

(V.27) Apr 2nd

burnt lives, burning issues...

**THE KAMBALAPALLY CARNAGE
A REPORT**



Prepared and Published by:

PEOPLES' DEMOCRATIC FORUM - PDF
Bangalore
April - 2000

PREFACE

The Kambalapally incident in Chintamani taluk of Kolar district in Karnataka, in which seven dalits were burnt to death on 11th March 2000 shocked the whole nation and seemed to take it back to the days of Belchi and beyond. Different individuals and groups reacted to the ghastly episode differently from their own standpoint. Above all there was one clear attempt at portraying the incident as consequential to the killing of an upper caste youth allegedly by dalits. This, in a way, succeeded in localizing the issue, shorn of its larger socio-economice and political dimensions. Some sections of the media also attempted to present the whole event as being the result of feuds between individuals on the question of their illicit relations with women.

PDF sent a team to the village on 16th March 2000 to put the event in perspective considering larger questions figuring in the context. The following is the result of the fact finding committee's endeavour to arrive at facts and understand them.

Bangalore

15 April 2000

The Initial Findings

Whenever one goes on a fact-finding mission one is always reminded of a famous remark by George Orwell: In the East everything appears clear and simple from a distance, but becomes hazy and complex as one gets closer to the scene of action. The experience of our team, comprising Prof. Nagari Babaiah, Prof. N. Ramesh, Prof. V.S. Sreedhara, Mr. Sriram, all from of PDF; Mr. Laxman and Mr. Maruthi Gokhale of Jaati Vinasha Vedike and Ms. Bangaru Kamakshi, independent observer, was no different when we went to Kambalapally in Chintamani Taluk, Kolar district on 16th March 2000 to enquire into the recent burning down of three houses in Kambalapally resulting in the death of seven Dalits. The facts of the carnage were visibly clear: the burnt down houses, the deserted Dalit colony, the atmosphere of fear and hatred... But the stories that lent their meanings to these facts varied as we listened to different versions narrated by different sections of the people. This report, therefore, is not just an attempt to collate the different narratives or sift the so-called "facts" from fiction, but to weave the various accounts of the episode into a perspective informed by a sensitive analysis of the socio - historical context in which the events took place as they did. The Kambalapally carnage raises several deep seated and complex questions that go beyond a mere enquiry into the episode as such. The spurt of attention the Dalit carnage has received from the media and political leaders seems to focus exclusively on the immediate convulsions that caused the deaths without any serious attempt to locate it in a broad socio-political context. Given its track record, even the official enquiry may only end up with a detective & cryptic analysis of the episode relying

as they usually do on a sequence of events as if there was always a first cause to every happening.

The immediate provocation for the Dalit carnage has been traced to the murder of one KrishnaReddy [popularly known as Kittappa], the village waterman of Kambalapally, allegedly by Dalits led by one Sriramappa of the same village. While who all were involved in KrishnaReddy's murder and the circumstances that led to his death is still shrouded in mystery, the vokkaliga community [to which KrishnaReddy belongs] is peeved by the way the issue of KrishnaReddy's murder has been sidelined by the press, the political dignitaries who visited the place and the Government. This was openly expressed by one of the office bearers of the Vokkaligara Yuva Vedike (VYV) when our team visited the village. The Vedike, reportedly agitated by the "official neglect" of Krishna Reddy's murder and their grievances, has been organising a series of protests and bundhs in different parts of Kolar District, under a new banner called 'Nagarika Hitarakshana Samithi' apparently demanding a ban on Dalit Sangharsha Samithi (DSS), the Dalit organisation. But obviously there is more to it than an expression of concern for Krishna Reddy's murder. We shall come back to this issue later. Before offering an analysis it is useful to recapture the events that led to both Krishna Reddy's murder & the subsequent attack by caste Hindus on Dalits leading to the carnage.

THE ORIGINS AND BEGINNINGS OF KAMBALAPALLY CARNAGE

The Kambalapally killings have their "origin" in a small skirmish that took place on 10-3-2000 at about 6.p.m. between Dalits and Reddys. However, this origin, in turn, has its

"beginnings' in the deep seated animosity and prejudice created by casteist forces that grip the lives and imagination of caste Hindus. This small skirmish is also a result of the long history of Dalit atrocities and caste war between Reddys and Dalits in that area. Still, it is useful to trace the "origin" of the carnage from the skirmish and then relate it to the historical background-the real site of the problem.

On Friday, the 10th March 2000, Shankarappa and Narasimhappa, both belonging to the Dalit community were bringing tender coconuts to the ailing father of the former at about six in the evening, along the Yenamalapadi road. At the same time, one K.M. Venkata Reddy (s/o Madhi Reddy) and Krishna Reddy were coming in the opposite direction on their moped. They were on their way to Billandlahally to supply milk. Venkata Reddy brought the vehicle so close to the two Dalit youths as if to hit them, before stopping the vehicle. When questioned by the Dalit youths as to why they rode so rashly, the Reddys purportedly shot back asking them why they (the Dalits) were using that road. This seemingly innocuous encounter led to a quarrel. The Dalits, recounting this incident, recall that the two Dalit boys were threatened in abusive language accusing that the Dalits have grown "too much" and that their arrogance would be "properly" dealt with as in the case of Billandlahally episode. (More about this infamous case later, but here it suffices to know that the Reddys had successfully stopped the Dalits from forming a unit of the DSS, that led to a clash, ending up with the death of three police men in 1997.) The old rivalry and caste hatred between the two communities had once again come to the fore on this pretext and the quarrel obviously did not end there but got carried into the village later. The two Dalits came back to Kambalapally only

to face the wrath of other caste Hindus who had by now come to know of the skirmish on the road. Thus another quarrel, this time more bitter, broke out in the village resulting in Shankarappa and Narasimhappa receiving severe blows and injuries. They ran away from the scene fearing for their lives with a few other Dalits. Later they contacted the Kencharlahalli police station (Kambalapally does not have one) on phone and reported the matter. The Sub Inspector of Police, Venkataramanappa came in his jeep along with a police van to Kambalapally. By that time, the DSS alleges, the Reddys had struck terror among Dalits, by ransacking some houses in the Dalit colony and assaulting some inmates. The DSS also has alleged that the SI did not visit the Dalit colony but visited some vokkaliga houses before he left the place. However the police constables stayed back with their van.

