THE SLAVES’ OWN COUNTRY

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They, Sathyajith Singh, Sharafath Ali, Shambhu, Rajkumar, Sukesh, Jainal, Muhsin, Kabiruddeen, all came to Kochi (a port town of Kerala, the south Indian state) for painting jobs. They were told so by the agent, rather. They came to the concrete fields of Kerala from the heavenly Bengal, where even little fragments of land is snatched from the men (who toil hard to make it green), to make way for car factories and chemical hubs. But when they reached Arookkutty, the city suburb, the job turned to be road laying. They worked hard day and night for one and a half month, only to receive severe beating in return for demanding wages. They yelled in maximum, though starvation and caning made their throats fragile, beating heads against the tin doors of the locked room. But for the trade union leaders who were camping just furlongs away have no ears to lend for those cries. They were busy attending the international conference of trade unions in an air conditioned hotel room in the metro. It was one of the brutal betrayal of the working class, the nation witnessed last year. Neither law enforcers nor law providers knew this. Finally it was local residents and two peoples representatives, yet to be corrupted by power, who came to their rescue. And thus the seven men returned home holding life in their hands. Even when they were waiting for their train to home, thousands of workers from north Indian states came jampacked in bogies and alighted at Ernakulam station. It is when poverty and starving at home become unbearable they catch trains to ‘God's own country’ (sobriquette of Kerala, the southern most state of India). And work here like oxen for less wages, bear beating and foul words. They come from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam, all lands gifted in abundance by nature. Thousands also turn up from the IT heavens, Karnataka and Andhra. Most of them lived from agriculture and related jobs till recently. When the new economic order, that makes the haves more wealthy by snatching from the have NOTs, became real, their lives came to a stand still. In a nation where welfare programs are made for Jindal, Mithal, Tata, Vedanthe and Ambanies who lead the table of worlds top millionaires, these sideliners were thrown out of the gate.

Demand wages, blows in return; Ask again, he is a Maoist
Workers from other states get less than 150 rupees as daily wages, where as a malayalee (resident of Kerala state) worker receive 250 to 400 rupees. If they get more, larger chunk will go to the agents pocket. Those who shares it include trade union leaders to police officers. It is this vicious circle that handles those who demand exact wages, using force and threat. But the story changed when some workers decided to resist. Those who do not heed to the exploitation were marked as Maoists. As a maoist leader was arrested from a quarry in Angamaly (a village in Kerala) the police pointed the gun of suspicion towards other state workers. Owners forced out many of them from rented houses. The authorities frantically searched poor dwellings of the unorganized workers in search of Maoist commanders from Andhra, Bihar and Nepal, like pelting bombs on the poor Afghan men to find Bin Ladin and co. See How fast Arundhathy Roy's words that the time when all of as are called maoist is not far has become real.... Most of the workers come to build flats that are fast coming up in the city heart. The other state workers are also employed in plywood companies and quarries at Perumbavaor, diamond units at Thrissur, tile factories at Òlur, in the paddy fields and rubber estates at Kottayam and steel factories at Palakkad. These migrant men work in hotels and poultry farms and even as news paper boys. But the labor department has no knowledge about their exact number and other details. And the department has no proven means to collect that. Unofficial statistics say that migrant workers number up to more than eight lakhs. Lions share of these men work in gravely dangerous conditions. One will collapse if he watch these men working atop ten and twenty floor buildings, hanging from a rope or chain without any security measures. They work in burning steel factories, with bodies wrapped in wet sacks. The accident rate is increasing in the building sector where security measures are scarce. More than fifty migrant workers died in the last two years in kerala due to dangerous working conditions. Most of them amidst building flats. The large
advertisements newspapers receive, curtained most of these from becoming news. Though these workers had to be insured, as per existing law, only a few employers do that. Sexual exploitation of the women workers too is common. These workers are put up in sheds worse than barns. Rooms with drinking water and other basic facilities are rare. Two men from Orissa, working in building sector, died in Kochi after the old building in which they stayed collapsed. In this incident, when all the established trade unions and political parties kept silence, it is the strong interference by T.U.C.I workers lead by T.C Subrahmanian, made the relatives of the deceased receive compensation. Though accident deaths continued no relief measures were taken. 'Even if we return home, we will come back'. When talked to the friends of a Bangali youth who died recently during work they said. 'Our fate is to die here with broken heads or die there starving'.

**Averted wagon tragedy:**
Trafficking of more than twenty five workers, including women and children, packed in a parcel van without air and light, to Kozhikode was the last chapter of this exploitation serial. It is the intervention of some youths who had still some humanity left, and media persons averted a big tragedy. They were brought to make trenches for *Kerala State Electricity Board* on contract basis. Do we have to lit our homes and streets bolting these innocent lives in the dark?

The health minister P.K Sreemathy (once a revolutionary leader), while replying to a question in the Kerala Legislative Assembly about the spreading of contagious deceases, held these poor men as the main accused. Deceases also migrated with these other state workers? Are these men responsible for infants dying in groups in capital's Hospital and the poor dying in government hospitals without life saving medicine and the spread of 'chikungunya'? Dear Minister, please don't get upset if we ask, like from the flags you held, do the red color vanished from the narrow vessels of your eyes also? It is true that the workers from other states live in non hygienic surroundings. But, it is the employers and authorities to be held responsible, who are not ready to make sure better living conditions for them. If exploitation and non consideration continue like this, the pictures of Goddess Kali, Karina (*a popular Indian film actress*) and Dhony (*Indian cricketer*) which decorates their tents will be replaced with militant leaders like Comrade Mao and Charu Majumdar. While talking neatness, one thing cannot be gone unsaid. If Tamil workers return to their place for ten days to celebrate Ponkal, the toilet tanks of the big bellied Malayalees will overflow. If not for those men, whom we call 'shitty pandies' our neat and clean kerala would have become an open toilet. But, when Kerala is growing 'smart' and galloping to develop who is there to remember these lesser mortals. It is not the names of these men who built kerala with their flesh and blood, but those of treacherous lords and rulers that will appear in the marble plaques. Well, what to wonder. After all our sense of admiration is that, on seeing the domes of Tajmahal, just forget the sweat and tears of twenty thousand workers, who worked hard for twenty years, leaving behind their beloved, their dreams and hopes, and sing in praise of an emperor's love for his wife.

*The end*