffering in this hell were from my Hindu community, there were some Muslims also.

In addition to the seasonal agricultural labour, I worked for different organizations like National Rural Support Program, for Bhandhar Hari Sangat, for one year at Rs.2000 per month. Then I worked in Greens Rural Development Organization where they gave me Rs.1500 per month for a year and after that for Pasbaan. Now these organizations call us for seminars or rallies and we go. Otherwise, we survive on cotton or chilli picking.

I went to India for the Pak-India people's forum. This is an old platform to promote peace between India and Pakistan. My world was within the restricted cluster of huts on the lands of the landlord for so long and now I have seen other cities in Sindh and I have been to Dehli, Agra, Jhodhpur, Ajmal Gudda and Bikaner. My 14 year old son is in fifth grade. He was selected and sent to play Cricket for Peace in India through Action Aid. This is an organization working for the rights of communities who are left behind. My son and his team met the prime minister of India, Manmohan Singh, and upon his return he met Shaukat Aziz sahib, our prime minister, as a part of this activity for peace building. Can you believe that my son traveled outside Pakistan and met all these people? Right now in addition to his studies he works on the banana crop.

Working for these organizations has given me more confidence but at times I feel unclear of their role and at times even resentful. Now I feel like many organizations have used us. I do appreciate their help, but I do not really believe that these organizations will bring a substantive change in our lives. If we want to change we will have to do something ourselves. We are illiterate so I don't know what we will do. About a year ago my husband died. I have 7 daughters and 5 sons. Two sons and three daughters are married. Only one daughter, Ganga, is married outside the camp. The others live in Hosri camp and are unmarried. I hope that I am able to marry them to my relatives in this camp and not with anyone who is a bonded hari for a landlord.

We have come a long way and the rest of our days will pass somehow, but I would not even wish my enemies to live the kind of life I have lived.

It is the government's responsibility to ensure our freedom and dignity. We will be happy making a living for ourselves. We do not need anything else from them.

Shrimati Dhorì

We lived in Tharparker, in a small village named Sheikh Wasan. I loved my father Rao who I was very close to. We worked as labourers so we were not very well to do, but we made enough to survive and take care of our needs. We did not owe any one anything and no one owed us anything. We would go and find work wherever we could. When I was of age, my family decided to marry me to Achlu who belong to a Bhil family. They had come from Jaisel Meir in India and settled here.

We happily lived in our village for a long time. We all worked together in the fields, picking cotton, weeding, preparing land. Mostly we got seasonal work. We made enough money to take care of our needs. We were not dependant on anyone.

One year was very tough, though. There was not enough work for every one. I had been married for quite a few years at that time and had five sons and three daughters. A lot of people had moved to Tharparker, so there were more labourers than labour opportunities available. This also caused the wages to go down. We started asking people and looking for work that paid well. We were told that there was this landlord, Allah Rakha, who had some lands, but not enough people to work them. We thought that this could be a great opportunity for us and decided to move there. The biggest mistake we made was not to ask anyone why he did not have enough people to work his lands. If there were so many people without work, why were they not rushing to him? I suppose we were very helpless at the time and could not starve our children without food. We closed our eyes and went there.

We went to the landlord with our eight children, five sons, Tario, Karmun, Rabub, Mohan, Parun and three daughters Birju, Mukhni and Niali. My husband went to the landlord's auttak and met his kamdar who was very nice and polite with him. He told Achlu that he did not want too many haris, but he would allow us to work there. He was even kind enough to give us Rs.2000/- in advance and told us to start work. No terms or conditions were discussed. The kamdar told us that as our wages accumulated, they would pay us. At that point we needed the work so badly that we started immediately without asking too many questions.

The way the kamdar arranged work for us was that we would work together as a family separate from his other field labourers. In the beginning the kamdar would ask us if we needed anything and that we should go to him if we had any troubles. He would also tell us not to listen to the other haris because they owed lakhs of rupees to the landlord and that is why they badmouthed him and his people.