Next day, Saturday the 11th March, the Dalits took the injured persons to Kencharlahalli police station, but the SI, who also happened to be a Dalit, refused to register the complaint. Then they went to Chintamani, the Taluk Head Quarters & met the Circle Inspector of Police, and lodged their protest and complaint. He summoned the SI and only after his intervention did the SI, Venkararamanappa, register the complaint. The Dalits were accompanied by Sriramappa of Kambalapally village and other DSS leaders of Chintamani. When they boarded a private bus in Chintamani to return to their village, one Anjaneya Reddy who was also in the same bus met them. This Anjaneya Reddy had the support of Dalits in the just concluded village panchayat elections. However he had lost the election and had some serious differences with other Reddys for this reason. He seemed to have assured the injured Dalits that he would question the other Reddys about their behaviour and assault. It is obvious that Anjaneya Reddy was not at the site of the action when the skir-

mish broke out. It is also obvious that he enjoyed the support of Dalits. However at the same time it should be noted that he was one of the accused in the murder of a Dalit called Venkataramanappa in 1998. This Venkararamanappa was the elder brother of Sriramappa who had taken the injured Dalits to the police station and was burnt to death the same night by caste Hindus. Sriramappa who had fled the village in 1998 along with his family members after his brother's murder, had returned to his village only recently.

The fuzzy nature of these shifting relationships and personal equations, caused perhaps by the exigencies of specific political and economic situations, defies any easy categorical analysis. The polarities, however, occur in terms of communities whose identities and destinies are decided by the overarching power of caste and religion. It also points out the complex nature of equations that shape the village life in this country. However, what finally emerges is the fact that political compulsions notwithstanding, caste sentiments continue to shape the structure of these relationships.

To resume the story, we found that the different reports we gathered concur till this point when the Dalits, accompanied by Sriramappa and Anjaneya Reddy reached Kambalapally at about 7 in the evening. From this point onwards, different versions take over, obviously depending on who is talking. What happened at that time holds the key to the murder of Krishna Reddy and the subsequent carnage. The official enquiry ordered by the Government will play a crucial role in exposing the hidden facts and the real culprits. However we can examine the various versions which are not so immune to inference that flow out of these accounts.

Claims and Counter Claims

Krishna Reddy worked as a waterman in Kambalapally. The water pump is adjacent to the motor road and is right opposite Sriramappa's house, which is now burnt down. Krishna Reddy was murdered near the pump right in front of Sriramappa's house. His body was the cause for and a mute witness to the mob frenzy that took the lives of seven Dalits at one stroke. It provoked the infuriated caste Hindus to lock the door of Sriramappa's house from outside, stuff hay and grass into the windows and chimneys, douse it and the other two houses adjacent to it with kerosene and petrol and set them on fire. All the members of the family died of suffocation. While Sriramappa, Narasimappa, Papamma, Subbamma, Ramakka and Anjaneya died in one house, Eashwaramma, who was in the other house, died on her way to the hospital. One of the inmates while trying to escape was stoned and was seriously injured.

But why and by whom was Krishna Reddy murdered? The Reddy representatives - Ashwath Reddy, the president of the local unit of VYV and Srinivasa Reddy, president of the local Youth Congress unit and one Veerappa Reddy argued that Sriramappa brought a gang of his men - all Dalits - from outside by the 7'o' clock bus and alighted at the water pump. They were well armed and on seeing Krishna Reddy attacked him right away stabbing him in the process. They said that while Sriramappa ran and took shelter in his house, others fled under the cover of darkness. They were obviously set on finishing off Krishna Reddy as a retaliation to what had happened on the previous evening. But why should the entire family be wiped out? Could they have not dragged Sriramappa out if they wanted him to be captured? Above

all, why did the Reddys and other caste Hindus not go to the police? The answers to these questions were illuminating though incredible. Aswath Reddy, Srinivasa Reddy and other spokespersons of the Reddy community maintained that their clan who burnt down the house were so much agitated by the dead body of Krishna Reddy that they lost their cool. Moreover they were afraid that Sriramappa had with him deadly weapons-they suspected bombs allegedly supplied to Dalits by naxalites from the bordering Andhra Pradesh - and to capture him alive was therefore unthinkable. According to these spokespersons, the Dalits would not have killed Krishna Reddy but for the support and provocation of 'some outsiders'. They were vague about who these 'outsiders' were. Now they were Andhra naxalites and at another moment they were none other than the Dalit leaders from Chintamani. They repeatedly maintained that Sriramappa, aided by DSS in Chintamani, was the sole cause for breeding animosity between the Dalits and Reddys. They were quite sure that all other Dalits in the village lived amicably and peacefully. (Sriramappa, according to them, had died with his hand holding a sickle and his shirt tucked in. The tucked in shirt is like a red rag for caste Hindus for it symbolised the growing arrogance of Dalits and their modernisation. We came across this reference more than once as if the tucked in shirt was an irritable metaphor for Dalit empowerment heralding the weakening of the Reddys' hegemony. The upward mobility of some Dalit youths is the root cause for the simmering discontent among caste Hindus. Sriramappa was an educated man. He was also a small time contractor and was reasonably well off compared to others in his village.) The Reddys also revealed inadvertently that the Atrocities Case which the Dalits used to file against caste Hindus at the drop of a hat had of late come down drastically particularly after the 1997

Billandlahally episode. This killing of the police by Reddys apparently had taught the Dalits a lesson to behave properly and had forced them to reconcile to the power the Reddy community wielded for none of the accused in that case had been punished. By extension it looked as if these Reddy spokespersons were arguing that after this carnage, the Dalits would fully realise their true place in the power hierarchy. After our repeated questioning they admitted that there was no factual evidence to prove that Sriramappa had with him weapons supplied by the neighbouring Andhra. Though they did condemn the act of burning down of the house, they repeatedly reminded us about Krishna Reddy's murder and how no one cared to give it the importance it deserved.

