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ANDHRA PRADESH CIVIL LIBERTIES COMMITTEE

THE KARAMCHEDU MASSACRE

A REPORT

GUNTUR

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THE KARAMCHEDU MASSACRE: A REPORT BY ANDHRA PRADESH CIVIL  
LIBERTIES COMMITTEE.

The Karamchedu massacre of harijans on 17th July, 1985 was the most horrible incident of the kind since the Belchi massacre of 1978. The police and a section of the press are describing it as a riot. This is a deliberate distortion of facts. What happened was onesided massacre of unarmed and helpless harijans by kamma/landlords armed with sticks, axes and spears.

A fact finding team of Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee visited Karamchedu, the village where the massacre took place, Chirala, where the harijans who fled from the village after the incident are now camping as refugees and Government General Hospital, Guntur, where the seriously injured are being treated. The fact finding team consisted of 1) Dr. A.Punna Rao, Reader in Telugu, Nagarjuna University, 2) Sri A.Jagannadha Rao, Assistant Registrar, Nagarjuna University, 3) Sri A.Subrahmanyam, Lecturer in Law, Nagarjuna University, 4) Sri Noor Basha Abdul, Lecturer in Commerce, Nagarjuna University, 5) Sri K.Vijaya Kumar, Professor of Mechanical Engineering, Bapatla Engineering College, 6) Smt. C.Rukmini, Teacher, Guntur, 7) Smt. Santha, A.P.C.L.C., Guntur, 8) Sri B.Venkateswara Rao, Advocate, Guntur, 9) Sri A.Janaki Raju, Advocate, Guntur, 10) Sri Y.R.Koteswara Rao, Lecturer, Narasaraopet, 11) Sri K.Venkateswara Rao, Lecturer, AMIE College, Guntur, 12) Sri D.Chandra Sekhar, Excise Department, and 13) Dr. K.Balagopal, General Secretary, Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee.

SOCIAL BACKGROUND:

Karamchedu is a so called rich village of Chirala Taluk, Prakasam District. The village has a population of about 10,000 of whom 6,000 are of the kamma caste. There are 300 families of madigas and 150 families of malas, accounting for a total harijan population of about 1,500.

Many of the kmmas (though not all of them) are landlords with more than 20 to 30 acres of very fertile land, while some have 60 acres and above. However, this is only a negligible portion of their total wealth in the form of lands

elsewhere, business, film-making and industry. The palatial houses seen at Karamchedu are a rare sight in rural India. But surprisingly the labourers are paid very low wages. The annual farm servants (paleru) are paid Rs.2000/- per year which is less than the minimum wage prescribed by law. Similarly the women are paid Rs.6/- to Rs.8/- per day for weeding which is also less than the legally fixed minimum wage. The men are paid a daily wage of Rs.10 to Rs.12/- which is very low in comparison with the prevalent wage rates of coastal Andhra.

Another illegal form of exploitation also came to the notice of the team. Those labourers who take land on lease from the landlord are forced to do household and fieldwork of the landlords, in addition to the payment of rent. This practice is clearly a case of vetti (forced labour) which is also illegal. The harijan labourers narrated to the team the way in which the system of tenancy was used as an instrument of their bondage.

There are two primary kinds of leaseholdings in the village. The first one is based on the equal sharing of the crop with the landlord in which the tenant need not do household and fieldwork for the landlord. But under this system the tenant is solely left to his means in all aspects of cultivation of land from ploughing to harvesting, which, upon calculation, turns out to be a losing proposition not sufficient even to make both ends meet. This forces the harijan labourer to opt for the second system which is based on the transfer of two thirds of the crop as rent to the landlord and in addition doing household and fieldwork for the landlord. Under this system the landlord supplies manure (animal excreta) and pesticides, whereas the tenant has to bear all other expenditure and will in turn receive one third of the crop as his share. The landlords will also occasionally advance loans to the people working under this system whereas the tenants functioning under the first system do not have this opportunity. In this system, tenancy is inseparably linked with the performance of duties at the house and farm of the landlord. This servitude to the landlord commences with the chiming of the temple bells (referred to by the harijans as 'hare rama ganta') at 4.30 a.m. and extends upto 10 p.m. in the night thus making a total of 16 hours a day in which he works only

... himself or for his family. For this work he is paid a nominal wage of Rs.4/- approximately in cash or kind. This link between tenancy and labour for the landlord is against the tenancy laws and smacks of medieval serfdom. The nominal wage paid to him is very much below the minimum wages fixed by law and in essence amounts to forced labour.

