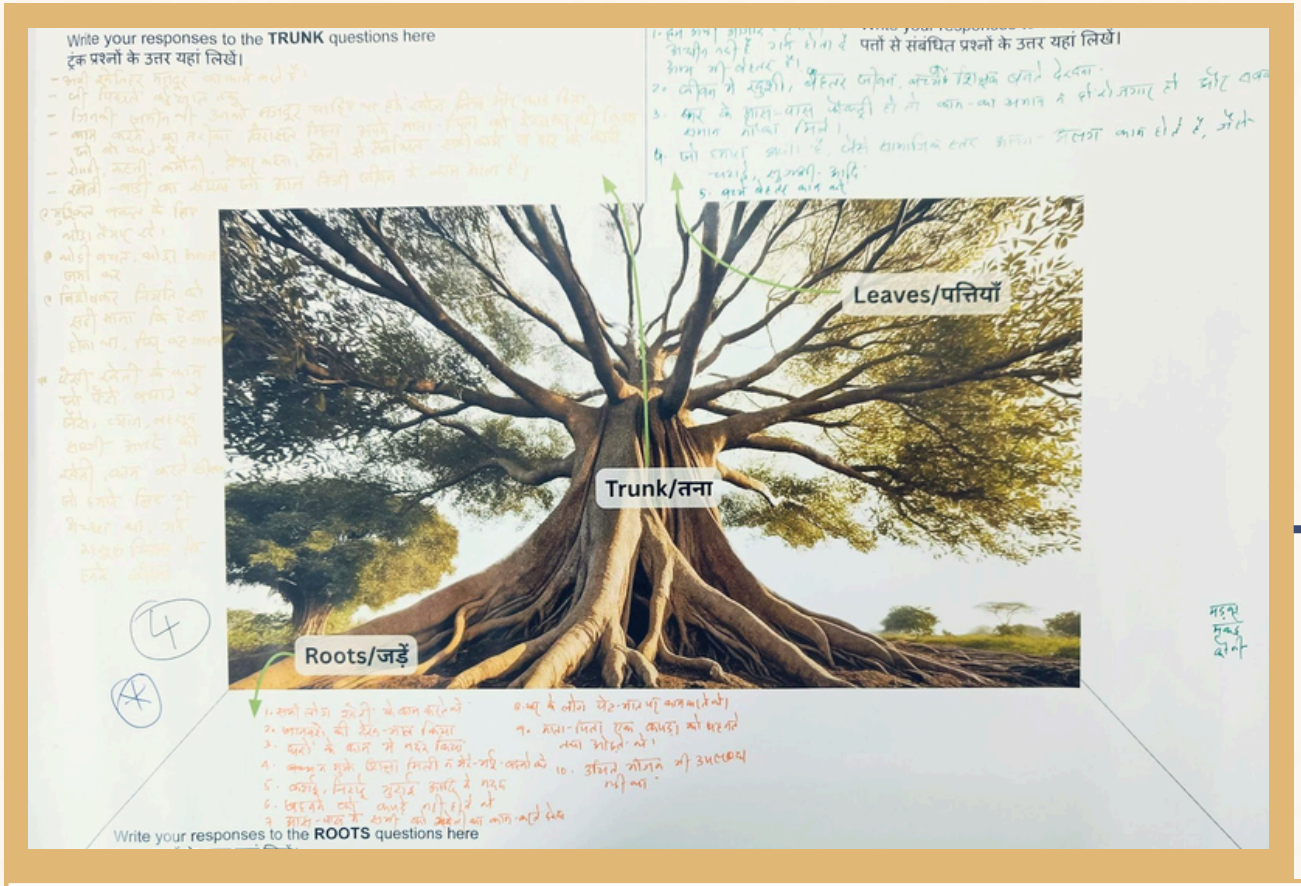
A Wicked Problem

The challenge of finding stable and fairly paid employment for survivors of bonded labour and human trafficking is riddled with complexities, especially in a state such as Bihar and for the Mushahar community. A people group who have a long history of systemic deprivation, social exclusion, and exploitation - resulting in widespread illiteracy among children, chronic food insecurity, lack of assets and dignified livelihoods, and limited access to healthcare and public services.