We trusted him and continued working there until our wages exceeded Rs.2000/-. When we asked him for our money, the kamdar said that he did not have enough money, but he

could give us food like flour, oil, tea etc. I was very concerned and asked Achlu why we were not being paid for our work. I had heard a neighbour making similar comments and did not want to get stuck. I told him that we should push him to give our money. My husband calmed me down and told me not to worry and that nothing bad would happen to us.

We went back to work and kept getting flour, tea, cooking oil, etc. from the auttak to live on. After living like that for a year, I asked my husband to go to the auttak and talk to the landlord. When Achlu asked him about our wages, the landlord asked him to come back in a few days. Every time my husband went back, the landlord would make excuses. I was very concerned again. My daughters were mature. I used to talk to them about my concerns. What if we get stranded here, I used to say in despair. I didn't know what to do as we could not just walk away from hard earned income for a whole year. We could only hope that he would pay us soon and when he did, we planned on leaving the place right away. We had no idea of their intentions.

The next time my husband went to the landlord to ask for money, he also told him that if we were not paid, we would leave. This made the landlord very angry and he told Achlu that we owed him Rs.80,000/- and that we could leave as soon as we paid him the money. That day we all went into a shock; we had no idea things could get that bad. We did not know what to do. There was no one who we could turn to for help, or go to with our problem.

None of us could go to work the next day. The kamdar came to our house and started cursing us. He told us that if we did not work, we would have to face serious consequences. Now we saw his real face. He was very cruel to us. We were very afraid and went back to work.

Time went by. We married three sons and two daughters under those circumstances. My sons in law, Sajan and Mir Khan also worked with us and had started living with us as a part of our family.

My daughter Niali who was married to Mir Khan was very beautiful. The landlord took the couple to the auttak and said Mir Khan would be his chaukidar and his wife, Niali, would also live there and help out with some chores. They both moved out of our huts to a place close to the auttak. Once in a while my daughter would come to the fields to meet me. She used to cry and tell me that the landlord was very cruel to her. He made advances at her and played with her like a toy. I didn't know how to comfort her.

By then we could see the ugly side of the landlord. He had become so cruel that whoever said anything negative about him got severely beaten up. So far they had our family working separately in the fields, but now that everything was in the open, they told us to work with the other haris. Men used to leave at 4:00 in the morning and we would go at 6:00 a.m. to work in the fields. If someone was late, the kamdar used to go to his or her home and beat him or her up. Their treatment of the haris kept getting worse with time. The landlord used to say that if any of us wanted to leave, he would sell our women to recover his money. We were now like their slaves.

When my old mother in law died, the family was very sad. The men of the landlord didn't even let us give her the last bath. My husband and son, were the only ones allowed to bury the body. The rest of us were told to get back to work. I cannot express our feelings at that time. We felt so unfortunate to have gotten stuck in such a situation.

The landlord used to bother the wife of one of our neighbours, Bharu. One day, Bharu tried to stop him from bothering her but the landlord got so angry that he called the police. He planted a pistol in Bharu's house and told the police that he was carrying illegal arms. Poor Bharu ended up spending a few years in jail because of this fabricated allegation. No one dared to stop the landlord ever again. He could tease any woman in the village. No one would ever stop him or protest.

One night when we all were at home, the landlord came straight into our hut. He ordered my son Tario to send his wife with him. He said he had some work for her at the house and wanted to take her along. We were all very angry and also afraid in our hearts but couldn't really do very much. We had to send her. He was very powerful. I could see my son's face getting red but he didn't say anything. She looked at her husband, to get a clue about what she should do. He lowered his head. She looked at my husband and then at me to see if we would say something to stop the landlord from taking her. We looked away. We knew that he would not forgive us for disobeying him. She left with him and was brought back after two days.

One day my son-in-law, Mir Khan, wanted to visit some of his relatives. The landlord did not like that. There was some heated exchange between the landlord and Mir Khan. The landlord asked his other chaukidar, to kill Mir Khan. Mir Khan started to run. The chaukidar must have felt bad, so he missed his aim on purpose. This is how his life was saved and he was able to run away. The landlord was very angry with Mir Khan for escaping and setting a bad precedence. We begged him to let Niali live with us but he did not allow that.

