

Ahmedabad: Child labour reports on BT cotton farms shock NGOs

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Ahmedabad: More than one lakh tribal children below the age of 14, from various districts of Gujarat, have been forced into hard labour in BT cotton fields across the state - stated the report of a sting operation carried out by Buniyadi Adhikar Andolan Gujarat (BAAG). BAAG is a state-level body formed in 2005, and made up of seven independent member organizations working for the common cause of basic rights.

With a view to unveil and put an end to this inhuman trend, BAAG will submit a memorandum to the collector of Palanpur on Monday. "We will take out a rally in Palanpur and subsequently submit a memorandum, elaborating on the reports of the sting operations carried out in villages," said Raju Solanki, secretary of Dalit Hak Rakshak Manch, one of BAAG's 7 constituent bodies.

Bashir Noyada of Gram Swaraj Sangh, while speaking on the sting operations and how they were conducted, said, "We took our teams to BT cotton farms in Kutch, Mehsana, Bhavnagar, Patan, Banaskantha and Vadodara. And we were so taken aback at the treatment meted out to the children, that we decided to inform the rest of the world of their exploitation," said Solanki.

Solanki added that even minor girls are made to slog on the farms, and besides the physical excruciation, they are sexually exploited, and at times raped as well. He elaborated that many of these children are brought in by local agents in the villages, who, on their part, also earn commission.

Children are made to work on the BT cotton farms as their delicate fingers prove helpful, and also because the cotton plants are more or less their own height. "These children have been working on 40,000 acres of land across the state. However, in return for all their toil, they are very badly paid by the farm owners," Bashir added.

Solanki stated that the state government has failed in implementing basic rules and regulations, and pointed out that tribal children have little access to education. "Poor implementation of the right to education, lack of opportunities and schools, and such other factors compel these poor children to engage themselves in agricultural activities," he added.

"If they are to be made to work on farms, the children should be paid appropriately and be treated well. At present, they are being exploited to such an extent that it is taking a toll on their health. They are promised the moon, but eventually get paid little more than Rs60-70 a day, including the agent's commission," said Solanki, adding that a medical team will be sent to study their health and mental conditions.

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