

## Case 3: Khairlanji Massacre

*In September 2006 the rape and murder of members of a dalit family by dominant castes, in Bhandara district of Maharashtra and the collusion of local political forces and authorities to underplay the event evoked shock and protest. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Research and Training Institute (BARTI), Dept of Social Justice (GoM) and Centre for Equity and Social Justice (YASHADA) carried out a commissioned study [Nodal Officer, SC-ST (Prevention of Atrocities Act) 1989] of this massacre and submitted its report in November 2006.<sup>1</sup> This case study draws its material from the above report. It brings out the horrifying fact that despite affirmative policies, and progressive constitutional and legislative provisions, even nearly 60 years after Independence, caste/class oppression reflected through violence against dalit men and women is seen as a weapon to curb dalit mobility and assertion.*

### Background

Khairlanji is a village with a population of 800 of which 750 are Other Backward Classes (OBCs), 30 are Scheduled Tribes (STs) and 20 are Scheduled Castes (SCs). The scheduled caste families totally numbered 3, of which today, the Bhotmange family has a lone survivor, after the massacre. The district of Bhandara borders Madhya Pradesh and is also surrounded by Gadchiroli and Chandrapur districts which have pockets of strong Naxal influence. Khairlanji, with its proximity to Nagpur city, and a substantial proportion of land benefiting from canal irrigation also indicates signs of urban influence and economic well-being.

The area is under the political influence of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The village itself reflects a strongly casteist mindset and the sheer minority of SC families compelled them to live in subordination to the Hindu majority.

### The Context

The family central to this plot is the Bhotmange family which consisted of: Bhaiyalal, the family head (age 55), his wife Surekha (40), sons Sudhir (21) and Roshan (14) and daughter Priyanka (17). The family migrated to Khairlanji 17 years ago with support of land offered by Bhaiyalal's maternal uncle. They also received support in establishing themselves from Surekha's cousin, Siddharth Gajbiye, residing in Dusala village nearby. However the dominant caste forces did not make things easy for the family. They earlier lived in a rented place but due to constant harassment from the owner eventually built a *kattcha* house on village panchayat land as they were not allowed to make a *pucca* construction. The house also did not have electricity connection and the family faced discrimination in access to drinking water at the common village well.

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<sup>1</sup> Organised Killings of Dalits in Khairlanji Village, Taluka Mohadi, District Bhandara, November 2006.

Despite these odds, the family sought to move ahead. Having their own irrigated land and by dint of their hard work, they got good crop yields and also had bidi rolling as supportive income activity. They thus acquired a satisfactory economic condition, owned a mobile phone and had developed a progressive attitude. Although Bhaiyala was 4<sup>th</sup> pass and Surekha had studied up to 9<sup>th</sup> std, Sudhir was receiving computer training and Priyanka, who was a good student, was studying in the 12<sup>th</sup> and used to ride to college on a bicycle. Surekha was an assertive woman, quite forthright in talking, who 'did not tolerate unfairness or nonsense'. The dominant sections envied their success and Priyanka frequently had to face the brunt of eve teasing. Village gossip talked of the need to 'straighten out the Mahar family'.

### **The Incident**

The immediate contributing factor for the conflict was the mainstream villagers' demand for right of public passage through a road to be constructed that would pass through Bhaiyalal's land. The family was resisting and contesting this through legal mechanisms for which they received support from Siddharth Gajbiye (SG). The latter thereby also invited resentment. On September 3<sup>rd</sup> (2006), SG was beaten up by people from Khairlanji on a dispute about wage payment to labourers. Surekha and Priyanka were witness to this incident and when the case was finally registered as a criminal offence under the Indian Penal Code and Protection of Civil Rights Act, on Sept 16<sup>th</sup> Surekha's witness account was recorded as evidence at Adhalgaon police station. On Sept 29<sup>th</sup> 12 of the 15 accused were arrested and released on bail on the same day.

Meanwhile, since Sept 3<sup>rd</sup> tension had already started building up in Khairlanji, but the administration neither took any preventive steps to dissipate the imminent communal tension nor did they provide protection to the Bhotmange and Gajbiye families. When the 12 accused returned to Khairlanji on Sept 29<sup>th</sup> they received a fabricated story that SG's brother was planning an attack on them to avenge the violence against SG. This angered the accused and they organized a mob and set out on a tractor to Gajbiye's village. Priyanka overheard talk of this plan by the village women when she went to fetch water from the village well and informed her father. Both of them immediately went to warn SG and his brother. Bhaiyalal later returned to his farm, while Priyanka went back home. When the mob did not locate SG and his brother at Dusala, they returned to Khairlanji and assembled outside Bhotmange's house (around 6 pm) and attacked Priyanka, her brothers and mother. Bhaiyala was alarmed when from his farm he saw the mob gathering outside his house. He rushed to seek help from SG and his brother. When SG called at the Bhotmange's around 6.20 pm Surekha frantically pleaded for help, but when the brothers rushed there the fear of the gathered mob pushed them back and they tried to contact the police through their cell phone. But the reaction of the Adhalgaon police was tardy, with a constable visiting the site as late as 8.30 pm, when he reported the situation as 'normal'.

The mob dragged Priyanka out of her house to the adjacent cattle shed, stripped and brutally gang raped her. Surekha faced the same fate. The brothers were violently beaten up. It is also alleged that a section of the mob asked the brothers to rape their sister and

when they refused, mutilated their genitals. Some informants also stated that the nude bodies of the victims were paraded through the village before dumping them in the canal running near the village. During the process of this massacre, most of the villagers remained passive spectators, while the few who tried to intervene were overpowered.

The beat constable having given a report of normalcy the SP of Adhalgaon police station did not see the necessity of further action and when on 30<sup>th</sup> Bhaiyalal Bhotmange went to the police station to file an FIR, he was advised to first look for his family which despite all his efforts led him nowhere. On September 30<sup>th</sup>, later in the day, Surekha's body was found and identified by a relative from Deulgaon. On October 1<sup>st</sup> the remaining bodies were found and similarly identified. However, the report of the fact finding committee indicates that the entire post-mortem was carried out indifferently and no proper examination made of the sexual violence. The manner in which the entire post mortem exercise was carried out has suggested suspicious motive to suppress evidence. The bodies were buried at Deulgaon. Despite this being a clear case of atrocity, the SP of Adhalgaon visited the village only two days after the incident. This led to widespread protests leading to the appointment of an inquiry commission.

The BARTI-YASHADA fact finding committee report points to “Deep rooted social conspiracy to facilitate the crime and suppress evidence and an obvious neglect and dereliction of duty”.

### **The Concerns**

The case brings out that dominant castes are unwilling to accept the social and economic mobility of *dalits* and the self assertion by these oppressed minorities are seen as a threat to the hegemony of dominant castes. The use of sexual violence to emasculate the male psyche of oppressed groups surfaces yet again in this incident. The collusion of the state machinery to suppress subordinated groups is a serious concern that pins the nail on proclaimed progressive policies, legislations and the Constitutional vision of non-discrimination, equality and justice.

### **Questions for Discussion**

- 1) How do you analyze the interplay of caste, class and gender factors in this incident?
- 2) What do you think would be the community level strategies to empower subordinated, marginalized, sections?
- 3) How do you think civil society groups, NGOs and progressive political forces should negotiate with the state to create facilitating conditions for such sections to realize their legitimate civil and human rights?
- 4) Can you site similar parallels in your region/area?