On the other hand, the Dalits who spoke to us maintained (as they have done in their memorandum to Sonia Gandhi) that Sriramappa had absolutely no role in the murder of Krishna Reddy. According to their version, by the time Anjaneya Reddy and the Dalits alighted from the bus (which included Sriramappa, Anjappa, B.K. Anjenappa, Shankarappa, the injured and others) a group of 40 to 50 persons was waiting for the complainants at the bus stop. After alighting from the bus they were proceeding to their houses when the vokkaliga mob started throwing stones at them. The Dalits ran towards their houses and bolted them from inside. But Anjaneya Reddy went to his house and came back with his own vokkaliga followers. He then went to the unruly mob questioning them as to who were the persons who had attacked the Dalits on the previous evening in his absence. On the other side of the mob was one Buchanagari ByReddy who had won the panchayat election against Anjaneya Reddy. This old political rivalry surfaced again and in the ensuing clash between the two Reddy groups Krishna Reddy was stabbed. Immediately Anjaneya Reddy and his supporters ran away from

the scene. (AnjaneyaReddy now stands as one of the accused.) On seeing Krishna Reddy's body, the vokkaligas lost their cool, rushed to the scene, joined ByReddy's group and in retaliation burnt the houses of Dalits which was quite opposite the site of murder. The Dalits accuse that the infuriated gang led by ByReddy and Maddi Reddy bolted the doors and windows from outside, doused it with kerosene and lit it with fire. We also gathered from other Dalit eyewitnesses that even women belonging to Reddy community abetted the crime by supplying the rowdy gang with kerosene and hay.

These two versions have their respective loopholes. If, as vokkaligas allege, Sriramappa had his hand in murdering Krishna Reddy it is highly incredible that he should take shelter in his house which, located as it is amidst other caste Hindu houses, is the most unsafe place for anyone to be in at such a moment. Repeated enquiries about the alleged possession of bombs and other deadly weapons by Sriramappa revealed that it was not true. The two spokespersons, Aswath Reddy & Srinivasa Reddy, during their conversation with us, conceded the fact that Sriramappa was seen holding only a sickle when his body was discovered after the carnage was over. Nor could they satisfactorily explain why if Sriramappa was their main target, the house was not broken in and the accused captured alive. The Dalits whom we met at Chintamani forest guesthouse camp told us that there was no animosity between Srirmappa and Krishna Reddy. There were some minor altercations between them and Krishna Reddy about the release of water but it had been sorted out long back and they had no complaints against him. Then there was no satisfactory explanation for the burning up of the other two houses-one right behind Sriramappa's house and the other across a narrow lane,- which only suggested mindless vendetta and an act of terror. It

appeared to us that the story that Sriramappa was well armed and that the house was burnt down as a 'spontaneous, emotional reaction of the uneducated rural rustics' to the murder of their own man as described by the spokespersons was a mere afterthought: a vain attempt to rationalise and even conceal the well planned and methodical way in which the carnage was carried out. Curiously, the police van which was stationed at the village the previous evening had been withdrawn earlier. This is yet another matter that needs to be looked into during the official investigation for it can certainly reveal many facts that can throw light on the actual happening that fateful evening.

The burnt down house, which stood as a mute witness to the wrath of the caste Hindu, told a different story altogether. There were visible marks on the walls to show that it was attacked with stones & other heavy materials. The inside was blackened by smoke and household articles charred. The two stone beams supporting the roof revealed fresh cracks, and inflammable materials thrown in through the crack and the chimney had destroyed most of the material in the kitchen. There were stones all around the house indicating the possibility that had anyone tried to escape they would not have been spared. The other Dalits in the locality were threatened to move out of the spot or face the wrath of the angry mob. It is likely that most Dalit men had just then returned to their village from work, after travelling quite a distance from the neighbouring villages. Since 1997 Billandlahally episode, no Dalit belonging to the Mala community was engaged for agricultural work by the vokkaligas of Kambalapally. These Dalits, who have since been shifted to Chintamani forest guest house as a temporary rehabilitation measure told us later that they were prevented from rescuing their fellow Dalits by the Reddy mob. They were chased away

by hurling stones. Even some women belonging to caste Hindu community pelted stones and helped their men by supplying kerosene and other material for burning the house.

When our team visited the village on 16th March 2000, the entire male population of caste Hindus had fled the place. The Dalit families belonging to the Mala community were being shifted to Chintamani. The only persons available were the caste Hindu women and children and a couple of vokkaliga representatives from the neighbouring villages quoted above. As mentioned earlier they were from the Vokkaligara Yuva Vedike and the local Congress Committee and had stayed there to give out their version of the story to the visiting dignitaries & the press persons. The few women who ventured to speak out parroted the same story and hurled venom on Dalits. One of them, an old woman, went to the extent of saying that the Dalits had doused kerosene on their own houses, 'hoping that they could later escape and blame us'. One of the women relatives of Krishna Reddy blamed Sriramappa for all the problems they were facing now. It is curious to note that their version completely collaborated with that of the Reddy spokespersons who watched us listening to these women with a sense of shared understanding. That similar experience awaited every visitor to Kambalapally is evident from the article in Frontline reporting on the same issue. (April 14, 2000, pp. 42-44)

The version given by Dalits about Krishna Reddy's murder is also not without its gaps. If Anjaneya Reddy and his men were solely responsible for Krishna Reddy's murder, then why is it that they were not attacked or captured? Has there been a police complaint against them by other Reddys? Did Sriramappa leave behind Anjaneya Reddy, who had assured Dalits of his

support, and rush to his house on seeing the crowd? It is likely that Krishna Reddy was killed by members of his own caste for personal and political vengeance. It is equally likely that Dalits, particularly local leaders like Sriramappa were not totally neutral in the party politics between two Reddy factions.

