

Kohrra 2: Burnt Labourers and the Curses of the Brutalised

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Abstract

The backdrop of the January 2026 warehouse fire in Anandapur, Kolkata, where locked exits led to the death of temporary workers. Depicting bonded labours, chained bodies, and a fatal warehouse blaze alongside documented instances of labour exploitation in Punjab and eastern India, the essay shows how Kohrra foregrounds structural violence-feudal inheritances, caste hierarchies, migrant precarity, bureaucratic apathy, and the normalization of coercive labour practices. It further mobilizes Raymond Williams' idea of a "structure of feeling" to suggest that contemporary Indian OTT narratives register a growing affective climate of inequality, distrust, and simmering rage. The retaliatory violence enacted by subaltern characters in Kohrra is read not as an endorsement of anarchic counter-violence but as a symptom of accumulated trauma and systemic dispossession. Ultimately, the essay contends that the convergence between the fictional blaze and the real-life warehouse disaster exposes the disjunction between aspirational rhetoric of national prestige and the lived realities of dehumanised labour. Unless structural injustices are addressed through meaningful enforcement, rehabilitation and collective accountability, such narratives warn of a deepening crisis wherein the brutalised return as agents of destabilisation rather than silent victims of neglect.

Keywords: labour, dehumanisation, brutalisation, trauma, violence, injustice.

In the early hours of 26th January 2026, India's Republic Day,

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around 30 workers were burnt to death at a warehouse in Nazirabad in South 24 Parganas, near Kolkata, in a deadly fire, whose source is yet to be forensically confirmed (NDTV 2026). Whatever the cause of the fire, the situation was exacerbated by the fact that they were unable to escape because the gates were locked from the outside which prevented their desperate attempts to flee the fire (Narayan 2026). This was not, however, an isolated occurrence. Instead, it has been reported that the doors were routinely locked from the outside, apparently to prevent theft and this was only one of a series of violations associated with the running of the warehouse (Roy 2026), its construction on internationally recognised wetlands, storage of inflammables without requisite safety measures, absence of fire audit and various other issues related to safety and security of labourers (Das 2026).

Only a fortnight after this incident, season 2 of the web series *Kohrra*, created by Sudip Sharma, premiered on Netflix. One particular episode of this procedural mystery series uncannily connects it to the disaster in Nazirabad where we see that a warehouse is gutted in an accidental fire, leading to the death of three individuals who worked in the farm of the warehouse owner Bajinder Atwal as bonded labourers and were kept in chains within the warehouse. Like the labourers in Nazirabad, these bonded labourers of the show were also unable to escape the fire because their chains prevented the possibility of any exit. The investigation and the discussion regarding these barbaric deaths, connected to a crucial strand of the show's plot, highlight, not just the inhumanity, negligence and systemic brutality associated with the treatment of migrant agricultural labourers, often belonging to Scheduled Castes and Tribes, but also the way in which feudal and colonial mechanisms of subjugation and exploitation persist in the era of late capitalism owing to the absence of consciousness and policies on the one hand and organised resistance on the other. Situated within the investigations associated with a wealthy feudal family integrated with the NRIs' world of global capital, the show, through this particular episode, not only turns the spotlight on the festering fissures within India's own body polity but also the gaping gulf that exists between the political rhetoric of global prestige and dehumanising realities of sordid, ruthless injustice.

