

From Rajavva to Satamma

The Continuing Agency of Sirsilla Taluk

This is an edited and translated version of an article from the Telugu literary magazine Srjana, March/April, 1985. This is one of the seven articles for which Ms Hemlatha, editor, printer and publisher of Srjana was arrested on April 18, 1985, and charged with sedition against the state, under section 124-A, IPC.

“LANDS should be in the grip of the landlords. The tillers of the land should not get any profits. Cultivation should be done as the landlord wills. Irrespective of the people’s need the landlord can stop cultivation whenever he wishes.” This is the ruler’s justice. To implement this justice, police attack villages and torture people for continuing to till the land. Utensils and other implements are rammed out of shape and broken. Food grains are spoiled and made unfit for consumption. Women are sexually violated. A “brown terror” is created in the villages.

On October 20, 1978, the Andhra Pradesh government declared the Sirsilla and Jagityal taluks of Karimnagar district “disturbed areas.” This was done for the “security” of landlords. On October 29, the hoodlums of the landlords of Kodarupaka village, Sirsilla taluk, attacked Rajavva, Banavva and Kanakavva, activists of the Mahila Sangham of the same village. Banavva and Kanakavva were not in their houses. 50 year old Rajavva’s husband was tied and beaten up and she was raped by seven hoodlums and left unconscious in the fields (See Manushi No. 2).

After six years of prolonged jurisdiction, the court has recently closed the case filed by Rajavva without punishing the criminals. On January 13, 1985, two subinspectors and six constables attacked Samudralingapuram

village in Sirsilla taluk and raped Satamma. About 80 people were beaten up. Paddy and other food grains were spoiled. Cooking utensils and agricultural implements were destroyed.

The extent of terror created by the police was evident even after 14 days, when the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee and Stree Shakti Sanghatana fact finding team reached the village. The village was like a raw wound. Broken doors, tileless roofs, broken tiles, broken pots and agricultural implements, different kinds of grains mixed and spread on the floor—this was the scene in the village. Police can kick the people not only on their backs but on their stomachs also, and they have done so.

On the night of January 13, subinspectors of Gambhirraopet and Mustabad, along with six police constables, attacked Samudralingapuram village which is 45 to 50 kilometres from Karimnagar. As soon as they entered the village they attacked the house of Koorella Narsaiah. He was forced to open the house. After entering the house, the police brutally beat up every member of the household. Storage bins were broken and grains thrown on the floor. Chilli powder was mixed in the wheat flour that had been soaked overnight for the next day’s Pongal festival dishes. Kerosene was poured into the rice. Utensils were beaten out of shape and a plough was broken.



From there, they went to the house of Raji Reddy who is an activist of Ryotu Coolie Sangham. He was not at the village. The police banged in the door and demanded that it be opened. In police language, asking and talking means abusing. Raji Reddy’s wife, Satamma, refused to open the door, saying that Raji Reddy was not in the house. She asked them to come in the morning if they had anything to enquire. Satamma is aged about 30 years. With no intention of listening to her words, the police broke open the door with a big stone.

According to law, women are not supposed to be arrested during the night. Women should not be interrogated before sunrise or after sunset. Perhaps, the police do not know about this law. Even if they do, they are a law unto themselves. After entering the house, they started abusing, and throwing about whatever came in their sight. They beat Satamma and her two sons, 15 year old Malla Reddy and 12 year old Devi Reddy.

Storage pots were broken and grains were mixed on the floor. The land deed papers kept in a pot were torn to pieces. All the time, they kept abusing the family for continuing cultivation even though asked not to do so by the landlords.

Satamma and her children were beaten severely with *lathis* and rifle butts.

Each of her children was pinned down by two constables, while she was being raped by the subinspectors. All the while she was receiving beatings and abuses. Satamma saw the beard of the subinspector who was trying to hide his face with a cloth. Later, she fell unconscious. She does not know how many men raped her. The children could hear their mother crying in pain and the abuses and beatings she was receiving. They said : “We did not see, but our mother was spoiled.”

In the past, in 1978, Rajavva’s son, who accompanied her to the police station to file a case, was humiliated and asked : “What is raping ? What is spoiling ? Tell how it is done.”

By the time Satamma regained consciousness the police had left. Due to forced sexual intercourse, she started bleeding profusely. The bleeding was continuous for three days, until a doctor prescribed medicines. The village *sarpanch* took her to the doctor two days later. The doctor refused to examine her as the case was not registered by the police. The criminals did not think that they needed to register their crime. If a woman is not examined within 12 hours, there is no evidence of assault. Moreover, unknowingly, Satamma had bathed. Even 36 hours after the incident, Satamma was bleeding yet the doctor bluntly refused to examine her.

All that the doctor had to say was that “the police cannot behave like that.” Medicines were given for temporary relief. None of the medical tests, that are supposed to be done in a case of rape, were performed. The regulation is that tests should not be done until the police file a case.

