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Modern Slavery and Muslim Everyday Ethics: Negotiating Human Dignity, Labor, and Social Justice in Contemporary India

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Abstract

This study examines modern slavery in contemporary India through the perspective of Muslim everyday ethics, focusing on human dignity, labour relations, and social justice. It addresses modern slavery not merely as an individual criminal practice but as a structural problem sustained by debt bondage, informal labour, caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and unequal power relations. Employing a qualitative conceptual research design, the study draws on secondary sources, particularly the *Global Slavery Index* 2023, modern slavery scholarship, Qur'anic interpretations, Islamic jurisprudence, and literature on lived religion. The analysis indicates that Islamic teachings on human dignity, justice, and social responsibility provide a normative foundation for challenging exploitative practices. In particular, the Qur'anic principle of *fakk raqabah* (manumission), together with the jurisprudential mechanisms of *'itq al-raqabah*, *fī al-riqāb*, and *mukātabah*, offers a historical and ethical basis for understanding the restoration of human freedom. Building on these insights, the study proposes the Dignity–Justice–Responsibility (DJR) Framework, comprising dignity-based recognition, justice-oriented labour relations, and collective moral responsibility. This framework extends Islamic ethical analysis beyond individual morality towards structural and institutional accountability. However, the framework remains conceptual and requires empirical examination, particularly through research into the experiences of Muslim workers, survivors of exploitation, and religious institutions in India.

Penelitian ini mengkaji perbudakan modern di India kontemporer melalui perspektif etika Muslim dalam kehidupan sehari-hari (Muslim everyday ethics), dengan memusatkan perhatian pada martabat manusia, relasi ketenagakerjaan, dan keadilan sosial. Penelitian ini memandang perbudakan modern bukan semata-mata sebagai praktik kriminal individual, melainkan sebagai persoalan struktural yang dipertahankan melalui jeratan utang, pekerjaan informal, diskriminasi berbasis kasta, ketimpangan gender, dan relasi kekuasaan yang tidak seimbang. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian konseptual kualitatif berbasis data sekunder, terutama Global Slavery Index 2023, literatur tentang perbudakan modern, karya-karya tafsir Al-Qur'an, fikih Islam, serta kajian mengenai lived religion. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa ajaran Islam tentang martabat manusia, keadilan, dan tanggung jawab sosial menyediakan landasan normatif untuk mengkritisi praktik eksploitasi. Secara khusus, prinsip fakk raqabah (pembebasan budak) dalam Al-Qur'an, bersama mekanisme fikih berupa 'itq al-raqabah, fī al-riqāb, dan mukātabah, memberikan dasar historis dan etis untuk memahami pemulihan kebebasan manusia. Berdasarkan sintesis tersebut,

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penelitian ini mengusulkan Dignity–Justice–Responsibility (DJR) Framework yang mencakup pengakuan berbasis martabat manusia, relasi ketenagakerjaan berorientasi keadilan, dan tanggung jawab moral kolektif. Kerangka ini memperluas analisis etika Islam dari ranah moralitas individual menuju akuntabilitas struktural dan institusional. Namun, kerangka tersebut masih bersifat konseptual dan memerlukan pengujian empiris, khususnya melalui penelitian mengenai pengalaman pekerja Muslim, penyintas eksploitasi, dan institusi keagamaan di India.

Keywords: *Modern Slavery; Muslim Everyday Ethics; Human Dignity; Islamic Jurisprudence; Lived Religion.*

Introduction

Modern slavery is one of the most pressing contemporary humanitarian issues, revealing how economic relations, social inequalities, and asymmetrical power structures can deprive individuals of their freedom, autonomy, and human dignity. Although slavery has been formally abolished in most countries, various forms of exploitation persist through forced labour, debt bondage, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and forced marriage. Rather than constituting a single, clearly bounded legal category, modern slavery is frequently used as an umbrella concept encompassing different forms of severe exploitation that occur across workplaces, households, and transnational production networks (Boersma & Nolan, 2022; Caspersz et al., 2022). Recent scholarship further emphasizes that exploitation should be understood along a continuum, since the boundaries between labour abuse, coercive employment, and forced labour are not always readily distinguishable (Boersma & Nolan, 2022; Strand et al., 2024). These practices do not necessarily involve physical confinement or the direct ownership of one person by another.

Instead, they may operate through threats, deception, abuse of vulnerability, economic dependency, debt obligations, and coercive control, thereby restricting an individual's substantive ability to refuse or leave an exploitative situation (Crane et al., 2021; McCabe & Eglen, 2022; Zenz, 2026). In this respect, modern slavery is not merely an individual criminal act but also a structural phenomenon embedded in unequal employment relations, exploitative business models, and complex global value chains (Caspersz et al., 2022; Szablewska & Kubacki, 2023; Stringer et al., 2022). Its persistence therefore requires an analytical approach that considers not only the immediate perpetrators and victims but also the economic arrangements and institutional conditions that enable exploitation to continue.

India provides an important context for understanding the complexity of this issue. The *Global Slavery Index* 2023 estimates that approximately 11.05 million people in India were living in conditions of modern slavery in 2021, equivalent to approximately eight people per 1,000 inhabitants. This represents the highest absolute number among the countries assessed in the report (Walk Free, 2023). The forms of exploitation identified include forced labour, debt bondage, human

trafficking for sexual exploitation, child exploitation, and forced marriage (Walk Free, 2023; International Labour Organization [ILO] et al., 2022). For instance, the Indian government identified 2,704 victims of human trafficking for forced labour and 2,049 victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in 2021 (Walk Free, 2023). The report also records that, in 2022, approximately 23 per cent of women aged 20–24 had been married before reaching the age of 18 (Walk Free, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). These figures demonstrate that human exploitation in India occurs across multiple spheres of life, ranging from productive sectors and domestic work to family relations and marriage (ILO et al., 2022; Walk Free, 2023).