Seeing his rage we knew that we would have to live there for the rest of our lives because after this incident they increased the security immensely on us. We lived there for 15 years and in that period of time our debt rose to eight lakh (Rs 800,000/-). I used to sit and cry at our situation. I used to think of the time when we came to that landlord and asked for work. Some moments in life are so bad but one can never go back and change them.

After some time we found out that there was a camp for haris like us in Hyderabad. Those who could somehow manage to run away from the landlords, got refuge there. Some of the families from the community around us ran away and we heard that they did get refuge. We also found out that there is a law, which prohibits the landlords to take people as slaves, and those who run away can go to the court for justice. There was suddenly hope in our hearts. We started contemplating about running away. However there were too many of us in our family and it just would have been very difficult for us to plan an escape. Someone from another family, though, ran away and filed a case in the court. Later he got his family freed through the police. We were very surprised at that. We had always thought that all the police officers were friends of our landlord.

The landlord's men were now guarding us very carefully when we were at work. After thinking about it again and again we decided to send my elder son Tario to file a case on our behalf. He registered a case in Hyderabad, but unfortunately it dragged for quite some time and no decision was taken. One night, my son and another person from the camp Sumar Bhil, who had also run away with him, came back home very quietly to get us and we all went with them. God gave us courage somehow and helped us to get to a camp.

It has been only fifteen days since our escape. I just hope and pray that our circumstances change for good. I can hardly sleep at night, as I am still so terrified of the landlord and his men every moment of the day. They can kidnap any one of us at any time. We all want to live a free life, a life without constant fears. Thank god for the help we got and thank god for these camps. We only need protection from such vultures that make use of the weaker circumstances of other human beings. We don't need much, after living in those conditions and circumstances for so long; we only need food once a day.

Another reason I stay awake at night is my daughter Niali, who was left behind in their custody. I shudder to think of what they must have done to her after we escaped. My heart bleeds for her. My freedom is not really freedom when part of my flesh is still in slavery.

Bayan Bhil

Fifty years old Bayan was picking cotton on the banks of river Indus, about fifteen miles from Hyderabad. Her bright clothes, *ghagra* and *chuni*, could be seen from far away. Even at this age she was efficient with her work that required high physical labour and exposure to the scorching sun for long hours. Her arms fully covered with white bangles indicated her married status to the others. Bayan was willing to talk to us about her life. She said she would start from her childhood, as those were still the most vivid and most pleasant memories for her.

We lived very happily in a small village near Islam Kot, Tharparkar. We owned 25 acres of land. I was three years old when my father, Premoo, passed away. Our mother, Thanoo, who is now ninety years old, raised us. When I was eighteen years old, I was married to Lakshman. There we worked on lands as we pleased; no one would tell us what to do. It was a rain fed area, so when there was no rain, things got very tough. We would not even have water to drink and animals would start dying. At times like these, we would always move to the barrage area for survival and then move back after a few months, when it rained. Many years went by like this.

In 1987, when it did not rain for two years at a stretch, we decided to move to the Barrage for a year where we could do some work and survive. Due to the drought, a lot of people had moved to this area and it was very difficult to find any work. At the time we were seven, the two of us, along with our three sons and two daughters. We continued looking for work. Some people told us that landlord Ghazi Abbas Marree had huge land holdings in District Saanghar and they did not have enough workers to work the lands. So we went there and met his kamdar, Aladin, who was very nice to us and gave us work. We had no idea of what we were getting into. We had planned to work there for a year and admitted our oldest son, Ram Chand, to a school in Sanjrani, a village close by.