In general the team found that the terms and conditions of labour are very stringent. If an annual farm servant works for, say, nine months and later absents himself for whatever reason, he runs the risk of losing his wage. As a harijan labourer, Tella Zedson put it, 'until the last month is complete and the crop comes home, the paleru is not sure of getting his wage'. He gave the example of Pilli Subba Rao who was a paleru of a landlord by name Jagarlamudi Tirupataiah. One day he could not go to work due to some domestic difficulties. That evening the landlord came to his house and personally thrashed Subba Rao's wife Ankamma in his absence. It may be noted here that the Minimum Wages Act provides for casual leaves for the farm servants. Thus the general treatment meted out to the agricultural workers and their working conditions are very humiliating and degrading.

In addition to this regular exploitation and harassment, the landlords have never allowed the labourers to organize themselves. When sometime back, a young man by name Venkateswara Rao tried to organize the labourers, the landlords beat him and drove him out of the village. Three years ago the landlords attacked the Malapalli and beat them. The landlords even hold their own 'kacheris' (arbitration) where the labourers are 'tried' and 'punished' for their alleged offences.

Matters came to a head during the last election. The harijans went against the will of the landlords and voted for Congress (I) instead of Telugu Desam. At that time there was some conflict and one harijan was beaten. The bitterness created by that conflict has persisted.

#### THE INCIDENT OF 16TH JULY:

There are two drinking water tanks in the village, one of them a well-maintained tank (with protected water system) used by the caste Hindus and the other a poorly maintained tank used by the harijans. On the evening of 16th July a

kamma youth by name Srinivasa Rao was feeding water (kudithi) to a buffaloe and was washing it near the steps leading down to the harijans' tank. The water was flowing down the steps into the tank. A lame youth by name Kathi Chandraiah and a madiga woman, Munnangi Suvarthamma who happened to be there objected to it. Another kamma youth by name Rayineedu Prasad joined Srinivasa Rao and they abused and manhandled Chandraiah and Suvarthamma. They beat them with the thick rope used to whip the buffaloes. It is said that Suvarthamma snatched the rope and beat Srinivasa Rao. Meanwhile another harijan, Pandiri Nageswara Rao intervened and settled the dispute by pleading with Srinivasa Rao and Prasad. That night Srinivasa Rao gathered a group of 20 persons and went to Suvarthamma's house and tried to drag her out and beat her. They left upon the appeals of Pandiri Nageswara Rao and others. All the people in the Madigapalli thought that the incident was closed. But the landlords asked Suvarthamma's father-in-law Munnangi Ankaiah to come and offer an 'explanation' for his daughter-in-law's 'misbehaviour'.

#### THE ATTACK OF 17TH JULY:

On the morning of 17th July, Ankaiah went to the house of his employer, Mandava Radhakrishna Murthy, at 7 a.m. He told him what had happened the previous day. It was while they were talking that the landlord youth, after assaulting Pandiri Nageswara Rao while he was taking tea, gathered at Radhakrishna Murthy's house and demanded that he should hand over Ankaiah. Radhakrishnamurthy hesitated to do so (the only decent act of a landlord during that day), but Ankaiah was forcibly pulled out of the house and beaten up. The youth took him to the common cattle shed. They kept him there and took axes, sticks and spears (bariselu) and went in a large mob of many hundreds towards the Madigapalli. Ankaiah got up and tried to run away. But he was caught and attacked with an axe by Yarlagadda Nayudamma. He is lying in Chirala hospital now.