Recent empirical studies further illustrate the persistence of bonded labour in India, particularly among socially marginalized communities and workers in informal sectors (Chauhan, 2022; Samonova, 2023; Agarwal, 2025). Samonova (2023), for example, demonstrates how gendered norms intersect with structural violence in the experiences of female bonded labourers from the Sahariya community. Similarly, Agarwal (2025) shows that formal rescue from bonded labour does not necessarily guarantee substantive freedom, as survivors may remain trapped in prolonged legal and administrative processes that reproduce their vulnerability. Related research on Dalit workers in western Uttar Pradesh also shows how caste-based social exclusion and debt relations sustain contemporary forms of bonded labour in brick kilns and sugarcane-cutting work (Chauhan, 2022).

Vulnerability to modern slavery in India cannot be separated from unequal social structures. The *Global Slavery Index* identifies conflict, climate change, gender-based discrimination, the marginalization of minority groups, and caste-based discrimination as factors that increase the risk of exploitation. The legacy of caste hierarchies, in particular, remains associated with intergenerational poverty and the limited access of Dalit and Adivasi communities to economic resources and social protection. At the same time, the extensive informal economy creates further opportunities for labour exploitation. Approximately 93 per cent of India's workforce—estimated at around 450 million people—is employed in the informal sector. Workers in this sector frequently lack formal employment contracts, adequate wages, social security, and access to labour protection mechanisms. Such conditions can foster dependence on loans, labour recruiters, and employers, potentially developing into debt bondage and forced labour. Research on bonded labour and migration in India demonstrates that indebtedness, landlessness, social disadvantage, and limited livelihood opportunities can reinforce exploitative labour relations (Deshingkar, 2023; Mishra, 2024). Thus, modern slavery is not merely the consequence of individual acts of exploitation, but is also embedded in socio-economic systems that produce and perpetuate vulnerability.

This situation raises important questions about the role of religion in confronting social and economic injustice. Rather than functioning solely as a system of beliefs or normative doctrines, religion may shape moral identity, social

solidarity, and everyday ethical action. In Islam, principles such as *karāmah insāniyyah* (human dignity), *'adl* (justice), *iḥsān* (moral excellence), and *amānah* (responsibility) provide an ethical foundation for understanding labour relations, workers' rights, and employers' obligations (Larouche, 2022; Mahmudulhassan et al., 2025; *Work between Obligation and Right in Muslim Culture*, 2022). From the perspective of *lived religion*, however, Islamic ethics should not be examined merely as a normative framework but also through how religious values are interpreted, negotiated, and embodied in everyday practices and social relations (McGinty, 2023; Kong & Shee, 2023; Szwed, 2025). Research on Muslim philanthropic networks in Uttar Pradesh, for example, demonstrates how zakat and sadaqa practices become forms of social engagement through which Muslim organizations negotiate welfare responsibilities and respond to socioeconomic marginalization (Larouche, 2022). Accordingly, the concept of *Muslim everyday ethics* in this article refers to the ways Islamic moral principles may inform understandings and practices concerning human dignity, labour rights, social solidarity, and responsibility toward vulnerable groups, without presuming that religious commitment automatically produces effective resistance to exploitation.

Examining this relationship also requires attention to the structural conditions that constrain the translation of moral commitments into social action. Recent studies of modern slavery demonstrate that labour exploitation is sustained by the interaction of commercial pressures, unequal employment relations, workers' socioeconomic vulnerabilities, and inadequate institutional oversight (Caspersz et al., 2022; Szablewska & Kubacki, 2023; Strand et al., 2024; Bryde et al., 2024). Research on bonded labour in India further illustrates how gendered vulnerability, caste-based marginalization, and institutional processes can restrict survivors' possibilities of achieving substantive freedom (Samonova, 2023; Agarwal, 2025). Although the *Global Slavery Index* 2023 identifies the marginalization of religious minorities as one vulnerability factor, it does not disaggregate victims' experiences according to religious identity or document Muslim communities' specific responses. Its findings should therefore be treated as a macro-level account of structural vulnerability rather than direct evidence of Muslim experiences or practices. Against this background, this article examines the relationship between modern slavery and Muslim everyday ethics in India by connecting Islamic ethical principles with the social conditions of labour exploitation, while critically considering the possibilities and limitations of religious solidarity, community action, and institutional responsibility. This approach contributes to the study of *lived religion* and Islamic anthropology by situating religious ethics within the everyday negotiations between moral commitments, economic vulnerability, and structural inequality.

Method

This study employs a qualitative conceptual research design based on secondary data to examine the relationship between modern slavery and Muslim everyday ethics in contemporary India. A conceptual approach is appropriate because the study seeks to synthesize existing knowledge, interpret relationships among established concepts, and develop an analytical understanding of a social phenomenon rather than generate or test primary empirical findings (Jaakkola, 2020; Koskela-Huotari, 2024). The research draws primarily on the *Global Slavery Index* 2023, particularly its country study on India, which provides data and analysis concerning forced labour, debt bondage, human trafficking, forced marriage, informal employment, gender inequality, caste-based discrimination, and the marginalization of minority groups. These data are complemented by relevant academic literature, policy reports, international human rights publications, and scholarly works on Islamic ethics and the sociology of religion. The secondary sources are selected purposively based on their relevance to the structural conditions of modern slavery and the ethical dimensions of human dignity, labour, and social justice. This purposive selection enables the integration of sources that contribute directly to the study's conceptual objectives and theoretical development (Koskela-Huotari, 2024; Lyhne et al., 2025). The *Global Slavery Index* serves as the principal empirical reference for understanding the scale and structural context of modern slavery in India, rather than as direct evidence of the religious identities or everyday experiences of Muslim victims.