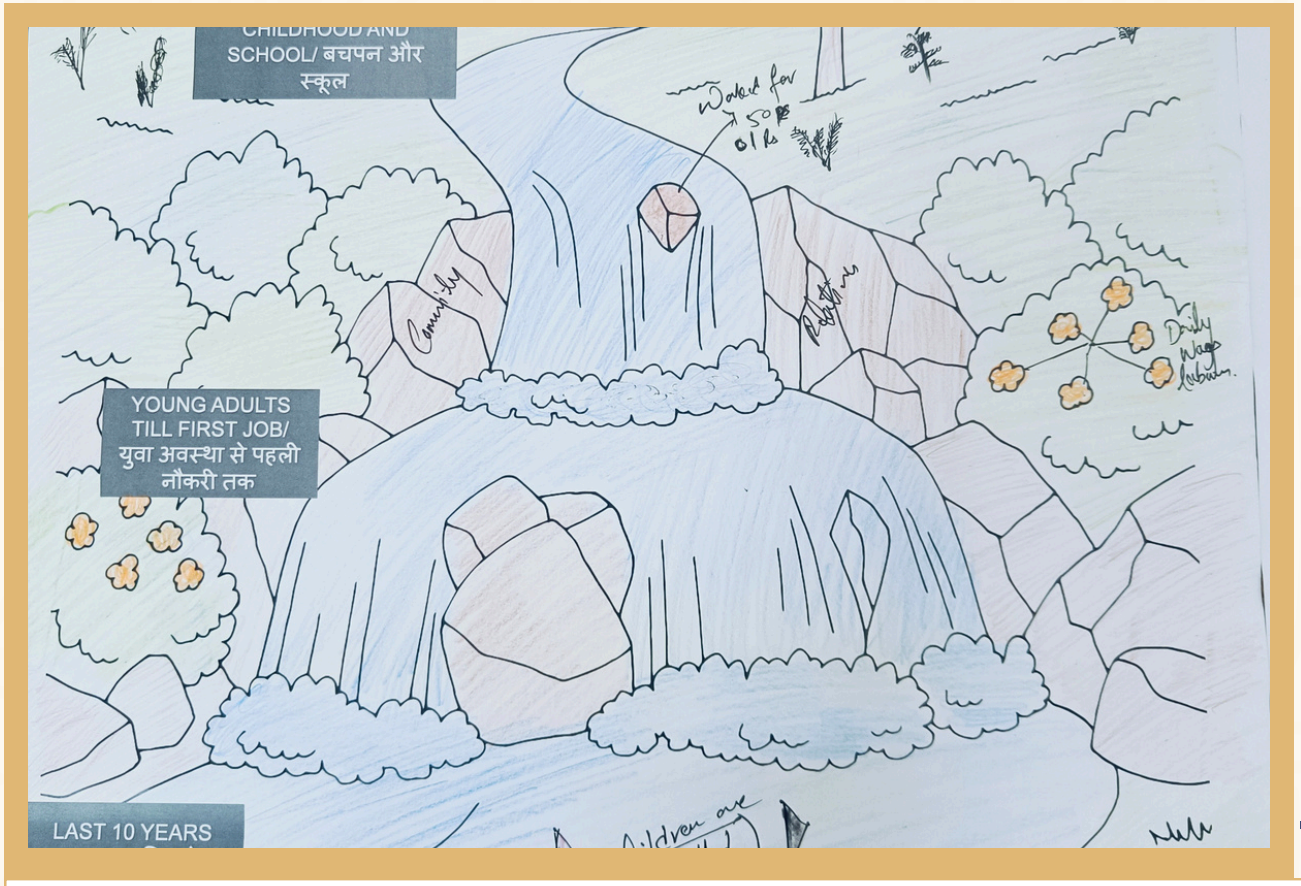
Approach

The project report documents the findings from the 6-month discovery project conducted with local partner organisations working across three districts in Bihar. The aim was to unpack and explore a freedom business strengthening intervention. The Freedom Business Alliance defines a Freedom Business as a social enterprise that exists to create safe, trauma-informed and sustainable employment opportunities for survivors of human trafficking and individuals at risk of exploitation. And so the aim was to give a working definition to what freedom businesses could look like in Bihar and across India; researching, analysing and mapping the freedom business landscape in Bihar, seeking out inspiring models of freedom business and ultimately highlighting six opportunities for freedom business in Bihar that could be pursued further.

