

India's caste system survives ts

By Janyala Sreenivas

While Indian society chooses to focus exclusively on the immediate crisis situation, local NGOs are quietly opening up separate relief facilities for the Dalits

THERE'S something even an earthquake measuring 9 on the Richter scale and a tsunami that kills over 1 lakh people can't crack: the walls between caste.

That's why at Ground Zero in Nagapattinam, Murugesan and his family of four have been living on the streets in Nambiar Nagar. That's why like 31 other families, they have been thrown out of relief camps. That's why they are hounded out of schools they have sneaked into, they are pushed to the rear of food and water lines, given leftovers, not allowed to use toilets or even drink water provided by a UN agency. That's why some NGOs are setting up separate facilities for them. Because they are all Dalits.

They are survivors from 63 damaged villages—30 of them flattened—all marooned in their own islands, facing the brunt of a majority of fishermen who are from the Meenavar community—listed in official records as Most Backward Class (MBC)—for whom Dalits are still untouchable.

The Indian Express toured the camps to find

an old story of caste hatred being replayed in camp after camp:

- In the GVR Marriage Hall Relief Camp, Dalits cannot drink water from tanks put up by UNICEF. The Meenavars say they "pollute" the water.
- In the Nallukadai Street Relief Camp, a Meenavar Thalaivar, or leader, grabbed all cartons of glucose biscuits delivered by a Coimbatore NGO. The Dalits were told: these are not for you.
- At Puttur Relief Camp, the Meenavars have hoarded family relief kits, rice packets, new clothes and other relief material. When the Dalits asked for some, they paid a heavy price—they had to spend the night on the road.
- At the Neelayadatchi Temple Camp, Dalits are not allowed inside the temple, especially when rice and cash doles are being handed out.
- Dalits from three villages taking shelter at Ganapati cinema hall in Tharambagadi are thrown out every night because the Meenavar fishermen say they did not "feel safe" falling sleep with Dalits around.
- So 32 ostracised Dalit families took shelter in the GRM girls' school in Thanjavur. But four days ago, even the school asked them to vacate saying it was due to re-open.

Those doing the discriminating brush all this aside. Says Chellayya, a Meenavar fisherman at a Tharambagadi camp: "These Dalits have been playing mischief, going back to the villages and looting houses. That's why we don't want them around here."

To which Dalit activist K Darpaya says:

Secretary, Rural Development, is deputing District Adi Dravidar Welfare Officers to relief camps.

"They will look into the problem and report back on what can be done to put an end to this. We certainly do not discriminate but if the fishermen themselves are doing it because of their local status, what can the government do?" says Nayar.

In various relief camps Dalits are told that food parcels and household kits are not for them. They are forbidden from drinking from UNICEF water tanks. They are not even permitted to use toilet areas. They are denied shelter and have no choice but to sleep in the open air

"What's left in the houses for Dalits to take? And where will they keep the loot even if we assume they have taken something? In the relief camps? On the road side?"

There's an irony here. For, the district administration and relief agencies have to depend on the strong network of Meenavar fishermen to disburse aid and relief. But so rampant has the discrimination become that relief in-charge for Nagapattinam district Shantasheela Nayar,

Talk to some of the victims and instead of bitterness and anger, there is grief and helplessness.

"In Nagapattinam, three relief camps we went to denied us shelter saying they had no space. At the Nataraja Damayanti high school, the watchman refused to let us in," says Murugesan.

At first, the families did not understand why but as door after door slammed in their faces, it became clearer. They approached their local municipal councillor K Tilagar. "He assured us


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want to sit with Dalits and have food. Some of them manage to get rice but other relief items coming in like biscuit packets, milk powder and family household kits are denied to Dalits."

Says M Jayanthi, a coordinator of South Indian Fishworkers Society (SIFS): "Dalits are facing discrimination in all relief camps where they are present. But society does not want to raise the issue as it would complicate things further. Without making it public, we are opening separate facilities for Dalits exclusively," she says.

Sevai, an NGO-based in Karaikal, Pondicherry, 20 kms from Nagapattinam, is the first organisation to address the issue.

Coordinator R Indrani says: "Since Dalits are not receiving sufficient food and water, we have started cooking for them in separate kitchens. They come from wherever they are taking shelter and we provide them whatever they want. We are also considering separate camps for them."

Several NGOs which noticed the problem raised the issue during their meeting with District Collector M Veerashanmugha Moni. "But no one is willing to take up the matter at the field level as this could complicate things. We don't want friction between the two castes by trying to address it during this crisis," says the team leader of NGO Accord, which is working among Dalits. COURTESY  AN EXPRESS