But the fact remains that Sriramappa's elder brother, Ventakaramanappa was killed near the same spot about two years ago (i.e. on 5-6-1998 to be precise) and none of the culprits had been brought to book so far. (One of the accused in that murder case was none other than AnjaneyaReddy.) Since that event, Sriramappa had not been living in Kambalapally. The growing atrocities against Dalits was discussed in a meeting convened by the District administration during December 1999. In that meeting Sriramappa had expressed his desire to go back to his village and had sought protection. He had told in that meeting that he and his family were forced to leave the village by the vokkaligas who had destroyed their bore well, murdered his elder brother and were waiting to liquidate him. The Tahsilar of Chintamani held a "peace meeting" in Kambalapally on 8-1-2000 and the Dalit family which included Sriramappa, his brother Anjanappa, his father Venkatarayappa and mother Ramakka came back to the village. And by March 12, they were burnt to death.

This clearly shows that whether Sriramappa had a role in Krishna Reddy's murder or not, the caste Hindus had not taken too well to the fact of Sriramappa's return to the village. Even the two Reddy spokespersons, while speaking to us, admitted that the Tahsildar's reconciliatory intervention had been a failure as it was carried out only in the letter and had not brought 'the two hearts and minds together'. Interestingly they added that they

wanted the Dalits, who were now shifted to Chintamani Forest Guest House, to come back to the village for after all 'they all belonged to the same place'. However the Dalits were clearly against the idea. They would rather live under a tree than step into their village again. For them it was a graveyard now and a prison house. As one old Dalit woman put it, they had thrown thorny bushes in front of their empty houses and walked out of that place with a curse that Kambalappay should become a desert. So much for the fine sentiments about one's own birth place!

The Kambalappally Dalit carnage has thrown up a number of questions, questions that epitomise the changing nature of rural India -particularly that of Dalits-and the unchanging attitude of caste Hindus. Does it reaffirm the growing belief that villages are increasingly becoming torture chambers for Dalits causing large-scale migration to urban areas? Is urban - modernity, then, a viable alternative to the suffering minorities? What kind of new and unfelt trauma does this migration hold out for Dalits? What is the role of Dalits in primary production? Can re-distribution of land stop this Dalit exodus? Is there space for any other alternative? And so on.

The Background

These questions which hold a key to the Dalit predicament to day can be approached more precisely and confronted more ably if one locates the Kambalappally episode in its specific historical context leading to an understanding of the problems and possibilities of the Dalit movement in Kolar.

Kolar has the highest SC / ST population, of about 30% as compared to other districts of Karnataka. Of this nearly 45% are cultivators whereas about 46% are agricultural labourers (as per

the figures based on 1991 census). However significant changes have taken place in the last 20 years in the socio - economic profile of Dalits, thanks to the state policies and special rights given to Dalits. Educational and job opportunities have enabled at least some of them to move away from their traditional occupation and location as well as their places of birth. The legal measures to protect the land rights of Dalits have also contributed to the Dalit advancement. However, the most significant contribution to this phenomena is the emergence of Dalit Sangarsha Samithi in Kolar in the mid seventies. The Dalit assertion which is notably more visible here than elsewhere has been seen by caste Hindus whose power also has grown significantly, particularly due to commercial cropping and entry into electoral politics as 'arrogance'. In sum, it can be said that though the power relation has remained intact without much radical shift, there have been some remarkable changes in power equations in terms of socioeconomic mobility however small the number is. Even today out of the twelve MLA's seven are Vokkaligas, three SC's and two Balijigas (who are also upper caste).

The growing resentment of caste Hindus against Dalits is not, therefore, due to the changing political relations, which has hardly made any dent in the lives of Dalits. It is primarily directed against the visible segments of Dalit population. This segment is largely constituted by those who have laid claims to the fruits of modernity in terms of Government jobs and small business. For instance as mentioned earlier, Sriramappa was not only college educated, but was also a small time contractor. This made him move around in villages-with his shirt tucked in - inviting the wrath of vokkaligas. Dalits who get higher education and white collar jobs and are sucked into the anonymity of urban life are neither visible nor a 'threat' to the hegemony of the caste

Hindus. It is those youths who go to towns for education but do not get jobs - it is becoming increasingly difficult even for Dalits to get jobs in spite of the benefit of reservation - who become the proverbial red rag to the caste Hindus. They are neither inside nor totally outside the village community. They do not - can not- get back to agricultural work nor can they be gainfully employed elsewhere. As one lecturer of the local college told us, the Dalit students create as much, if not more, problems to the college administration as the upper caste students do. They frequently clash on petty matters, which is indicative of serious differences imbibed from traditional value systems.

Another main reason for a great deal of resentment among caste Hindus is the Protection of Civil Rights Act which allows a Dalit to register a case on a charge of caste oppression against an upper caste person. The caste Hindus allege that Dalits and the DSS have misused this Act. In fact Aswath Reddy, the local convener of VYV told us vehemently that they were being harassed with this Act. ' In Chintamani taluk alone there are as many as 200 attocity cases, but all of them are false', he said. We probed this a little further and asked how he could be so sure that they were all false. 'Because no case was proved!' was the reply. But the common experience is that it is easier to disprove the allegation than to prove it. The claim that in none of the cases the accused were found guilty only betrayed the accusation. But as reported in the 'Frontline' it is likely that caste Hindus use this Act to settle scores with enemies, some times from their own caste by using their dalit follwers. It is also possible that Dalits do use this as a weapon much to the resentment of others. The factual veracity of these claims & counter claims apart, the fact remains that Kolar has seen more number of caste clashes in the recent

past than any other place.

