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Dalits demand their rights

By Zia Ur Rehman
For CentralAsiaOnline.com
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THARPARKAR, Pakistan ó Long accustomed to discrimination, Pakistan's Hindu Dalits are fighting a new form of harassment that is driving them from their ancestral villages in the Tharparkar District of Sindh.



About 70 Dalit families have left to protest the growing incidence of kidnapping of their young women. The kidnapping typically leads to rape or forced conversion to Islam and marriage.

That fate befell a 15-year-old Dalit girl, Daya, recently, the Dalits say. Kidnappers snatched and forcibly converted her, after which a local Muslim landlord, Mumtaz Hangorio, married her, said Arjan Meghawar, a Dalit.

Pakistan has nearly 3m Hindus, 75% of whom are Dalits. About 70 Dalit families have moved from Aakli to the plains near Mithi, where they are protesting the abduction of their women and demanding security. [Zia Ur Rehman]

"Daya ... was kidnapped when the entire family was asleep", he told Central Asia Online. "They were told that she converted to Islam in a local madrassa".

Her family have been unable to see her, he said, calling that situation typical for the families of such kidnapping victims.

"The kidnappers have ordered the Dalit community to stay quiet; otherwise, they will abduct more girls", Meghawar said.

He rejected the claim that the girl converted voluntarily.

"First, Daya is only 15", he said, "which means she is not legally eligible to marry; second, she was not produced in any court to record her statement in this regard". The minimum age for marriage in Pakistan is 16.

Daya was the second Dalit girl victimised by men from the majority community, according to the Dalits. Local men kidnapped and gang-raped Kasturi, 17, on January 24, said Veerjee, head of the Kohli Association.

The abductors are "local bigwigs belonging to the ruling Pakistan People's Party, who are now issuing threats to keep the Dalit community silent", he said.

Kasturi's parents have paid a price for disregarding such threats and complaining to the police, he said; even the police are now harassing them.

"Even though (rape) is a nonbailable offence", Veerjee said, "the local court granted bail to the accused". Kasturi and her family had to flee their village because the suspects threatened them, he added.

Section 365-B of the penal code allows only higher courts, not local ones, to grant bail to those suspected of "kidnapping ... any woman" with forced marriage or sexual intercourse in mind, Arshad Malah, a legal scholar, told Central Asia Online.

Fed up with injustice and fearful for their safety, the fleeing Dalit families (about 400 individuals) have abandoned the village of Aakli and relocated to the plains near Mithi, said Hot Chand Toghani, a social activist with the Thardeep Rural Development Programme.

The government could do more to help them, he said. It has only "distributed 100 application forms for the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP)", he told Central Asia Online.

The government is doing its best to protect the Dalits, replied Shaarjeel Memon, a member of parliament representing Tharparkar from the ruling party.

"The district government has been directed to establish houses for them and provide food and water", he told Central Asia Online. "They'll be receiving aid money from the BISP very soon. We are trying to convince them to end their protest and return to their villages".

That idea doesn't sit well with some aggrieved Dalits.

"No one can imagine how difficult it is to leave one's ancestral village", said 70-year-old Mehendero Meghawar. "But we've decided not to go back".

Kidnapping brides from the Dalits and forcibly converting them are common abuses, said Sono Khangharani, a Dalit social worker who pins the blame for such acts on local landlords and other influential residents.

"The Dalits are the poorest of the poor and are discriminated against daily, even though the Pakistani constitution promises equal rights to all", he said.

Khangharani is the first Dalit to receive a governmental award. President Asif Ali Zardari named him a recipient of the Thamgha-e-Imtiaz civilian honour in August 2009.

Pakistan has nearly 3m Hindus, 75% of whom are Dalits.

Dalits encounter discrimination from both Muslims and higher-caste Hindus, Khangharani told Central Asia Online. The Dalits' "untouchability" bars them from accessing public places.

"Neither Hindu nor Muslim barbers will shave Dalits or give them a haircut", he said. "Hindus and Muslims won't eat food prepared by the Dalits, either. Such practises concerning untouchability are very common in Sindh".

Islam not only forbids forced conversion and forced marriage, it mandates equal treatment of all religious minorities, said Mufti Wali Khan Almuzaffar, a prominent Islamic scholar. Islam has no concept of untouchability and the idea of an untouchable social class comes entirely from tradition and myth, he added.

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INTERNATIONAL THE NEWS

71 Dalit families leave ancestral village to protest girls abduction

Sunday, March 07, 2010

By By Jan Khaskheli
Karachi

In the first incident of its kind, 71 Dalit Meghwar families of the Aaklee village, comprising 400 members, have left their ancestral village to protest against the alleged abduction of a 15-year-old Meghwar girl Daya. According to the villagers, the teenager was forcibly married to a Muslim influential.

This is the second incident of abduction of a girl from the minority Dalit community during the last two months. Earlier in January 2010, Kasturi, a young girl from the Kolhi community in Nagarparker, was kidnapped and gang-raped.

The Meghwar families have now set up their makeshift huts on the plains near Mithi Town and are demanding protection for their young daughters, who they believe are not secure after the kidnapping of Daya. The protestors said that they not yet lodged an FIR against the accused out of the fear of more kidnappings of their women. Daya was kidnapped on January 23 from her hut in the night. Soon after the incident, it was declared that she has converted to Islam at an old Madrassa in Samaro town and married with one Mumtaz Hingorjo, son of a local influential.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), Sindh Taskforce, the alleged abductors, Mumtaz and his father Talib Hingorjo, have threatened the community to stay quite on the issue or else they would kidnap other girls from the community.

Former Member of the Sindh Assembly, Engineer Gianchand, who also belongs to the Meghwar community and is the general secretary of Scheduled Castes Federation of Pakistan, told The News that the people are in great trouble. "They are practically living on the ground. Nobody from the government has come forward, extending a helping hand in this difficult time.

They are starving and they don't have any access to potable water," Gianchand said. The ex-MPA's family has given a piece of land to the protesting villagers to settle down.

The Meghwar community members are considered traditional supporters of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). However, the community elders maintain that though they had conveyed the issue to the party leaders, all they received are empty assurances.

Ratna and Khaku, parents of Daya, believe that the accused had forced their daughter to change her religion. "It is a forced conversion," they claimed.

Pirbhu Satyani of Thardeep Rural Support Programme, a local NGO, rejected the claim of the Madrassa head and the abductors regarding the girl's change her faith on her will. "The girl is only 15 years old, which means she is ineligible for marriage according to the law of the land. Secondly, the girl should be produced before the court where her statement should be recorded before the magistrate," he added.

Satyani said that Thardeep was providing the protestors with food and other necessities. He said the families need shelter immediately and the cost to build a single hut ranges between Rs15, 000-17,000. He regretted that the government was doing nothing for these families except distributing some 100 forms of the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP).

Mehendro Meghwar, a local activist, said, "No one can imagine how difficult it was for us to leave our ancestral village. We have decided not to go back to our village."

When asked about their immediate needs, majority of the protestors said that they were worried about the education of their children because the exams had already started. Besides, they said, they had lost their jobs. They also sought a piece of land from the government.

According to a statement issued by the HRCP's, Pir Ayoob Jan Sarhandi, who heads the Madarssa in Samaro, has claimed that they have converted 40,000 non-Muslims to Islam so far. "Not a single case of forced conversion has been proved against us. In this case, the girl showed her willingness," the HRCP statement quoted Sarhandi.