The police, after leaving Satamma’s house, attacked Uppari Basti on the outskirts of the village. Most of the male members of this colony go to Bombay or Madras in search of work. They visit their houses once or twice in a year. Therefore, women outnumber men in this colony. The police went there in search

of Kammari Yellaiah. There is another Yellaiah—Tummala Yellaiah—in the colony. The police went to his house. They asked his wife Balavva, poking her with a *lathi* : “Bitch, what is your husband’s name ?” As soon as she said: “Yellaiah, your slave”, they started beating her and asked : “Bitch, is your husband in the party ? Where has he gone ?” Yellaiah was sleeping in the field, keeping vigil. The police took Yellaiah’s son to the field, beating him all along the way. On focusing the torch, they realised that this was not the Yellaiah for whom they were looking. Yet he was beaten up. They took away Yellaiah’s son’s watch. They also took watches and money from many other houses.

After this, the police returned to Uppari Basti again. This time they found Kammari Yellaiah’s house. Kammari Yellaiah works in Madras. Yellaiah’s wife

stays alone but she was not in her house that day. As the house was locked, the police were angered. They climbed on to the roof and broke the tiles. They broke open the door and also storage bins. They mixed various grains together. Plates, brass utensils and other things were beaten out of shape. As there were no people to be beaten up, they entered the house of Gangavva whose only fault was that she was Yellaiah’s neighbour. She has a two month old baby. She was beaten to unconsciousness. Her husband, who works in Madras harbour, was not there. Her relatives admitted her in Karimnagar hospital in an unconscious state. The villagers say that she was transferred to Nizamabad hospital and that she had not yet recovered.

Once an area is declared ‘disturbed’, this kind of terrorising becomes part of the daily routine of the police. Before these areas are declared “disturbed”, the landlords of these areas, with the help of paid ruffians, terrorise people who dare to oppose economic, social, political and sexual exploitation. Now this job is done by the police who take their pay from the treasury of the people’s elected government.

In Sirsilla taluk, some landlords own thousands of acres. Irrespective of the party that is in power at the centre and the state it is the landlord’s writ that rules the villages. Apart from the lands that are not accountable on paper, there are 24 families who own land from a 100 to thousands of acres, according to the records. Economic, social and political authority rests in the hands of landlords. Along with economic, social and political exploitation and oppression, women are additionally subjected to sexual exploitation and oppression.

In 1970-72, the newly formed Ryotu Coolie Sanghams began to fight sexual exploitation along with all other forms of exploitation.

Prabhakara Rao, landlord of Boinapalli village, known as the ‘white saheb’, was notorious for his sexual exploitations. He made Devamma, a dhobi woman, divorce her husband, Devaiah,



and after some time, sent her back to Devaiah and raped her again. Devaiah, who resisted this, was beaten until he bled on June 30, 1978, and was thrown in an unconscious state in a dried up stream the next day. After hearing about this ghastly deed, the people of neighbouring villages came to Boinapally, caught Prabhakara Rao, garlanded him with slippers and beat him with brooms in public. Women, who were still furious, paraded the white saheb through the surrounding five villages.

After this incident, people, especially

women, resisted sexual exploitation. Mahila Sanghams were formed in many villages. With the intention of weakening these newly formed Mahila Sanghams, Rajavva of Kodarupaka was raped.

Some time later, religious fundamentalists who supported the landlords' oppression of people in the district, kidnapped a revolutionary student named Padma and tortured her for three days. Now, the police too have started perpetrating sexual atrocities.

According to the amendments made to the rape law in December 1983, in the

aftermath of the widespread campaign around the Rameezabee and Mathura rape cases, rape committed by policemen either in a police station or outside it is custodial rape. In Andhra Pradesh, six instances of custodial rape have come to the notice of the Civil Liberties Committee which has sent out its fact finding teams. Such incidents may be occurring all over the country.

It is for democratic organisations, particularly women's organisations, to expose such incidents and protest against them.

Colleagues Demand CBI Enquiry Into Indu's Death

ON July 2, 1985, at 1 p.m., about 200 employees of the ministry of irrigation, both women and men, and some **Manushi** volunteers held a protest demonstration in front of M-24 double storey flats, Lajpat Nagar IV, residence of Naresh Rawal, employee of India News and Feature Alliance, whose wife, Indu Rawal, an employee of the ministry of irrigation, died under suspicious circumstances on June 26.

On June 26, at about 7 p.m., a neighbour of the Rawals came to **Manushi** office and informed us that Indu had died and foul play was suspected. Two of us went immediately and reached the house before the police or Indu's parents arrived. Later, two others of us also went, and all four of us stayed there till 1 a.m.

