

No rehabilitation in place for red sander smugglers?

Activists claim 180 men from TN are still in prisons of Andhra Pradesh, but the govt has not prevented them from being exploited

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THE Dharmapuri administration has no scheme to rehabilitate the tribal people from the district who are often exploited to cut and smuggle red sandalwood (red sanders) from forests in Andhra Pradesh.

As many as 180 such men - from Dharmapuri, Salem, Vellore and Tiruvannamalai districts - are in prisons in Andhra Pradesh, say activists. But the Tamil Nadu government has not tried to prevent the exploitation of these people by agents who often trick them into doing criminal activities.

Besides, families of the 20 woodcutters who lost their lives in the 2015 shooting by Andhra Pradesh Forest personnel have received no compensation. According to the officials, they were shot while trying to smuggle red sandalwood.

But even after three years, things appear to be the same. On Thursday, a native of the district, C Kumar, was arrested in the Seshachalam forests in Andhra Pradesh.

Tribal people, who can be easily exploited, are used as labourers by brokers who function from Dharmapuri, said Senthil Raja, regional coordinator of People's Watch. The brokers promise them large amounts of money as well as safety. A man who goes for the work has to carry around 50 kg of red sanders that has been cut out of the forests and he can

NO COMPENSATION

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earn ₹30-40,000 for it, added Raja. Now, 1 kg of the wood costs about ₹4,000.

Though the 'woodcutters' escape in some cases, more often they are imprisoned, said Raja, who was with the National Human Rights Commission investigation team.

It is easy to exploit the tribal people as there are few employment opportunities for them.

Tribal Welfare Officer Saravanan said Dharmapuri district had no rehabilitation schemes for them, but there were welfare and development schemes and scholarships for tribal people.

DFO Rajkumar said there were reports of red sanders smuggling from Andhra, but not from Dharmapuri. SP Bhandi Gangadhar said he had held talks with officers of the Red Sanders Anti-Smuggling Task Force, adding that plans are being drawn up to create awareness among the tribal people about the law against cutting red sanders. Asked about brokers active in Dharmapuri, he said no recruitment was done directly here. But migrant tribal workers who go to other places or states are lured with promises of money.

In 2016, at a meeting in Sithari and G Giridharan, representing the State, had said that welfare schemes for Rs 42.4 crore had been recommended, besides the need for rehabilitation to prevent incidents like the killing of 20 men, said former MLA Dilli Babu.

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