At the end of the year, we went to the kamdar and told him that we were ready to go back to our home and wanted him to finalize the accounts. We wanted him to keep the money we had taken from him for our expenses and give us the remainder of our labour that we had earned over the year. To our surprise, he informed us that we owed him Rs.20,000/-. I looked at my husband. Shocked. The neighbours were right. They kept telling us that we would also get stuck like they were, but we did not listen to them. We did not know what to do any more. The kamdar told us that we would have to continue working there until our debt was paid off. This is how we got stuck with those cruel people and our debt continued to increase. We told him a number of times that if he gave one of us five days off, we could go back to Thar and bring back money to pay off our debt, but he did not agree. My son went to school for two years. One day he came back crying and said that the kamdar stopped him from going to school, tore his books and told him to start taking care of the cattle. This was the end of all our dreams. We were completely enslaved by them.

*There were 56 families in our village. Every morning all the men and women would first go to the *auttak* for attendance and there we would all be assigned tasks for that day. No*

one knew ahead of time what he or she would be doing. If someone was not able to complete the work they were given for the day, they were beaten up real bad, whether it was a man or a woman.

One day they told all the women to get 40 kilos of grass each. Sumro Oad's wife Sahiban was also with us. During the day as we were all working, she fell and started screaming. We ran towards her, but the kamdar told us to go back to our work. She continued screaming for a while and then gave birth to a child. After a while she put her child to sleep and went back to work in that condition. In the evening she picked up her child, carried the grass on her head and walked back to the auttak with the rest of the women. There they started weighing every one's grass, every one had more than 40 kilos, but Sahiban only had 20 kilo. The kamdar beat her up with a stick so mercilessly that she fell with her 4-hour-old baby. I was trembling with anger and sadness. Many women were crying and feeling sad for her but could not do anything.

There were 13 young girls in the village. Those vicious people would not let them get married and used them whenever they wanted. Gallan Oad's daughter Shakilan, Gamro Kohli's daughter Kali and Kaisro Bhil's daughter Moraan were all unmarried, but all three of them gave birth to children. Those cruel people killed the innocent children so that there was no proof of their wrong doings. This is how life was at our village. They owned everything, even our lives and our dignity.

I cannot forget the day when my eight-year-old son, Morio, was not able to complete his work on time. They beat up my child so viciously that his ears bled for a month and since then he has been completely deaf. One day all the men were busy digging a canal when a big rock fell and four men got crushed under it. Another day Ratno Bhil broke his back and was crippled for life. Chanaiser Bhil died on the grass-cutting machine. Jamal Kundani was beaten up so bad that some say he ran away while others say that they killed him. His wife was so depressed that she also died after a while. They had two innocent children who now wander from one house to the next in the village. At times I felt that the pain was tearing my heart; at times it seemed like my heart had turned to stone and nothing mattered any more.

My husband had become very weak from constant hard work. There was no medical help available and we did not even have enough food to eat. He continued working in that condition and I slowly watched him die in front of my eyes. When he was alive, he would always say that when I die, somehow send my body to my brothers in Thar; I don't want to be buried here. I begged those cruel people, but they did not allow me to take my husband's body to Thar. They didn't even let me send a message to his brothers to come and get him. I was not even able to fulfill his last wish. How will I ever be able to face his brothers? She started crying.

We planned to run away a number of times, but they were always very alert and never allowed the whole family to work together in one place. We had also seen what they did after the Munnoo Bhil's case. This landlord, Ghazi Abbas Marree, kidnapped haris four times from the hari camp and then we saw what they did to them. We were really scared to even run away. We continued living in those conditions. One day, however, I was so fed up that I somehow gathered all my courage, took my youngest daughter, Seetal and

my son, Anbo and ran away. I went straight to one of our relatives, Nanji, who lived in the Azad Nagar Hari Colony in Hyderabad. I had told my other children to join me at Nanji's when ever they could. On August 22, 2006 they were also able to come over and finally we were all together again.

Four days later when we were building a house for ourselves, landlord Ghazi Abbas Marree's nephew, his son, kamdar, and some other people came in armored vehicles to kidnap us. As soon as we saw them, we started screaming, every one in the hari camp came out and a fight broke out. The haris were able to surround the culprits and capture four of them, including the kamdar, and tie them up. The others ran away firing in the air. They seriously injured some of our people. My daughter in law, Muradan's head was bleeding, five year old Hanju's arm was broken, my relative Nanji was also injured and his son, Bimoon, was in such a bad condition that he had to spend a month in the civil hospital of Hyderabad. Then police came from the Hosri Police Station and arrested the four culprits we had tied up. Later we found out that they were released on bail.

