

Tribal

Dual Horrors: Irula Women Victimized by Rape and Bonded Labor Face Police Apathy in Tamil Nadu

Rape charges omitted in FIR, AIDWA supports affected families and demands rehabilitation



An Irula couple working in a field (symbolic pic) Wikipedia



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Tamil Nadu— A distressing incident has recently shed light on the appalling living conditions endured by women and men belonging to the Irula community, listed among the 'particularly vulnerable' tribal groups by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Few women, originating from various parts of Tamil Nadu, have come forward to file a complaint with the office of the Tamil Nadu Director General of Police. These women revealed that they were subjected to rape, physical assaults while working as bonded laborers in a woodcutting unit situated in Chengalpattu district.

To compound the abhorrent nature of these crimes, the employer Badur Balu hurled derogatory casteist slurs at them, exacerbating their already deplorable circumstances. In exchange for their grueling labor, these people were compensated a meager sum of 100

rupees per day, toiling from the crack of dawn till dusk, enduring exhausting working hours.

The victims were freed when a local human rights organization named People's Watch came to help and rescued them on May 28. Activists claim atleast 20 such women have complained sexual violence here. "One of the women gave a written complaint at Kelambakkam police station on June 6, narrating the sexual assaults and tortures inflicted by the employer. *The FIR was registered, however, the police have not invoked provisions for rape as elucidated in the IPC. Instead, they have only invoked provisions of the SC & ST Act, and the accused employer has not been arrested due to immense political pressure, Aseervatham, the State Coordinator of People's Watch,*" told *The Mooknayak*. He further informed that when no action was taken, the women went to the DGP office on June 22 and gave written complaints but FIRs haven't been registered yet.

Aseervatham informed that these women along with their families were brought in to work at the wood cutting unit from several places and were forced to live in miserable conditions. They did not have clean water to drink , nor were they given adequate food to eat. The laborers were made to work from 6am to 6pm continuously and sometimes even made to work past midnight. "Since they are uneducated and cannot read or write, the employer paid them as little as 100 rupees per day and made them sign on receipts depicting larger sums. The wages were also not paid on time and the men suffered verbal and physical abuses while the women were molested, raped and tortured severely while their husbands were away at work" Aseervatham explained.

10 women, along with their husbands and children, are presently residing at the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) office. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, AIDWA is making preparations to meet the district collector on Wednesday. Their primary objective is to demand appropriate shelter and comprehensive rehabilitation measures for these affected families.



The accused employer Badur Balu | People's Watch

Harrowing testimonies of victims expose widespread sexual violence and exploitation

Aseerwatham provided copies of the four complaints and the FIR to The Mooknayak, whose narratives are capable of moving anyone to tears. *These complaints vividly describe the unimaginable ordeals these women endured, including being coerced into unwanted*

sexual encounters by their employer, who would invade their homes even at 2 in the morning.

One of the women is from Ranipet. She revealed that she and her husband had been working as woodcutters for three years. She shared how the employer would sexually assault and rape her when her husband was away loading wood onto a truck. Even when her children were with her, the employer forcefully dragged her outside and violated her. " Since we have no education and knowledge, we are afraid of him and we lived like slaves." she said in her complaint to the DGP, seeking action and protection for her family.

Another complainant, a 22-year-old woman, narrated that she attempted to escape multiple times with her husband and five children. However, no matter where they hid, the employer's staff would find them, beat them, and forcibly take them back. They moved from Tambaram to Padur in Kancheepuram district without any other job, living in constant fear of being tracked down and kidnapped by the employer.

The third complainant, a 19-year-old tribal woman, mentioned that she had completed her 10th grade but had to take up the job because her parents were indebted to the employer. She disclosed that she remained silent about the sexual assault due to the threat of being stabbed. Although they were rescued by local officials, no action has been taken against the accused, causing them to wander in fear, constantly changing locations to avoid being found and taken back.

