

Report on the Sale of Female Babies in Nalgonda District, Andhra Pradesh dated the 29th May 2001.

29th May 2001

Sub: Sale of Female Babies in Nalgonda District, Andhra Pradesh.

I visited the District of Nalgonda on 12th May 2001 to study personally the position in regard to this issue. In view of the reports that the sale of female babies was mostly being indulged in by the tribal Lambadas I decided to visit Lambada habitations. One problem in the backward Nalgonda district is the absence of basic infrastructure like proper roads especially to the far off Lambada habitations known as Tandas. I was accompanied by the Collector and District Magistrate of Nalgonda Shri Manohar Prasad, IAS, Shri Rafai, IAS, Joint Collector, Shri Hari Singh, Revenue Divisional Officer and Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Miryalguda and Shri Vidyasagar, Mandal Revenue Officer. Though we traveled from 9.45 am to 7.pm we could visit only three habitations because of the far-flung nature of these habitations, namely, the Chandranaik Tanda, hamlet of Neredugommu village, Chandampet village and Telladevarapalli village of the Chandampet Mandal for verifying the ground realities in regard to the sale of girl children in the area. However, whatever I saw was pretty enlightening.

2. At the very outset I invite your kind attention to the accompanying brief note furnished to me by the Mandal Revenue Officer, Chandampet on the subject which shows that since the year 1997 as many as 27 children had been sold in this Mandal area. It is, therefore, crystal clear that the sale of

female infants in this area is a reality and has been going on for quite some years.

3. In this context I may draw your attention to Reports of the cases of sale of female babies in Gulbarga District of Karnataka and the scandals in regard to the sale of children in the Ranga Reddy District of Andhra Pradesh. I enclose some of the early press cuttings relating to these cases and a report received by me from the Collector of Ranga Reddy District Shri Ajay Jain, IAS. I understand from Dr Justice K Ramaswamy, Honourable Member, NHRC, New Delhi that the NHRC New Delhi is already seized of these cases in Karnataka and Ranga Reddy District in Andhra Pradesh.

4. Returning to my findings in Nalgonda District, the following are the facts relating to my investigation involving interaction in the villages visited by me with the persons who sold away their female infants and the village communities concerned:

Shri Ramavath Ramulu S/o Kotia of Chandranaik Tanda, hamlet of Nerudugommu village is about 30 years old. He sold away his girl child in July 2000. His wife Chitti had died in June 2000 when the child was 3 months old. In addition to this child, there were 2 other girl children aged 5 years and 3 years. Answering questions from me he said that he had not sold his child but that he had “given it away” because there was no way his baby could be fed since the mother, his wife, had died. He did try to feed the baby with milk powder but the child’s failing health made him believe that she would not survive. He himself was a migrant worker in the city of Hyderabad about 100 Kms away driving an auto rickshaw and earning about Rs.2, 500/- a month. His mother told me in response to a question from me that she had herself wanted to take care of the baby but that her son elected to sell away the baby to some one in the city of Hyderabad.

When I pointed out to Shri Ramavat Ramulu that he had a mother and a father, a married sister living at a place just 2 Kms away and also two younger sisters aged 16 years and 9 years and he himself was earning Rs.2500/- a month and, therefore, he had no reason to sell away his child, especially considering the willingness of his mother to take care of the child, he replied that his relatives had to migrate to the Guntur area in search of wage employment, that his mother was of unsound mind and, therefore, he had no way of taking care of the child and hence “gave away” his child. As for the person to whom he gave away his baby, he stated that it was a woman who belonged to the Champapet area of Hyderabad city, who had approached him saying that she wanted to bring up the child. She was a married woman but Ramavat Ramulu had not met her husband. He did not know her name nor did he verify if she had any children of her own and yet he gave away to this woman his child at her request.

Shri Ramavat Ramulu admitted to me that his mother had offered to bring up the child but said that he did not have confidence in his mother as he felt she was not a responsible enough person, after watching her for 15 days bringing up his infant. To a specific question from me he said that he did consult the other members of his family before giving away his child and that his pregnant sister, a mother of 3, had offered to bring up the child but that her husband had objected to that. However, his father did advise him to take care of the child. Yet he gave away the child to a woman in Hyderabad. Responding to another question from me he stated that he did not seek the help of the people of his Tanda for taking care of his child.

