

Freed from bondage, life still hard labour

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CHENNAI: Every time a group of bonded labourers is rescued, officials are feted, owners of the units are hauled and the hitherto faceless are given names. It doesn't take long for these workers to realise that freedom comes at a cost.

Without documents, land or entitlements, labourers freed of bondage find that little has changed for them after being rescued. A study by the department of social work in Loyola College and International Justice Mission, has thrown light on their lives through a set of numbers: Around 50% of them had debts, 85% of them did not have access to a toilet, 75% didn't have water tap and 70% continued to toil on daily wages that were

little more than what they received when they were in bondage.

The survey covered 208 workers in four districts - Tiruvannamalai, Tiruvallur, Vellore and Kancheepuram - most of who had worked in bondage for up to 10 years. From 1997 to 2007, the state government has rescued 13,500 bonded labourers, mostly from rice mills, brick kilns, agriculture and tree-cutting units. The actual number, experts estimate could be well over 10 lakh.

Gladston Xavier, head of the department of social work, Loyola college, said while the rescue of labourers receives attention, their rehabilitation continues to be poor. "Our study focused on two areas - relief gap and rehabilitation and trust in the public justice system. It wasn't a pretty picture. While their condition is definitely better in terms of freedom of mobility, it just isn't enough to survive," he said.

The first big hurdle labourers face is receiving the 20,000 the state provides to start their lives afresh. "The amount rarely reaches them. They have no papers, no land, no identities. They find themselves ineligible for even the entitlements like the free mixers and fans given by the state government," said Gladston, saying while the laws related to bonded labour are stringent, implementation continued to be a problem.