The fourth complainant, a 22-year-old from Thiruvallur district, shared that the employer had paid her and her husband ₹10,000 in advance in 2019 but only gave them ₹300 together for a week's work. Unable to repay the money, they became targets of repeated sexual violence by the employer. Exhausted after work, the employer would visit their hut even at 2 am, forcing her to engage in sexual acts. For the past four years, they have lived in sleepless nights and constant fear.

AIDWA demands rehabilitation of the affected families

The Mooknayak spoke to AIDWA Tamil Nadu State President S. Valentina to gain insights into the present state of the affected families. Valentina said, "It has been 7 days since they have been accommodated at the AIDWA office. It is extremely distressing to witness their helplessness - no job, no money, and no home. Their immediate need is food."

AIDWA is preparing to meet the district magistrate to inquire about the rehabilitation plans for the victims. Valentina said, "We are also planning to meet MP Kanimozhi, who will return after attending a conference in Kanyakumari. There are 10 women, their husbands, and 8 children, making a total of 28 people. To provide them with food, we require at least 5,000 rupees daily. We are actively seeking a solution to provide them with relief."

MLA Claims Unawareness of Plight

The Mooknayak contacted Abdul Samsad P., the Manapparai MLA, to take updates on the police case. However, the legislator expressed ignorance and stated that he was not informed about the matter or the plight of the Irula people. "I am familiar with the People's Watch organization, but no one has approached me with their problems. I will inquire about it and speak to the officer at Kelambakkam Police Station," the MLA said, pledging to investigate the situation further.

The Particularly Vulnerable Tribe: Exploited as Bonded Labour in Tamil Nadu

The Irula (Iruliga, Irular) tribe, one of the most vulnerable tribal groups in Tamil Nadu, finds itself trapped in the clutches of bonded labour. This marginalized community, plagued by extreme poverty, is often forced into exploitative labor conditions due to their unique skills, particularly in brick kilns and rice mills, making them a preferred source of cheap labor. They are subjected to police atrocities and intense discrimination perhaps due to their dark skin color and lack of education.



The movie is based on real life incident of an Irula couple

Jai Bhim- is a 2021 Tamil film based on a real incident of police atrocity and state violence against the marginalized Irula community, with Justice K. Chandru fighting for justice. It follows Sengeni and Rajakannu, a couple from the Irular tribe, as Sengeni seeks help from advocate Chandru after Rajakannu goes missing from police custody. The film received critical acclaim for its gripping story, performances, direction, and powerful social message.

According to activists, nearly 90 percent of rescued bonded laborers in districts such as Kancheepuram, Thiruvallur, Thiruvannamalai, and Vellore belong to the Irula community. Concentrated in the northern and eastern regions of Tamil Nadu, these tribal members lead a nomadic lifestyle, having lost their ancestral forest habitats due to rampant deforestation. Historically known for their expertise in snake and rat catching, the Irulas have gradually transitioned into agricultural laborers and, eventually, into various industries as the 21st century unfolded.

International Collaboration: When Irula men captured Burmese pythons in Florida

The Irula tribe has a rich history of traditional occupations, including snake and rat catching as well as honey collection. Additionally, they

engage in labor work as coolies in the fields during sowing and harvesting seasons, work in rice mills, participate in fishing activities, and maintain cattle farms.

One of the notable contributions of the Irula community is their expertise in combating the rampant rat infestation that affects Tamil Nadu's farms, causing a significant loss of grain production each year. To address this issue, Irula men employ a traditional method of fumigation using earthen pots. However, this practice has detrimental health effects, leading to severe respiratory and heart problems due to prolonged exposure to smoke.

In a remarkable international collaboration, in January 2017, two members of the Irula tribe, Masi Sadaiyan and Vadivel Gopal, along with two translators, were enlisted to assist in capturing invasive Burmese pythons in Key Largo, Florida. The State of Florida recognized their invaluable skills and paid them \$70,000 for their services. Within a span of just two weeks, they successfully captured 14 pythons, showcasing their exceptional tracking abilities and knowledge of wildlife management.

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