The data are analysed through qualitative content analysis and conceptual interpretation. Qualitative content analysis provides a systematic procedure for identifying relevant textual meanings, organizing them into analytical categories, and interpreting their significance in relation to the research problem (Kawamoto et al., 2023; Nicmanis, 2024; Lyhne et al., 2025). The analysis proceeds by identifying recurring issues in the sources, classifying them into key themes, and interpreting their implications through the perspectives of *lived religion* and Islamic social ethics. Particular attention is given to the concepts of *karāmah insāniyyah* (human dignity), *'adl* (justice), *iḥsān* (moral excellence), and *amānah* (social responsibility) as analytical categories for examining the ethical implications of labour exploitation and social vulnerability. This process involves moving from the identification of textual evidence to thematic categorization and interpretive synthesis, while maintaining the contextual meanings of the sources and the relationship between theoretical assumptions and analytical procedures (Nicmanis, 2024; Lyhne et al., 2025). Rather than assuming that Islamic ethical principles are automatically reflected in social practices, this study critically examines the potential tensions between normative Islamic commitments and the structural realities that sustain modern slavery. Through this approach, the research develops a conceptual understanding of how Muslim everyday ethics can be situated within broader discussions of human dignity, labour rights, and social justice in contemporary India.

Result and Discussion

Theoretical Perspectives on Modern Slavery

In contemporary scholarship, *modern slavery* is an umbrella term used to describe various forms of human domination and exploitation that deprive individuals of, or substantially restrict, their freedom. Kevin Bales (1999, 2012) explains contemporary slavery through the relationship of control between those who exercise power and those who are subjected to it. Such control may take the form of violence or threats of violence, restrictions on freedom of movement, control over the body and labour, and the extraction of economic benefits from exploited individuals. Accordingly, slavery does not necessarily require the legal ownership of human beings, as was characteristic of historical slavery, but may operate through mechanisms of control that effectively undermine individual freedom and autonomy (Bales, 1999, 2012; A *Full Freedom*, 2018).

This perspective is important because it expands the understanding of slavery beyond the status of legal ownership towards relations of domination and exploitation. Nevertheless, the use of the term *modern slavery* also raises conceptual questions. Patterson and Zhuo (2018), in their examination of human trafficking, slavery, and contemporary forms of servitude, emphasize the importance of distinguishing between slavery, forced labour, servitude, human trafficking, and migrant smuggling. Not every case of human trafficking necessarily fulfils the characteristics of slavery, just as not every form of poor working conditions can be classified as forced labour. These distinctions are essential to prevent the conflation of different forms of violation and the production of exaggerated prevalence claims. Recent scholarship similarly highlights the conceptual ambiguity surrounding modern slavery and the need to distinguish between different forms of labour exploitation and unfree labour (Boersma & Nolan, 2022; Caspersz et al., 2022; Fudge, 2025).

Another debate concerns structural and relational approaches to modern slavery. The relational approach focuses on the concrete actions through which perpetrators dominate, restrict, or exploit victims. By contrast, the structural approach examines the socioeconomic conditions that enable exploitative relationships to persist, including poverty, unequal power relations, discrimination, economic dependency, and inadequate labour protection. These two approaches need not be treated as mutually exclusive. Identifying acts of domination is necessary for determining the specific forms of exploitation, whereas structural analysis helps explain why certain individuals or groups are more vulnerable to becoming victims. Research on global value chains demonstrates that labour exploitation is frequently embedded in complex production networks, unequal contractual arrangements, and fragmented systems of governance (Caspersz et al., 2022; Strand et al., 2024; Szablewska & Kubacki, 2023).

The structural perspective also helps explain why modern slavery can occur within employment relationships that formally appear voluntary. When individuals accept employment because of debt pressure, a lack of alternative livelihood opportunities, or dependence on employers to meet their basic needs, formal consent does not necessarily reflect substantive freedom. Under such circumstances, employment relationships may develop into relations of domination when economically powerful actors exploit the vulnerabilities of others to maintain control. Fudge (2025) situates unfree labour within the broader context of the global economy, particularly labour migration and transnational supply chains, demonstrating that exploitation does not occur exclusively within individual relationships but is also connected to cross-border economic and legal governance. Similarly, research on modern slavery in global value chains highlights how commercial pressures, business arrangements, and fragmented accountability mechanisms can facilitate the continuation of exploitative labour practices (Crane et al., 2021; Caspersz et al., 2022; Strand et al., 2024).

Drawing on these debates, this article adopts three complementary analytical perspectives. First, the perspective of control and the loss of freedom is used to identify the defining characteristics of exploitation. Second, the structural perspective is employed to explain the socioeconomic conditions that produce and reproduce vulnerability. Third, the political-economic perspective examines the connections between labour exploitation, markets, migration, and global supply chains. Together, these perspectives provide the analytical foundation for interpreting data on modern slavery in India before connecting them with the Islamic ethical principles of human dignity, justice, and social responsibility.

This framework must also be approached critically. The term *modern slavery* is not an entirely uncontested analytical category. Its overly broad application may obscure the distinctions between labour exploitation, unfree labour, and slavery in a more restrictive sense. Patterson and Zhuo (2018), for example, caution against conflating slavery, forced labour, servitude, and human trafficking, particularly when estimating their prevalence. Fudge (2025) likewise demonstrates that the concept of modern slavery is shaped by legal, political, and economic agendas, which may divert attention from the structural processes underlying labour exploitation. Therefore, this article employs the term *modern slavery* in accordance with the categories and scope adopted by the *Global Slavery Index*, while remaining attentive to the conceptual distinctions established in academic scholarship. This qualification enables the Indian data to be analysed more carefully without assuming that every form of labour injustice constitutes slavery in an identical sense.

