

Salil Mekaad, Hindustan Times
Email Author
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After the flood, a deluge of discrimination

A padlocked door was all that was left of Kanakappa's house when floods hit Karnataka two months ago. Though the 59-year-old Dalit labourer in Bellary district survived the natural disaster, his family of eight, left with only the clothes they were wearing, faced another ordeal — discrimination.

In the immediate aftermath of the flood, Kanakappa's family did not get shelter at a relief camp set up in a temple — it's out of bounds for Dalits.

Later, Dalits in the area were allegedly not given food from the ganji kendra, a government food distribution centre set up in an upper caste locality.

"The battle with the floods lasted only three days, but the fight for survival in these two months has been appalling," Kanakappa said, standing at the opening of a tin shed on damp mud at a school.

The school was made into a relief shelter only after protests from Dalits who lost everything in the floods.

He and members of around 330 lower caste families in Hachauli village, around 350 km from Bangalore, reportedly got unsigned cheques of Rs 5,000 each as compensation, which they were forced to return.

Kanakappa's distress is shared by many of the 5.4 million lower caste families affected by the vicious floods that hit 14 districts of northern and coastal Karnataka in September-end and the first week of October.

"Karnataka society, like any other society in India, can't be expected to be an egalitarian society," said state Flood Relief Nodal Officer S.M. Jaamdar. "A few cases of discrimination have been reported from remote flood-affected areas and have been dealt with strongly."

He claimed the priority of the state government was relief and rehabilitation and it could not be expected to end age-old discriminatory practices during a crisis.

Chief Minister BS Yeddyurappa said the government was keeping a vigil and strict action would be taken in case of any kind of discrimination in flood relief works.

Around 18 million people were affected by the floods that claimed more than 230 lives, inundated around 4,300 villages, destroyed more than 600,000 houses and ruined crops in more than 220,000 hectares.

The government had opened 1,211 ganji kendras offering food to the victims — mostly in upper caste localities. "Dalits were either denied food or fed leftovers," said Karnataka Human Rights Forum for Dalit Liberation Convenor Basavraj Kowtal.

"We were sent back from the ganji kendra and asked to bring our own plates," said Ramesh Honnamere (38), a resident of Bijapur district, around 580 km from Bangalore, in northern Karnataka. "Everything we had was washed away in the floods."

Alleged caste discrimination and government apathy forced Dalits to make temporary roadside shelters.

NGO People's Forum for Flood Relief and Rehabilitation shot a letter to the Karnataka State Legal Service Authority, which has been reviewing flood relief work, alleging that caste and communal politics were playing a major role in relief and rehabilitation. "In some villages, separate camps and ganji kendras were set up for Dalits since the dominant caste people refused to allow them to enter the camps and ganji kendras already established," the letter alleged.

"In several of the 346 villages planned to be shifted by the government, the upper caste members are deciding the location of Dalit dwellings in the new land allotted to them," Action Aid Karnataka Programme Coordinator Shameem said.

The state government, however, says the NGOs' claims are highly exaggerated. A padlocked door was all that was left of Kanakappa's house when floods hit Karnataka two months ago. Though the 59-year-old Dalit labourer in Bellary district survived the natural disaster, his family of eight, left with only the clothes they were wearing, faced another ordeal — discrimination.

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