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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 'pardón' 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 through 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.


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

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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. Inspite 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 come forth, incredulity turned to anger and frustration. At the governments we elect, and leadership we look towards?

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