



JERSEY MAYHEM

Indian workers, camouflaged as volunteers, paid \$1.20 an hour for 'forced labor' building Robbinsville temple: Lawsuit

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Ed note: A description of the Dalit was imprecise in an earlier version of this article. This article has also been updated to include remarks from a BAPS spokesman.

ROBBINSVILLE - The operators of a first-in-its class temple in Robbinsville trafficked hundreds of Indian laborers, camouflaged as religious volunteers, and paid them just over \$1 an hour for 87-hour weeks, while keeping them locked down in the very temple they were building, according to a federal lawsuit brought by six former workers.

The civil lawsuit was filed Tuesday against Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam (BAPS) Swaminarayan Sanstha Inc., a Hindu religious organization, and several business entities related to the organization's sprawling temple in Robbinsville and its construction. It was joined by a federal investigation, according to local officials; the FBI was on the site Tuesday as well.

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The workers were brought into the United States on "R-1" visas, which "are available to members of the religious denomination sponsoring the visa holders, for those who minister or work in religious vocations or occupations," according to the complaint.

The defendants told U.S. authorities the workers were "religious 'volunteers,'" according to their complaint. But in actuality, the defendants got years' worth of "forced" manual labor out of the workers at a rate of about \$450 a month, according to the complaint.

The workers' lawsuit was first reported by The New York Times.

Nobody answered the phone at the temple Tuesday, nor at a BAPS public affairs office, although Matthew Frankel, a spokesman for BAPS in New Jersey, did offer a statement later in the evening.

“We were first made aware of the accusations early this morning, we are taking them very seriously and are thoroughly reviewing the issues raised,” Frankel said.

It is unclear whether any of the defendants has hired an attorney.

A USA TODAY NETWORK reporter who tried to enter the temple grounds was denied access to the property, which was gated with a security guard on duty.

The laborers' passports were taken "as soon as they left the airport at JFK" and "Security guards in BAPS uniforms were stationed at the temple premises where the workers lived and worked," according to the complaint.

Labor: House passes sweeping workers' rights bill

The workers were forbidden from talking with temple visitors, under pain of losing their already "meager" wages, according to the complaint. "Supervisors told the workers that they police would arrest them if they left," the complaint states.

The defendants deliberately sought out workers from the "Scheduled Caste," or "Dalit," as well as "other marginalized communities in India," according to the complaint. Dalit, once referred to as "Untouchables," are relegated to the bottom of India's traditional social structure.

One of the workers, a man named Moham Lal, "died while he was subjected to forced labor at the temple, and the Defendants retaliated against other workers who organized to demand, among other things, that Moham Lal's remains to be treated according to his — not the Defendants' — religious rituals and that the Defendants improve working conditions," according to the complaint.

Altogether, "the workers spent years building, improving upon, and maintaining the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir," or temple, according to the lawsuit.

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"We're very surprised by this. They've had a great relationship with the town. They've been a great corporate citizen," Robbinsville Mayor Dave Fried said of the temple in a phone interview with the Asbury Park Press. "I've certainly never seen anything that would give me pause during my visits there. This is absolutely very surprising."

The township later also issued a formal statement Tuesday, acknowledging "federal law enforcement activity" but denying knowledge of "any labor issues that may have been present."

Labor trafficking: Accused captor of 33 immigrants pleads guilty

"The Township was aware of temporary housing on the site and conducted inspections of that housing in April and June of 2020, until in-person inspections were suspended due to COVID-19," the statement read. "As to not interfere with this ongoing federal investigation, the Township will have no further comment."

The workers' lawsuit also named three New Jersey residents — Bharat Bhai, Pankaj Patel and Kanu Patel — who allegedly employed or supervised workers at the temple.

Mike Davis has spent the last decade covering New Jersey local news, marijuana legalization, transportation and basically whatever else is going on at any given moment. Contact him at mdavis@gannettnj.com or [@byMikeDavis](https://twitter.com/byMikeDavis) on Twitter.

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