

A lawsuit filed in federal court Tuesday alleges the builders of a New Jersey Hindu temple — considered to be one the largest in the United States — lured workers from India, worked them nearly 90 hours per week and paid them around \$1.20 per hour.

One worker, the lawsuit claims, died from forced labor.

The allegations were made against Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, a Hindu sect known as BAPS, and the leaders who run the Robbinsville temple and its construction. [The temple opened in 2014](#) and is constructed entirely of Italian marble that was sculpted in India and completed on site off Route 130 in Robbinsville.

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The temple is known as BAPS Robbinsville.

The development comes a month after New Jersey labor authorities halted work by a contractor at the Robbinsville temple and at a BAPS temple in Edison.

The new lawsuit is a proposed class action complaint, alleging around 200 workers on religious immigration visas endured forced manual labor for the ongoing construction and expansion of the religious property on the 100-acre site.

The FBI was at the Mercer County property Tuesday, a spokeswoman confirmed. The New York Times [first reported](#) that investigators are looking into “claims of labor and immigration law violations.”

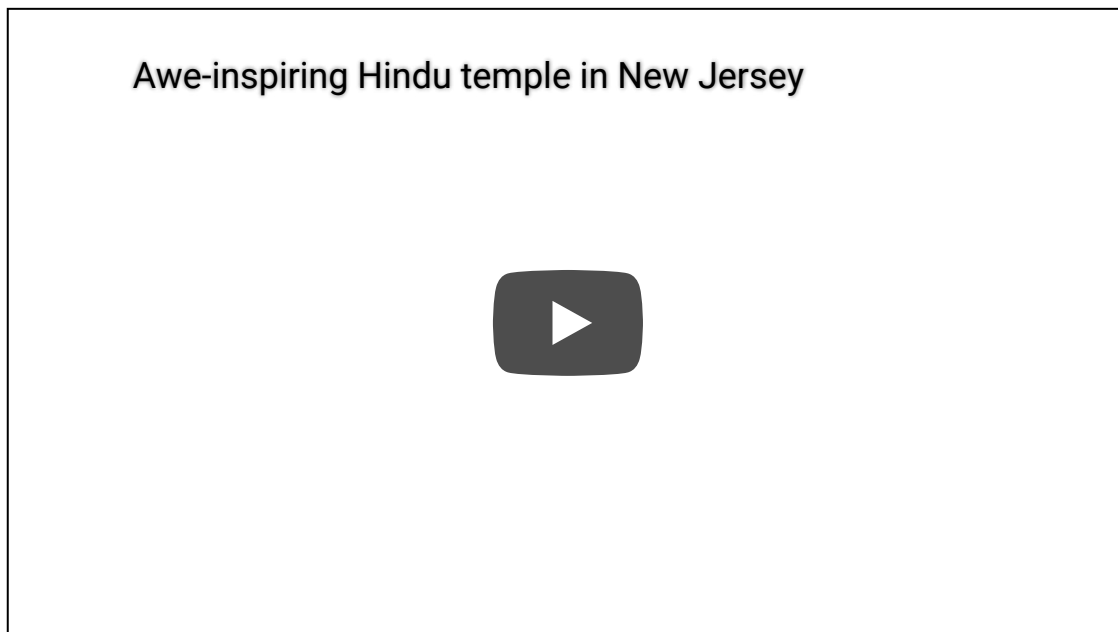
The 42-page lawsuit outlines years of alleged abusive and inhumane working conditions the men were put through as construction began on the temple and as BAPS continually expanded the religious property.

A spokesperson for BAPS did not immediately respond to a request for comment, though he has disputed the accusations, according to the New York Times.

“We are naturally shaken by this turn of events and are sure that once the full facts come out, we will be able to provide answers and show that these accusations and allegations are without merit,” Lenin Joshi, the spokesman told the newspaper.

As construction continued at the temple, also known as a mandir, the lawsuit alleges BAPS “intentionally recruited workers” from marginalized communities in India to come help with the project using religious visas.

The lawsuit paints a much more grim picture of what life became for the workers.



According to the lawsuit, the men had their passports taken upon arrival in the United States and were “forced to live and work in a fenced, guarded compound which they were not allowed to leave.” Security guards were stationed outside the compound and cameras monitored the grounds.

The workers would be summoned to start their days at 6:30 a.m. by a siren, according to the lawsuit. They received brief breaks throughout the day, though their shifts ended at 7:30 p.m., the lawsuit says. The men could work up to 40 days in a row without a day off, the lawsuit alleges, and were required to work in the rain or snow.

For this work, according to the lawsuit, the workers were paid approximately 31,000 to 35,000 rupees, around \$425. They would receive \$50 in cash, while the rest was put into their bank accounts in India.

But that pay could be docked excessively, the lawsuit alleges.

Mukesh Kumar, one of the plaintiffs who filed the lawsuit, was fined 7,500 rupees (around \$102 and approximately 26% of his monthly salary) when he was observed without a helmet on. Others were docked significant amounts of their pay for idling, smoking or “otherwise not acting in accordance with temple rules.”

On top of the long days and minimal pay, the lawsuit alleges the work the men did was “very dangerous.”

“They had to manage stones that weighed several tons, they were exposed to and breathed dust from cut stones and chemical solutions used to soak the stones, and they were frequently exhausted by the long hours with almost no days off,” the lawsuit says.



One worker, Moham Lal, allegedly “died while he was subjected to forced labor at the temple,” according to the lawsuit. After his death, the temple leadership “retaliated against other workers” who organized to demand that Lal’s remains to be treated according to his religious rituals and that they improve working conditions.

The workers were under the understanding that if “they tried to leave their work and the temple compound, they would suffer physical restraint and serious harm,” according to the lawsuit.



A construction vehicle, right, at the gatehouse at BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha (Hindu American Religious Center) at 112 N Main Street in Robbinsville NJ (Michael Mancuso | NJ Advance Media)

It was a far cry, according to the lawsuit, of what the workers were promised.

One worker, who is identified in the lawsuit as Pappu, said he was recruited in India by Bharat Bhai, a supervisor of workers at the temple, because if he worked at the New Jersey temple “he would receive better work and salary than in India.”

The workers were led to believe they would be working four to seven hours per day and work 20 to 25 days per month. The workers were allegedly instructed to tell the U.S. Embassy during visa interviews that they were volunteers and would be “doing decorative painting or carving working (nikashi) on stones to be used in the New Jersey temple,” according to the lawsuit.

Instead, they cut and laid stones, removed garbage, did road work and dipped stones in chemicals, according to the lawsuit.

“(BAPS) 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 lawsuit says.

The lawsuit alleges BAPS and its New Jersey leadership violated Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act and state wage and hour laws. The attorney representing the workers did not immediately return a request for comment.

Of the workers named in the lawsuit, they allege the abusive conditions occurred primarily from 2018 into the fall of 2020.

The lawsuit Tuesday is not the first time allegations of unethical working conditions at the temple have arisen out of its construction.

In April, the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development (NJDOLE) issued a company-wide stop-work order to Cunha's Construction Inc., which has work-sites at the Robbinsville temple and BAPS Temple in Edison.

The state agency said the contractor was paying workers in cash off the books, did not have workers' compensation insurance, failed to pay overtime, and for unpaid or late paid wages. It is unclear if those violations are related to the workers who filed the lawsuit Tuesday.

In addition to New Jersey, BAPS has temples in North America in Atlanta, Chicago, Houston and Toronto, [according to their website](#).

Just recently, the Robbinsville temple [held a COVID-19 Vaccination Drive](#) in collaboration with Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. It was the first time it had been publicly open in more than a year.

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