

NEERUKONDA: ECONOMIC BASIS OF THE RECENT OUTRAGE AND THE CRIMINAL  
APATHY OF THE POLICE.

APCLC Report.

On 17th July 1987, A Fact Finding committee of APCLC visited the village of Neerukonda, where a caste-Hindu assault on harijans (Malas) led to the death of one person and serious injuries to 4 others. The following is the team's brief report.

PARALLEL WITH KARAMCHEDU:

A mob of about 150 to 200 youth, mainly of the Kamma caste but also containing 10 to 15 Yadavs, attacked the Mala street early in the morning of 15th July. They hit out at whomever they could find, with axes, spears (bariselu) and sticks. They were obviously not motivated by vengeance against any individual; but rather it was a general assault on the Malas to 'teach them a lesson'. In this, the incident is entirely parallel to the Karamchedu killing that took place almost exactly 2 years ago, on 17th July 1985, which was also a general assault on the harijans with axes, spears and sticks. The second similarity is that Neerukonda and Karamchedu are the native villages of influential Telugu Desam leaders, former Health Minister Dr. M.S.S. Koteswara Rao and the Chief Minister's son-in-law and present Health Minister Dr.D. Venkateswara Rao, respectively. The third similarity is that in both villages, very close relatives of these Ministers took the leading positions in the attacks. The final similarity is that in both the villages, the police took precious little action in the first two or three crucial days, managing to arrest only a handful of the more than 200 assailants.

THE ECONOMIC CONFLICT:

While the political and caste factors behind the assault have received much publicity, the fact is that there is a strong economic basis for the conflict between the two communities. Unlike Karamchedu, Neerukonda is in a dry region with no irrigation facilities. However, because of the advantageous soil conditions, extensive tobacco cultivation is undertaken on rainfed

land. This is the basis of the prosperity of the land lords of the village, atleast half a dozen of whom own upto 50 and 100 acres of land. These big landlords are all Kamma by caste. The total number of Kamma households is about 200, many of whom are not rich. On the other side there are about 150 families of the Malas, and in between are about 40 Yadava (Golla) families. In the conflict the Yadavas are divided between the two sides. The Malas, with few exceptions, are dependent upon wage labour, though some of them have a couple of acres of land. They work mainly in the paddy and tobacco fields of the land lords, which naturally creates a situation of conflict.

WAGES: The daily wage rates they are paid are abnormally low for a prosperous district like Guntur. For work like weeding and transplanting paddy they are paid Rs.5 to 8 per day, and for grading tobacco they are paid only Rs. 7/- per day. This is much below the legally fixed minimum wage of Rs.13/- per day in a zone I Agricultural region like Guntur.

ARREARS: Even this less-than-minimum wage is not paid promptly. For tobacco grading the labourers are paid only after the entire crop is marketed. This means that often the labourers have to wait for six months before getting payment. The women complain that even for weeding paddy fields, they are only paid after the crop is marketed, which means a delay of atleast 3 months. It should be noted that the farmers get crop loans from the Agricultural Co-operatives precisely for the purpose of meeting the needs of labour and other costs before the produce is marketed. Obviously they are using the crop loans for the purpose of trade or money lending and are keeping the labourers waiting for months for their wages.

USURY: When the labourers do not get prompt payment for their work they are naturally forced to take loans. They again go to the same landlords for loans. If landlord A delays payment they go to landlord B for a loan. He charges exorbitant

interest at the rate of Rs. 3 to 5 per month, i.e. 36 to 60 percent per annum. As a consequence, many of the labourers are constantly indebted, and some have outstanding loans of a few thousand rupees.

#### UNTOUCHABILITY:

Until 1981, relations between the two communities were amicable, because the Harijans were docile and obedient. In that year the Malas set up a candidate of their own in the gram panchayat elections. This led to a quarrel. At that time an 'agreement' was arrived at, according to which the Malas and the caste Hindus agreed not to take out processions - wedding, festival or election processions - in each others area. Since the Mala houses are confined to one street, this 'agreement' actually means that their processions will be confined to only their street, while the others can go through the rest of the village. Thus the 'agreement' actually amounts to the practise of Untouchability, and is an offence under the Civil rights Act, 1956. It is surprising that such a blatant practice of untouchability should be carried on in the native village of the State's Health Minister.

#### THE ASSAULTS:

From 1981, and especially after the Telugu Desam Party came to power, there have been many assaults upon the Malas by the Karma youth. There have been six assaults in total. Each time a mob of youth would raid the Mala Street with sticks and beatup the people randomly. There were no casualties in the previous incidents. What happened in the latest incident is that perhaps inspired by Karamchedu, the assailants used axes and spears in addition to sticks, killing Manne Sessaiah (60) and seriously injuring Bejjam Devaratnam (40), Sikha Nageswara Rao (45), Chukka Veeraswamy (35) and Korra Rosaiah (22). Of these, Rosaiah is a Yadava and the rest are all Malas.

#### POLICE INACTION:

As the assault was going on, the S.I. of Mangalagiri, Koteswara Rao, came to the village. When questioned how he got


the news, he says that he got an 'anonymous phone call'. The harijans, however, say that the Kamma youth had threatened the previous day saying: 'tomorrow we will attack you'. It seems that is their habit. So the police must have been aware of the likely assault. But not expecting the assault to turn lethal the S.I. seems to have come at leisure to make some noise after the assault is over.

The most shocking thing is that, fully 3 days after the assault, just 2 persons have been arrested by the police, as against the estimated 150 to 200 assailants. Moreover, these two are a Yadava (Korra Lakshmaiah), and a dhobi (Chakali Hanumanthu), the latter having no connection with the incident. Not a single Kamma youth has been arrested till now by the police. Some have been picked up but immediately .. released. Most of them have left the village but are visiting their homes daily and openly. It must be noted that many of them are close relatives of the former Health Minister Dr. M.S.S. Koteswara Rao. Is that the reason why they are yet to be arrested?

CONCLUSION:

The Chief Minister has ordered a Judicial Enquiry into the incident. It appears that the government thinks that old and retired judges are more efficient in investigating crimes than policemen. Since the names of the main suspects are already known all that is required is to order the police to hunt for them on a priority basis, and arrest them. Neerukonda is actually a rather interior village from which it is not easy to escape within a few hours. If the police had not remained completely idle for more than one day, they would have got all the assailants by now.

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