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Annals of the Poor

Sabin Mukkath

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As dawn descended over the village, the men sat by the fire smoking beedi, stoking the coal fire and heating the iron chisels used for their work in the stone quarry. The women were fetching water from the village well with pots of water on their heads — their daily household chores had begun. Somewhere a calf mooed. I lay awake on my bed staring at the tiled ceiling and thinking about my plans for the day. My work as a development activist in the village over the last few months had been eventful and interesting. The stone quarry workers were beginning to organize themselves to demand better working conditions from their employers. But suddenly, these thoughts about the workers were interrupted by a loud banging on my door.

At death’s door

Arumugam was at the door, desperation and sadness writ all over his face.

“Saar, please come. Mayavan is seriously ill,” he said abruptly.

Arumugam led the way as we rushed to a small run-down hut on the northern end of the village. In the hut, Mayavan was lying on the earthen floor with his head on the lap of his only surviving sister Gomathi. His chest was bare, revealing an emaciated body and protruding ribs. His breathing was short and laboured. As his eyes slowly turned to me, I saw a flicker of recognition. I could also see the pain he was going through. After a few words of comfort I went back to my house to organize transport to take him to the hospital about twelve kilometers away. While I was preparing to leave, Arumugam returned.

“Do not go Saar, he will not survive the trip,” he stated, as a matter of fact.

Shocked, I asked, “Why not?”

“He will not survive for long Saar, please do not bother getting transport.”

Some of the women now gathered around him and they also told me that Mayavan would not survive the trip to the hospital. I felt frustrated that they had stopped me from getting him there. I went back to the hut to check on his condition.

The stone crusher

I had known Mayavan for a while. He had worked in a stone crusher for most of his life. Because he suffered from tuberculosis, he was always running into trouble with his employer. Whenever he fell sick and stayed home, his employer would come to his house to get him back to work. Inhaling the dust-filled air in his workplace had badly affected his lungs. At one stage, I helped get him hospitalized for treatment and his health improved considerably during that time. However, upon his return from the hospital, this boss forced Mayavan to continue working in the stone crusher. He did not have any option because he was a bonded (slave) labourer.

Over several years, Mayavan had borrowed money from his employer to meet his health care expenses and now he was forced to work for him until the loan was repaid. However, because the wages he received were so low, it was going to be almost impossible for him to ever repay the loan.

Mayavan was a strong spirited individual and always stood up to his employer despite all the verbal abuse and physical treats. He was involved in organizing his fellow workers to join the Quarry Workers’ Association to improve labour conditions in the region. His courage and honesty encouraged many to join, but when Mayavan returned to work in the stone crusher after his hospitalization, his health took a real turn for the worse.
“He has breathed his last”

I entered the hut once again to see Mayavan. The old lady sitting beside him said calmly without looking at me, “He has breathed his last.” She tied a white piece of cloth around his face. Unable to accept the suddenness of his death, I checked his pulse. I thought I could feel his pulse faintly … or was it my loud heartbeat? I insisted that we take him to the hospital to confirm his death but the older womenfolk told me that he was dead and that it would be unnecessary. They indicated to me that his tongue had fallen and he had stopped breathing. The womenfolk and men gathered around the hut and Gomathi suddenly started crying out loudly beating her chest.

I stumbled out of the hut feeling sad and shocked. Mayavan had lived under the constant threat of physical violence on account of his involvement in organizing the quarry workers. Over-burdened by debt and poor working conditions, he died a bonded labourer. He was buried in the village graveyard before sunset.

Bonded labourers

The next day, Gomathi and her husband were off to work in the quarry. She did not have the time or privilege to grieve the death of her only brother. Gomathi and her husband were also indebted to an employer and thus were forced to work as bonded labourers. They had to struggle for their own survival.

In debt bondage, the worker is forced to forfeit her right to sell or withdraw her labour power altogether. It is ironic when one of the most basic experiences of life — earning a livelihood — involves the surrender of dignity and freedom to an employer. Such employers usually trap labourers by advancing a loan and then deducting the interest payments on it from their wages. This practice is an effective way to retain workers over a long period of time and to increase profits. The production of goods is usually done through one or several intermediaries or sub-contractors, thereby mystifying the capital-wage relationship. Since most of these industries are in the informal sector and left unregulated by the government, the workers are unregistered and vulnerable to such exploitative practices. The availability of cheap, exploitable labour in rural areas and the high returns on capital make these ventures particularly lucrative for the employers.

Mayavan’s legacy

It is now eleven years since Mayavan died. His grave is covered with weeds and wild flowers, but the lives of the quarry workers have changed for the better. They have taken control over their lives. Mayavan’s efforts in organizing workers against unscrupulous employers inspired people around him. The workers closed ranks and organized to get themselves released from bondage. They also formed a Quarry Worker’s Co-operative where they all work together today. There is hope of a better and brighter future and I can hear it coming. May Mayavan rest in peace.

Sabin Mukkath is a Community Development Consultant in Hamilton, Ontario. Excerpted from “Beneath The Big Tree” Kimmage Development Studies, with permission.

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Fr. Mike Doyle, CSSp
121 Victoria Park Ave,
Toronto, ON M4E 3S2
Tel: 416-698-2003 Ext. 43
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OR
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