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In the show, we are shown a young man's desperate search for his missing father in and around Dalerpur, on the basis of a thirty year old photograph, because he is only aware of his father's journey and subsequent disappearance without any other information and evidence. The missing man in question is one Rakesh Kumar who was brought from Bihar and Jharkhand along with a few others to work as bonded labour in the Atwal farm and also in their household, almost thirty years ago. A report by Dr. Lakshmidhar Mishra, a special rapporteur for the National Human Right Commission, in 2008, demonstrated with extensive details how, despite the introduction of the Bonded Labour System Abolition Act of 1976, in Punjab's agricultural farms and brick kilns, many migrant labourers were permanently attached to specific farms and kilns where they remained entangled in shackles of debt to such an extent that they virtually became bonded labourers (Mishra 2008). This is very much a part of an ongoing national problem as evident from the fact that in 2016 the then Indian Labour Minister Bandaru Dattatreya informed Parliament that the country had an estimated 18.4 million bonded labourers. Even though the government had mentioned that its plan was to rehabilitate these bonded labourers by 2030, only about 12000 were officially rehabilitated between 2016 and 2021, exposing the entrenched nature of the crisis, coupled with governmental inefficiency or apathy (Kuttapan 2025). Across India, reports of such bonded labourers keep surfacing from time to time with only a handful of them being rescued and rehabilitated and the problem obviously worsened in the post-Covid scenario. In 2021, for example, the Union Government issued a letter to the Government of Punjab mentioning the rescue of 58 bonded labourers from Punjab's border districts who were originally from UP and Bihar, belonged to extremely poor families and even suffered from fragile mental conditions (Sharma 2021). Even in 2024, 30 bonded labourers were rescued from a potato farm in Kapurthala which included, alongside 22 persons from Bihar, including children, 8 citizens from Nepal (News on Air 2024), testifying to the widespread network of human trafficking and bonded labour persisting in the region.

It is this particular context which *Kohrra*, Season 2 manages to foreground through the plotline involving the young Arun Kumar who frantically searches for his father Rakesh Kumar, while working

as a homeless informal worker who keeps frequenting government offices and NGOs in search of the whereabouts of his father. This becomes tied to the central plot of Preeti Bajwa's murder investigation when her brother Bajinder's warehouse catches fire, leading to the death of all the workers who were kept chained inside. The visuals of the charred remains of the workers and the massively burnt body of the lone survivor compel the viewers to confront the pitiless precarity that hides behind the vaunted claims of our 'Vishwaguru' aspirations (PTI 2026). What is even more remarkable is that neither the watchman Malli, who tried to save the workers but failed nor the owner Bajinder have a sense of the inhumanity and barbarism associated with the phenomenon. When confronted with the question of who chained the workers, Malli confoundingly states that he only did what he was ordered to do and therefore should not be considered guilty. His response unwittingly echoes the responses of many of those who were associated with the administration of gas chambers and execution squads during the Holocaust and countless others who have embodied the "banality of evil" (Arendt 1963). In the same vein, Bajinder argues that he inherited these bonded labourers from his father who had originally bought them and therefore could not be held accountable for their eventual death. Neither the illegality of the original action nor the inhumanity of his own choices affects him in any concrete way. The bestiality of this practice becomes even more evident when we discover that Rakesh Kumar who worked as a bonded labourer, not in the farm, but in the Atwal household, was also kept in chains in the adjacent cowshed along with the buffaloes, even though he was eventually released, only after his prolonged servitude had damaged his mental faculties.

Of course, it is the police officers, associated with the investigation, SI Dhanwant, played by Mona Singh, ASI Garundi, played by Barun Sobti and the Inspector who operate as the conscience of the series and denounce these barbaric practices. When the Inspector wonders how such practices continue in twenty first century India, he reflects the ignorance and shock that an average viewer is supposed to experience, even though such practices continue to linger with ample official documentation. More importantly, it is SI Dhanwant who rages at both Malli and Bajinder and reminds them of their moral responsibility. While she denounces Malli by telling him

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that the deaths happened because Malli and other farm workers "did not support [their] fellow workers, but supported [their] boss instead", she also warns Bajinder that whatever legal ploys he might deploy to defend himself, "one day the curses of those men will fall on [his] daughters". Most importantly, she reminds us of our collective failings as a society and as a nation when she states, "One man alone does not enslave a bonded labour. It takes a whole village to commit the crime".