The Scale and Forms of Modern Slavery in India

To understand the empirical context of modern slavery in India, this article draws on the *Global Slavery Index* 2023, published by Walk Free. The report uses estimates based on conditions in 2021 to illustrate the prevalence of modern slavery. India is

estimated to have 11.05 million people living in conditions of modern slavery, equivalent to eight people per 1,000 inhabitants. This figure represents the highest absolute number among the countries assessed in the report. It is important to emphasize that this figure is an estimate, rather than a count of victims who have all been formally identified through government legal or administrative processes.

Table 1. Key Indicators of Modern Slavery in India

Indicator	Data	Description
Estimated population living in modern slavery	11,050,000 people	Estimate based on conditions in 2021
Prevalence of modern slavery	8 per 1,000 inhabitants	Equivalent to 0.8% of the population
Vulnerability Index	56/100	Score indicating vulnerability to modern slavery
Government response	46/100	Assessment of the government's response to modern slavery
Informal-sector workforce	450 million people (93%)	Majority of the workforce employed in the informal sector
Women and girls in domestic work	92% of approximately 5 million domestic workers	Indicates the gender dimension of domestic work
Domestic workers under 14 years of age	20%	Indicates children's vulnerability in domestic work
Victims of trafficking for forced labour identified by the government	2,704 people	Government identification data for 2021
Victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation identified by the government	2,049 people	Government identification data for 2021
Women aged 20–24 married before the age of 18	23%	Estimate based on 2022 data
Women and girls married as children	216 million people	Cumulative estimate for India

Source: Compiled from Walk Free, Global Slavery Index 2023: Country Study—India. The reference years differ across indicators; the figures should not be interpreted as measurements from a single year.
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The data in Table 1 demonstrate that modern slavery in India cannot be understood solely in terms of the number of victims; it must also be examined in relation to the social conditions that increase vulnerability to exploitation. The estimate of 11.05 million indicates the scale of the problem, while the fact that 93% of the workforce is employed in the informal sector provides context for the extensive reach of employment arrangements that may offer limited labour protection. Although these two indicators do not establish that all informal workers experience modern slavery, they highlight the importance of examining the relationship between informal employment, income insecurity, and the possibility of exploitation.



Figure 1. Modern Slavery in India Data

From a structural perspective, these conditions can be understood in terms of the relationship between economic vulnerability and limited livelihood choices. Workers without formal employment contracts, social security, or adequate access to financial resources may occupy a weaker bargaining position, particularly in informal employment arrangements characterized by income insecurity and inadequate institutional protection (Khan, 2021; Goswami, 2023; Sahu & Behera, 2025). Under certain circumstances, their dependence on employers or labour recruiters may be exploited to sustain abusive employment relationships, especially when workers lack effective mechanisms for collective bargaining, legal protection, and access to social security (Thakkar, 2024; Ajay & Devika, 2025). Accordingly, informal-sector employment data should not be equated directly with modern slavery statistics; rather, they should be understood as part of the broader social context in which exploitation may occur (Patterson & Zhuo, 2018; Khan, 2021; Sahu & Behera, 2025).

The gender dimension is also significant in interpreting these figures. The predominance of women and girls in domestic work, together with the continuing prevalence of child marriage, indicates that vulnerability is not distributed evenly across the population (Thakkar, 2024; Gausman et al., 2024). Domestic work performed in private households may create particular challenges in terms of monitoring, labour protection, and access to complaint mechanisms, especially because employment relationships are often individualized, geographically dispersed, and characterized by unequal power relations between employers and workers (Thakkar, 2024). Recent research on women domestic workers in India further documents experiences of workplace harassment, discrimination, violence, and limited access to labour protections (Thakkar, 2024; Ajay & Devika, 2025). Meanwhile, child marriage and forced marriage demonstrate that human exploitation does not occur exclusively within productive relations but may also be connected to family structures and broader social relations (Gausman et al., 2024; Acharya & Behera, 2025). This interpretation is consistent with Patterson and Zhuo's

(2018) emphasis on the diversity of contemporary forms of servitude, including sexual exploitation, domestic labour, and forced marriage.

Human Dignity and Islamic Social Ethics

The central issue underlying modern slavery concerns how human beings are treated within social and economic relationships. When an individual's body, time, and labour are controlled through threats, debt bondage, human trafficking, or restrictions on freedom, that person is reduced to an instrument of production and an object of economic gain. Within the Islamic tradition, criticism of human exploitation is grounded not only in the concept of *karāmah insāniyyah* (human dignity) but also in the concrete Qur'anic and jurisprudential teachings on *'itq al-raqabah* (the emancipation of enslaved persons). Q.S. al-Balad [90]:11–16 presents *fakk raqabah* (the freeing of a slave) as one of the actions required to undertake *al-'aqabah*, the steep path of moral virtue. Al-Ṭabarī, in *Jāmi' al-Bayān*, and al-Qurṭubī, in *al-Jāmi' li Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, explain *fakk raqabah* as releasing a person from the condition of enslavement. Thus, human emancipation is not merely an expression of individual generosity but an act of moral virtue accorded an important position in Qur'anic ethics (al-Ṭabarī, 2001; al-Qurṭubī, 2006; Sinai, 2023).

