

200 Potharajus quit age-old profession

By Our Staff Reporter

NIZAMABAD, JULY 21. Yet another social barrier was broken on Saturday, when 200 Potharajus (non-brahmin priests), denounced their age-old profession of initiating young Dalit girls into the Jogini system and uncivilised system of 'Gavu' (slitting the throat of live lamb) in village festivals and joined the mainstream of the society.

The system prevailing in some parts of Telangana and other areas across the State, has brought untold misery to the poor families of the Potharajus and also the Jogini women. While the Government had initiated various steps through the District Scheduled Castes Services Cooperative Society (DSCSCS) to rehabilitate the Jogini women by giving agriculture lands, houses and loans to start micro enterprises, the Potharajus have been neglected by the successive Governments. In all, there are 1,200 Potharajus in Nizamabad alone, who are dependent on this profession for their livelihood.

The Potharaju system is one striking social feature in Telangana area where they perform the village festivals called 'Oora Panduga' and rituals to appease the Gods and Goddesses besides initiating young girls belonging to

the SC community into the Jogini system. The Potharajus generally belong to the SC community and their most humiliating experience is during the village festival, when they are forced to slit the throat of live lamb and offer it to the village God or Goddesses. In one such village festival, a young Potharaju, died of suffocation after he was forced to perform 'Gavu' in Jannepalli village of Navipet mandal in 1999.

The district administration and Sangha Vikasa, a non-Government organisation, chalked out an action plan to bring these Potharajus into the mainstream of the society. Accordingly, a function was organised at the District Sports Authority ground here today, where 200 Potharajus took a pledge and agreed to quit the profession. Thereafter, all of them had their hair cut which symbolised their commitment to keep away from the profession.

It is the first time in the history of the State that such large number of Potharajus had gathered at one place and quit the profession. The district administration also responded to their pleas and assured them of all help.

The Collector, Mr. G. Ashok Kumar, announced that a Rs.1 crore action plan had been prepared to rehabilitate the Potharajus in the district. They would be sanc-

tioned agriculture land, provided with houses and given loans to start micro enterprises. He termed the event as a social revolution and said the Potharajus breaking the chain was a real achievement. He said vested interests wanted continuation of this deep-rooted system.

The Joint Collector, Mr. Kadmiel, the SC Corporation Executive Director, Mr. Shaik Meera, the DRDA Project Director, Mr. K.V. Satyanarayana, the Sangha Vikasa Director, Mr. Rajaiah and senior district officials were present.

It was a colourful display of their profession, when most of the Potharajus clad in traditional dresses danced amid drumbeats and came to the venue of the programme. In the presence of the rehabilitated Jogini women, the Potharajus, who are said to be the primary cause of prevalence of the Jogini system, took a vow to desist from making further attempts to initiate any young girl into the profession.

The Potharajus also narrated how they are forced by circumstances to continue in the profession at the instance of the village elders and influential persons of the village.

One Potharaju Sailu, an aged man from Akbarnagar in Varni mandal, explained how the socie-

ty had been cruel to them. Even if someone fell sick, the Potharajus were suspected of performing sorcery, he said adding that he himself had been punished by the villagers for no fault of his. He said their children were the worst affected as they were not allowed to enter the school. There is complete discrimination from all sections of the society and hoped that at least now the Government would initiate some steps to improve their lives.

The district administration had arranged a special health camp for the rehabilitated Jogini women and their children. A leading businessman of Nizamabad, Mr. P.R. Somani, offered clothes to the Potharajus while another businessman, Mr. Javeri Patel, extended financial help to a young Potharaju boy who secured admission into the Jawahar Navodaya School. The AP Medical Representatives Union district representatives gave Rs.25,000 worth of medicines free of cost at the health camp.

Some Dalit organisations, who submitted a memorandum to the Collector, during the programme expressed dissent stating that by making the Potharajus perform the rituals before quitting the profession was nothing but expressing faith in the age-old system.

Potharajus give up their vocation

Rs 1 crore proposals to rehabilitate joginis: Collector

FROM OUR BUREAU

Nizamabad, July 21: District Collector Ashok Kumar said that proposals worth Rs 1 crore were submitted to the government for rehabilitation of those who have come out of the Potharaju-Jogini system.

The district administration held different programmes at the district sport authority stadium here on Saturday on the Jogini and potharaju system. Many potharajus from various mandals of the Nizamabad and Adilabad districts came here

and had their hair cut on the occasion. People usually believe that there are some magical powers in the hair of Potharajus. Over 200 Potharajus pledged that they would quit the profession and pursue other professions.

Health tests were also conducted on 500 joginis and medicines worth Rs 25,000 were distributed to them. Mementoes were presented to potharajus and they were apprised about alternative vocations like agriculture and cattle breeding.

Speaking on the occasion, the Collector said that land would be

distributed to potharajus who had come out of this system, as was being done in the case of joginis.

Potharajus play active role in converting a woman into Jogini.

The Collector said that it was unfortunate that even though country was progressing on many fronts, Potharaju-Jogini system was continuing in the district.

Ashok Kumar said that even though an Act was passed banning jogini system in 1988, still many gullible women are being converted into joginis in the district and exhorted that the NGOs to play an

active role in creating awareness among women. He said that some persons were obstructing the government and NGOs working for the uplift of joginis and potharajus. The Collector said that there were about 2,000 potharajus in Nizamabad district. He said that it was laudable that many potharajus came voluntarily to discard the condemnable system.

District joint Collector D Cadmiel presided over the meeting and SC corporation incharge ED Chinnataiah, DRDA PD Satyanarayana were present.