

Report on the Exodus of Madigas from Budihalli

An all women team comprising members of various human rights, and women's organizations including PUCL-K, AIPWA, Samata Vedike and Stree Jagruti Samiti visited Venkateshwaranagar slum outside Chellakere, Chitradurga district, on 5 September 2010 to investigate reports of atrocities , especially of sexual exploitation, on Dalits in Budihalli which led to the exodus of 35 families on 18 August 2010. The community subsequently shifted to the hutments of Venkateshwaranagar and its neighborhood. The fact finding team was able to meet with about forty five of the community members, record their experiences and also to assess their current living conditions. We specifically focused on the plight of the women in the community with whom we met separately. We were facilitated in our contacts and interaction with the community members by Mr. Shiv Moorthy of HRFDL, who has been working closely with the community.

The Fact-Finding Report

i) Madigas in Budihalli:

Budihalli is a small village located 30 km away from Chellakere town. For generations, the Madiga community served as bonded labour to the Nayaka and Golla community, who are the primary land owners in the village. Sexual exploitation of the Madiga women has been part of the exploitative bonded labor practiced here. When the original bonded labor system ended, the Madigas were employed at meager daily wages, which recently amounted to Rs30-50/day, for a hard day's labour, far below the national minimum wage provision. However, to-date, the sexual exploitation of their women continued unabated. Caste discrimination has been rampant with the members of the Madiga community facing the brunt of caste hierarchy. They were treated as untouchables by Nayakas and Gollas. Madigas were not allowed to worship in the temple and faced humiliation while fetching water from the main tank. They are abused, humiliated and at times, punished, if the orders of Nayakas and Gollas are disobeyed. Any attempts to assert their rights or transgress the existing norms invited further recriminations and severe abuses or implications in false cases of theft, kidnapping or manhandling.

On 22 Dec 2009, when Madiga people cleared the woods for cultivation purpose in 4 acres of government grazing land (bagarhukum), from a total of 150 acres in and around Budihalli, which was being used by the dominant communities for grazing their cattle. Members of the Nayaka and Golla communities attacked them and even attempted to rape a Madiga girl. Police case was registered in Parashurampura Police Station on 26 Dec 2009 (FIR No 0147) and an indefinite protest was held. Meanwhile, Dalits were booked for rioting on the same issue. Since this time, the Madigas have been facing severe social boycott and public humiliation. In Feb. 2010, a group

of HR/CL activists with women organizations visted Budihalli and to other villages in the area. Some of the grievances of the Madiga community, at that time, were recorded in their FF report (annexure 1).

The community members have since been denied any kind of employment in the village. Further, if any person dared to employ a member of Madiga community, he was subject to a Rs 500 fine. Without this employment, the Madiga community was left with no source of livelihood. Only a few Madiga men travelled to Challakere seeking employment. A number of petitions were submitted to the taluk and district officials for rehabilitation. Despite many assurances, only 30 days of NREGA work was provided over the last eight months. The wages for this work have not yet been fully released - only 20 days of wages are paid so far. Gruel centres requested as a relief measure were also not started. The community was suffering from starvation and had no other means of seeking livelihood.

ii) The Exodus:

Against this backdrop, a married Nayak man managed to take Sumithra, a Class XII student, of Madiga community to Bangalore and remarried her. A fortnight later, he brought her back to Budihalli, ripped off her mangalsutra and deserted her. When Madigas sought justice by filing a police case, counter cases were filed against them.. They were forced to settle for a paltry sum of Rs. 25,000 as compensation.

In a separate incidence, Lakshmamma, a Madiga woman, was brutally beaten up by Nagappa and his wife, belonging to dominant community. When Lakshmamma filed a case, counter cases were filed on six of her brothers and a sister.

These two incidents were principal triggers in their abandoning their original ancestral village. Deeply frustrated over their continual ill-treatment, the sexual harassment of their women, growing starvation, social boycott, insufferable humiliation, case and counter case tussles ,deprivation of livelihood and rehabilitation they began their exodus on the midnight of 17 August 2010, leaving their huts, lands, and most belongings behind. About 35 nuclear families trudged the nearly 30 km distance to reach the outskirts of Chellakere town.

With the help of activists of Human Rights for Dalit Liberation (HRFDL) nearly 25 families are temporarily settled in vacant huts and also with other residents of Venkateshwaranagar slum; the rest have occupied huts in the adjacent neighbourhoods. They are being supported by a few relatives also living in these slums. All members that we spoke to were unanimous in their agreement never to return to Budihalli. They have no source of employment or livelihood, so far in Venkateshwaranagar slum. They are clear in their demands and expectations from the government, which is detailed in a later section.

iii)Sexual Exploitation of Women

Rape, sexual abuse and social boycott are a primary reason for the Madiga families abandoning their village. Madiga women of Budihalli have been victims of various forms of sexual exploitation by members of the upper castes. These dominant communities have tried to reinforce sexual servitude of Madiga women with the practice of bonded labour. When women refused to cooperate they are verbally abused, threatened with torching the huts or false implications in theft cases.

District officials have denied that the women were raped and sexually harassed and accused that no cases have been registered by women in this regard. We met separately with only the women members of the Budihalli Madiga community who all, and independently, charged upper caste land owners of Budihalli with sexual harassment and exploitation. We recorded a written petition with their charges and also demands, which is included with this report (annexure 2). Twenty one women of the community, who were available for the interaction, signed this petition.