This emancipatory orientation is reinforced through several legal provisions that establish *'itq al-raqabah* as an expiatory act (*kaffārah*) for particular violations. Q.S. al-Nisā' [4]:92 prescribes the emancipation of a believing slave as part of the expiation for accidental homicide. Q.S. al-Mujādilah [58]:3–4 establishes manumission as the first prescribed expiation for a husband who pronounces *ẓihār* before resuming marital relations, while Q.S. al-Mā'idah [5]:89 includes the emancipation of a slave as one of the available options for expiating a deliberately broken oath. In addition, Q.S. al-Tawbah [9]:60 identifies *fī al-riqāb* as one of the categories eligible to receive zakat, which classical Islamic jurisprudence associates with financing the emancipation of enslaved persons, including assistance for *mukātab* individuals seeking their freedom. Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]:177 also identifies expenditure for the emancipation of enslaved persons as an expression of righteousness. Furthermore, Q.S. al-Nūr [24]:33 provides a basis for the mechanism of *mukātabah*, a contractual arrangement through which an enslaved person may obtain freedom in exchange for an agreed payment, accompanied by an exhortation to provide financial assistance. Al-Qurṭubī records differing juristic opinions concerning whether an owner is legally obliged to accept a request for *mukātabah*, but the verse nevertheless establishes a normative mechanism for facilitating emancipation. Taken together, these provisions demonstrate that manumission in Islam has several dimensions: a legal obligation in specific cases of expiation, an instrument of wealth redistribution through zakat, and a form of social virtue encouraged through *mukātabah* (al-Ṭabarī, 2001; al-Qurṭubī, 2006; Mitter, 2001; Sinai, 2023).

These Qur'anic and jurisprudential provisions offer a foundation for understanding *karāmah insāniyyah*, *'adl* (justice), *amānah* (trust and responsibility), and *iḥsān* (moral excellence) as ethical principles oriented towards restoring human freedom. *Karāmah insāniyyah* recognizes human beings as subjects possessing inherent dignity, rather than commodities that can be exchanged or controlled for the benefit of others. The principle of *'adl* requires employment relationships not to be established through domination and unequal power relations, while *amānah* frames economic authority and employers' responsibilities as trusts that must not be used to exploit weaker parties. Meanwhile, *iḥsān* directs human relationships beyond formal compliance towards treatment that respects the dignity and needs of others. In the context of modern slavery, the relevance of the teachings on *'itq al-raqabah* does not lie in equating the legal status of enslaved persons under classical Islamic jurisprudence with that of contemporary forced labourers, trafficking survivors, or debt-bonded workers. Rather, its relevance lies in its ethical orientation and legal objectives: eliminating forms of domination that deprive people of their freedom, restoring human autonomy, and mobilizing social resources to release individuals from exploitative relationships. Applying these principles to contemporary circumstances therefore requires a *maqāṣidī* analysis that considers substantive similarities in exploitative conditions, particularly the deprivation of freedom and the denial of human dignity (Mitter, 2001; Sinai, 2023; Brockopp, 2006).

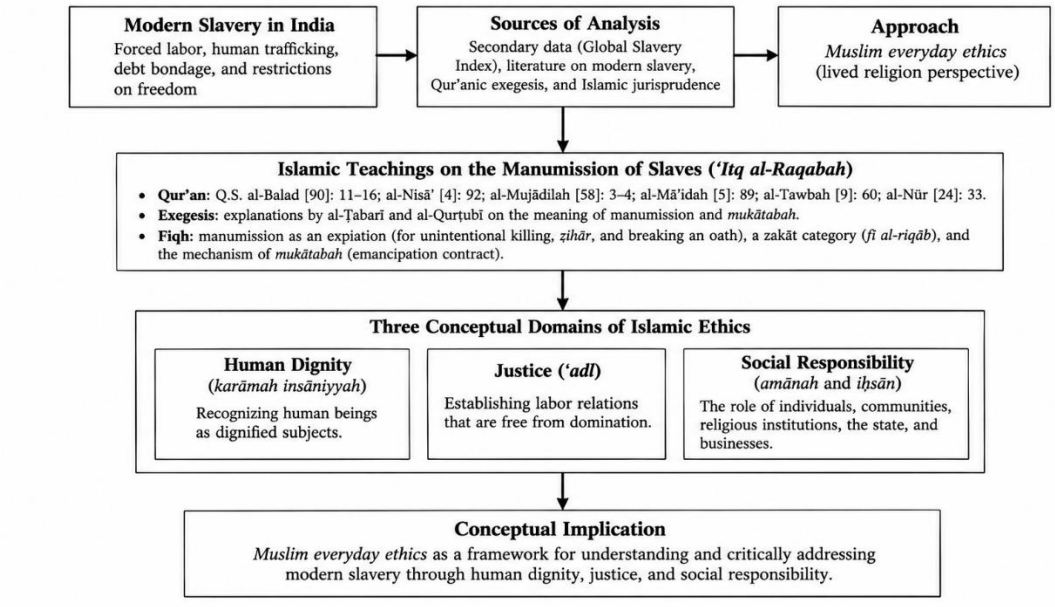

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of Muslim Everyday Ethics: Qur'anic and Jurisprudential Foundations of Manumission and Responses to Modern Slavery in India.

Within this framework, the perspective of *lived religion* becomes relevant because religion is understood not merely through formal doctrines and normative teachings, but also through the processes by which religious values are interpreted,

negotiated, and translated into everyday life. This article employs *Muslim everyday ethics* as a conceptual framework for examining how Islamic teachings on emancipation, human dignity, justice, and social responsibility can serve as sources of moral orientation in confronting human exploitation. The focus is not to demonstrate that Muslim communities in India have undertaken specific practices of emancipation or victim protection, but rather to examine the normative resources within Islam that may inform ethical responses to modern slavery. This distinction is important because the *Global Slavery Index* does not provide a specific breakdown of victims' religious identities or document the responses of Muslim communities. Accordingly, the report's data are used to establish the structural context of modern slavery in India, while Qur'anic exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence serve as normative sources for developing an ethical interpretation.

Institutional Responses and the Limits of Social Protection

Another dimension that requires consideration is the institutional capacity to respond to modern slavery. The *Global Slavery Index* 2023 assigns the Indian government an overall response score of 46 out of 100. This assessment indicates that, although efforts have been made to strengthen coordination and anti-human trafficking mechanisms, significant limitations remain in victim protection, law enforcement, and supply-chain monitoring. In particular, the report assigns a score of zero to the dimension concerning government and business responses to supply-chain risks (Walk Free, 2023).

