

Families dump mentally ill in tiger reserve

SHAME Pay truckers to abandon them at Karnataka's Bandipur National Park

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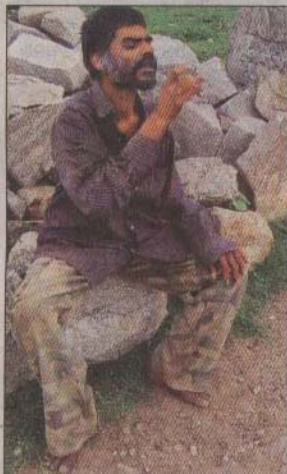
NEW DELHI: Some families have found a shocking way of getting rid of their mentally challenged members.

They pay truckers to dump them on a forlorn stretch of road running through Karnataka's Bandipur National Park, a tiger reserve 220 km southwest of Bangalore.

The hapless victims, many of whom can't even utter their own names coherently, hail mostly from West Bengal, Orissa, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Left to the mercy of the elements, many have either been killed by wild animals or sexually abused by truckers. Lacking basic survival skills, some of them have even set forest fires.

Apart from families, police in the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala are also alleged to have paid truckers to get rid of the mentally ill people they take off the streets,



■ **Vijay (name given by locals) was dumped in the forest two years ago. He is fond of smoking and even started a forest fire once.** HT PHOTO

NGOs working in the region said.

Some of those who survive have landed up in a hospital run by Catholic missionaries.

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A few like the Marathi-speaking, middle-aged Vijay (name given by locals) do petty chores to earn food from tourists and forest officials.

"One or two such people are brought to us every week," said Sister Hillary, doctor-in-charge of Karunalya Hospital of Nanjangud town on the edges of the park.

Of the 57 currently being treated at the hospital, 32 are women, six of them pregnant and five HIV positive.

"They are being treated for a range of ailments from advanced schizophrenia to delusion to paranoia, apart from being provided food and shelter," said another doctor at the hospital.

The trend of dumping the mentally ill began in 2007, locals said. The victims are unaware that their kin preferred to pay for abandoning them rather than spend on their treatment. Some like 20-something Savitri (real name unknown) ended up being raped during her trans-

portation and getting pregnant, Sister Hillary said.

"Long-distance truckers are known to pick up the mentally ill, especially women, and rape them before dumping them," said B Renuka Prasad, in-charge of Gundalpet police station in the region.

Checkpoints along the stretch have done little to curb the menace. Police attribute it to their inability to understand what the victims are saying. Sometimes the truckers are known to drug the victim with opium, making it impossible to question him or her. Besides, policemen normally check the papers of vehicles and what they are carrying, not the cabin or passengers in it.

The Karnataka government hasn't been able to curb the racket. "We are aware of the problem. The administration is conducting a survey of such persons. They will be treated and rehabilitated," said Karnataka State Mental Health Authority Member Secretary H. Chandrashekhara.