

Irula tribal people held hostage, tortured, raped..: Grim tale of bonded labourers in Tamil Nadu

The case has shone new light on the long-outlawed practice of bonded labour in which debtors are forced to work to pay back borrowed cash while interest keeps mounting.

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CHENNAI/CHENGALPATTU: The abolition of bonded labour system is more talked about than practised in Tamil Nadu. The Act to abolish this system of modern slavery in the country is nearly four decades old. The rescue and rehabilitation of the victims reported off and by the media are merely the tip of the iceberg. Against this backdrop, *The New Indian Express Online* chose to revisit the plight of 22 bonded labourers who were rescued by the Chengalpattu district administration in May this year.

The case has much relevance now since the timber merchant, the accused in the case, is roaming free even as justice remains beyond the reach of the women, including a minor girl sexually abused by the man.

All the 22 who were rescued from the clutches of Padur Balu belong to the vulnerable **Irula** tribal community. They were exploited, abused, and sexually harassed before they were rescued.

The incident sheds new light on the long-outlawed practice of **bonded labour** in which debtors are forced to work to pay back the lender even as interest on the credit spirals perpetually.

The Case

Padur Balu paid an advance of Rs 15,000 per family and accommodated them in a forest godown in Thaiyur Balammal Nagar in the Thiruporur block of Chengalpattu district. They had been working for more than six years in abject conditions. They were not allowed to move freely and were threatened with dire consequences if they tried to leave the place. Balu paid them just a bare minimum wage. The labourers hewed timber for 12 hours a day and were paid only Rs 100 / day.

After six years, one day the district administration came to their rescue. But by then, they were not only exploited work-wise but the women and minor children were subjected to sexual abuse by the accused.

Police Case

One of the victims, Priya * (name changed), who was working for Balu was allegedly **raped** by him multiple times. She chose to lodge a complaint with the Kelambakkam police. In the complaint, Priya, who is now, 21-years-old claimed that more women and minor girls were raped by the timber merchant.

After Priya lodged a police complaint, three more women, including the minor girl, lodged complaints of sexual assault with the Kelambakkam police. They said that Balu allegedly raped them, denigrated their community and threatened them that he will withhold their wages if they opened their mouths.

Intimidation

After this Balu's men kidnapped Priya, assaulted her and threatened to kill her if she did not withdraw the complaint. The woman, who was hurt during the assault, then lodged a complaint under the SC/ST(Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, at the Kelambakkam Police Station on June 6, however, police did not take up the case, until the intervention by human rights activists.

Demand of Human Rights Activists

All India Democratic Women's Association (**AIDWA**), Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front and People's Watch filed a complaint with the Tamil Nadu director general of police in Chennai on June 23, after which the local police began an investigation into the cases filed by the Irula women.

Activists have urged the government to conduct a detailed investigation into the case and overall exploitation of downtrodden and vulnerable communities as bonded labourers across Tamil Nadu. They insisted that steps should be taken to eradicate bonded labour.

Though bonded labour systems still exist in large numbers, the state has done little to remedy the situation. This neglectful state of affairs has allowed organised networks of those employing bonded labourers to take advantage of social hierarchies.

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2023/jul/08/irula-tribal-people-held-hostage-tortured-raped-grim-tale-of-bonded-labourers-in-tamil-nadu-2592440.html>