Table 3. Government Response to Modern Slavery in India

Government response dimension	Score
Identification and support of survivors	36/100
Criminal justice mechanisms	58/100
National and regional coordination	75/100
Addressing risk factors	50/100
Government and business supply chains	0/100
Overall government response score	46/100

Source: Walk Free, Global Slavery Index 2023: Country Study—India.

Table 3 reveals considerable differences in institutional capacity across the various dimensions of the government's response. National and regional coordination receives a relatively higher score than the other dimensions, whereas government and business supply-chain accountability receives the lowest score. This disparity suggests that inter-agency coordination does not necessarily translate into adequate capacity to monitor labour practices and ensure protection throughout every stage of production. In other words, responding to modern slavery requires not only policy coordination but also effective monitoring mechanisms, survivor protection, and corporate accountability (Walk Free, 2023; Caspersz et al., 2022; Strand et al., 2024). Research on socially sustainable global supply chains

similarly identifies commercial pressures, exploitative business models, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, and insufficient regulatory oversight as factors that enable labour exploitation to persist (Bryde, 2024).

From the perspective of Islamic social ethics, these institutional limitations provide an analytical basis for distinguishing the responsibilities of the state, businesses, and society. The state has a legal obligation to protect workers and prosecute exploitative practices. Businesses are responsible for ensuring that their production processes do not depend on forced labour or working conditions that undermine human dignity. Meanwhile, society and civil society organizations can contribute by promoting awareness, solidarity, and support for vulnerable groups. These responsibilities are complementary, but they are not interchangeable. Social assistance, for instance, cannot replace the state's obligation to enforce the law or businesses' responsibility to guarantee workers' rights. This understanding is consistent with contemporary research emphasizing that addressing modern slavery requires coordinated governance, effective institutional oversight, and accountability across global supply chains (Caspersz et al., 2022; Szablewska & Kubacki, 2023; Bryde, 2024).

Accordingly, Muslim ethics can be positioned as a source of moral orientation for developing social responsibility, rather than as a substitute for public policy and institutional intervention. Practices such as zakat, *ṣadaqah*, and community solidarity may contribute to social protection and support for vulnerable populations. However, these practices cannot, by themselves, resolve structural problems such as debt bondage, discrimination, and inadequate supply-chain oversight. The distinction between charitable assistance and structural justice is therefore essential: charitable interventions seek to alleviate suffering that has already occurred, whereas structural justice also questions and seeks to transform the institutional and economic arrangements that allow exploitation to persist. In this respect, Islamic social finance may complement broader social-protection mechanisms, but its contribution should be understood in relation to institutional governance, resource distribution, and the structural conditions of poverty and inequality (Adinugraha et al., 2023; Sari et al., 2025).

Modern Slavery and the Conceptual Relevance of Muslim Everyday Ethics

The relationship between modern slavery and Muslim everyday ethics needs to be understood through the intersection of exploitative structures, moral agency, and the practice of justice in social life. Modern slavery operates not only through physical violence or direct control over individuals but also through economic dependency, debt bondage, restrictions on freedom, discrimination, and unequal power relations. Bales (1999, 2012) argues that contemporary slavery is fundamentally characterized by mechanisms of control through which certain actors appropriate individuals' freedom, labour, and economic productivity. Thus,

unlike historical slavery, modern slavery does not necessarily depend on legally recognized ownership of human beings; it may persist through relations of domination that effectively undermine individual autonomy. This structural perspective is particularly important because individuals may formally consent to employment while lacking the substantive freedom to leave it. Debt bondage, recruitment-related debts, wage advances, and economic dependency can transform apparently voluntary employment into exploitative relationships. Consequently, the distinction between *formal consent* and *substantive freedom* is essential for understanding modern slavery (Patterson & Zhuo, 2018; Boersma & Nolan, 2022; Caspersz et al., 2022). In India, this problem is reflected in the *Global Slavery Index* 2023, which estimates that 11.05 million people were living in conditions of modern slavery in 2021. The report also identifies caste discrimination, gender inequality, conflict, climate change, and minority marginalization as factors associated with vulnerability. Although approximately 93% of India's workforce is employed in the informal sector, this figure should not be equated directly with modern slavery; rather, it provides a structural context for understanding economic insecurity and workers' limited bargaining power (Walk Free, 2023; Strand et al., 2024).

The perspective of *lived religion* provides a conceptual foundation for connecting these exploitative structures with religious ethics. McGuire (2008) emphasizes that religion should be examined not exclusively through formal doctrines and institutions but also through individuals' experiences, interpretations, and everyday practices. Similarly, Ammerman (2014) demonstrates how religion is embedded in ordinary social relationships and everyday activities. Drawing on this perspective, this article uses *Muslim everyday ethics* as an interpretive framework for examining how Islamic moral principles can inform understandings of human dignity, labour relations, and social responsibility. However, because this study is based on secondary sources and conceptual analysis, the term does not describe empirically documented practices among Muslim communities in India. Instead, it provides an analytical perspective for exploring the normative resources of Islamic ethics in addressing modern slavery.

Building on modern slavery scholarship, *lived religion*, and Islamic social ethics, this article proposes the Dignity–Justice–Responsibility (DJR) Framework as a conceptual synthesis for examining modern slavery through Muslim everyday ethics. The framework integrates three interrelated dimensions: dignity-based recognition, justice-oriented labour relations, and collective moral responsibility. Its conceptual contribution does not lie in introducing entirely new Islamic ethical principles, but in bringing these dimensions together into an analytical framework that connects the recognition of human dignity, the organization of economic relations, and the distribution of social responsibility. The first dimension, *dignity-based recognition*, establishes human dignity as the ethical foundation for rejecting

the domination and commodification of human bodies and labour. Grounded in the Islamic concept of *karāmah insāniyyah* and the Qur'anic affirmation of human dignity in Q.S. al-Isrā' [17]:70, this dimension regards individuals as moral subjects rather than economic instruments. It therefore extends the idea of victim protection towards *human agency restoration*, emphasizing the recovery of individuals' capacity to make decisions, leave exploitative employment, access protection, and exercise control over their lives.

