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FEATURED

Robbinsville Hindu temple raided by FBI over allegation of forced labor

By Isaac Avilucea iavilucea@trentonian.com @IsaacAvilucea on Twitter
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Drone view of the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir complex in Robbinsville.
Rich Hundley III — For The Trentonian

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ROBBINSVILLE — It was the temple of doom.

Leaders of a township temple considered the largest in the U.S. are accused of exploiting hundreds of low-caste men from India who claimed they were forced to do endless grueling labor for paltry wages.

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The searing allegations against the Hindu sect Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, or BAPS, were made public in a class-action lawsuit, filed Tuesday in U.S. District Court in New Jersey.

BAPS is closely aligned with India's ruling party and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, *The Times* reported.

The suit claims temple leaders repeatedly violated the Trafficking Victims Protection and Fair Labor Standards acts.

Lawyers for six Indian nationals said their clients were among as many as 200 men who were forced to do hard labor at the temple and confined to it, unable to talk to visitors or leave without accompanying "overseers."

The suit claims BAPS leaders told laborers they'd be arrested by police if they left the "fenced-in" compound, which was guarded and monitored by surveillance.

One worker, Moham Lal, allegedly died from the forced labor, and others faced retaliation from temple leaders for demanding Lal receive a proper sendoff according to his religious rituals, and for speaking out against the abuses.

The explosive claims coincided with federal agents raiding the temple Tuesday, which was first reported by *The New York Times*.

A FBI spokeswoman confirmed agents were at the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir as part of "court-authorized law enforcement activity" but declined further comment.

The Times, citing sources familiar with the matter, claimed the visit was connected to claims of labor and immigration law violations.

A source with knowledge of the matter said dozens of people were bussed away from the site, which drew state officials attention before the raid.

New Jersey 101.5 reported that the state Department of Labor and Workforce Development issued a stop work order last month against Cunha's Construction Inc. and owner Nuno Cunha over repeated violations of state wage and hour laws, following visits to the BAPS temple in Robbinsville and Edison.

A BAPS spokesperson said the organization takes the allegations "seriously" and is reviewing the claims.

According to the lawsuit, laborers were recruited from India on religious R-1 visas on the promise they'd make better wages and have more opportunity in the U.S.

They were told they'd only work four to seven hours a day and no more than 25 days a month, the complaint says.

The alleged torturous treatment began soon after they landed at JFK Airport in New York.

BAPS officials seized the men's passports, shuttled them off to the alleged temple of doom and forced them to work up to 13 hours a day for scant pay— \$450 a month or about \$1.20 an hour — falling well below fair-labor wages in the U.S.

The men received \$50 in cash while the rest was put into their bank accounts in India.



Laborers — who lived in crowded trailers at the compound — were especially vulnerable as most belonged to the Dalit, the lowest rung in India's caste system, according to the complaint.

Before leaving their homeland, laborers signed documents, many in English, that they couldn't understand, and were coached what to tell U.S. Embassy officials.

Each day, laborers were summoned by a siren to begin at 6:30 a.m., with few breaks throughout the day, enduring bone-crushing labor that included digging ditches, operating heavy machinery and shoveling snow, according to *The Times*.

Workers were docked for minor violations such as not wearing helmets, according to the complaint.

"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 stated.

The laborers called "worms" and psychologically coerced, according to the complaint, which pointed to other manipulation tactics such as workers being told they were "serving God," the suit said.

Mukesh Kumar, a 37-year-old worker and named plaintiff in the suit, told *The Times* that the death of their colleague forced them to come forward about the abuse they endured.

"We said, 'We don't want to die like that,' he said.

BAPS spokesperson, Lenin Joshi, denied the allegations, telling *The Times* that the men performed complicated work putting together intricately carved stone from India.

"They have to be fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. In that process, we need specialized artisans," Joshi said. "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."

BAPS describes itself as a "spiritual, volunteer-driven organization dedicated to improving society through individual growth by fostering the Hindu ideals of faith, unity, and selfless service."

Robbinsville Mayor Dave Fried in a phone interview called the allegations in the lawsuit "troubling."

BAPS Robbinsville opened in 2014, after layers of planning and zoning approval from Mercer County and Robbinsville officials, according to the suit.

The township zoning board approved BAPS to construct a 146,420-square-foot storage area used as a "religious kitchen" and a delivery area.

Fried said township inspectors conducted fire inspections at the compound's living quarters before they were occupied, but they didn't have reason to suspect from routine walkthroughs the horrific abuses that was allegedly perpetrated behind the compound walls.



"We've never seen anything like that while we've been on the site," he said. "We've had nothing but positive interactions with the temple and its members."



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Isaac Avilucea

@IsaacAvilucea on Twitter

Isaac Avilucea is The Trentonian's main municipal scribe. A two-time prior restraint winner and testicular cancer survivor, he relishes his reputation as the "Mean Girls" reporter that followed his 18-day stay at the now-defunct North Adams Transcript.