I asked the 40 men and women who had assembled at the Tanda where I was conducting my Inquiry whether they believed the statement of Ramavat Ramulu that he did not sell his child but that he had merely given

away his child to a woman who asked for his child. There was considerable stone walling by the community in regard to answering my question and most of them gave ambiguous answers though a few of the men said that he would have taken “ just 50 or 100 ” rupees in exchange for “giving away” his child. When I specifically posed the question to the assembled community as to whether Ramavat Ramulu’s action was right they replied in one voice that it was wrong on his part and that such an action would be wrong on the part of any one.

Answering a specific question from me, the assembled community denied that they resorted to killing their girl children. Asked why then were children sold and what was the difference between killing and selling, a lone woman said that there was no difference between the two. The rest remained silent. Ramavat Ramulu himself stated in reply to another query from me that he would have given away his child even if it were a boy and not a girl. However he had no answer when questioned as to how he could hand over his child to an unknown person and what confidence did he have that his child would be safe in her hands.

Ramavat Ramulu told me that he was planning to marry again.

The other person to whom I spoke in this Tanda is Smt Mudavathu Ramili a woman of about 30 years who had 4 children in all, 3 of them girls. According to official reports she had sold her fourth child, a girl. When questioned by me she denied the charge and said that her child had actually died because of illness and because she was not feeding properly- that is, she was unable to drink milk. She claimed that she had buried her child at a place 3 ½ kms away from her village. The officers, however, do not believe her version and the finding of the Mandal Revenue Officer is that she had indeed sold her child. It may be mentioned here that the custom

amongst the Lambadas is that they bury their own land and not at some place far away from the village, as claimed by Mudavathu Ramili.

A third person Shri Ramavat Ramkoti who had also reportedly sold his infant was not available in the village.

The Collector and the other officers are completely convinced that Shri Ramavat Ramulu sold away his infant baby in the city of Hyderabad and that he had also attempted to act as a “mediator” or a broker to arrange for the sale of girl children to those wanting to buy them. On the basis of my own interaction I am convinced that Shri Ramavat Ramulu sold away his infant baby and I also find that he is quite defiant in his attitude to the whole episode, giving the clear impression that he has no regrets whatever. He is also now getting ready to marry.

At the next village Chandampet where I met the woman Sarpanch of the Panchayat and the community, prevalence of the sale of children in their village was strongly denied by those assembled. However, a few in the assembly stated that while there was no such practice in their own village, such practice did exist in some of the neighbouring villages.

At Telladevarapalli village I met Smt Muthyalamma, a Scheduled Caste woman aged 45 years who had sold away her 7 month old female infant Renuka to a broker but the baby had been rescued and restored to her by the administration. Answering questions put to her by me in the presence of the village community, Smt Muthyalamma told me that she “gave away” her baby to one Sapavath Ramulu because Sapavath Ramulu had told her that he had no children and that he wanted to bring up her daughter. When I questioned her husband Varimalla Gorraiah as to how he allowed this to happen he replied that he was a migrant labourer to the neighbouring

district of Guntur and that this happened while he was away in Guntur District. His own absence and the persistence of Sapavat Ramulu had resulted in the “sale” of his child, he claimed. Together they added: “We did not know that Sapavat Ramulu was selling children. We believed that he was childless. Also, Muthyalamma had no breast milk to feed the infant. Muthyalamma never had the intention of ‘selling’ her baby. It was only to help Sapavat Ramulu a childless man to adopt her child that she agreed. They would never again sell this child.”

The facts of this case as established by the Mandal Revenue Officer, however, is that the child had been sold through Sapavat Ramulu, who is a broker arranging sales and purchase of infants. He belongs to Bandamida Tanda of Polepally village of Channampet Mandal. That the infant Renuka had been sold away and was being transported to Hyderabad along with other infants was reported to the police by one Shri Narasimha Rao, a reporter working with the Telugu newspaper Eenadu. Shri Narasimha Rao himself had come to know of this on being tipped off by one of the two rival factions operating the child sale racket. The police intercepted the broker at the bus stand in Chintapally village and recovered Renuka and another female child belonging to P.A. Palli of Miryalguda Revenue division. It was such a well organised racket that those involved in the transportation of these infants included a woman called Bichia who had a 6 month old baby of her own and, therefore, was acting as a wet nurse to feed the other two babies while being transported to Hyderabad! In order to throw inquisitive on lookers off scent, all those involved made it appear that Renuka was a Chenchu infant (Chenchus are among the most backward of the Andhra Pradesh tribals). Once the police intercepted the brokers, the Mandal Revenue Officer Shri Vidyasagar put his machinery into action and tracked the case down to Polepalli village where the mother

Muthyalamma was living. There the Mandal Revenue Officer elicited from Muthyalamma herself the truth that she had “sold” Renuka to child broker Sapavath Ramulu of Bandamida Tanda of Polepally village. Sapavath Ramulu had sold Renuka for Rs.1,000/-, taking Rs.500 for himself and giving Rs.500/- to Muthyalamma. The price of Renuka was thus Rs.500/-.

