

## 12 workers rescued from bondage in Kancheepuram

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CHENNAI: Twelve bonded workers, including two children, from the Irula tribe were rescued from a woodcutting unit in Thirumudivakkam, Kancheepuram district, on Friday. When officials asked them to narrate their ordeal, some quietly showed them their palms. Seven years of clearing thorn bushes had left scars on all of them.

The group comprised two families, spanning three generations. All of them had worked for the unit's owner, identified as Murugan, to pay off an advance they took, which varied between Rs 5,000 and Rs 10,000. While one family hailed from Puthirankottai in Kancheepuram, the other used to reside in Tiruvannamalai before being trapped in bondage.

S Balram, 45, who was among those rescued, said his father, a daily wager, had taken an advance of Rs 8,000 from Murugan, seven years ago. "When my father was unable to pay off the debt, he asked me to work," said Balram. Soon, his entire family, including his two sons, including a 11-year-old, were made to work in the unit.

Their daily work involved cutting shrubs and supplying raw materials, including firewood, to local medicine companies and shops. They also did other menial jobs for the unit's owner. "We used to start early in the morning and worked for 12 hours," said Selvam, from Puthirankottai who had taken an advance of Rs 5,000 from Murugan. He and his family were paid Rs 30 per head every day. When the families went home during lean seasons, Murugan would track them later and bring them back. "We tried to shift our location in between, but he found us and threatened to file a case against us," he said. All the labourers lived in an abandoned building close to the unit.

M Rajendran, revenue divisional officer in Tambaram, who was part of the rescue operation said a case has been filed and Murugan has been taken into custody.

Activists and volunteers say the case has highlighted not just the rampant prevalence of bonded labourer but also the increasing number of children found in these groups. In 2016, Tamil Nadu reported the sixth highest number of children who are trafficked with 317 being rescued. According to data with non-voluntary organisation International Justice Mission, 220 children were rescued from bondage in 2016, compared to 100 in 2015. Most of them were rescued from textile industries, agricultural fields, brick kilns, beed-making units and matchstick factories.