

Hunger death in Balia

**Hunger could not gave way to caste prejudices
Rawat**

By Vidya Bhushan

Tragic, but true. Many of us have this firm opinion that India caste system is notoriously insensitive and rigid. Despite being victim of caste prejudices, we continue to be rigid in our system. We talk among the 'converts'; we work among our own communities. Indian caste system has virtually blocked all way for inter caste dialogues.

The grave fact is that many of the Most Backward Communities (MBCs) living in Uttar-Pradesh are suffering more than the Dalits. When I speak like this, I mean many things. Dalits have positively developed rationalist traits; of course, a number of Dalit communities are victim of brahmanical superstructure theory and follow the 'God' as destructively as any other 'God' fearing person. Some of the Dalit communities have been well politicized and have used education as well as Ambedkarism for their benefits. That Ambedkarism could not reach to a large number of other Dalit-MBC communities is a failure of the 'educated elite'.

Identity of the Poor

As I said, in many of the cases these MBCs are economically worst than the Dalits. Mushahars, Rajbhars, Kols, Koaries etc have lost whatever forest rights they had. There is no politicization of the communities. There is no land for them. There is no movement among them. No political formation ever thought of providing them land, education and work. So after ignoring such grave realities we are back in the business of mobilization in the name of communities. So every community in Uttar-Pradesh has its own Panchayat now and perhaps by the time next elections are called, most of them would have their own political parties with 'Supreme' leaders who would manipulate things for their own purposes and ultimately strengthen the perpetrators of the caste system.

Tragically, there is no effort to bring each one of them together and fight against the brahmanical social system because 'leaders' are experimenting the BSP experiment, where one community can solidly back its leader without questioning him/her. Unfortunately, such things do not work all the time.

In this 'identity' business, the 'poor' 'dying' communities do have a satisfaction in their mind that they are 'above' the other community in the 'social' set up. And therefore, caste prejudices do not melt that easily even in death. And a recent case of hunger death in Balia which I have already reported to the National Human Rights Commission raises many questions before us.

Hunger Death of Gangajali

My friend Mr Jai Ram Anuragi, Secretary, Dr Ambedkar Social Welfare, Society, Asanwar, Balia, phoned me today about the hunger death of Mrs Gangajali Devi w/o Shri Suresh Verma on July 16th, 2006. She was 35 and had three children. One elder daughter is about 14 years of age. For many days, they were virtually without food. The condition of their children is pathetic and if something was not done immediately, they might face the same fate.

According to villagers, including the Village Sarpanch Mr Subhash Chandra, who is a Dalit and who, I spoke on phone, confirmed that the said family was living in utterly miserable conditions for the past few months. The family belonged to backward Koeri community. Gangajali and Suresh Verma had three children- one daughter and two sons.

Suresh used to work as a factory labour in Kanpur. After the death of his father Satya Narain Verma, in 2005, he came over to Balia and started living in the village only. The father had 3 Bighas of land. The land is now technically in the hand of his elder brother who immediately dissociated with Suresh and his family. The hapless family started living separately in a nearby hut. With no land to survive, Suresh would work as casual labour for Rs 50/-. That was not a permanent income for him to survive.

Despite being landless, his family did not get a Below the Poverty Line Ration Card or Antyodaya Ration card or Annapurna Ration card which would make free quota of ration for him every month. While this year, the Sarpanch gave him a BPL Card yet that Card does not provide everything except wheat and rice for a limited quantity. Living in utterly desperate situation his wife died two days ago.

While government may claim that the death have other reasons, yet most of the people, I have spoken, confirm that the condition of the family was hand to mouth. The people confirm that if he had gotten the ancestors land, such a situation would not have arisen.

The Condition of the elder daughter of Suresh is equally bad according to villagers. The local people contributed and took her to doctor yet if something is not done immediately, the other siblings may also die.

When death revived caste

And thinking of a hunger death in the village Basanwar in Chilkar village, its Pradhan Subhash Chandra who is a Chamar, a scheduled caste community, extended his helping hand to Suresh Verma, a Koeri. Subhash went to his house offering his condolences and with grains and other eatables. To his horror, Suresh refused to accept the Food grains from the Subhash, suggesting that he cannot accept food from the Dalits. Even when his daughter is in desperate need, Suresh refused to accept food. He is surviving on Food provided by some backward community and upper caste people. One is sure; he would not get it for long. People even contributed money for the cremation of his wife. Rs 2,500/- were collected for his family but Suresh

spend most of the amount in conducting the last rites and offered handsome money to the Brahmins and gave them good food.

Dalits and backwards cannot get justice as long as they are part of such notorious social structure which discriminate and which refuses to die down despite 'death' hanging over our head. I have seen such discrimination in Tsunami also where Arunthaiars, Dalits were exclusively called to pick up dead bodies. Poverty create superstition and I have mentioned many time, how the Mushahars who are dying of hunger are going to local 'Babas' and Ojhas to get rid of evil spirit.

The tragic case does not end here only. Any fight for right to food and dignity has to take a definite ideological shape. Gangajali has died. A Dalit community wanted to help her and yet her husband refuses. This is sickening how people are chained to an idea or a perception that death is sweeter than following the caste system. Suresh's case is a case of typical Indian village system where caste identities are dominant and where we need to work more aggressively. Remember, whether it is right to food or right to land or right to gender equality, we cannot win a battle against poverty and hunger as long as we are caged in such atrocious caste system. Hunger is a socio-cultural issue in this country and an exclusive 'economic' dose would not resolve the crisis. India suffers from this crisis of exclusion and identity. Here humanity dies regularly due to an insensitive class yet whenever the poor Dalits comes with a large heart to provide support to their fellow villagers, the old prejudices are revived. True, caste does not die in India even in death. Suresh Varma's idiotic and ignorant acts should not discourage people like Subhash Chandra in providing help to all those who need it. May be some day, such acts will help us eliminate caste system in India. Hopefully, that day, Suresh would not go spoil his money to a 'Brahmins' house, to wash ' his' 'sins'. If there is one big sin in India, which has thoroughly played havoc with the Dalit communities in India and particularly in this cowbelt, it is donating large sum of money and gift to Brahmin on the death of the person. 'Mrityubhoj', (party on the death of a person) must go, if we want Dalits, MBCs, tribals to survive without debt. A large war against such evil practice is necessary otherwise Suresh Varma and his kind of people will not be able to live. Their lives would be more miserable than the deaths as they would not be able to pay back the debt they have taken to 'appease' the 'insensitive' gods, through the Brahmins. Time to stop this nonsense of Mrityubhoj.

Is it not ironical that a person whose wife die of hunger and for whose cremation people collect money give a wonderful feast to the Brahmins to keep his wife's 'soul' in peace? Shame on a society which enjoy feasting on the deaths of a poor hungry person.

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