They are very dangerous people. Now we spend every moment in fear as we can be kidnapped any time. We pick cotton to earn a living here and wait to see what fate has in store for us. All I want is freedom. I want to own my body and own my life. I am tired to living as a slave.

Luxmi

We were very happy living in Phulhudson district, Mirpur Khas. It was 1987 when I got married, remembered Luxmi, sitting in front of her kitchen stove. I remember my parents were so happy. Our family was quite well off. My in-laws were from Sangar District. They were haris of Ghazi Abbas Marree. I will never forget the day when I went there for the first time as a bride. Her eyes widened, I found the whole environment to be very strange. Usually in our traditional context, when a new bride comes home, the whole village gets together to see and greet her. But that day was very different; there was no one to celebrate that I had become a part of the family.

I also noticed that everybody looked very drained, almost lifeless. So I asked some of the other women in the neighborhood. They told me that I was new there and that I would find out for myself soon. I found that answer quite strange also.

Gradually I found out that our every task, eating, sleeping, feeding the children and so on, happened by the orders of the kamdars of the landlord. None of us had any free will to do what we chose. Everything was how they wanted it to be. Slowly, as I realized what life was going to be like, something died in me. She lowered her head and remained quite for a while. It seemed like she was traveling through her past days.

*Luxmi called a young woman and handed over her task of cooking that she was supposed to do. Relieved of her work, she sat in a more relaxed manner and continued: *my happiness and the excitement of my marriage vanished gradually as I discovered that I was a slave. I had left one world and entered another that was so different. I started to become fearful, and my fear slowly turned to anger. And that anger was directed towards my parents because, in my mind, they were the ones who had put me in this situation.**

There was no way I could go back to where I lived happily with my family. I saw my whole life ahead of me, living in that colorless place, devoid of all life.

Gradually I found out from other women what kind of people the landlords and their kamdars were. I found out how they treated women of this community. I even saw some incidents with my own eyes. I asked my husband as to why circumstances were so bad and if we could survive there. He replied by saying 'we owe them lakhs of rupees. Until we pay off that loan, we would have to live here, doing as they order us to do'. He would also say that we would never be able to pay this loan. Therefore we would have to spend the rest of our lives here.

The landlord, Ghazi Abbas Marree, had the appearance of a regular person, but in reality, he was a beast. His son, Naseem Khan, and his kamdar treated my niece, Shanty, very badly. I can't even begin to describe what they did to her. And I remember how hopeless and upset my sister-in-law was. But no one had the courage to say anything to the landlord or kamdars. They were cruel to most women, even the pregnant ones. I remember one day they beat a pregnant woman until she lost the child. The family just looked on hopelessly, too afraid to do anything.

One day my husband, Shagun, got an opportunity to run away. Leaving me there, he ran straight to Matli Hari Camp. Some one had told him about the camps and organizations that could provide help to us. The people at the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan helped him and gave him a letter for the Sangar police. After a report was filed, the police came and talked to the landlord. God knows what they discussed, but the police returned to the Sangar Station. I felt so terrified of what the landlord would do to my husband and me after getting to know that we reported him to the police.

It had now been five years; five years of living in slavery, of being away from my parents. The anger I had initially felt for them was now replaced with a strong desire, a desire to see them once again. We tried to arrange a visit with the permission of the kamdars but were not allowed. One day I was at work when I found an opportunity where I could run away. I did, and ran straight to my parents.

My husband got some courage again and found an opportunity to run away also. He joined me at my parents after a while and eventually we both moved to Matli camp. Food was scarce and income was limited, but at least we had a place to stay, and that alone was enough for us. Still, we lived in constant fear of our landlord. He was so resourceful and powerful. We were afraid that he would come after us and take us back.

