

Increasing caste atrocities in Karnataka

Contributed by Correspondent
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Eighty Dalit families from Kadkol in Karnataka's Bijapur district were 'punished' by caste Hindus of the village in October 2006 with social and economic boycott for drawing drinking water from the village tank to which they had been denied access for decades. For this 'crime', the Dalits, mostly agricultural labourers, were removed from work by their landlords, barred from ration shops, and even flourmills. The caste Hindus then began to use the tank to bathe their cattle, wash clothes, and even defecate. The Kadkol incident is only the latest story of atrocities against Dalits in Karnataka - one of 40 in the last seven months. The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 (POA), extends more specific - and in certain cases more stringent - penalty for offences against the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes than the Indian Penal Code. The POA enumerates the forms of violence that constitute an 'atrocities' against Dalits and Adivasis by members of the upper castes, whether acts of humiliation or bodily harm. Commonly practised atrocities against Dalits such as forcing them to consume inedible substances, fouling water sources used by them, dispossessing them of their land, committing sexual offences against Dalit women, and denying them access to public spaces, among others, count as non-bailable offences under the Act. They are punishable with imprisonment for a minimum of six months, along with an appropriate compensation for the victim. The compensation is Rs 25000 or more for victims of crimes such as insult and intimidation; Rs 50000 for the victims of sexual abuse, and up to Rs 1 lakh for those affected by the fouling of water, and for the families of those murdered or incapacitated (Rs 2 lakh if an earning member is attacked). In Kadkol, no arrests have been made yet for the denial of access to a public water tank and later for its fouling by caste Hindus, according to the Superintendent of Police in Bijapur (though three persons were arrested much later under the POA on charges of assault). Despite well-publicised protest meets by Dalits, the SP denies that a criminal case was even registered with the police on the issue of social boycott. Between 2002 and 2006, the cases reported under the POA in Karnataka increased significantly, according to the records of the Additional Director-General of Police. The number of cases of atrocity reported in 2002 was 1232 and 1306 in 2005. In 2006, 1,056 cases have been reported so far. This reflects both the unchanging social prejudice and a growing awareness of the provisions of the Act among the victims. The Act has empowered them to challenge such acts. Ravivarma Kumar, Senior Advocate and Chairman of the Karnataka State Backward Classes Commission, credits much of this growing awareness to the concerted efforts of Dalit rights groups of Karnataka. What is immediately worrying, however, are these figures: For the approximately 1200-1300 cases reported every year over the last five years, convictions have been negligible - 24 in 2002 and just five in 2005. There have been no convictions so far in 2006. The number of acquittals has, however, fallen drastically - from 341 in 2002 to just one in 2006. This could have been read as a positive development if it meant that convictions were proportionately higher, which is not the case in Karnataka. Most of the registered cases are stuck midway between police investigations and trials pending in court. A positive initiative of the State Government has been the revised Government Order of 2002 under which a victim of a caste atrocity receives full monetary compensation at the time the charge sheet is filed in court. Earlier the compensation was paid in installments staggered across the trial period, thus delaying the payments indefinitely. Some of the highest reports of crime against Dalits in the last five years have been reported from Bangalore, Gulbarga and Bellary districts. As for the nature of the crimes, murder rose from 25 cases in 2002 to 40 in 2005, and this year the figure already stands at 27. Reported cases of rape of Dalit women and girls were the highest last year in this five-year span, with 56 cases reported. This year the figure stands at 39, reflecting the continuing vulnerability of Dalit women. The crimes categorised as 'grievous hurt' numbered 54 and cases of arson totalled six till October 2006. (Courtesy: The Hindu)