

Failure to curb sandalwood mafia led to death of tribal workers in Andhra: People's Watch

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The fact finding team talking to victim's kin

By Our Representative

A Madurai-based NGO's fact-finding team on a recent incident involving the death of two Tamil Nadu labourers, who allegedly died after being taken in custody by the Andhra Pradesh forest officials, has said that, belonging to the scheduled tribal (ST) Malayalee community, they were part of several tribals from various villages of Sitheri Panchayat, Harur Taluk, Dharmapuri District, being taken to Andhra Pradesh on November 21, 2021 to work as wage workers.

Being taken in a Tata van with the ostensible aim to work for saddle wood smugglers, the driver of the van came to know that the forest officials were trying to catch the van. "The labourers who were traveling in the van were informed that the forest officials were chasing them. He stopped the van and jumped away. Thereafter one of the forest officials drove the van. The labourers and van came under the custody of the forest officials", the report said.

But, it added, because of inadequate security arrangements, many labourers jumped from the speeding vehicle on the Mydukur bye-pass road in an attempt to escape. More than

30 of them were injured, while two -- Raman and Balakrishnan – who were severely injured died. Questioning the manner of the death of the two tribal workers, the report states, one of them Raman was lying in the Proddatur government hospital for treatment on November 26. His photograph was flashed on WhatsApp of the Sitheri Panchayat President Govindammal. However, 24 hours later, on November 27, his dead body of Raman was laid in front of a tailor shop in Sitheri, Harur Taluk, Dharmapuri district in Tamil Nadu. “The question of how might have Raman's dead body reached Sitheri village, about 350 km away from Andhra Pradesh is a puzzling question.”

As for Balakrishnan, it raises question on how his skull was split in two, whether he died at the spot or died after jumping out of a van and being attacked by forest officials. “Suspicion has been raised by the fact-finding team because on November 26 he was reportedly admitted to Proddatur government hospital, though the FIR states that the body arrived at the hospital, which is eight km away from the spot of the incident, but it took three hours for the body to reach. “Doubt prevails as to what is the reason for the delay”, it said.

Hence, the report insisted, there is reason to believe that the Proddatur Taluk Police appears to be involved in a "conspiracy" with the forest officials to cover up facts of the death of the two tribal workers.

Suggesting that these were not isolated victims, the report said, incidents such as these are common, as tribal workers, mainly of villages of Dharmapuri, Thiruvannamalai, Salem and Kallakurichi districts, who live in remote hilly areas, are “deprived of subsistence farming and many are struggling to win their daily bread.”

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It noted, “Taking advantage of this helpless situation, the smuggling mafia gangs are taking the tribal people for wage work and engaging them in illegal red sandal cutting business. The district police do not take legal action to detect or prevent brokers who are involved in such planned illegal social crimes.”

Pointing out that the tribals are victims of these “illegal trafficking gangs”, the fact-finding team report has blamed the death of the two workers on the Andhra Pradesh forest department, in whose custody it had taken.

Seeking a compensation of Rs 10 lakh to to their families as relief and a suitable government job should be provided to a member of the victim's family based on their educational qualification, the People's Watch team has asked the Tamil Nadu chief minister to constitute a committee headed by a member of the State Human Rights Commission comprising professionals from government officials and experts from NGOs to inquire the subsequent event from November 21, 2021, when the labourers were taken to Andhra Pradesh and submit a report within two weeks.



It also demanded that the Tamil Nadu government “should set up a Special Investigation Team (SIT) headed by an experienced ADGP-level senior police officer to register a case and conduct a proper investigation into the incident, insisting, “Action needs be taken under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Act, 2015 for such planned atrocities perpetrated by the Andhra Police and the forest department on the poor and oppressed tribes of Tamil Nadu.”

At the same time, the report said, “We urge that speedy research should be carried out on the socio-economic status of the Scheduled Tribes in the districts of Dharmapuri,

Salem, Kallakurichi, Tiruvannamalai and Tirupatur”, insisting, “It could be led by retired senior IAS officers like former additional chief secretary Christudoass Gandhi.”

Stating that the Tamil labourers are being taken in service of “the red sandal smugglers operating within the Tamil Nadu border, their leaders and their direct and indirect agents”, the report said, “The district collectors of Dharmapuri, Salem, Kallakurichi, Thiruvannamalai and Tirupatur districts should carry out a series of open campaigns against the red sandal smuggling in areas inhabited by tribal people, the poor and other communities.”

It insisted, “Groups should be formed in every village and carry the campaign through them and also encourage folk art groups to get involved in the campaigns. NGOs working in these areas should be employed for such campaigns. It is recommended to the Government of Tamil Nadu to allocate funds for this and take necessary action.”

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