Added to this the ideological inconsistency of the DSS leadership has led to confusion among the cadres and factions within the movement. For quite a considerable time DSS remained away from electoral politics, focussing only on issue of economic and social empowerment of dalits. But when the organisation reached a stage when it commanded a large following the establishment, i.e., the political parties began wooing its supports for their electoral gains. The leadership also fell a prey to this and supported different political parties at different times-now the Communists, then the Janata Dal, later the Congress(I) and of late BSP. These shifting stands of the DSS has also contributed greatly to its breaking into factions, subsequently resulting in its getting weaker and weaker and that is what the establishment wanted. But, these efforts could also be understood as part of the Dalits' search for power, though misguided. In the process a few individuals in the movement gained access to power in the form of membership of the legislative council or chairmanship of a government body or proximity to the local political leaders. On several occasions, this compromise also forced the cadres to join hands with the same upper caste leaders whom they had opposed earlier. It has had its direct bearing on the community, particularly the jobless youth, resulting in their lumpenisation. Though the DSS has contributed in no less measure to question the notions of caste superiority, it has not been possible even for the DSS to create a sense of solidarity within different Dalit sub groups, most notably between the Malas (Holeyas) and the Madigas, the two prominent subcastes among Dalits. The unequal representation of all the subsections of Dalit community in various spheres has also resulted in the formation of various factions within the Dalit

movement.

The situation is not peculiar to Kolar or Karnataka. But Kambalapally stands as a microcosm of the internal alienation within the Dalit community. The village has the following composition:

Caste / Sub-caste	Number of families
Malas	29
Madigas	75
Reddys	75
Barbers	03
Brahmins	03
Gollas	02
Muslims	04

While all the Malas without exception have fled (or shifted to Chintamani) the Madigas have stayed back. The Malas told us that they were not hired for any work by the local land owners & had to seek work elsewhere sometimes travelling more than 10 to 12 kilo metres, everyday. Even their traditional occupation, such as for example going round the villages announcing the death of a villager, has been taken away from them. According to them the Madigas, though numerically equal to Reddys, were afraid of them and hence did not come to their support on that fateful night. We could infer that the Madigas who received very little benefit out of any government scheme like education and jobs, still lived under humiliating conditions totally under the grip of the feudal set up. The Malas, on the other hand, had gained access to developmental programmes in spite of all the limitations, leading to some sort of social mobility and assertive power. It is significant to note that the DSS has now given a memorandum to the Government that the Malas and the Madigas should be given separate reservations so that the benefit percolates to every subsect within the Dalit community. While this is a sign of

the realisation of the internal dissimilarity within the community, it can not by itself be a solution. The Madigas should have adequate representation and empowerment in social and cultural terms. This is possible only when the DSS forges a new solidarity with all the oppressed and the minorities based on a shared understanding of the oppressive forces that rule and shape the power structure of the society. In other words the solidarity should take the form of a political society without being seduced by the mainstream party politics. Only such a move, that resists easy appropriation by the power lobby, can empower them to stay in villages, have access to land and other common resources and grow into a self sufficient community with adequate bargaining power.

At the same time, it should also be noted that in spite of the bickering, differences and factionalisation, Dalits so far have functioned within the framework of the law of rights & constitutional provisions. It is the caste Hindus, on the contrary, who have tried to go beyond the legal framework of rights and used their feudal power bloc to control and dominate the Dalits. The caste based atrocities repeatedly committed by the caste Hindus have made a mockery of the law of the land, civil liberties and human rights. A brief glance at the history of caste atrocities and show of muscle power by caste Hindus against Dalits in Kolar district bear testimony to the reinforcement of the feudal mind set prevalent in both the state and society.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE DSS

AND

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CASTE CONFLICT

The DSS traces its emergence to the brutal killing of a Dalit boy, Munivenkatappa in 1975. The reason attributed to this

murder is that he, along with another vokkaliga boy from the same Mulbagal taluk, was studying for the PU course during the academic year 1974-75. While Munivenkatappa passed with distinction, the other boy failed. The Dalits allege that the vokkaligas could not tolerate this and murdered Munivenkatappa. Whatever may be veracity of this story, the death of Munivenkatappa stirred the conscience of Dalits. They formed the district unit of DSS in 1975 and staged protest demonstrations and held public meetings. This was the first attempt by Dalits to come out in public in an expression of solidarity.

This was followed by two separate incidents of gang rape and murder of two women, one Chinnamma of Doddihalli and Nagamma of Nallaguttahalli, of Chintamani Taluk, during 1975-76. The Dalits took up the case seriously, even got the body of Chinnamma exhumed and re-postmortem conducted by a panel of three doctors. They held massive protest rallies seeking justice and action against the culprits. But the accused went scotfree and nothing ever came out of the trial. These incidents prompted the Dalits to once again raise their voice against the upper caste violence resulting in the emergence of a few leaders among them. One of them, N. Shivanna, even contested the Chintamani Assembly elections in 1978 and lost to Chowda Reddy, a vokkaliga candidate. The election led to a spate of violence, resulting in the burning down of an entire colony of Madigas and in the death of Pedda Patelappa. The Dalits became so agitated that they too took to counter violence and seriously injured some police personnel.

The turning point in DSS movement, however, came about in 1979 when one Kumbara Sheshagiriappa, a potter by caste, was murdered and his daughter, Anasuyamma gang raped.

KrishneGowda, a local landlord wanted to buy Sheshagiriappa's land situated next to his. He tried to coerce Sheshagiriappa into selling his land but when it did not work, he retaliated. DSS took up the case even though the victims were not Dalits. (Kumbaras are potters by profession and belong to one of the most backward castes.) This was a major moment for the Dalit movement for two reasons. One, for the first time they took up a case from outside of their own community in an expression of solidarity. Two, they put a big resistance, one of the most well organised & well articulated protests ever demonstrated before. The huge procession took Sheshagiriappa's 'Jyoti' from Kolar to Vidhana Soudha, the State Legislature. The procession was led by prominent Dalit personalities who are well known names today in DSS : late Prof.B.Krishnappa, Devanur Mahadeva, Siddalingaiah, L.Hanumanthaiah, N. Muniswamy, O.Rajanna, O. Sreedharan, H. Govindaiah and N.Shivanna. Many sustained injuries in the police lathi charge in front of Vidhana Soudha. There was even a walkout by the opposition party in the Assembly led by its leader late Sri Devaraj Urs condemning the inaction of the Government.