To the extent I was able to elicit information, the police who had intercepted the group transporting the children to Hyderabad had not yet arrested Sapavath Ramulu, the main broker in the case though Bichia herself was presently in judicial custody. I requested the Collector to have him arrested at once and investigate the matter further.

During my conversation with Muthyalamma and her husband Gorraiah it came to light that one of their children, a girl named Venkatamma who is 10 years old, had been engaged as a bonded labourer against an advance of Rs.2000/- in Devarakonda. I requested the Collector to have her rescued at once.

I found that the child Renuka who had been restored to her mother Muthyalamma was incredibly malnourished. She was almost dead. I pointed out to the Collector that Renuka had no chance of survival unless she was immediately and at once shifted to a hospital and provided nutrition rehabilitation. I told the Collector that both Renuka and Muthyalamma should be admitted into the hospital together and provided appropriate nutrition rehabilitation and care together so that the life of the baby could be saved. The Collector took immediate action. When I checked on the morning of the 28th May 2001 with the Collector on telephone as to what the condition of Renuka was, he reported to me that Renuka had been admitted into the Niloufer Hospital, Hyderabad and that she was recovering.

I also requested the Collector that after Venkatamma, the bonded child labourer had been rescued from her master at Devarakonda, the entire family be rehabilitated with the funds available under the bonded labour relief and rehabilitation scheme.

During these village visits of mine I spoke to the District Women's Welfare Officer and the personnel of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme as to how the kind of things we were witnessing in the villages were happening and what their role had been in regard to all the attendant issues. I regret to record that none of them had a clue to what ever was happening in the villages and made vague references to their coming to know about these happenings only from the newspapers though the ICDS anganwadis are situated in the villages! That none of them thought that Renuka was so seriously malnourished that her death was imminent and that she needed immediate admission into the hospital speaks volumes of the absence of training in regard to their work as well as their attitude orientation. That there was a failure at the level of the development officers at the grass roots level to detect the connection between poverty, bonded labour and sale of children as in the cases of Muthyalamma, Venkatamma and Renuka is a sad comment on how little have the dimensions of poverty in their worst manifestations have been understood by the field level staff.

5. Findings and Recommendations

From the facts gathered by me through my personal visits to the villages mentioned above, my interaction with the parents involved in the sale of children, the village communities and the officers in the field the following conclusions emerge:

1. The general indifference that families have towards girl children manifests in the most acute form in the Lambada community by way of selling their girl children and some times even killing them.
2. The case of Mutyalamma of Teledevarapalle shows that this phenomenon is not exclusive to Lambadas and could be practised by the other poor like the Schedule Castes as well.
3. That the practice of killing female infants and or selling them allowed to continue over a period of time with out any action by the State provides such practice with a social sanction and such a practice in time becomes a social habit. When it becomes a social habit, racketeers come to run the society with impunity and even live with great dignity and power as seen in the Hyderabad City's "Precious Moments" case. The racketeers develop and impose on the society in general and the poor in particular self serving rationalisations such as a poor woman's girl child is better off being sold away rather than live in poverty or a poor woman's family on the whole can better itself economically by sacrificing one of its own members for the sake of the rest of the family, etc., The poor communities come to accept such false gospel as truth and tend to lose their innate sensitivity.
4. While poverty has been often advanced as a reason and while there is little doubt that acute poverty prevails in the upland areas of Nalgonda District in general and becomes unmanageable for the poor in years of drought in particular, the fact that not all the poor people indulge in this practice shows that there are special reasons why the girl children of the Lambadas face this fate. This is not to down play the catalytic role of poverty in this practice but we need to go deeper into the reasons by special studies and investigation. The Lambadas seem in