The landlord mob who proceeded towards Madigapalli encircled the houses from all directions. Some of them went back to their locality and incited their fellow-caste men to join them by appealing to their caste pride (actually they were incited to attack madigas if they were born to kamma parents). Soon



their number swelled to thousands. The minimum figure mentioned by the harijans is 2000 and the maximum is 4000. The hardly 350 families of madigas were helpless against this mob of thousands armed with spears, axes and sticks. They tried to save themselves by running away, by hiding under haystacks, or by pleading with the assailants. But the assailants were pitiless. The first to be killed was Tella Elisha. As he ran into the fields from his house he was chased and hacked to death. Duddu Yesu was attacked inside his house. His nine months' pregnant daughter-in-law tried to save him but the assailants pushed her aside and assaulted Yesu with spears and axes. He died at Govt. General Hospital, Guntur, on 22nd July. Duddu Ramesa was a young man who tried to run out of his house. The assailants caught up with him within a few yards of the house and hacked him. He too died at the Govt. General Hospital, Guntur on 21st. His teenage wife, Duddu Sulochana, who is recovering at Govt. Hospital, Chirala, is yet to know of her husband's death. Duddu Vandana was another young victim. He came running to his mother Alisamma and told her what was happening in the village. He took Rs.10/- from her to go to Chirala to lodge a complaint with the police. As he ran out of the house he was pounced upon by the assailants (Yarlagadda Tirupataiah, Chaganti Nayudamma and others) and was hacked and speared to death. According to Alisamma her son was murdered after the police had arrived.

The oldest victim was Tella Moshe. He was a 70 year old man. When the mob attacked his house his 65 year old wife Veeramma pleaded with them to spare the old man. But they were in no mood to listen. The old man then ran towards the fields. There he joined Tella Muttiah and Manda Pentaiah. Fifty of the assailants surrounded them and started assaulting them with spears and axes. Moshe and Muttiah died on the spot. Moshe was killed in the most cruel manner. After he fell down, Yarlagadda Tirupataiah drove a spear into his groin and twisted it. Other names of the assailants are, Potini Lakshminarayana and Yarlagadda Ramesh. Manda Pentaiah managed to escape death by pretending to be dead. He was injured on the head and lay completely still. Lakshminarayana asked Tirupataiah to make sure that he was dead. Tirupataiah stamped upon the prostrate body of Pentaiah but he managed to successfully pretend to be dead, and that is why he is alive now. He is at present in Chirala hospital. In addition to these six persons killed, many more were injured. Two more men are still in serious condition.

The women were dragged out from the houses and abused. Their blouses were torn and they were molested. An old woman in the village told the team that three young women were raped and speared, while a stick was inserted into the private parts of one of the victims.

In addition to these murders and rapes, most of the houses of the Madigapalli were destroyed. Pictures of Jesus Christ (many of the madigas are christians) were torn. Roof-tiles were pulled down and holes were made in the mud walls. Rs.2000/- was stolen from the house of Tella Peda Mastan.

This massacre in the village and in the fields took place between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. of 17th July. Many of the harijans said that the police came soon enough but did not take any steps to stop the murders. Till now only eleven arrests have been made, though the harijans say that 2000 to 3000 strong mob assaulted them. One of the arrested persons is Mandava Radhakrishna Murthy, who was the only person who at least initially hesitated to hand over Ankaiah to the mob.

The terror-stricken harijans who fled from their village after the incident are now camping as refugees in a church compound at Chirala. They are clearly not in a mood to return to Karamchedu. The district officials who provided food for them on the first two days are not to be seen after the Chief Minister's visit. They have not so far taken any measures for the rehabilitation of the victims. This callous and indifferent attitude of the district administration has forced the victims to reject the offer of compensation.