The Sheshagiriappa episode led to a wide spread resentment among Dalits and stirred their consciousness as never before. In spite of their struggle and wide spread and sympathetic media support the culprits had gone without any punishment. But it had its benefits too. The DSS by now had become a presence to reckon with and had become visible as a political force. The next most important intervention of DSS - historically significant too - was its attempt at the release and rehabilitation of a large number of bonded labourers in H.Nagasandra village in Gauribidanur Taluk during 1982-83.

The agitation for the redistribution of land demonstrated that Dalits too could and should fight for their legitimate rights. This episode clearly established the power of Dalit assertion. At the same time it also drew the attention of the caste Hindus who saw in the DSS a potential threat to their traditional hegemony. The resistance to Dalit power consolidated itself and later on took the shape of 'Vokkaligara Yuva Vedike' (VYV). The socio-political implication of this development can not be underestimated for it was first and foremost a formal representation of organised resistance to the Dalit rise and then a form of political caveat for the future show of violence and oppression. The VYV initially functioned as a cultural forum of vokkaliga youth, but soon it shed its mask and began to work towards its hidden agenda of lobbying for power with overt political interests. This became evident when it openly intervened in a quarrel that erupted between students belonging to Dalits and vokkaligas. The matter took a serious turn, each group making claims & counter claims and had to be sorted out by the police and the then social welfare minister, K.M.Krishna Reddy. Though the matter was solved and truce declared, the VYV gained enormously in the bargain. On the other hand, the Dalits felt they had received a raw deal. There was every reason for them to feel frustrated for in all the cases mentioned above almost all of the accused went without punishment &, if tried, were acquitted for want of evidence. This, as always, could dampen the spirit and morale of any organisation and DSS was no exception. It once again revealed in no uncertain terms the nature of the unequal power structure inherent in the caste-ridden Indian society.

Two more important incidents illustrative of this phenomena followed the familiar trajectory only reconfirming the might of the caste Hindus who had the covert support of the state

inspite of the socalled Dalit members in the political and administrative fields. One was the case of Kannappa who was allegedly made to eat human excreta in Harati village in Kolar district by a caste Hindu. Reason? Kannappa, a drumbeater by profession had refused to oblige the landlord to offer his service after accepting Rs.20 as advance. (The refusal was due to political or factional differences.) This was in the summer of 1994 and a House Committee, constituted to look into the case, gave a clean chit to the accused, Venkataram Gowda, a local Congress leader. Peoples' Democratic Forum (PDF) sent a fact finding committee to the place and found out that the facts, as revealed by the medical reports, pointed out to a different story. PDF, through its press statement on 5-4-94, brought to the notice of the public that in spite of medical reports and other documents, the Joint House Committee which comprised Dalits and other members of the opposition had not cared to visit the scene of crime, but instead had conducted its deliberations in the Guest house relying solely on the statements made by only a few people, that too in the presence of the police. Interestingly the Committee while accepting that there were signs of physical assault on Kannappa did not have anything to say about bringing the culprits to book atleast on that count. Instead it only suggested that 'such instances should not occur again'. ('The Hindu' and 'Kannada Prabha', both dated 4.5.94.) PDF's demands that a fresh enquiry be conducted and a criminal case and a case under SC/ST Atrocities (Prevention) Act, 1989 be registered against the accused, the medical reports be made public and Mr.Kannappa be given adequate compensation were put to cold storage. What is worse, the local police authorities filed cases against Kannappa and others who had stood by him in his difficult days for having given 'false statements' about his being forced to eat excreta. It should be noted

that PDF had openly alleged that the administration had shielded the accused as he was close to political leaders and that the House Committee had not done its work properly. This was a serious allegation and had it been false, the House Committee had every right to resort to Privilege Move against PDF. But the fact that the House Committee and the Government did nothing either to prove its innocence or concern regarding these serious allegations only goes to show how the state connives with the upper castes in its 'calculated silence' and betrays its true colours.

The most shameless and glaring example of the hidden power bloc of the caste Hindus and their infiltration into the state power is provided in the case of the now infamous 1997 Billandlahalli episode. As noted earlier the VYV had already raised its voice against the DSS for its struggle in the bonded labour case during 1982-83. The simmering discontent against the DSS took a most violent and ugly turn when the Vokkaliga Sangha vehemently opposed the starting of a unit of DSS in Billandlahalli, a village about 30 kms from Chinthamani. Tracing the incident back to its details, the VYV spokesperson told this team in Kambalapally that they were not opposed to the opening of the DSS as such but only to the involvement of 'outsiders' meaning Dalit leaders from Chinthamani. This reasoning sounded frivolous and unsustainable for the very spokespersons stationed at Kambalapally as leaders of the Reddy community, were, by the same logic, outsiders to that village. Apart from personal resentment and enmity, it was clear that the VYV was ideologically and politically opposed to the spread of the DSS in yet another village. The situation became so tense that the district administration and the police, sensing trouble managed to convince the DSS leaders to cancel the programme of the inauguration of the new unit in Billandlahalli

scheduled on 1-9-1997. When the police were on their way to the village to announce the cancellation of the programme, they were met with stiff resistance in the form of road blocks and mass protests. The activists of the VYV had assumed that the Dalit leaders were being escorted by the police in spite of their opposition to the programme. What happened then clearly indicates the well - organised plan of the VYV activists to stall the programme. One SudhakaraReddy who was sitting on a tree with a loaded gun to shoot the Dalit leaders fired at the police and one constable fell dead. The other vokkaligas who were hiding behind the bushes to attack Dalits ran towards the police and attacked them with deadly weapons in which one police constable was killed on the spot and another was chased, caught, dragged out of the school building where he had taken shelter and hacked to death in the presence of teachers and students. Many police officers and constables were injured and their vehicle burnt. The police personnel later held a dharna in the police station. The DSS also protested against the brutal act of the vokkaligas. The matter was widely reported in the press. A Bundh was observed in Kolar by the general public and the DSS. In spite of wide spread media coverage and condemnation of these brutal killings of the police, no effective steps were taken to prosecute the culprits. All the accused came out on bail and nothing has happened since then as usual. This emboldened the vokkaligas all the more and they felt that nothing would ever happen to them. It was a clear demonstration of the strong hold of the vokkaliga community on the state apparatus for the state did not even bother to take the incident to its logical conclusion and protect the morale of its own police force. This explains why the Sub-Inspector, even though he too is a Dalit, refused to register the complaint given by Dalits in Kambalapally, a day prior to the carnage: he was

obviously sure that he was not safe in a predominately vokkaliga locality. So much for the power and responsibility of the state in safe guarding the interests and lives of Dalits & other minorities.

