

NHRC notice on Sumangali scheme

NEW DELHI: The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has issued notices to the Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu to free the enslaved girls absorbed by spinning mills under the Sumangali scheme in Tirupur.

The apex watchdog of human rights passed the order while acting on a petition filed in this regard by Supreme Court advocate and rights activist Radhakanta Tripathy.

It was an irony for old and poor parents who send their young daughters to work in spinning mills to earn money and can be married. But the girls get entrapped in a vicious circle of exploitation and abuse.

Sumangali in Tamil means a happily married woman. In Tirupur, it became a nightmare and often ended in death. It was nothing but a system of forced bonded labour of unmarried girls, Tripathy pointed out. Girls under the Sumangali scheme were supposed to be paid their wages at the end of their contract which could be of one year to five years or more than that. And, if for any reason, their services were terminated over some petty issues, the girls would not be paid any money. The girls' plight begins soon after they are spotted by agents who move around in poor pockets looking for people desperate for money to fix their daughters' marriage. Slavery still existed in one of the developed States like Tamil Nadu. The mills of Tirupur and Coimbatore flout labour laws and other humanitarian laws while dealing with the 'Sumangalis'.

The girls suffer from anaemia, TB, lung infections, respiratory problems and menstrual disorders because of the unhygienic condition of their work and living.

Citing the tragic stories of 'Sumangalis', Radhakanta sought the intervention of the NHRC as the practice posed serious human rights violation. The petitioner requested the apex human rights watchdog to send special rapporteur or a team to study the situation and recommend to the State government to free the 'Sumangali girls' and ensure their basic human rights through preventive and punitive actions.