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19 Oct 2009 03:15:00 AM IST

Caste bias rules in Virudhunagar village

KARIAPATTI: The plight of the 37 Dalit families, whose members have fled T Veppankulam in Virudhunagar district — of the 120 families, 70 are that of caste Hindus and 49 Scheduled Castes — to Kariapatti is just one of the many instances of caste discrimination happening every day in the State, where untouchability is still practised in subtle forms.

Dalit, who are discriminated against by the dominant upper class caste Hindus, face various types of atrocities. In a petition submitted to the divisional revenue officer, Veeran, a Dalit ward member of Veppankulam village panchayat, says they have to pick up their footwear in their hands while walking on streets housing the caste Hindus. If they are on a cycle or other two-wheelers, they have to get down and walk. This applies to even small children walking to their anganwadi schools under the hot sun.

Sexual harassment of Dalit women is a major concern of rights activists. Jayamma (23), a Dalit woman who has studied upto class VIII, is vocal on the issue. She says she paid the price for giving a tongue-in-cheek reply to a caste Hindu man who wanted to know what she was doing at the PDS shop. "He grabbed both my breasts and pushed me down and beat me mercilessly." Such incidents happen frequently, other women echo her.

Caste Hindus do not like to see Dalits well dressed, Jayamma says. Women have to tie their saris above their ankle, with the ends tightly tucked into their hips. In the event of any death in a caste Hindu family, one woman per Dalit family has to go up to the cremation ground sounding the kulavai. If they fail, a meeting is convened by the panchayat the next day and they have to prostrate before the assembly. The petition says the two-tumbler system still prevails in the village albeit in a modified form. While caste Hindus is served tea in a steel tumbler, it is plastic cups for Dalits. Interestingly, the panchayat president, Malarkodi, is a Dalit, who was put up by the caste Hindus for the reserved post. During meetings, she either has to stand or sit on the floor. Sitting on the chair is a strict no-no, the villagers say.

Muniaraj of People's Watch, a Madurai-based human rights NGO, says the main reason for the exploitation of Dalits is their complete economic dependence on the upper castes. "The villagers are daily wage labourers. They do not own any land and work in farms belonging to caste Hindus. Hence, they have to be at their beck and call."

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