

Three decades on, justice eludes Dalits of Tsunduru

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A makeshift memorial, known as Raktha Kshetram (Place of Blood), stands testimony to one of the worst anti-Dalit massacres since Independence. (HT PHOTO)

An hour's drive from Tenali town in coastal Andhra Pradesh, Tsunduru is an idyllic village ringed by fields of lush paddy. But a few steps brings the visitor face-to-face with a nondescript mound of black soil overgrown with shrubs and heaps of garbage – a reminder of the village's grisly history.

Clear the weeds and the graves present themselves, eight of them, next to each other with a board in the background that says: "Johar, Tsunduru Dalitha Mrutha Veerulaku" (A tribute to the Dalit martyrs of Tsunduru). Below this, a question for the visitor in Telugu: If all the killers are innocent, who is responsible for this carnage?

This makeshift memorial, known as Raktha Kshetram (Place of Blood), stands testimony to one of the worst anti-Dalit massacres since Independence. Early in the morning on August 6, 1991, members of the Reddy and Kapu communities allegedly attacked the local Mala community, a Dalit sub-caste, with sticks, axes, knives and weapons.

Dalits fleeing into the nearby forests were chased, thrashed, their limp bodies stuffed into gunny bags and dumped into the Tungabhadra canal that flows through the village. A team from the local police station allegedly stood by and watched as the Dalitwada (colony) was attacked. Eight men died on the spot, and three more succumbed to their injuries later, including one who allegedly was fired on by the police.

The gory crime sent shockwaves across a country at the cusp of liberalisation and an entire generation was jolted. But back at Tsundur, the besieged Mala community braced themselves for a long fight, coming together to build a movement from the ground up and determined to not let caste hostility stilt their economic and social progress.

Thirty years have passed since. Today a new generation of Dalit people is leading the surge: The 750-odd Mala families have their children in schools and colleges, and many have moved to nearby cities of Tenali, Guntur and even Vijayawada.

“The Dalits in the village have come a long way in the last 30 years and are living with their heads held high, but the wounds are yet to heal. They continue to rage unless we get the final justice,” said 47-year-old Jaladi Moses, whose father Jaladi Mathaiah and uncle Jaladi Immanuel were among the eight killed.

Many of the young Dalit men and women have found employment in government services, as clerks, teachers, officers, bank officers and even software engineers. Shielded from the everyday discrimination that their parents and grandparents took granted for, they have flourished and built

a life for themselves. With the money and the confidence of an assured job, many Mala families have built houses and clean roads and sewage.

The rundown Dalit colony has now transformed into a separate panchayat by the name of Ambedkar Nagar, a statue of reformer and drafter of the Constitution, BR Ambedkar, towering over their roofs –in itself a signal of the defiance and new-found confidence.

“The 750-odd Dalit families, who used to work as agriculture labourers and tenant farmers in the fields of upper-caste people, have all been given agriculture lands to the extent of half-acre to one acre, besides houses in the surrounding villages,” said Suresh, a local Dalit leader.

A key source of power in India is politics, and often dominant caste communities feel secure in the sizeable political representation.

But in Tsunduru, Dalits have also become politically active. And what has helped them is Vemuru assembly constituency, of which Tsunduru is a part, is reserved for scheduled castes, and now represented by YSR Congress MLA Merugu Nagarjuna. Any person in the locality, even if they are dominant caste, has to go him for any work – a source of pride for the local Mala community.

There is also a perceptible change among the Dalit youth, as majority of who are well educated and employed. “In the past, there used to be two-glass system in tea stalls and restaurants (one glass for the forward castes and the other for the Dalits). We never used to walk on their streets with footwear. But now, the youth go to restaurants and sit beside the upper caste people,” Moses said.

The Mala community in Tsunduru was able to galvanise the entire state for their legal fight. The legal team received contributions from every corner of the state and the case became a landmark in the state’s civil liberty history, with protests held in many cities including the capital Hyderabad.

Much of this work was done by senior advocate and Dalit activist Bojja Tharakam, who died in 2016.

The locals were helped by the state government, which has made sub-plans for scheduled castes, making separate budgetary allocations that cannot be transferred to other departments. In addition, land has been assigned to many SC families without the years-long delays that are common in other states, and a network of residential schools, junior and degree colleges exclusively for Dalit students has helped spread education among the community.

“Dalits in Tsunduru were successful in making the incident a national issue. Dalit organisations and social activists from across the country visited the village and created awareness. The government was forced to set up a residential school and junior college in the village, as a result of which more and more Dalits have become educated. Today, almost 80 per cent of the Dalits in Tsunduru are educated and work as teachers, lecturers, bank officers, government employees and even software engineers. This was possible only because of the sustained struggle by the Dalits,” Suresh, the local activist, said.

But prosperity hasn't completely erased old fault lines. A road through the middle of Tsunduru divides the Dalit settlement from that of the dominant castes. “The boundary remains even now,” added Suresh.

The dominant castes say they have moved on. “It was one of those unfortunate happenings. Why do you want to rake it up again?” was the response of an upper caste man, whose father was one of the people named in the chargesheet as an accused.

The fate of the legal case continues to roil older men and women in the Mala community. Many of them say they were witnesses to the carnage and continue to struggle with the trauma. “The police gunned down my younger son in front of my eyes, just because he raised his voice against

the killings. My wife has become mentally disturbed. What pains us is that the court had acquitted the police who killed my son,” said K Raja Rao, son of Anil Kumar, in whose memory the Dalits constructed a stupa adjacent to his house.

Local villagers say the immediate dispute was triggered by a skirmish in the local cinema hall: A Dalit boy’s feet had touched a Reddy woman; the village condemned this and clamped a boycott of the Mala community, a majority of who are Christian. Tensions rose over the next few days, culminating in the killings of August 6.

Sustained advocacy over the next three years prompted the administration to set up a trial court specially constituted for the Tsunduru massacre and trial began in December 1994. Out of the 219 people from the Reddy and Kapu communities who were charged with murder and under the SC/ST prevention of atrocities act, 33 persons died during the course of the 13-year trial. The trial court gave its judgement in July 2007, sentencing 21 accused to life imprisonment and 35 to one-year simple imprisonment.

The accused challenged the special court verdict in the Hyderabad high court, which acquitted all of them in 2014 after hearing the case for nearly seven years, citing insufficient evidence. During the course of this prolonged trial, prominent lawyers and human rights activists such as K G Kannabiran, K Balagopal and B Chandrasekhar died of ill-health.

“We moved the Supreme Court, which stayed the HC order. The case is still confined to the courtroom,” said senior lawyer Y Koteswar Rao, who was one of the advocates fighting the case for the Tsunduru victims. The case is still pending in the Supreme Court.

Anger simmers in Tsunduru over the fate of the trial. “The high court acquitted the accused on technical grounds – such as lack of clarity on the timing of the deaths, delay in lodging of complaint to the police, inconsistencies in the deposition of witnesses. But eight Dalits were killed;

who killed them?" Moses asked.