

Bangalore Metro being built by Bonded Children Child Helpline takes a child into their protective custody

His frail limbs are best meant to wield the willow in his school in a village in West Bengal, not the heavy hammer at the site of Bangalore Metro. But that is one of the many hazardous operations Jabbar (not his real name), a boy no more than 13 years of age, has been engaged in. Question him of his age and pat he will reply in broken Hindi "I am eighteen". He is engaged in every hazardous operation that a Metro site is given to: lifting heavy sheets and pillars, digging, drilling, perhaps even welding – all activities explicitly prohibited under the Juvenile Justice Act, Child Labour Act, Minimum Wages Act, and various other legislations protecting child rights and human rights. Fundamentally, his presence on the Metro construction site was blatantly violative of Constitutional provisions protecting children from such hazardous operations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and so on.

It appears that none of these Rights and social values matter to the Metro authorities, who are brazenly implementing the southern reach of the Metro, despite strong street protests led by *Hasiru Usiru* over the past ten days. On Sunday, 26th April, Mr. Narendra Babu, MLA and Dr. Rajeev Gowda, Professor of Economics in IIM-B joined the *Hasiru Usiru* led Padayatra along the Lakshman Rao Boulevard (Bangalore's last remaining green road) and Lalbagh, protesting their illegal conversion from park to Metro line, without any conformance with the Karnataka Town and Country Planning Act. An Ordinance was issued to amend the Parks Act to allow a station to be located in Lalbagh, but no such matching step was taken to allow 3 kms. long Lakshman Rao Park to be taken over by the Metro. The intent clearly has been to avoid public debate. But it is inexplicable why an Ordinance should have at all been employed when there have been at least four Legislative sessions during which time a Bill could have been tabled for debate - honouring the democratic credentials of our polity.

As the protestors marched shouting slogans, Jabbar laboured with several other young boys brought from Jharkand and West Bengal to build Bangalore's prestigious Metro. He must have found this protest rather ridiculous – his thoughts set on the father, mother, two brothers and a sister whom he has left behind soon after his 8th standard examination. He claims the Nagarjuna Construction Company pays him Rs.110/day and feeds him and takes care of his needs. His intent: work for two summer months to supplement his family's income and go back home to continue his schooling.

Based on a complaint lodged with the Labour Commissioner and the Child Welfare Committee the the Child Helpline swung into action today and took Jabbar into their protective custody in accordance with the Juvenile Justice Act. Two other boys were working at the site and should have similarly ended up in the protective custody of the Child Helpline. But the street smart engineers of Nagarjuna Construction Company quickly ensured that these children disappeared from the work site.

That such blatant violation of human rights could be the basis of the prestigious construction of Bangalore Metro is shocking. This project has been under the glare of the media and tens of residents associations, civil society initiatives, etc., and one would expect that Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Ltd. (BMRCL) would spare no effort in at least ensuring there are no fundamental violation of human rights. It is unbelievable, therefore, that the Metro officials have had all the time to call Press Conferences to defend their actions and attack those who have questioned their lack of transparency, but not one official of BMRCL found it fit to visit the worksites and ensure all was well.

For a project that has international exposure from Japan Bank for International Cooperation and massive investment from the State and Central Governments, BMRCL has no dearth of resources. Rs. 9,000 crores (per current estimates) will be invested in this project, and it seems that Bangalore's futuristic comforts will be based on the sweat and blood of children.

Jabbar admitted that he was brought by one Ansur who paid his father a paltry amount of Rs. 200/- as rent so that this little son of India is employed as cheap labour for "Namma Metro". As per the law, this is nothing but trafficking in children – a very serious crime, party to which now are M/s Nagarjuna Construction Company and BMRCL.

The fate of other children who are not in protective custody now rests precariously. If the police do not secure them at the earliest, those involved in employing these children, and those responsible for not monitoring worksites to prevent such dastardly inhuman operations, may well ensure their complete disappearance.

We have been protesting against illegal encroachment of Parks and illegal felling of trees. Violation of the Fundamental Rights of Child was not even on our scanner.

There is no option now for the Karnataka Government, but to do the following:

- 1) Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Ltd. must immediately suspend the contract accorded to M/s Nagarjuna Construction Company, pending enquiry.
- 2) Government of Karnataka (Horticulture Department), must immediately withdraw the clearance accorded to BMRCL to build the Metro through Lalbagh.

It is truly tragic that while Lalbagh has witnessed illegal felling of trees by BMRCL, under the direct gaze of the public and the media children are employed to build Bangalore's Metro at Lakshman Rao boulevard. These criminal activities must be investigated and the guilty punished without any mercy.



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PS: The online petition to the Chief Minister of Karnataka urging a rethink on the Southern reach of the Metro has been endorsed by over 2,500 people. Details at:
<http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/savelalbaghfrommetro/index.html>

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