

WADING INTO A CONTROVERSY

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Role of NGOs, SHGs, Donors & Charities, and Institutional & other Stakeholders in Development Process

KERALA, PALAKKAD, 10/06/2022. Swapna Suresh, an accused in the diplomatic channel gold smuggling case, during a meet the press in Palakkad on Friday. Photo: KK MUSTAFAH / THE HINDU

An ongoing controversy over Kerala's diplomatic channel gold smuggling case shifted its focus suddenly to a high-profile non-governmental organisation named Highrange Rural Development Society (HRDS) India when it hired and fired Swapna Suresh (in picture), one of the key accused in the case, within a few months.

At no time in its 25-year history has the HRDS been much under the spotlight than when it hired Ms. Swapna in February this year. Since then, the Thodupuzha-based NGO has frequently been in news.

Many times it denied the allegations that it was a body meant to cover the Sangh Parivar interests. Yet, some of its top functionaries have close links with the Sangh Parivar and the BJP. The circumstances that led to the hiring of Ms. Swapna and the days that followed raised questions about the role of the Sangh in placing her with the HRDS.

With the apparent support of some top Sangh leaders, Ms. Swapna appeared before a magistrate in Kochi and gave a confidential confession directly linking Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, his family and a few top bureaucrats and politicians with the gold smuggling case.

"We cannot take this harassment any longer. Different agencies of police are routinely coming and questioning our staff since we gave a job to Swapna. It has begun to affect our functioning," said HRDS chief coordinator Joy Mathew, after sacking Swapna last week. According to him, the HRDS does not have the wherewithal to take on the government agencies.

Tribal development

Headed by its founder-secretary Aji Krishnan and president Atma Nambi, the HRDS says it works for tribal development. With offices in Delhi, Palakkad and Attappady, the HRDS has devised several projects with special focus on tribal development in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Tripura, Assam and Jharkhand. But interestingly, two of its major projects have run into rough weather in the tribal land of Attappady.

Even when there were allegations that the HRDS has more to hide than what it speaks profusely about its multi-crore projects, some of those who associated with and funded it in the initial days have distanced themselves from it apparently over lack of transparency. Former Union Minister K. Krishnakumar, who moved over to the BJP, and the Madhava Warriar Foundation headed by Mumbai-based businessman and a Sangh Parivar sympathiser Madhava Warriar are some of them.

The huge amount of funds that the HRDS handles for its projects makes it different from other NGOs that function in tribal areas. For a housing project named Sadhgraha, the HRDS has earmarked a whopping Rs. 53,015.29 crore. For a medicinal plants cultivation project titled 'Karshaka', it has earmarked Rs. 270 crore. But both projects brought the HRDS under the scanner in Attappady. An Assembly subcommittee is currently investigating the role of the NGO

in an alleged land grabbing scandal.

Under the ambitious Karshaka project the NGO tried to procure 5,000 acres of tribal land on lease for 30 years. Some former bureaucrats, including R. Ramachandran Nair and his Vidyadhiraja Vidya Samajam, were in the thick of the controversy as the tribes-people raised a hue and cry against the land-grabbing mafia of Attappady.

“It’s just the tip of the iceberg. People don’t know what is happening in the name of tribal development in Attappady. Some big names are involved in the land-grab deals. We hope the Assembly inquiry committee will bring to light the shady deals that could have erased the tribal lands of Attappady forever,” said N. Padmanabhan, a former journalist and chairman of the Jananeethi, a civil society organisation.

The 100-odd low-cost houses constructed by the HRDS in Attappady for the tribes-people under the ambitious Sadhgraha project have gone abegging. The 370-sq. ft houses made of fibre cement panels and corrugated sheets cost Rs. 5 lakh each. But the civic bodies in Attappady objected to them as they were built without the consent of the Tribal Development Department. Politics may be behind the denial of permission, but the multi-crore project of the HRDS has grounded in the tribal land that the NGO has made its home.

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