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Fearing for life Mirchpur Dalits refuse to return

Vrinda Sharma

Despite being offered government jobs, monetary compensation and police security, Dalits in this Haryana village are adamant on their demand for a separate village. "Why is it so difficult for everyone to understand? Our homes were burnt by our neighbours in front of police, what sort of peace will the administration offer us?" asked Subhash, a disillusioned villager.

On April 21 over a dozen houses belonging to the Dalits were set ablaze allegedly by Jats of the same village over a minor row. Eighteen-year-old Suman, who suffered from polio, was trapped in her burning house and was charred to death on the spot, while her father Tara Chand (70) suffered 90 per cent burns and died later.

While the administration had claimed that the victims of Mirchpur incident were being fully compensated for the loss to their houses and domestic goods, the burned down streets of the village bear a haunted deserted look as only one third of the Dalits are left in the village.

"Most of the dalits of the village left soon after the incident to live with relatives elsewhere and a group has gone to New Delhi, to protest and demand a safe haven – our own village. The ones that are still in the village are feeling safe only due to the excessive police presence," said another villager.

Two of Tara Chand's sons have started working at the Hisar secretariat, on the posts that the administration offered and a compensation of Rs. 5 lakh has been given to the family. But no rehabilitation is visible at the site of the tragedy, "The administration had sent some bricks, but the villagers sent them away. We are not going to stay here at any cost, then why built structures on the graves?" said Subhash.

Speaking to *The Hindu* from New Delhi, Satyawan, who is leading the protest group at Jantar Mantar said, "Administration and politicians don't care if we live or die, as long as they don't look bad. Our demand for a separate village and death penalty for the murderers has not been addressed by anyone yet but we will continue to demand justice."

On May 2 the Deputy Commissioner, Hisar, Mr.O.P.Sheoran assured that relief will be provided to the victim families and the accused involved in this incident would be punished at all cost. He also appealed to the people of the Mirchpur to maintain peace and brotherhood of the village.

When asked about the attitude of Jat members of the village, 45 year- old Mala Devi said, "Due to the police no one says anything in open but they approach us, directly or via the panchayat members and give us subtle hints that we should budge or else there could be trouble."

The Jat households of the village, whose men have been convicted and arrested in the arson case, refused to speak to the media. Interestingly all the Upper Caste villagers claimed that their entire family was not in the village at the time of the incident.

"Since that day, a Dalit family can not even find a glass of milk inside the village; we fetch these basics from near by places. Each villager is dependent on his village, Government can provide jobs to a handful, but what will the Dalits do when another community continues to oppose their right to live?" asked a 65-year-old Dalit man who stayed back in the village.

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'They will kill us if we go back to our homes'

Durgesh Nandan Jha, TNN, Jun 1, 2010, 01.13am IST

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NEW DELHI: For two weeks now, the Dalit families from Mirchpur in Haryana's Hissar district have taken shelter at a temple in Delhi, terrified by the threat to their lives back home.

Small children, women and the elderly have been living on the premises of the Valmiki temple near Mandir Marg and surviving on food given to them by local people from the Balmiki community.

A number of the children have been falling ill, some even being hospitalised due to health problems caused by the summer heat. But the villagers say they will live in penury, put up with the heat, even forget about everything back home, but they will never go back.

"The Jats will kill us if we do," alleged 44-year-old Kamla Devi, a dalit woman whose husband and 18-year-old physically challenged daughter were burnt alive by a mob in the village on April 21. Her house was allegedly set on fire by the Jats because one of the Balmikis objected to some Jat boys hitting a dog. People from the other community in turn, said Devi, burnt her house and at least 20 other Balmiki houses in broad daylight.

"More than 200 people, men and women, gheraoed our houses and started spraying petrol on them. I was sitting in my house with my two sons, Pradeep and Umarlal, my daughter Sonam and my husband Tara Chand. We were talking about my daughter's marriage when the fire ate up Tara Chand and Sonam. When we tried to save them, the mob began to run towards us. I finally ran for my life, so did my two sons," said Devi.

Gulab Singh, a security guard who belongs to the Balmiki community, said he was nearby. "They threw bricks at me. I still cannot stand properly. After setting the houses on fire and looting what was inside, some of them celebrated, dancing and abusing us," he alleged.

Those taking refuge in the temple include about 50 elderly people, and over a 100 women and children. "We left our village soon after the incident because the Jats were threatening to burn more houses and kill us. For about 15 days we kept protesting at the district collector's office, then decided to come here, worried for our lives. People from our community here are supporting us in every way they can, but the summer heat has taken its toll on the children. They are suffering from fever and gastroenteritis. Some of them have fallen seriously ill and have been admitted to the AIIMS," alleged 63-year-old Bunny Singh.