We found Indu's body lying in the bathropin in a partially burnt state. Her

tongue was protruding and her neck swollen. These are usually signs of strangulation. Her feet were unburnt so much so that even the nail polish on her toes was visible. There was no sign of charring, soot, or disturbance around her. A plastic soapcase and the soap in it, lying under her shoulder, were unburnt.

According to Indu's in-laws, she had taken leave that day and had stayed at home while all of them went out. When they returned at 5.30 p.m., she failed to respond to their knocking. The door was not properly bolted from inside so they managed to open it without damaging it, and found her lying burnt. A purported suicide note saying that no one should be blamed for her death but assigning no reason for the suicide was found. The in-laws claim that they do not recognise Indu's handwriting.

The Rawals' house is one of several tiny flats which adjoin each other along one corridor. Yet the next door neighbours deny having heard any scream or sound or



Indu's colleagues demonstrating outside her in laws' house

perceived any smell. This seems impossible if Indu had burnt herself to death as her in-laws claim.

Initially the neighbours were afraid to speak openly but after some-time, several of them confided to us that the Rawals are an undesirable family and are avoided by others in the neighbourhood. Many neighbours suspected that Indu must have been killed the previous night and her dead body locked in the house only to be "discovered" at the appropriate moment. A neighbour also told us that Naresh's four married sisters in addition to one unmarried sister were present in the house the previous night whereas the Rawals stated that only one of them was there.

Indu Rawal, aged 24, was married to Naresh Rawal four months ago. The two families are closely related, and the Rawals said they were very fond of Indu and had been very eager for the match to be arranged. They claimed that Indu was very happy with them, and they had not the faintest idea why she should have committed suicide.

We were present during the police interrogations which, we felt were completely inadequate. The following day, the death was reported in the newspapers as a suicide on the basis of a police bulletin. Thus, the police had accepted the suicide theory put forward by the Rawals even before the post mortem or verification of handwriting of the note had taken place. We issued a press statement contradicting the report.

Some of Indu's colleagues read the statement and came to meet us. They invited us to address a meeting of Indu's colleagues at the ministry. There, we learnt that she had told some colleagues of her sufferings ever since her marriage. She had said that she lived in terror and dared not open her mouth in the house. Her colleagues told us that before marriage she was a very cheerful person. She had confided to her friends that she and her husband did not have any marital relations. She had narrated the taunts flung at her by her in-laws who criticised her cooking and



**Indu Rawal and her husband
Naresh Rawal**

housekeeping. The day before she died, she had taken lunch to her husband's office, but had returned after about three hours without having eaten anything and seemed to be in a very disturbed state of mind. She told her close friends that her husband had insisted on her taking leave the following day to sort out differences with her mother-in-law. When parting from her friends, she had asked them to make enquiries about her, in case something happened to her.

At the demonstration, Indu's colleagues narrated the whole sequence of events. They raised slogans demanding a CBI enquiry, and calling on the neighbours to socially boycott the Rawals. Many neighbours came out to witness and join the demonstration.

We then proceeded to the police station where a memorandum was handed over to the officer in charge. The SHO in charge was unable to offer any explanation for the police having termed the death a suicide in their bulletin or for their having refused to record the statements of Indu's colleagues.

Indu's colleagues want to help her family in following up the case in the court.

The response of Indu's neighbours and colleagues is a hopeful sign. One neighbour acted with great promptitude in coming to inform us immediately, so

that we were able to reach the house before her body was removed and make enquiries on the spot. Equally heartening is the reaction of Indu's colleagues. The employees' union has taken up the case even though it is not directly related to the work situation. At the demonstration, the union pledged itself to fight the case. This extension of understanding of employees' rights is very significant for women. It means that they can develop the possibility of another form of social support apart from the family.

Update. On July 4, 1985, at 3 p.m., Indu's family and their neighbours, residents of Gita Colony, demonstrated in protest outside the Rawals' house. Indu's mother and brothers were present. A large number of the Rawals' neighbours came out and discussed the case. Some offered to give written statements and to join a signature campaign started by Indu's family. Even though the first response of Indu's family seemed to be to let things be the brothers are now determined to follow up the case.

One of the reasons the neighbours gave for considering the Rawals an undesirable family was the conduct of the daughters of the Rawal family. Many accused them of being women of loose character.

This accusation was unfortunately, partly based on their having made self-arranged marriages. Even young girls of the neighbourhood seemed very disapproving of the fact that these women had found their own husbands and their mother had not spent much money on dowry.

Until 10 days after the death, the police had refused to register a case of murder despite the insistence of Indu's colleagues and family. In fact, they were most reluctant to let Indu's family lodge an F.I.R. alleging murder. Nor had they arrested any member of the Rawal family. There is a widespread feeling that the police, as usual, have been bribed into conniving with the murderers. It is a matter of great shame that the police make such tragedies an occasion for profiteering. □