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WORLD NEWS

Hindu sect in the US accused of forced labour to build temple

About 200 workers alleged they were paid less \$1.20 an hour, which was the minimum federal wage way back in 1963, instead of the mandated ₹12/hour, in New Jersey's Robbinsville

By Yashwant Raj, Washington

UPDATED ON MAY 13, 2021 08:45 AM IST



A view of the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Robbinsville Township, N.J.(AP)

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About 200 workers alleged they were paid less \$1.20 an hour, which was the minimum federal wage way back in 1963, instead of the mandated ₹12/hour, in New Jersey's Robbinsville. They said they were forced to work nearly 13 hours a day, all seven days a week; lived in crowded temporary shelters at the temple complex; were prevented from leaving the area unaccompanied; and were verbally abused as "worms" by their employers.

Many of them identified themselves as Dalits.

The temple -- being touted as the largest Hindu shrine in the US -- is being constructed by t^h Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), which describes its socio-spiritual Hindu organisation. Members of the sect, which has 3,850 centres around the world, call themselves Swaminarayan followers and are considered to be influential in political circles.

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According to the lawsuit filed in the US District Court, District of New Jersey, on Tuesday, the workers said that their employers' actions "constitute forced labor, trafficking with respect to forced labor, document servitude, conspiracy, and confiscation of immigration documents in the course of and with the intent to engage in fraud in foreign labor contracting".

The class action lawsuit was filed by civil rights lawyers representing six workers of the temple as plaintiffs and 200 in all. The six plaintiffs are Mukesh Kumar, Keshav Kumar, Devi Laal, Niranjan, Pappu, and Brajendra; they say they are Dalits from Rajasthan.

The Indian embassy in Washington DC is believed to have sought more information on the matter from relevant US authorities, according to officials aware of the developments.

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Wednesday it sought “any info or tips” pertaining to the order. The India Civil Watch International (ICWI) told news agency PTI that the FBI rescued around 200 workers, “most of them Dalits, Bahujans, and Adivasis” on Tuesday.

The lawsuit said these workers were brought to the US between 2011 and now, on R-1 visa, which is meant for foreigners engaged in religious vocation and work. But at the temple, they “performed solely manual — not religious — labor”, the lawsuit said.

They were recruited in India through agents and on arrival in the US — John F Kennedy airport in New York — their Indian passports were taken away to “prevent them from leaving”, according to a complaint.

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Once on the temple campus, the workers “were forced to live and work in a fenced, guarded compound which they were not allowed to leave unaccompanied”. They lived under the watchful eyes of security guards in BAPS uniforms and cameras “monitored and recorded” their activities. They were prohibited from speaking to outsiders and failure to obey rules could result in pay cuts, the lawsuit alleged.

They were housed in “crowded trailers” at the temple complex and began working the day after arriving. They were paid approximately ₹31,000 to ₹35,000 (about \$425 – \$450) a month, the lawsuit said. They were each given \$50 in cash and the rest was transferred into their Indian bank account. They were never given salary receipts.



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There was no response from BAPS to requests for comments. However, Kanu Patel, one of those named as defendants in the lawsuit, told The New York Times, “I respectfully disagree with the wage claim.” He also said he was not in charge of daily operations at the temple.

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