In order to achieve these aims a design thinking and systems practice approach was taken, with the JoyCorps team partaking in a series of discovery workshops both online and in-person. Our hope was to help both organisational leadership and those working on the field to find clarity in how to address the intervention in a viable way. Building on from the established aftercare work already in place and keeping with the focus of partnerships and collaboration at the centre.



With this project, we had one opportunity for us to gather information from survivors coming out of bonded labour. We wanted a way to gather information that didn't seem too invasive especially coming from us - who they didn't know or trust - and give them the opportunity to share as much as they could without feeling pressured or cornered. So we made art work sheets and paired them with a person they knew and trusted - and asked them to to visualise parts of their life through the different pieces of art. This tree, a local, familiar tree, was meant to symbolise their work. The roots - were to understand early influences and life context, early work experiences or family circumstances that led them to work; the trunk - was to reflect on work patterns, strengths and survival; and the leaves - to invite stories of change, dignity, identity and hope and understand support systems around their work.



Just like that of the image of the tree, we used a colourless picture of a river running through, what look like, three distinct landscapes. We used each of these landscapes to symbolise three different, very broad, stages of their lives - the first stage with the sky and mountains was their childhood and schooling, the second stage was them as young adults and the first job, and the last part was their lives in the last 10 years. Participants could choose to colour in as much as they wanted, but using objects in each of these landscapes to share memories, or part of their lives that were hard, and those that bought joy and the in-betweens.

One of the exercises we wanted to do that day, was to understand their perception of finances - how money is currently spent in their households and how they would ideally like to spend it- highlighting the gap between needs, priorities, and income. Groups of participants were formed based on where they're from and by gender for context, and rice was used to symbolise earnings - white for their current earnings and current spending, and rice mixed with turmeric so it turned yellow, for their current earning and their ideal spending.



There were various buckets of spending marked on plastic cups that included the basics like health, food, transport, education, savings, but also included the extras like celebrations, debt and one even for "any other" which led to a lot of the women acknowledging unnecessary spending on alcoholism. As the cups filled up there were distinct differences even across groups, that showed up in the levels and proportions of white and yellow rice in each cup.

Findings

The 6 areas of opportunity for freedom business highlighted in this report are:

1. Agriculture: Widescale opportunity for the landless

Through leasing, collectivization and market-linked crops, agriculture offers a sustainable, scalable pathway for Musahar empowerment. Despite landlessness being a barrier, examples from Bihar demonstrate that Musahar families have successfully farmed through land leasing and collectivization.

2. Agricultural Processing: Pathways for empowerment

Within the agricultural processing sector starting with grain mills and basic processing - is a practical, low-barrier entry for Musahar communities. With local availability, strong demand, government schemes, and training ecosystems, it offers a pathway to scale, diversify, and connect with Bihar's growing agro-industrial sector.

3. Farm Based Biofertilizers: A sustainable opportunity

Biofertilizers combine livelihood generation with sustainable farming. Natural farm-based production is low cost, community friendly and profitable. It can be started as an additional income alongside cultivation.

4. Textiles / Sustainable Textiles: Finding resilience through making

Three business lines are recommended for exploration within the textiles sector; fabric upcycling, fabric recycling and garment manufacturing.

5. Alternative Bricks and Construction Materials: Building a redemptive narrative

While most of these innovations stem from an environmental concern, they offer opportunities and advantages to address the rampant abuse, violation of rights, safety, and health issues as well.

6. Agroforestry: Growing livelihoods

The agroforestry sector offers potential livelihood opportunities in Madhepura, Gaya and Purnia. Within agroforestry, we are looking at both cultivation and manufacturing articles - which could potentially offer high margins and open up a vast and promising sector for marginalized communities.

Freedom Business Opportunities

Amongst this selection is a spectrum of opportunities that represents the range of directions the intervention could be taken.

Within each of the areas, an in-depth exploration into the market viability and community fit has been presented, along with the potential partners and entrepreneurs who could support the initiation of pilot projects.

At the end of the report you'll find the recommendations to consider when progressing forward with selected pilot project(s).

Join the journey

We've compiled a full-length report of this process and we would love to share more on it with you.

To learn more about the work of JoyCorps Studio: *Sign up for our newsletter or get in touch with us*