The second dimension, *justice-oriented labour relations*, translates the recognition of human dignity into principles governing employment relationships. While dignity explains why human beings must not be exploited, justice establishes how socioeconomic relations should be organized to prevent domination. Islamic principles of *'adl* (justice), *amānah* (trust and responsibility), and *iḥsān* (moral excellence) provide the normative basis for criticizing unequal bargaining power, unjust wages, contractual manipulation, and the exploitation of workers' economic dependency. On this basis, the article proposes a conceptual shift from *contractual justice* towards *substantive labour justice*. Whereas contractual justice primarily evaluates fairness through formal agreements and contractual obligations, substantive labour justice considers workers' actual freedom, the distribution of power, transparency, workplace security, and access to protection. A formally signed contract or the payment of wages does not necessarily establish a just employment relationship if workers cannot refuse exploitative conditions or leave their employment without facing threats or severe economic consequences. This approach is consistent with contemporary research emphasizing the relationship between labour exploitation, unequal employment arrangements, and governance failures within global value chains (Caspersz et al., 2022; Crane et al., 2021; Szablewska & Kubacki, 2023).

The third dimension, *collective moral responsibility*, conceptualizes social responsibility as a mechanism for preventing and addressing structurally embedded exploitation. Modern slavery cannot be overcome through individual morality alone because it is sustained through interactions among workers, employers, corporations, consumers, social institutions, and the state. Islamic principles of *amānah*, *ta'āwun* (mutual cooperation), and *takāful* (social solidarity) provide a normative foundation for extending moral responsibility from individual conduct to institutional and collective accountability. Nevertheless, responsibility must be differentiated according to each actor's power, capacity, position, and economic benefit. The state is responsible for establishing regulations and enforcing labour protections; businesses must ensure that their production processes are free from forced labour; religious institutions can contribute through moral education, advocacy, and social support; while communities and consumers can consider the ethical implications of production and consumption. This framework therefore distinguishes *remedial responsibility*, which addresses suffering that has already

occurred, from *transformative responsibility*, which seeks to change the socioeconomic structures that reproduce exploitation. Zakat, *ṣadaqah*, and community-based assistance may alleviate immediate vulnerability, but they cannot substitute for institutional accountability or structural reform. This distinction is particularly important because social responsibility must not shift the burden of addressing exploitation onto the very individuals and communities most affected by it.

Taken together, the three dimensions constitute the DJR Framework as a relational and mutually reinforcing conceptual structure. Human dignity provides the ontological foundation for recognizing every individual as a subject possessing freedom and inherent worth; justice establishes the principles governing socioeconomic relationships without domination and exploitation; and collective responsibility identifies the actors required to protect human beings and transform unjust structures. In this framework, dignity explains why individuals deserve protection, justice determines how relationships should be organized, and responsibility identifies who must act and according to what capacity. These dimensions should not be understood as strictly linear stages but as interconnected ethical commitments: recognition of dignity requires justice, justice requires collective responsibility, and collective responsibility provides the social and institutional means through which dignity and justice can be realized in everyday life.

Table 4. The Dignity–Justice–Responsibility Framework of Muslim Everyday Ethics

Conceptual dimension	Islamic ethical foundation	Issues under critique	Ethical orientation	Social implications
Dignity-based recognition	*Karāmah insāniyyah* (human dignity)	Commodification of the human body, control over personal freedom, and the deprivation of individual agency	Recognising every human being as a dignified subject possessing freedom and agency	Protection of human dignity and autonomy, and restoration of individual agency (Qur'an 17:70; Bales, 1999; Patterson & Zhuo, 2018)
Justice-oriented labour relations	*'Adl* (justice), *amānah* (trust), and *iḥsān* (benevolence)	Unequal bargaining power, debt bondage, unfair wages, and forced labour	Establishing labour relations based on substantive freedom and justice	Protection of workers' rights and the promotion of just employment relations (Qur'an 4:58; 16:90; Boersma & Nolan, 2022; Crane et al., 2022)

Collective moral responsibility	*Amānah* (trust), *ta'āwun* (mutual cooperation), and *takāful* (social solidarity)	Inadequate social protection, weak accountability, and insufficient institutional oversight	Distributing responsibility according to each actor's power, capacity, position, and benefits	Prevention of exploitation, victim protection, and structural transformation (Qur'an 5:2; McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2014)

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis based on modern slavery literature, lived religion scholarship, and Islamic social ethics.

The framework also enables this article to advance five theoretical propositions. First, the recognition of human dignity constitutes an ethical foundation for rejecting all forms of domination that deprive individuals of their freedom, agency, and control over their bodies and labour. Second, the recognition of human dignity requires labour relations that guarantee substantive freedom, distributive justice, and adequate worker protection. Third, the prevention of and response to modern slavery require collective responsibility differentiated according to the capacity, power, position, and benefits of each actor. Fourth, Muslim everyday ethics provides a conceptual space in which Islamic normative values are connected to moral judgement and socio-economic relations; however, the translation of these values into practice does not occur automatically. Fifth, an ethical response to modern slavery must encompass both remedial measures to protect victims and restore their agency and transformative measures aimed at changing the structural conditions that enable exploitation. These five propositions constitute a conceptual synthesis that may provide a basis for further theoretical development and empirical investigation. They should not, however, be understood as hypotheses empirically validated through fieldwork in this article.