We were told that a case of attempted rape was lodged in December 2009 which was countered with another case against the victim's mother. Generally, women fear social stigma and feudal backlash. In addition, both the hospital and police station, necessary to establish cases of sexual violence, are inaccessible due to their sheer distance from Budihalli. These are at distances of about 30 km from Budihalli in different directions. Plus, the lack of direct transport requires villagers to travel 55 km in two buses to reach the Parashurampura police station, to lodge any complaint. The women maintained that the lack of basic amenities like toilets (which compel them to tread in darkness), unsafe and inflammable thatch huts, lack of living space forcing them to sleep in open spaces and economic dependency increased their vulnerability to sexual exploitation from their previous masters.

iv)Apathy of District Administration

District Minister Karunakara Reddy, Deputy Commissioner Amlan Aditya Biswas and Superintendent of Police Labhu Ram have completely denied the charges of rape, sexual harassment and social boycott. Minister Karunakara Reddy asked, "Why women have not lodged any case against sexual harassment?" He advised the villagers to not to politicize the issue and settle the differences amicably.

A fact-finding committee constituted by the DC comprising Additional Deputy Commissioner, Assistant Commissioner, Tahsildar, District Social Welfare Officer and Circle Police Inspector visited Budihalli for investigation and submitted a 14-page report **denying** there was an exodus. The report says that 26 families voluntarily left the village at different intervals for earning better wages and not due to any victimisation. Assistant Commissioner T Venkatesh has stated that a good number of them have leased out their lands. Further, he said that 9 families left Budihalli on the night of 17 Aug 2010 fearing arrest after a fight broke over a petty issue.

Right from the beginning, the district administration has taken the side of the dominant community and issued public statements at the behest of the Nayakas and Gollas. There has been a deliberate ploy to highlight the statements of three Madiga families, who have been co-opted by these land-owners, in Budihalli, and deface the 35-odd families that have left their village.

Even the minimum recommendation of opening gruel centres to prevent starvation made by the previous fact-finding team of human rights groups has not been fulfilled. Worse still, when the people approached the district administration he responded that there is ***no urgent need to open a gruel centre as no one had yet died.*** Each family has got only 25kg of rice for temporary sustenance as relief.

The official response unanimously seems to be for the community to return to Budihalli. However, the community members that we spoke with were vehement about never returning to Budihalli. Recently, the state government has sanctioned Rs 63 lakhs for purchasing land and providing irrigation facilities, as part of a rehabilitation package for the Madigas of Budihalli. According to the Deputy Commissioner, 18 acres of dry land will be purchased with Rs 45 lakhs and the remaining Rs 18 lakhs will be invested on community irrigation. However, adequate government surplus lands are available which could be diverted for the same purpose and the funds could be utilised for community development. Even if the lands were to be purchased, our enquiries indicated that the estimated cost of 1 acre of land from private owners is in the range of Rs 40,000 to Rs 50,000, which does not tally with official figures of 45 lakhs for 18 acres. On the day of our Fact Finding, we were informed that the DC was available at his residence. However, he refused our request for a meeting, over phone.

v) Our Analyses:

The exodus of the entire Madiga community from the village of Budihalli is ground breaking in being the first instance where a community of the most deprived, lowest, untouchable caste bracket broke away from the stronghold and exploitative practices of dominant and land holding communities. This act of gigantic and historic defiance followed extreme social boycott and continued sexual exploitation, suffered by them, at the hands of Nayakas and Gollas of Budihalli. Partisan attitude of the DC and officials has only added to the misery of this deprived community, and sheer apathy and neglect of the officials amounts to condoning and perpetuating caste based atrocities. State Government's recently announced rehabilitation package is limited in spirit and scope – it grants land compensation only to nine families with small land holdings that had legal papers of their forefathers. To properly rehabilitate the Madigas would require all 35 nuclear families to be given land compensation for pursuing a livelihood means. Further, it is surprising that the state wants to 'buy' land for this purpose, when plenty of land is available around the Budihalli and Chellakerre area, that the State is already allotting for other purposes. It would be unfortunate if the community is not rehabilitated in its entirety, with provisions for

secure life and livelihood means, and is fragmented by the very processes that aim to rehabilitate them.

vi) Recommendations based on Community Demands:

1. The district administration should start gruel centres immediately to prevent starvation.
2. Minimum cultivable land for agricultural sustenance from government surplus holdings to be provided to every Madiga (nuclear) family, which has left Budihalli.
3. Government should create sustainable livelihood for the community, as a whole, and provide basic amenities including, pucca houses, toilets, anganwadi, community schools, PHC and potable water.
4. An independent body comprising community members, women's organizations, dalit organizations and other human rights groups should be constituted to ensure proper utilization of finances, including the sanctioned amount of Rs. 63 lakh towards community development and establishing livelihood mechanisms.
5. Stringent legal action should be taken against all perpetrators of sexual crimes against women of Budihalli.
6. Deputy Commissioner AA Biswas should be immediately removed from his post, for failing to conduct an impartial enquiry, not providing any relief/rehabilitation measures to the deprived community, and making statements that are unbecoming of his office.