particular to believe that since a girl in any case has to leave the parental home after her marriage to live with her husband, the parents do not need to take the same care of the girl children as they would of their male progeny who would continue to live with them or in their own village even after they are married. “Why water a plant that is not going to grow in our own home?” is the rhetorical attitude of the community. It is not, however, as if they sell away or kill all their girl children. They rationalise the selling away of one of their girl children, usually the last born, by arguing that by the reduction in the burden of having to maintain a large family they are better able to support the rest of the children, including their girl children. This rationalization, while certainly self-serving, is only partly so but also partly genuinely felt and believed. This, therefore, takes the question back to their acute poverty which is very real. But that this rationalization results in the sale of only female children and not male children shows the basic indifference and hostility to the girl child. Thus, it is a combination of several factors such as a basic indifference to the existence of the girl child; acute poverty; willingness to sacrifice one of one’s own children so as to ensure a better life for the rest of the family; existence of racketeers in child trafficking and their going unchecked by those charged with the enforcement of Law; the cruel necessities of regular migration outside one’s own village rendering protection to the girl children extremely difficult; the racketeers in child trafficking using either women or men belonging to the Lambada community itself to pretend that they are childless and that the only reason they are buying the girl children are to raise them as their own to decoy the poverty stricken Lambada households; the choice of the racketeers favouring Lambada girls because the Lambada children easily stand out in our villages as fair complexioned and very beautiful endowed with

attractive physical features; the relatively more attractive moral choice offered to the parents that “after all selling is better than killing” and above all the total absence of a sense of outrage at all levels of our society starting from the Lambada community itself, the law enforcing machinery, the village community, the political leadership at all levels including in particular the elected representatives of the Panchayati Raj Institutions, Members of Parliament and the Legislative Assembly and the vast field level bureaucracy. It is not as though every body should be painted with the same brush for I am convinced about the very sincere efforts being made by the present Collector of Nalgonda Shri Manohar Prasad, the Joint Collector Shri Rafai and Shri Hari Singh, the Revenue Divisional Officer, Miryalaguda. I must also acknowledge the excellent work done by Shri Vidyasagar, Mandal Revenue Officer, Channampet Mandal. The role of Shri Narasimha Rao, a reporter of the newspaper ‘Eenadu’ in alerting the authorities to the case of the sale of Renuka is commendable. So has been the part being played by the social activist Smt Jamuna of the NGO “GRAMIYA”. But as in everything else in a democracy, the leadership in these matters should come from the highest political level, especially from those in power, so that a relevant agenda laying down priorities is handed down to the Administration at all levels to chalk out a programme that confronts all the dimensions of this problem discussed earlier. Such a programme should include more focused and more genuinely intensive efforts in the implementation of poverty eradication programmes, the center piece being an Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) that entitles the poor to full employment and honest minimum wages that would, inter alia, help prevent large scale migration; using such a programme backed by food grains to create rural roads so that there is greater access to far flung

areas of acute poverty; and above all the strengthening of the ICDS programme and the rural health infrastructure. From what little I saw of the District Department of Women and Children including the ICDS personnel during my village visits I am of the view that they have dismally failed in their duty to the women and children of the poor households of the area.

5. That there is a discernible connection between all the various serious manifestations of poverty such as that between bonded labour and sale of children, as seen from the Muthyalamma case. Hence, all such manifestations have to be recognised as a single organic challenge and anti poverty programmes implemented in an integrated way targeting and focusing on the groups of people of the kind seen here, on priority.
6. That anti poverty programmes should be underpinned by awareness generating social action in regard to gender issues and child rights of the kind witnessed here and the concept of convergence should mean the bringing about of an integrated strategy of this kind and
7. The State Government should organise a strict and transparent crack down on all those involved in this racket as a campaign and prosecute them and take other preventive measures available under the Law so that every trafficker and profiteer and their patrons get to realize how painful it can be to them if the Law is strictly administered.

What is required is the implementation of a policy that combines developmental action with strict criminal administration.

In conclusion, I would like to place on record my appreciation of the spontaneous and willing cooperation extended to me by the Nalgonda District Administration headed by its very able and sensitive Collector Shri Manohar Prasad, IAS to visit the villages and find out the facts for my self and for also initiating whatever immediate corrective action was possible at their own level. The factual note presented by the Collector and enclosed to this Report is evidence of the openness with which the Collector has approached this issue.

I recommend that this Report may kindly be forwarded to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Andhra Pradesh for the State Government's information and appropriate action.

K R VENUGOPAL.