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March 26, 2006

### Caged Humans Running Rice Mills

When we think of India, we do not think of slaves – imprisoned in small enclosures behind barbed wires, made to work long hours for minimal food, kept in conditions that would make animals ill. And if we were told that such situations exist in India, we would probably consider Bihar, maybe UP or Rajasthan. But certainly not Tamil Nadu?

Amongst the largely middle class readership of this forum, the images conjured up about different nations is different. Definitely, when the topic of India is raised, there's an acknowledgement of the problems as well as the developments in bringing issues in the open. This forum has carried stories of neglect and disempowerment amongst communities in South Asia. In spite of all this, when we think of India, we do not think of slaves – imprisoned in small enclosures behind barbed wires, made to work long hours for minimal food, kept in conditions that would make animals ill.

And if we were told that such situations exist in India, we would probably consider Bihar, maybe UP or Rajasthan. But certainly not Tamil Nadu? Certainly not the state that has among the higher literacy rates and claims to be one of the more progressive states in India?

So it was with incredulity that we heard Siddamma's story of workers held in private prisons used to run privately owned rice mills. Workers from primarily tribal communities were imprisoned for small amounts in loans – Rs 500 to Rs 3000. Workers were denied any medical attention and were forced to live in conditions where women were not even allowed medical help during delivery of babies and were expected to be at work the next day.

And these were supposed to be mills that took government subsidized grain and milled it – often for use by the public distribution system. Surely the government would know of these processes? Siddamma said that when various human rights groups approached the block level government official, presenting to her the story of one woman who had managed to escape, the official is supposed to have said that she owed the mill owners lakhs of Rupees for them having taken care of her needs and she could either leave the mill and pay that amount or go back to the mill. And then we wonder why bonded labor does not end in India? As these details came forth, incredulity turned to anger and frustration. At the governments we elect, and leadership we look towards?

Eventually, the trickle of escapees became a flow and when three hundred 'slaves' petitioned the government, the case reached the national parliament and these 'slaves' were released. But not the others. That needs further analysis by our bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, the released slaves have nothing – except for trauma and wounds. One mill owner has been arrested. And the mill owner's have come up with a plan to 'pardon' the debts of these workers. How magnanimous.

A few other mills have now been wrested from such mill owners. One group of workers has been able to lobby with the government to give them the license to run that mill as a collective and after much 'analysis', the government has agreed. Meanwhile, other mills continue to run with humans in cages. And we continue to write these articles from behind desktops, sharing our outrage that will express itself again with the next glass of wine or cup of coffee and result in another article and the bureaucrats continue their process of analyzing the system. And humans stay caged. In Tamil Nadu. In India.

However, the hope the labourers will someday be able to get their rights and live with dignity continues to drive their struggle at the grassroots. This forum would have served its purpose if the readers carry the awareness of this struggle with them.

Status Update: Livia, one of the volunteers from Germany had been working on a documentary about the Irulas since early Jan. This documentary is almost done. The documentary not only goes over the documented history of the Irulas, their tradition and customs, but also on where the Irulas are now and what they do. One of the specific reason to make the documentary was awareness for IAS officers (collectors) who change every few yrs and come with a fixed notion of who the Irulas.

Another 300 bonded laborers have received the community certificates and obtained their release letters. Here is an example of a release letter. Another 300 will be receiving it in the coming week. They are still in SK Nagar. They will be provided ration cards and the collector has agreed that the released bonded laborers will be covered under the Below Poverty Line scheme.

More details are available here:

<http://ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=579>

Posted by collective at March 26, 2006 11:05 PM

Comments

The great things are ,people never care about the big people who are stealing the irual tribes talents in the way of or in the name of Herpetologist and wildlife film makers.

They are making lot of money from the foreign T.v. channel like National geography and animal planet, etc. But they are paying only a small amount to the poor tribes.

It is easily identified the people but the government giving awards to them. Because there is strong background with these talent stealers.

Posted by: gomathi on December 25, 2006 08:46 AM

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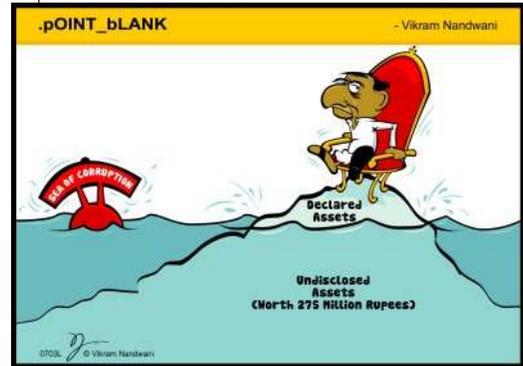
### Take Action

Clean Water for Bhopal  
Threat to Life of Advocate for Dalit Rights  
Dow Paid Bribes; Indian Government Takes No Action

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### Cartoons

People's Leader: 275 Million Undisclosed Assets



Vikram Nandwani's Cartoons, on his Blogsite.

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