

Swaminarayan temple in US raided, workers taken from India treated as forced labour: Report

90 labourers removed from site by US federal agencies. In lawsuit, 6 workers alleged they were paid merely 10% of hourly minimum wage, forced to live in gruelling conditions.

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BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Robbinsville, New Jersey | www.baps.org

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New Delhi: A Swaminarayan temple in New Jersey, US, was raided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Homeland Security, and the US Department of Labour to investigate allegations of forced labour against Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sansthan (BAPS), **reported** *The New York Times*.

Quoting a source, the *NYT* report said 90 labourers were removed from the site by US federal agencies after Tuesday's raid.

In a lawsuit filed Tuesday in US District Court of Newark, six workers alleged that the organisation brought them to the United States from India to work on an extension of the temple situated in Robbinsville, New Jersey. However, they were paid merely 10 per cent of the hourly minimum wage according to New Jersey law, and forced to live in gruelling conditions. Their passports were allegedly impounded and they were confined to a fenced, guarded area. A majority of the workers were Dalits, said the report.

The organisation has, however, denied all allegations, and in a **statement** said they are "thoroughly reviewing the issues raised".



BAPS has been behind scores of temples built around the world. The foundation has close ties with the Bharatiya Janata Party, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has hailed the spiritual head of the organisation — Pramukh Swami Maharaj — as his “mentor”. The PM gave a eulogy at his funeral. The organisation has also donated the equivalent of about \$290,000 to the construction of the temple in Ayodhya, the *NYT* report said.

What are the allegations?

Mukesh Kumar, 37, was among the 200 construction workers flown out to the US by BAPS in 2018. He quit and returned to India after a labourer died due to an illness. Shortly after, Kumar contacted Swati Sawant in 2020, an immigration lawyer who then began investigating these claims.

Sawant, a Dalit herself, organised the temple workers and arranged legal teams to take up the case, according to *NYT*.

In the complaint, six men have come forward with the allegations saying they were brought to the US in 2018 and were made to work long hours often under dangerous conditions.

They allege that they were paid \$1 per hour for their work when the minimum wage in New Jersey is **\$12 per hour**.

According to the complaint, the workers were allegedly brought to the US on R-1 Visas that are applicable for clergy and religious workers like missionaries. The labourers were presented to the US government like volunteers.

The complaint further said the workers were made to sign several documents, often in English, and tell US embassy staffers that they were skilled workers or decorative painters. However, the lawyers for the workers say the men were forced to do manual labour on the site and made to work for more than 13 hours a day. They were given \$450 a month — \$50 in hand and \$400 deposited to their bank accounts in India.

The complaint added that the workers' passports had been confiscated, they were given lentils and potatoes for meals and that their pay was cut for the smallest of violations such as being seen without a helmet.

Earlier, the organisation had come under the radar of US federal agencies after a 17-year-old boy died in 2017 following a fall at the construction site. A case was filed against BAPS by the family, which was settled for an undisclosed amount, according to the *NYT* report.

One of the lawyers in the wage claim suit has said this could be the first forced labour case in the US since 1995.



Representatives of BAPS denied these allegations in interviews to the *New York Times*. They also issued a **statement** saying, “We were first made aware of the accusations this morning, we are taking them very seriously and are thoroughly reviewing the issues raised.”

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