Close on the heels of the Billandlahally incident and almost a year later, on 5-6-1998, Venkataramanappa (elder brother of Sriramappa burnt in the carnage) of Kambalapally was stoned to death in the presence of his wife and other members of the family by vokkaligas. Those accused included MadhiReddy, Anjaneya Reddy, KrishnaReddy (Kittanna, now murdered) and other 39 persons. All these were let out on bail and not a single person has been punished. The reason for this murder was a village Panchayat decision that Venkataramanappa, along with Anjappa and Ravanappa (all Dalits) were guilty of stealing sheep belonging to the villagers of Kambalapally. Fearing police action, the accused Dalits fled the village along with their families. A police complaint was nevertheless filed, but during investigation it came to light that the sheep were actually stolen by the vokkaligas mentioned above (those accused in Venkataramanappa's murder). The sheep were later recovered and handed over to the owners reportedly helped by the same dalilts who were earlier accused of stealing the sheep. This incident brought contempt & ridicule to the vokkaligas and they were waiting for a suitable opportunity to avenge their shame, resulting in the brutal murder of Venkataramanappa.

The Present Scenario

The Dalits have been living with a peculiar dilemma ever since these two episodes which form the immediate backdrop for the March 2000 carnage. They have no other means or access to security and protection other than what the state guarantees, but

they have to live with a powerless state apparatus which had become totally pliable in the hands of the caste Hindus. As mentioned earlier, the Dalits, barring a few instances of petty skirmishes and irritable behaviour, have remained largely within the law of rights and framework of the Constitution. But the caste Hindus never get tired of pointing their fingers at these instances of Dalit arrogance and high handedness as a justification for their organisational needs and 'self-defence'. The VYV, it should be noted, has the blessing of none other than the most powerful vokkaliga pontiff, Sri Balagangadhara Swami who in his inaugural address to the Vedike exhorted its members (and his ardent followers) to fight unitedly and liquidate its 'enemies'. Without mincing his words he stated that the interests of the vokkaligas should be protected irrespective of their political affiliations and strive to gain access to political power. This overt support to vokkaligas by their religious leader has enabled them consolidate their political power all over the State. All these have contributed severally to the rise of the vokkaliga power and emboldened them to maintain their stronghold in the village. The selfassertion and upward mobility of a handful of Dalits appear to them as a stumbling block in this venture and a threat to their traditional hegemony. It is highly unfortunate that the general resentment against Dalits is so prevalent among caste Hindus - the modern myth that Dalits are the pampered lot, garnering all plum posts and educational opportunities - that it has come very handy for vokkaligas to play on the popular anti-Dalit sentiment, to the best of their advantage and profit. It is precisely these factors that finally led to the Kambalapappy carnage and to the renewed and vociferous demand for the ban on DSS.

The VYV, under the cover of a new banner called

'Nagarakia Hitharakshana Vedike' has carried out a misinformation campaign, organising bundhs and protest marches all over Kolar district in the wake of the Kambalapally carnage, demanding action against KrishnaReddy's murderers and Dalit leaders. It has also demanded the resignation of the State Home Minister, Mallikarjuna Kharge. Chintamani taluk is full of anti-Dalit slogans and graffitis. A bundh was observed on March 21 in Chintamani and on 22 in Bagepalli seeking a ban on DSS for allegedly 'spreading communal hatred in the district'. It was followed by similar bundhs in other prominent towns like Chikballapur, Gowridanur, KGF, Mulbagal, Malur and Bangarpet. In all these towns the Vedike reiterated its demand to ban the DSS and condemned its activities by personally accusing several Dalit leaders of provocation and extortion. In some places the protest marches turned violent, resulting in the police resorting to lathi-charge when a mob attempted to enter the Dalit's colony at Sidlaghatta Circle. ('Deccan Herald', 25-3-2000) This is the first major move by caste Hindus of declaring a caste war against Dalits. Media reports & news analysis on Billandlahally episode had earlier warned that Kolar, particularly Chintamani, was going the 'Bihar' way. The fear seems to have come true, with the vokkaligas taking to armed violence in an open defiance of law. The VYV has all the potential to 'grow' into another Ranavir Sena, settling scores with Dalits and other minorities.

Ironically, the Reddy spokespersons in Kambalapally as already mentioned had made it known that the Dalits were receiving support from naxalites from the Andhra border. It is not a coincidence that even the Chief Minister talking to the press after his visit to Kambalapally echoed the same opinion. This, we believe, is highly far-fetched, mischievous and misleading. It only

betrays the ideological bankruptcy and the lack of political will on the part of the state to understand the problem of Dalits and make sincere efforts to solve their problems. Once branded as naxalites, the state can easily and without any provocation pounce on the people in the name of law and order, and suppress their legitimate demands. We would like to take this opportunity to warn the state and the public that if the present situation of caste war is left unchecked, the situation may turn more violent as is happening in Raichur already. If the vokkaligas go the Bihar way, the time is not far off for the Dalits to go the Andhra way. Whatever happens in the future, its fate is certainly going to be writ by the state. It is not difficult for those who are familiar with peoples' struggles in this country to see the familiar trajectory the Kambalapally episode might take and the hidden dangers it contains within it. The responsibility of learning the right lessons from this recent history rests more with Dalits than any one else.

