

Tea estate girls easy prey for traffickers

SANJOY RAY

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Sushena Munda showing the photograph of her missing daughter Laxmi.

TEZPUR, Oct 20, 2014 – Any unfamiliar individual walking into their locality, irrespective of appearance, is looked upon with suspicion!

An alert is sounded and the message spreads like wildfire. In no time, hundreds of 'them' swarm around the by-now uncomfortable visitor.

The fear is not without justification. For, hundreds of teenagers, mostly girls, hailing from the tea gardens of Sonitpur district in Assam, have never come back.

Marked as one of the epicentres of human trafficking, tea estates like Nahorani and Tinkhuria have emerged as hotbeds where dreams of hundreds of starry-eyed young girls were nipped in the bud, year after year, that is.

Rekha Munda, an orphan, lost five priceless years of her teenage before she was rescued around a month back from Delhi. Aged around 19 now, Rekha with the help of some child rights activist had to lodge a complaint against the owner of a placement agency by whom she was subjected to torture on a regular basis.

Now that she lives with her grandmother, she admits that starting life afresh will be a challenge. However, she is ready to give it a try, come what may.

"What about those girls who are still in the clutches of those greedy people? She laments.

Sushil Lakhra was just 12-years-old when he fell into the trap of the well-oiled nexus. His father Anjulus Lakhra(55), a tea garden labourer of Tinkhuria TE in Dekhiajuli block of Sonitpur district, nearly 200 kms from Guwahati, has almost lost hope of his ward's comeback.

"I did not think Sushil would come back. I was not sure whether he was dead or alive," Anjulus said in a depressing tone.

Sajal, who lured my son promising him a good job in Delhi, has now turned his back. "He says he is not aware of my son's whereabouts," Anjulus said.

Unlike Anjulus, however, Sushena Munda, whose 12-year-old daughter Laxmi is missing since the last three years, is still hopeful of her daughter's return. With hope writ large on her face, she invariably shows the photograph of her daughter to everyone who she feels could help in finding her daughter, and breaks down in between.

Sushena and her husband Mangal even visited Delhi, but after days of investigation with the help of Bachpan Bachao Andolan volunteers, they got the impression that their daughter might have been re trafficked for forced labour to somewhere in Haryana by a placement agency there.

Locals say that in terms of the pattern, in most cases the trafficker or middlemen speak their language (Sadri) and mostly take advantage of the absence of the victims' parents during the day time when they are at their workplace (tea garden).

Some of the traffickers are even known to their victims. But the family members of the victim

often hesitate to approach the police 'out of fear', the locals say.

It is due to this ever-widening police-public chasm that a good number of missing cases are not reported and hence the traffickers enjoy a dream run in the vulnerable areas.

Sunila Tanthi of Hatibari Line (demarcation of colonies for labourers of Nahorani TE), a Class-IX student of Rangapara Higher Secondary School, nurtures a dream of becoming a nurse in order to serve the people.

Not many months ago, she was rescued from New Delhi. While recounting the horrific trail of events, she said, "I do not know what happened to me then. The person named Deepak came to our home one afternoon and promised me a good job and education in Delhi. I did not even inform my parents, thinking that they would not allow me to go. When I went there, the scenario was very awful. I was shifted to newer places every 12 months and paid very less. I spent nearly three years in virtual confinement."

Significantly, Sibani Tanthi (16) and Sonjha Tanthi (13) of Nahorani Tea Estate might emerge as among the very few successful cases of comebacks.

Assam Police record reflects that the number of girls trafficked for sexual exploitation is much higher than those for cheap or forced labour.

There have of course been rescue efforts and the culprits also get arrested from time to time. But the conviction percentage is so abysmally low that it hardly works as a deterrent for the traffickers.

PAJHRA, a Tezpur-based NGO, which has been working a lot for the welfare and empowerment of the tea garden community, believes that the Government and the civil society have to understand the intricacy of problem first, and then devise a deterrent mechanism.

But if the volume of those trafficked is taken into consideration and the endless list of those still missing from the tea gardens of Assam is any indicator, the law enforcing agencies and those at the helm of the police force have their job cut out.

Although the Assam Police has constituted a number of task forces to deal with the menace, there hardly exists any police station in the State, especially those covering the most affected domain of human trafficking, which displays photographs of listed traffickers as they do in case of vehicle lifters.

Is there any monitoring mechanism which ensures that the girls are not re-trafficked once they are rescued?

Questions are also asked from time to time as to why the Government's empowerment/rehabilitation plans for women have not fetched the results they should have.

The Additional Director General of Assam Police (CID) Mukesh Sahay in one of his reports had said that in 2013, nearly 140 women/girls had been trafficked from Assam and the number of missing girl child was nearly 1,500 from January 2013 upto May 2014. The number of girl child traced out during 2013 was just 413.

"Assam is more of a source area for trafficking of women, children and transit, and to a lesser extent a destination," he opined.

All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam president Raphaal Kujur said, "Every year girls from the tea gardens of Assam are trafficked for exploitation. The Government has failed to arrest the trend. Although poverty and lack of awareness contribute to the menace, no concrete action plan on the part of the police or those at the helm of affairs, has aggravated the problem.