The list of the names of the prominent assailants given by the harijans and the list of the names of those arrested by the police on 19th July are juxtaposed below:

<u>Prominent assailants named by victims</u>	<u>Persons arrested by police</u>
1. Chaganti Satyanarayana	1. Chaganti Satyanarayana
2. Chaganti Nayudamma	2. Chaganti Nayudamma
3. Gorantla Anjaiah	3. Gorantla Anjaiah
4. Potini Lakshminarayana	4. Potini Lakshminarayana

<u>Prominent assailants named by victims</u>	<u>Persons arrested by police</u>
5. Chaganti Vishnu Murthy	5. Mandava Radhakrishna Murthy
6. Chaganti Subba Rao	6. Vankayalapati Lakshmi- narayana
7. Yarlagadda Tirupataiah	7. Yarlagadda Arjuna Rao
8. Yarlagadda Ramesh	8. Potini Raghavaiah
9. Yarlagadda Ranga Rao	9. Yarlagadda Udaya Bhaskara Rao
10. Maddukuri Mohan	10. Kondagunta Kistaiah
11. Rayineedu Prasad	11. Perni Venkata Subbaiah
12. Rayineedu Satyanarayana	
13. Rayineedu Seetaramaiah	
14. Pratap, S/o.Venкатasubbaiah	
15. Goturi Venkateswarlu	
16. Gottipati Lakshmaiah	
17. Daggupati Kishore	
18. Yarlagadda Buchi Nayudamma	
19. Daggupati Kodi Naganna	
20. Yarlagadda Somaiah	
21. Daggupati Hari	
22. Yarlagadda Nageswara Rao	
23. Yarlagadda Subba Rao	
24. Cherukuri Venkateswarlu	
25. Potini Akkaiah	
26. Potini Tirupataiah	
27. Srinivasa Rao	

A comparison of the above two lists shows that many of the main assailants have not so far been apprehended. No further arrests were made by the police from 19th till date.

A police camp has been set up in the village and a large police force is camping there. Nevertheless, on the 22nd July, while so many police were in the village, a madiga woman by name Tella Rebbamma was beaten up by upper caste men. Her son is a postman of the village. Along with most of the madigas he fled from the village. His mother Rebbamma went to the post office to give his leave letter. She was caught and beaten up.

Even the Superintendent of Police, who was camping at Chirala, was not aware of this incident even after three hours of its happening until the team brought it to his notice when it met him on the 22nd. When the team enquired him about the steps taken by the police, he admitted that the police did not search for dead bodies. When asked whether the investigation is being made into the possibility of a premeditated plan to attack (the offence of conspiracy) he refused to comment. He abruptly ended the interview and left the room when the team asked questions about police inaction.



CONCLUSION:

The team concludes that the massacre was pre-planned, deliberate and barbaric, carried out with an intention to terrorize and landless workers into meek submission. Though the immediate cause which led to this incident was the happenings of 16th evening, it would be erroneous to believe that it is only this minor incident which sparked off this inhuman carnage. The roots of this brutal assault lie primarily in the unequal land relations reinforced by the prejudices bred by a reactionary and exploitative caste system. The fact that Duddu Ramesh, Duddu Vandanam and Tella Muttiah, three of the killed, were the spokesmen of their people goes to show that the murders were aimed at specific targets and symbolizes the intolerance of the landlords towards landless labourers who try to be on their own.

It should not be forgotten that Karamchedu is only a microcosm of the coastal belt which is throwing up much of the ruling elite of Andhra Pradesh and there is a striking similarity in the method and intent of the attacks of landlords on landless labourers and the state-sponsored attacks of police on the movements of organized agricultural workers.

ANDHRA PRADESH CIVIL LIBERTIES COMMITTEE CONDEMNS:

- (1) the brutal and savage attack on the hapless harijans by the landlords of Karamchedu village;
- (2) the inaction of the police in apprehending the culprits;
- (3) the failure of the district administration in taking steps for the immediate rehabilitation of the victims.

ANDHRA PRADESH CIVIL LIBERTIES COMMITTEE DEMANDS:

- (1) that the culprits be arrested and prosecuted in accordance with law without any further delay;
- (2) that the judicial enquiry be commenced at the earliest;
- (3) that the victims be rehabilitated at the earliest and that the cost of their rehabilitation must entirely be borne by the state government;
- (4) that the rules relating to minimum wages, working hours, etc., of agricultural workers be strictly implemented throughout the state.