The district unit of the DSS in its memorandum submitted to Smt. Sonia Gandhi has urged for preserving the burnt down house as a memorial and its blown up photographs to be hung in the Vidhana Soudha and the Parliament House. Such symbolic acts will serve little purpose if they do not go along with more practical & meaningful attempts by the Dalits to find a solution based on material needs and aspirations. The series of episodes narrated above, culminating at present with the Kambalapally carnage have made it clear that given the existing social set up in the rural areas, the Dalits can not live with minimum security and dignity. The educated Dalit youths are slowly getting alienated from their rural moorings without any meaningful access to urban modernity. The growing unemployment within the Dalit community, the garnering of the available, but shamefully limited, state facilities by a small section of the Dalits,

the increasing thrust towards privatisation and withdrawal of state from crucial social sectors, are going to make the lives of all the minorities, particularly Dalits, a miserable one. The desire to go back to their village by the late Sriramappa and his family should be understood as an expression of a felt need of this family to come to terms with living in their native place, as a result of their realisation that it is difficult to cope with city life. Now the Dalits have vowed never to step back into that place. (Curiously, the vokkaligas want them back in their village, which now only sounds as a ploy to keep them within their hold and control.) There certainly exists in this dilemma the predicament of thousands of Dalits in India. They certainly need to modernise and have access to all the benefits of modernity, which is necessary to come out of the shackles of the feudal order, but should it necessarily happen through migration to the urban centres?

The Possibility

It is now clear that at the core the Dalit problem is the question of land. But we have also seen that mere allocation or distribution of land to Dalits has not really empowered them in any way for they still have to exist and struggle within the feudal or semi-feudal set-up prevalent in most of our villages. However land is the material base for Dalits to survive and remain rooted in the land of their birth. It is sad that the memorandum submitted to the Congress President by the DSS makes no mention of the land question. PDF would like to suggest that the state recognise the community rights of the Dalits and arrange to distribute land to the community as such so that no one person has an any exclusive right over the land. This, it is hoped, might prevent distress selling of land usually forced upon the Dalits as

was the case with Kumbara Sheshagiriappa, for he had paid through his life for not willing to sell away his land to a vokkaliga land lord. On their part the Dalits will have to work out a plan towards community farming by forming peasant cooperatives which are self sustained and autonomous. The various tasks of running such a collective farming enterprise could be shared by educated Dalits, be it establishing links with market or other government agencies to fully utilise the special provisions set up for the purpose. The various successful attempts at organic farming and modern methods of energy utilisation and water management, leading to a sustainable agricultural economy have the potential to profitably utilise the services of literate and educated dalits to harness the available resource. There are today several agencies with the necessary required know-how and skill to impart training in such ventures.

A concerted effort at such experimentation could begin right away and the initiative for action towards this goal should come from the DSS. This should also prevent the unnecessary migration of youths to the cities and small towns and make them not to depend solely on government jobs which have become hard to come by in spite of reservations and other benefits. Gainful employment in the village economy and management of human and material resources should certainly put an end to the growing lumpenisation among Dalit youths which, of late, has been causing so much heart burn among caste Hindus. This, we believe, is not a mere rosy dream or an idyllic projection of an impossible plan. The Kambalapally episode has stirred the consciousness of all sensitive and progressive sections of the society all over the nation & Dalits should not merely locate the present convulsions in the immediacy of

circumstances but go beyond them and create a future which holds a different possibility for Dalits - as well as for all oppressed minorities - to recreate a new social order and tolerant culture within the rural ambience.

The immediacy of the situation, of course, calls for a thorough probe into the entire incident by the CBI and severe action against all the culprits irrespective of their caste or political power. The easy escape of the caste Hindus has almost become a rule than an exception and if public morale and security for Dalits need to be restored the law should be allowed to take its own course. The press has reported that some of the accused - MaddiReddy, Byappa, VenkataReddy, AnjaneyaReddy, Ravi, Anand Kittanna, Narayana Swami and Reddappa - have already surrendered to the Special Court for Atrocities against SCs and STs on 30th March 2000 and have been remanded to judicial custody. Our information reveals other names involved in the carnage apart from those who have already surrendered. We give below their names and also demand that only an impartial enquiry would confirm the truth.

The list includes: Benakonappa Jayanna, Narasimha s/o Kothhaval Kittanna, Kadathalamora Anjappa and his brother Sriramudu, Bobepalli Subbaiah, Gopalappa and Venkata Reddy s/o Gopalappa, Shivanna and Sankara s/o Peddayappa, Peddappa and Anjappa s/o Vema Reddy, Ramachandrappa Reddy, Kapupalli Venkatappa, Ramesha s/o Chedabaavi Shanthamma, Venkatappa, Srinatha and ByraReddy, Bucchumugari Narayanappa, Panakagaru Anjappa, Dinu and Divani. The eye witnesses have also alleged that Kamakshamma, Parvathamma and Kotvala Venkatamma abetted the crime by supplying kerosene to set fire to the houses.

In the light of the above, PDF demands that:

- ◆ **Compensation should be given to all the victims be they Dalits or others - and adequate rehabilitation measures taken up.**
- ◆ **The CBI probe should look into entire socio-historical context, which has given rise to the present tension and carnage. Further, the CBI should look into the roles played by various political parties, present and past legislators and above all the support base and hidden agenda of the Vokkaligara Yuva Vedike.**
- ◆ **Culprits who are responsible for the murder of the Dalit family as well as of Krishna Reddy should be booked and tried in a special court as promised by the government.**

PDF appeals to the Dalits to struggle for justice unitedly by taking up the issues of other oppressed castes/classes, and to restrain from entering into party politics and learn from the mistakes committed in the past. It also urges the DSS to end its factionalisation and work towards an alternative model of development geared towards sustainable modes of living. Most importantly, the DSS should, as an experiment, work out a programme for co-operative farming, with all its related aspects, from water and land management to the gainful deployment of the human resources to check Dalit migration to the cities.

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