

HRE Adivasi/Dalit Report

In May the second phase of the HRE program in Kerala began enthusiastically, with a new India Chapter branch opening after a program at the Adivasi & Dalit House Settlement Colony at Kurumthar in Pathanamthitta district.

The focus of the HRE team was on the discrimination taking place in that region against Dalits (the lowest Hindu caste) and Adivasis (the indigenous or 'tribal' people of India), who together comprise around 17% of Kerala's population of 33 million*. They are mostly labourers, divided by sub-castes according to their work. Most hold a piece of government-donated land, usually valued around 4 cents (1 acre is worth 100 cents), but their access to education is very limited. Most live in small huts and struggle to earn their daily bread and send their children to school. They are still considered "untouchable", and disallowed from entering upper-caste premises or some of their worship places. Worse, they are also often effectively deprived of their right to worship, by frequent disputes with the upper caste over ownership of traditional places of worship.

Such a dispute led to an upper-caste attack on the Kurumthar adivasi community around twenty years back, over ownership of their worship place, the Kurumthar Kavau. (The Tribal and Dalit places of worship in Kerala, known as *kavu*, are based on the presence of local deities related to the communities' day-to-day life, and ancestor spirits. Trees always surround the *kavu*, and no living thing on the premises may be killed. It is common to see many birds, insects and even snakes living peacefully alongside humans. Environmentalists now advocate the importance of the *kavu*, as it shelters many creatures and stores water for nature and people. Unfortunately many of them have been destroyed or abandoned due to social conflict or the greed for so-called development).

Mrs. Thanka, a victim of the attack, inaugurated the two-day HRE workshop by recalling its brutality, and how it took 14 years to get their land and *kavu* back from the upper caste through the judicial process.

During the interaction with the HRE team, participants voiced their grievances regarding their status as second-class citizens. One, Jincy Binu, said that even though they are invited to social gatherings such as weddings and other ceremonial functions, they are not allowed to sit and dine with upper-caste people, but must wait to eat separately at the end. A social worker from the community related how she was ill-treated at an upper-caste wedding, and afterwards never attended any such events again.

Another participant, Chitra Podiayan, said that in order to avail themselves of their right of worship as Adi-Dravida worshippers ('nature worshippers'), the communities were forced to build their own places of worship. Also they felt that some in the upper-caste communities look down on their deities, and do not consider that they are real Hindu gods. Priyanka Prasad noted how a particular sect of local Christians considered all others to be sinners and devil-worshippers, refusing to mingle with others such that there is zero social interaction with them.

Another participant explained how some years ago, they were not allowed to take water from the upper caste-owned wells during summer. Recently this had changed, but still

they cannot take water directly, instead it is brought and poured into their pots so that they do not touch the wells.

An educated girl who is the first-degree holder from the community said that the root cause of the degree of social discrimination in the region was the lack of education. She related how some 'forward caste' students coming to her for private coaching are even reluctant to drink a cup of water from her house.

Another participant shared that the young people - even children of higher-caste communities - call Adivasi & Dalit elders by name, but expect their own elders to be addressed using respect titles by Adivasis & Dalits – failing which they would be physically attacked.

Participants related how dehumanized they felt, and how such behavior affronted their human dignity and challenged the secular constitution of India. They had never heard that the UN had such a valuable declaration as the UDHR, signed by all its membership. They enquired why it is not practiced, though agreed by all nations including India. The HRE facilitator informed them that the reason for organizing HRE programs is to educate the masses about these important UN declarations, and so help society to challenge discrimination based on religion and belief.

Almost thirty participants attended the program, most of them women as men are the family breadwinners. Initially they were reluctant to respond when they found that one IARF facilitator was upper-caste, the other Christian, but when our aims and objectives were explained to them as encouraging them to feel as equal human beings, they commented how the program was an eye-opener to them, and asked for further such educative programs in their area.

The HRE team helped them chalk out an action plan to tackle discrimination. More social interaction, education and awareness programs among both tribal and upper-caste society are important for the attainment of mutual respect of one another's faith and human dignity.

The ladies cooked and served food for the participants, and finally all of them shared how they felt their struggle was recognized.

* According to the Indian Constitution all are Hindus except Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Parsees, Bahais, Ahmadis and Sikhs. Dalits & Adivasis, officially known as "Schedule Castes" and "Schedule Tribes", often live together in one village, sometimes side by side. In Kerala they have the same class status, and at Kurumthar the communities live in the same "settlement colony", near the Adivasis' *kavu*. Dalits are the outcasts of Hindu religion, and Tribals, though nature-spirit worshippers and therefore not strictly Hindu, are now considered part of the Hindu community, though also outcast.