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Tsunduru Diary, By Gogu Shyamala

First Court Hearing on 17th November 2004 - impressions.

The trial of the Tsunduru accused has begun fourteen years after the incident.

On the 6th of August 1991, 8 Dalits of Tsunduru, Guntur district, were massacred and thrown into the Tungabhadra drain. Seven were Malas and one a Madiga. Many were the emerging strengths of the community; well educated, they were targeted by the upper caste Reddy landlords of the village. According to eyewitnesses, the Madiga youth's eyeballs were torn out of their sockets before he was thrown in the drain alive to drown, his scholarship was seen as a mark of defiance against upper-caste grip. One victim's brother died of a heart attack.

The response strengthened the Dalit political process across the state. The legal process has tested the enforcement of the SC/ST Atrocities Act passed in 1989. First, the accused wanted the trial held away from Tsunduru to dissuade Dalit presence in the hearings. The case was pursued in the Supreme Court, which directed that a special court be organized in premises built in the Dalit section of the village. Second, the accused's effort to change the Special Public Prosecutor (PP), Mr. Chandrasekhar, was resisted successfully. The upper castes also tried to prove that the Dalits who were killed were Christians and that the SC/ST Atrocities Act did not apply. The victims' families had to successfully prove that they were indeed SCs.

The Dalit argued that the intense social pressure endangered livelihood in the upper caste sections of the village, and demanded separate institutions like a separate panchayat and schools, along with individual water supply, ration shop, bus stop, etc. They demanded independent land holdings to seek their livelihood without fear for life. They also wanted pucca houses. The government has met these demands. The resulting separation led to the Dalitwada of Tsunduru being called Ambedkarnagar. These economic gains were but a palliative for the crippling loss suffered by the community.

Two Anveshi representatives, K. Sajaya and I, went to Tsunduru to attend the court hearing, which was marked by tension and fear. A 200 strong contingent of the accused appeared at 10:25, just before the court opened session. The first witness for the prosecution was absent till 10:30, appearing dramatically, distressed and tense. The PP sought adjournment since he was unable to confer with the witness before the session.

The court was adjourned till the 1st of December 2004.

The victims' families have been scarred by the loss of their best-loved ones. They weep that the land and facilities given are "blood food" from their children's sacrifice. On the other hand, the witnesses seem tense and fearful. The victims' families understand the witnesses' fear of reprisal, since a judgment of "guilty" would shatter upper-caste pride, result in life terms for several accused, and would be resisted strongly. Survivors, eyewitnesses are still haunted by the savagery of caste privilege. Many cannot eat well even today - they are weak and lack the will to life.

Regional Dalit support has not developed enough to guarantee sustained well being of the witnesses if they testify. Only a mass Dalit movement can provide such support. The long years between massacre and trial has weakened the momentum. Passport confiscation, ban on higher studies, and externment orders on the Tsundur activists have fragmented the political structure. The outside Dalit groups who come in to express solidarity cannot remain in Tsundur forever, as both the witnesses and the accused know full well. The various actors are cautious and the situation is fluid.

Coverage of the incident in the media is poor. This diary is an attempt to make supporters and activists aware of the event.