

# Freedom at last for 548 migrant workers in bondage

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**C**HENNAI: Like every other couple, Pureet Kata and his wife wanted to save enough to secure their future together, even if it was at the cost of leaving their two-year-old daughter behind and moving to an alien city. This week, they will return home to Odisha, with calluses from their toil, bruises from the man who promised to help them build their dreams, and a fear of closed spaces.

Pureet, 28, was among 548 bonded labourers from Odisha and Chhattisgarh, who were rescued from a brick kiln on the outskirts of Tiruvallur on Wednesday. "We just want to see our daughter again," said Pureet, weakly.

Pureet once worked as a farmer in Ranimunda, a semi-arid village in Odisha. "Our crops had failed. We were struggling to find a source of income when a man named Babloo came to our village and told us we would find work down south," said Pureet, who was given ₹17,000 as loan, for which he was asked to work for a year to pay off. Carrying bundles packed with just bare essentials, around 50 people from the village set out.

When they arrived, the owner told them the terms and conditions: they would be paid ₹400 a week for the entire family; work hours would be from morning till evening with a lunch break and all of them would be provided accommodation. In a month, the group realised they had signed up for a lot more -they were not allowed outside the unit's premises, the owner used the loan as a ruse to physically abuse them and their children.

It was a call from a labourer who managed to escape from the unit that set them on the road to freedom. "He called his relatives in Odisha to narrate the ordeal. They got in touch with the labour and revenue department officials there, who intimidated their counterparts here," said Mathew Joji of International Justice Mission (IJM), an organisation that was part of the rescue effort.

M Narayanan, the revenue district officer in Ponneri, who headed the team which raided the unit, said the labourers were found to be living in abysmal conditions. "All of them were packed into tin-roofed quarters or tattered tents. Many of them said they had not eaten for two days at a stretch," he said. When officials called out to the labourers, asking how many wished to head back home, they were greeted with silence. "They could not believe they were going back home. One man raised his hand. Soon, others followed suit," he said.

The workers were in two marriage halls on Wednesday and will head home to freedom in two days. Officials said a case had been filed against the brick kiln owner.

"We found that in 2011, around 500 labourers were rescued from the same man. He changed his name and moved to another place," said Narayanan. According to data with IJM, from 2011 to June 2015, 2,415 workers were rescued by the organisation, out of which 1,427 were migrant workers.