

Dalit Girl Thrown into Fire by Upper Caste Men

Her pregnant mother severely thrashed while trying to rescue her daughter from flames!

By Madhu Chandra

The world woke up to the gruesome and spine-chilling story of Kamlesh, a six year old little girl from dalit community in UP, who was tossed into the burning fire by the members from upper caste community in her village three years ago. Her crime: she walked by the house of an upper caste family early in the morning, to go to the open field, the only space the dalit community has to heed the nature's call. Justice denied, accused acquitted, critically wounded, skins cracking and right elbow crippled.

Her fully pregnant mother Manju tried to snatch her from the roaring flames but was stopped by the culprits who stood there to prevent any rescue attempt. They thrashed and beaten her severely. She collapsed to the ground watching flames licking her daughter to death before falling unconscious. She regained consciousness few minutes later and managed to pull her daughter out of the fire. But by then she suffered more than 80% burns and was at the brink of death.

While little Kamlesh battled for her life, five critical hours have been wasted at a government hospital. And after 36 hours she was moved to a bigger hospital before she was finally moved to the Safdarjung hospital in Delhi. Lack of proper treatment at critical hours meant she wouldn't make normal recovery. Three years later, her right hand is a piece of dead rubber having lost mobility and function. Her left hand and right leg burnt severely and she suffer from searing pain. The scars inside her are as fearsome and permanent. A tender, innocent life has been violated and nipped in the bud.

The incident so traumatized her mother, Manju, that she suffered a mental break down and would not recover to testify in the court against the culprits later. None of the neighbors who witnessed the brutal act would come forward to testify against the culprits with muscle power, influence and connections in high places. Many were forced to compromise and others were intimidated into silence. Kamlesh's father Saudan says, "Names of four culprits were registered with police. But names of three were removed and only one was arrested. We were forced to withdraw the complaint."

Justice was not only delayed but denied and subverted. It was made to serve the perpetrators! No fair investigation and no protection for the witnesses meant case would fall apart and justice would not be served.

A fact finding team led by Dr. John Dayal - member of National Integration Council, Madhu Chandra - Regional Secretary of All India Christian Council, Vidhya Bhushan Rawat - Social Activist and Anil Chamadia - Senior Journalist and Dalit Activist visited the village two months ago was shocked to learn that court had closed the case as there were no witnesses to testify against the culprits. Kamlesh's mother Manju was mentally unstable to appear and testify and all the accused walked out free. It was like rubbing salt into the wound for Kamlesh's family. No justice, no medical assistance, no future. Help from the state government was more a token gesture than real. The incident further deepened their bleak financial condition. They borrowed money from friends and money lenders to treat their daughter which further plunged them into crisis. Victim is further victimized.

This is just an example of the discrimination and oppression millions of dalits suffer daily in India. They suffer in silence and submission. Any form of challenging the system will be fatal and dangerous. Caste lines are not to be crossed or violated. A local Dalit activist and leader of All India Confederation of SC/ST Organisations told the fact finding team, "For years, Dalit community in the village has been on the receiving end of caste discrimination and neglect. This is the first instance where police have at least arrested the culprits."

Kamlesh is now nine years old and future doesn't hold much hope for her unless we step in and help. She needs proper medical treatment to regain the use of her hands and extensive plastic surgery to mend her scars before she can face the world.

A civil society delegation met National Commission for Scheduled Caste chairman Dr. P. L. Punia on April 11, 2011 and submitted a memorandum, seeking justice for young Kamlesh. Commission took serious note on lapses committed by law enforcing agencies of the district and ordered Uttar Pradesh government to appeal the case in high court against the session court judgment acquitting the culprit without fair trial. Commission also ordered government to provide medical care and police security to young Kamlesh and family as they could be attacked for appealing at higher authorities.

Madhu Chandra is a social activist and research scholar based in New Delhi. He works as Regional Secretary of All India Christian Council (www.indianchristians.in), Spokes Person of North East Support Centre & Helpline (www.nehelpline.net) and National Secretary of All India Confederation of SC/ST Organisations (www.scstconfederation.org).