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Rape, torture by landlords forces Karnataka villagers to flee

Senthilir S, TNN, Aug 26, 2010, 03:42am IST

BUDIHALLI (KARNATAKA): It's the untold tale of a village in the grip of the feudal system, and a quiet revolt brewing. Budihalli village of Karnataka's Chitradurga district is a glaring example of caste discrimination and bondage, with a yawning gap between communities.

Here, landlords hold sway. They allegedly rape and torture women of lower castes while the men work as bonded labourers, paying off debts accumulated over generations.

Breaking the stranglehold, 25 families of Madiga (scheduled caste) community left the village to look for self-respect and a new life. They reached Venkateshwaranagar in Chellakere taluk, 30 km from Budihalli, and set up tent.

The exodus took place a fortnight ago. Women, men, children and the elderly took their possessions and began walking until they reached a settlement abandoned by nomads. For now, they are living in thatched huts.

For them, this migration is symbolic: a breaking away from sexual harassment, rape and torture by the Gollas and Nayaks. The penniless families had no money to even buy bus tickets to their destination.

Sitting cramped in the huts — two families in each — they recounted the horrors of their life in Budihalli. "We didn't know where to go. We left our village without taking our belongings. We don't have jobs or money to send our children to school. We are struggling for two meals a day. The government has not helped us in any way. We have lost hope, and have no place to go," cries **Kollamma T**, a Madiga woman.

Savithramma (name changed), fighting back her tears, said, "Every day, drunk landlords would barge into our houses. They harassed and raped us. All these years, we were scared to talk because of social stigma."

"They abused us. Our men went to work in the fields of the landlords as bonded labourers to repay the loans taken by our grandparents. We were unable to bear the harassment, and wanted to work independently. So we began to sell firewood and cultivate government land," she said. When the Madigas began earning independently, the Golla and Nayak landlords socially boycotted them.

H N Shivamurthy, state organizing convener of the **Human Rights Forum for Dalit Liberation in Karnataka**, said, "The families of the dalit community had protested several times. One woman, **Palakka Durgappa**, lost her life while protesting. She sat in the rain for three days, protesting. But it hasn't helped them."

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