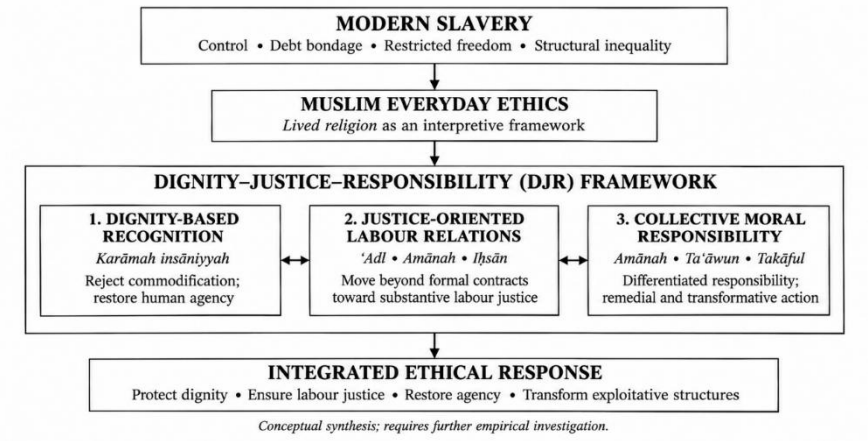

Figure 2. The Dignity–Justice–Responsibility (DJR) Framework: A Conceptual Synthesis of Muslim Everyday Ethics in Addressing Modern Slavery

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in developing the Dignity–Justice–Responsibility (DJR) Framework of Muslim Everyday Ethics as an analytical

approach to modern slavery. The framework brings together modern slavery scholarship, which foregrounds mechanisms of control and exploitation; Islamic ethics, which provides moral orientations concerning human dignity and justice; and the perspective of *lived religion*, which examines the relationship between religious values and everyday life (Bales, 1999; McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2014). In doing so, it proposes a shift from an individualistic understanding of ethics towards a relational and structural conception. Ethical conduct is not assessed solely through good intentions or personal piety, but also through how moral values are mobilised to challenge unequal power relations, regulate labour relations, and establish social accountability.

Nevertheless, the DJR framework remains a theoretical construct that has not yet been empirically tested through field research. The *Global Slavery Index* data also do not provide direct evidence of the experiences or ethical practices of Muslim communities in India. Accordingly, this article does not claim that Muslim communities have either implemented or failed to implement these principles. Rather, it offers a conceptual framework for examining how human dignity, labour justice, and collective responsibility can provide an ethical basis for understanding and critically addressing modern slavery.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that modern slavery in India cannot be understood solely as an individual criminal practice but must also be examined through structural conditions that sustain exploitation, including debt bondage, informal labour, caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and unequal power relations. The analysis of the Global Slavery Index 2023, which estimated that 11.05 million people experienced modern slavery in India in 2021, highlights the scale and complexity of these vulnerabilities. By bringing together modern slavery scholarship, *lived religion*, and Islamic social ethics, this study proposes the Dignity–Justice–Responsibility (DJR) Framework as its principal conceptual contribution. The framework integrates three interrelated dimensions: *dignity-based recognition*, grounded in *karāmah insāniyyah*, which affirms human dignity and the restoration of agency; *justice-oriented labour relations*, informed by *ʻadl*, *amānah*, and *iḥsān*, which moves beyond formal contractual compliance towards substantive labour justice; and *collective moral responsibility*, based on *amānah*, *taʻāwun*, and *takāful*, which distributes responsibility according to the power, capacity, and benefits of different social actors. The framework thus extends the discussion of Muslim everyday ethics from individual moral conduct to the structural and institutional conditions necessary to prevent exploitation and restore human freedom.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations. Its reliance on secondary sources and conceptual analysis means that it does not provide direct evidence of how Muslim individuals, workers, families, or religious institutions in India interpret and enact

Islamic ethical principles in response to modern slavery. Furthermore, the Global Slavery Index does not disaggregate victims according to religious identity, while the proposed DJR framework has not yet been empirically tested. Future research should therefore employ ethnographic and qualitative fieldwork to investigate the everyday experiences of Muslim workers, survivors of exploitation, community organisations, and religious institutions in specific Indian contexts. Comparative studies across regions and labour sectors would also help identify how Islamic ethical principles are negotiated in different social and economic settings. Such research could empirically assess the explanatory relevance of the DJR framework and examine how its three dimensions contribute to victim recovery, substantive labour justice, and the transformation of exploitative structures.

Declarations

Author Contribution Statement

YA was solely responsible for the conceptualization and design of the study, literature identification and selection, data collection from secondary sources, qualitative content analysis, conceptual interpretation, development of the Dignity–Justice–Responsibility (DJR) Framework, and manuscript preparation and revision. The author reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

This study is based on secondary sources, including the Global Slavery Index 2023, published academic literature, policy reports, international human rights publications, Qur'anic interpretations, and Islamic jurisprudential works. The data and materials used in this study are available from their respective publicly accessible sources. No original primary dataset was generated or collected for this research.

Declaration of Interests Statement

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced, or be perceived to have influenced, the research reported in this article.

AI Usage Statement

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used in a limited capacity to support the technical aspects of manuscript preparation, including language refinement, grammar checking, and improvements to academic expression and textual structure. The conceptual framework, interpretation of sources, analytical arguments, and conclusions remain the intellectual responsibility of the author. AI tools did not replace the author's critical analysis, scholarly judgement, or academic

validation. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

Additional Information

This article is based on an independent conceptual study of modern slavery and Muslim everyday ethics in contemporary India. The analysis draws on publicly available secondary sources and Islamic normative literature. All arguments, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this article represent the author's scholarly views and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Darul Huda Islamic University or any other affiliated institution.

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