Most of the Dalit men taking shelter at the temple worked as labourers in the other community's households. They said the matter of a dog being beaten was only an excuse.

"For ages, they have dominated us. Our families have been their paid slaves. The fact that some of us are prospering, socially and financially, upsets them," alleged Bala Ram, one of the Balmiki villagers.

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SC notice to Haryana over Dalit attack

Dhananjay Mahapatra, TNN, May 31, 2010, 01.12pm IST

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NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court has sought a response from the Haryana government on reports that 152 Dalit families had fled Hissar district and that two of them had been killed by upper caste Jat community members.

Terming the incident as extremely serious, a bench of Justices G S Singhvi and C K Prasad asked the district Commissioner to appear in person with all relevant details at the next date of hearing.

The apex court passed the direction on a PIL filed by the some of the affected persons seeking action against the alleged culprits and protection and rehabilitation of the aggrieved families.

A 70-year-old man and his 18-year-old physically challenged daughter were killed and at least 18 houses were damaged on April 21 in an arson attack allegedly by members of the Jat community on Dalit families in Mirchpur village in Hisar, some 300 km from state capital Chandigarh.

At least 20 families of the Valmiki community in Mirchpur village had reportedly fled following an arson attack on April 21 in which 15 houses were also damaged.

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Embers of anger and agony in Mirchpur

Vrinda Sharma

Mirchpur (Hisar): “I heard her cries when the burning roof collapsed on her. How can I now befriend those who doused that roof with petrol? I will not sell my daughter's body,” said Kamla Devi, who lost her husband and teenaged daughter in the caste violence here on April 21.

Kamla Devi's sons on Friday refused Government jobs that the administration offered.

The Dalits from Mirchpur village protesting outside the District Commissioner's office in Hisar demanded death penalty for the guilty. Holding the fort firmly, the crowd refused to return to the village until its demand of rehabilitation in a new establishment elsewhere, away from Mirchpur, was met with.

Eighteen-year-old Suman, who suffered from polio, was trapped in her burning house and was charred to death while her 70-year-old father Tara Chand suffered 90 per cent burns, and died later, when over a dozen houses belonging to the Dalits were set ablaze allegedly by Jats of the same village. Kamla Devi, who faints each time she recalls the events which led to the death of her family members, says she wants nothing, and adds, “what can anyone give me now?”

Claiming that the Dalits have started to realize their collective strength, Krishna Duggal, national president of Akhil Bhartiya Dhanak Samaj, a dalit organization said: “We can not go back to the village where the police brazenly granted Jat an hour's time to burn homes and the administration has not done anything. The arrests are merely an eye wash and soon the guilty will roam around free.”

Six teenage girls and three boys of Mirchpur, sitting on fast unto death outside, said the politicians are ‘passing time’. “No politicians supported the protest; giving cash compensation to one family will not rehabilitate the dalit families who lost their houses. It will not bring peace to the entire village. The guilty should be given death sentence. That is the only just verdict.”

Meanwhile, Jat representatives of the village visited the District Commissioner and requested that the administration helps bridge the rift so that, “the villagers can live in brotherhood again.” “We all condemn the events and are ashamed of the anti-social elements in the village. But we assure our Valmiki brothers that their life and property will be valued, so they should return to the village,” said Devar Tom Prakash.

The Deputy Commissioner of Hisar, O.P Shaoran, said that despite administration's attempts the protesters are adamant on not returning to their village.

“The administration promptly provided them with security, ration and jobs but their

demand for capital punishment (to the guilty) and land in a new village can not be granted the same way.”

In Mirchpur, 60 kms from Hisar, the burned houses stand testimony to the horrible tale that the few Dalit families left in the village detail. “This trunk had clothes that were being stored for her (Suman's) wedding; this used to be the special handicapped cycle she used; these are burned pages of her books and that hole in the roof is right over the place where we found her body,” says a villager. Each of the over 18 homes has walls blackened by smoke.

“We lost many valuable items -- water-coolers, washing machines, televisions, refrigerators and motorcycles; all were doused with petrol and set on fire. They identified houses of the well-off among the Dalit community and set them on fire first. It was an attempt to burn down whatever prosperity they saw,” said a traumatized women whose home was also destroyed.

The Jats term the arson as “a shameful act done by misguided youth,” but the Dalits are convinced that it was a pre-planned attack to curb their prosperity and kill them. Cases have been registered against policemen who were present at the scene and allegedly helped the guilty.

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