It is this collective complicity that again takes us back to that warehouse in Nazirabad where workers were kept locked inside ever night as a matter of routine. The Mayor of Kolkata stated that the warehouses in question, illegally built over protected wetlands, have been in existence for over 20 years, even though his claims have been disproved by satellite images (Bandyopadhyay and Kundu 2026). However, there still remains the question as to what the municipality, the fire department the labour department and other concerned authorities have been doing for so long which allowed these illicit practices to continue and thereby destroy the lives of so many men. It may also be asked why the local residents did not report these malpractices to the authorities or why the media never chose to highlight these issues before disaster struck. This silence and indifference is also very much in keeping with the inaction that surrounds the varied plights of informal workers in India where the proscribed practice of manual scavenging and hazardous sewage cleaning continues to claim lives in spite of repeated directives from the Supreme Court. This is also in line with the 2025 ITUC Global Rights Index, published in June 2025, which identifies India as being a country where there is no guarantee of workers' rights. Yet, despite the heinous irony of such deaths on the eve of the Republic Day, which could well be deemed as involuntary manslaughter, there were no widespread outbursts of popular anger against either the authorities or the business house which kept its workers locked in that warehouse at night, in a city, which only a year or so ago, witnessed spontaneous eruptions of dissent and protest, following the rape and murder of an on-duty doctor of R G Kar Hospital. While compensations have been paid to most of the bereaved families, by both the government and the owners of Wow Momo, the company that used the warehouse only two lower level executives of Wow Momo have

been arrested, without any action against the owners, Sagar Dariyani and Binod Homagai who obviously had a moral responsibility to ensure their workers' welfare.

This is probably down to the fact that in the emotional economy of privileged urbanity, these informal workers often serve as embodiments of that bare life (Agamben 1995) which always straddles a liminal space of exception where neither law, nor moral outrage nor media coverage follows standard ethics. But the absence of solidarity, sympathy and protection exemplified by such exceptionality also leads to erosion of trust in the state and its legal, political or juridical apparatuses, often prompting a turn to criminality in search of either retribution or recognition.

Kohrra 2 also shows these possibilities through the murders of Raju Sirda and Preeti Bajwa. When Arun discovers that Raju Sirda was the one who had brought his father to Dalerpur and assumes that his father has been burnt to death, he kills Raju in a fit of rage and then squats beside the corpse without any attempt to escape. On the other hand, the final episode shows that the murder which sparked the entire sequence of action was also caused by a frenzied Rakesh Kumar who strangled Preeti to death after she repeatedly asked him to return home when she found him sitting again in the cowshed with chains around his ankles, as he had lived for several years. While the show doesn't offer any detailed explanation of Rakesh's murderous action, it is possible to surmise that the inarticulate rage of prolonged servitude and dislocation from one's family was accidentally triggered by Preeti's repeated references to home and exploded in the form of that deadly assault. It could well be seen as an episode of psychotic rage brought about by post-traumatic stress disorder caused by years of dehumanised exploitation coupled with the disorientation of unaccustomed freedom in a damaged psyche. In the process the show also serves as a caveat against anarchic outbursts of violence which might critically threaten the social order unless structural injustices are holistically addressed.

Of course *Kohrra 2* is not alone. The same pattern is evident from other OTT shows like *Raat Akeli Hai: The Bansal Murders* (2025), *Human* (2022) or *Delhi Crime Season 2* (2022) where subalternised characters resort to criminality against elite families with utter disregard for legal and juridical apparatuses. Such shows, along

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with books like Manu Joseph's *Why the Poor Don't Kill Us* represent a growing structure of feeling regarding contemporary social maladies, especially across North and Central India. They represent the social crisis brought about by growing inequality, erosion of trust in apparatuses of state and the need for counter-violence as an antidote to structural violence fostered by entrenched hierarchies of caste, class and gender, among other determinants. Perhaps herein lies the significance behind the evolution of the police procedural or murder mystery into a social procedural where more than the individual brilliance of a Sherlock or Poirot or the heroics of ACP Pradyuman and Daya, what matters is the foregrounding and intensification of social processes through which crimes and criminals are produced. Raymond Williams defined structure of feeling in the following terms

"We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships... in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet, we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating... These are often more recognizable at a later stage, when they have 'been (as often happens) formalized, classified, and in many cases built into institutions and formations". (Williams 1977, 132)

The combination of dehumanising exploitation inflicted by entitled elites who indiscriminately use violence to further their own ends, lack of justice and representation for subalterns, desperate use of criminal counter-violence by those subalterns may well crystallise into potentially catastrophic formations unless radical remedies are pursued. Unless we respond to these developing structures of feeling with due alacrity, we may well reach a point of no return which will plunge us into irremediable chaos where our apparently untainted lives will also be ravaged by the curses of the brutalised.

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