After living there for a year, people started saying we were safe and that the landlord had probably given up looking for us. They told us it was time to move on, find a better life for ourselves. So we left and found work at a place some 20 km from Hyderabad, Khisaana Muri. After a long time, I had the feeling of being liberated; free to do whatever I wanted. We decided that we would never take the risk of working for a landlord ever again.

But only God knows how that bastard landlord found out about us. One day he came with some armed men and attacked our home. I remember it like it was yesterday. I felt as if I would die with fear. The landlord's men dragged my husband and me into their jeep. They took us back to his land and put chains on our feet so we wouldn't try running away again. We were devastated!

They put us back to work. They kept men and women separate, day and night. And they treated women even worse than they did before. They humiliated us and raped us brutally. I remember praying that death would take me, but like my other prayers, this one too went unanswered. In this way we spent one torturous year. We tried to convince the landlord that we would not run away again, anything so he would lessen his atrocities against us.

In the end, when we didn't have any other choice, and we were exhausted by the brutalities, we decided to come up with a plan. We told the landlord the next day that we wanted to marry Kanji's son and we had to take the barat to another village. The landlord was happy to know that a young beautiful girl would be added to his community of slaves, so he accepted the request. We all dressed up as if we were actually going to a wedding, and left. What the landlord didn't know was that we had made arrangements

and went straight to Thatta, where we could find the Superintendent, Police, Ata Mohammad for help.

When the landlord found out that we tricked him he was furious. So we all stuck together and remained on the land of the Superintendent for a year.

One day we met Veeru Kohlan and she guided us to Hosri camp. We were very scared and knew that the cruel landlord would not let us live in peace even here in a camp. But we still took the risk of working in a poultry farm near Hosri and lived in a small room on the roof of that farm. We had to earn a living.

One day we both were lying in our room, exhausted after a tiring day. My husband didn't have his shirt on and my head was uncovered. In a flash the room was crowded with men, among them was Ghazi Abbas Marree himself. He had his men beat us up viciously and they dragged us back to his land.

They took us back and tied our hands and feet. We were sure that the landlord would kill us this time. He took my husband at his auttak and kept me with the potter's family. He was as cruel to us as any man could be. He tortured my husband so much that he told the landlord where the other runaways were. So the next day he took my husband along and reclaimed all the others. I was terrified to see my niece Shanty back in that hell. He left Shanty with me and kept the others somewhere else. We stayed there for five days. On the sixth day Veeru Kohlan and the police came to rescue us. They raided the place and freed us. We were brought to Zail Pak Hari camp.

We are much better off here, and hope to stay here for a while. I work at a hospital set up by Greens Rural Development Organization from 3 to 5 and get one thousand rupees. My husband works as a chaukidar (guard) at someone's house and gets two thousand five hundred.

"What kind of a life is this? We cannot even leave our home freely. I wish we had legal rights to live and have some kind of authority so that no one could kidnap us again. We want police to safeguard us. We know that as long as we are in the camp, we are okay. But we know that the moment we leave this camp we will be captured again. We want our government to give us the rights we deserve, so that we don't have to worry any more about slavery. The rest we will work out ourselves. We will make our own living. We feel that even though we don't live there anymore, we are still trapped in a prison. My mother came to see me and I put my head in her lap and cried until I didn't have any more tears left. I told her about my life, and the humiliations I had gone through again and again and again. Sometimes I felt that I had been used so much by these bastards that I didn't even have the strength to stand up straight on my two feet. I don't understand this vicious cycle of loans. All I know is that we had done nothing in those years we were with that landlord but worked hard day and night. Loan or no loan, no one should have the right to humiliate me like they did for so long. I asked my mother if she had any advice for me to be in peace within myself. All the pain I had accumulated was killing me.

I am glad that the landlord, Ghazi Abbas Marree has died but his son Naseem Marree and his kamdars are still alive. They are very dangerous. We ask the people from these

organizations to make some papers for us so that we are safe and no one can take us away again. Right now the only support we have is of God. I have no clue what the future will bring for us. Luxmi walked away quietly and sat on the ground with her back resting against a half broken mud wall of her compound. She stared in space sadly without uttering a word for a long time.