

Continuing Resistance—Anti Rape Agitation In Karnataka

KARNATAKA was recently 'locked by the alleged assault on two innocent women by the henchmen of Mahanta Swami, the chief of Mysore Mutt, a religious institution in Kuderemoti, a remote village in Yelburga taluk, Raichur district.

On June 11, 1985, in broad daylight, Parvathavva, aged 40 and Husseinabi, aged 28, were dragged on to the road, beaten severely, abused profusely, stripped and garlanded with *nim* twigs and paraded naked on the roads of the village for more than an hour. Hundreds of women and men mutely witnessed this sordid spectacle.

Parvathavva, wife of a village-school teacher, Veerapaksha Gowda, is an active worker of Akkana Balaga, a sort of women's wing attached to the Mutt, the activities of which were normally conducted in the Mutt premises. Hence, Parvathavva used to visit the Mutt regularly.

On April 9, the young Mahanta Swami made advances to her. She pleaded with folded hands: "You are a holy man. It is a sin to make advances to your own devotee." She alleges that the Swami threatened her with dire consequences if she resisted his advances.

She said that while she had informed her son of the Swami's advances, she had kept her husband in the dark to avoid causing agony to him. Later, she stopped visiting the Mutt.

The Swami then got some letters written to Mr Gowda, cooking up stories of his wife's infidelity. Parvathavva and her son, who received the letters, decided not to show them to Mr Gowda.

However, when the Swami's harassment increased, Parvathavva told her husband the whole episode, and the

latter complained to the local ASP, Mr Kempanna.

The ASP assured them of a thorough investigation, but advised them against filing a complaint at that stage, as a powerful man was involved and witnesses were difficult to get.

When the Swami heard of this, he moved heaven and earth to force the couple to come to terms with him. The Swami's middlemen, caste leaders loyal to the Mutt, "well wishers", and "prominent citizens", including present

On June 11 morning, the Swami's henchmen arrived at Durgigudi in tractors. Gowda alleges that they beat him up, threatened to kill him, and forced him to sign a blank paper.

Meanwhile, Parvathavva, with her son, returned from Koppal police station. The gang that was looking for her, rushed to the bus station and dragged her up to Durgigudi where they stripped her, clubbed her on the head, garlanded her with *nim* twigs and paraded her through the village for over an hour. Her



Parvathavva



Husseinabi

and former legislators, started flowing into Gowda's house.

In spite of threats and harassment, the couple did not yield. But at one point, the shattered husband wanted to agree to a compromise. On July 10, Gowda says, some people, led by Mr. Chandrashekar

Sondhi, the owner of a drama company, arrived at their house and asked Parvathavva to agree to a settlement. When she showed them the door, they were enraged.

son Prabhu, aged 21, who protested, was also beaten up severely by them, she alleged.

Husseinabi, a neighbour of Parvathavva, had earlier spurned Sangakah, the brother of the Swami. She was also allegedly subjected to the same treatment.

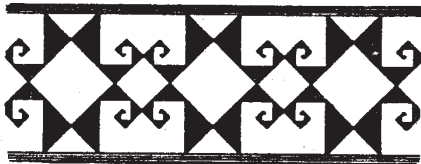
"Bibi was treated even worse", Parvathavva said, "She was beaten black and blue. Mud and cowdung were thrust into her private parts. Her breasts

were burnt With cigarettes.” Husseinabi is still being treated at Raichur hospital for vaginal infections and other injuries.

When this ghastly incident happened, Bibi’s husband was away from the village. Her two brothers were also beaten up severely.

None of the assaulted people could move out of the village either to hospital or to the police station until the next day, as the henchmen surrounded their houses.

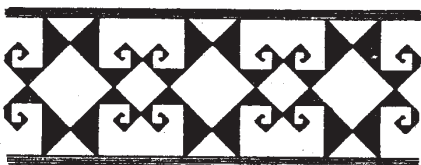
From the next day, there was a stream of politicians and middle-men to Parvathavva’s house including the local MLA, Basavara-jaraya Reddy and ex MLA, Desai, whom the husband requested to leave him alone. “What is



the point in your coming after the house is burnt and women’s honour is robbed? Come what may, I will expose the Swami”, he said.

Mr Gowda, who has since been transferred to Yelburga from Kudremoti, said the police were reluctant to accept his complaint. They appeared on the scene on June 19.

The news could filter out to other areas only after June 19. A number of Raichur based organisations like All India Student Federation, Democratic Youth Federation, Dalit Sangharsh Samiti and Democratic Women’s Association have formed Kudremoti Action Committee and launched a campaign against the Swami in the villages of the district. Parvathavva and Gowda spoke at a press conference on July 3 in Bangalore and a memorandum was submitted by all these organisations to the chief minister, who assured them that a CID enquiry would be held. □



Accused Acquitted : Report from Bhatinda

In Manushi No. 13, we reported the case of Paramjit Kaur who died of extensive burns on October 3, 1982, in the Civil Hospital, Bhatinda. The Punjab Human Rights Committee set up an enquiry commission to investigate the circumstances of her death. The commission found that Paramjit was married to Avtar Singh on September 30, 1976, and due to her parents’ inability to meet continuing dowry demands after marriage, was thrown out of the house by her in-laws in 1978. She filed a suit for maintenance. Avtar Singh also filed a suit against her, which was, however, dismissed with costs, the judge remarking that Paramjit’s in-laws were greedy persons.

Paramjit’s father-in-law, Pritam Singh, then went to her parents’ house at Budhlada and brought her back to Bhatinda, promising that she would not be maltreated again. When maltreatment began, she once again sought shelter with her parents, from where she was again brought back by her in-laws only a week before she died.

The commission also found that on September 26, 1982, Paramjit was beaten up by her husband and his family. The neighbours heard her crying for help but thought it was another routine quarrel. The police did not register any case although the doctor in the hospital said that her clothes smelt of kerosene.

A magistrate, in whose court Pritam Singh is an employee, recorded her dying declaration in which she allegedly said that she had caught fire accidentally. Although she was an educated woman, this so called declaration bears her thumb impression, not her signature.

The police made strenuous efforts to hush up the case but the Human Rights Committee worked unceasingly to see that it was brought to court. Finally, a case was registered against Paramjit’s husband and in-laws.

It lingered for months in court and two magistrates were transferred before they could deal with it. Finally, additional

sessions judge Dina Nath Sharma, after dismissing all the prosecution witnesses, including the child witness as unreliable, acquitted all the accused persons. He also made defamatory remarks against the general secretary of the Punjab Human Rights Committee who has spent about 30 years of his life as a social and political activist and has taken particular interest in women’s issues. The judge said in his judgment : “Ved Parkash Gupta is a blackmailer who wanted to extort money from them but as they could not oblige him, the present case has been fabricated in connivance with the parents of Paramjit Kaur.”

Since Mr Gupta, in spite of his active involvement in bringing this case to



Paramjit’s burnt body

court, had not even been cited by the police as a prosecution witness, he was never in a position to blackmail anyone.

Paramjit’s parents cannot afford the expenses of appealing to the high court and the committee is also short of funds so the judgment is not being challenged. When one considers that such is the conclusion of a case actively fought by experienced and committed activists, one wonders what happens to the many cases which do not come to the notice of any such organisation or individual. □