

No land 27 years after being freed as bonded labourers

Forest Dept. recently took back the land on which they were allowed to cultivate, officials assure alternative land will be identified

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"Now, we are left with no option but to go back to work as bonded labourers," rued Lakshamma of Ganguru in Arkalgud taluk on Friday. She is among the 91 people released as bonded labourers by the State government in 1994.

Even after waiting for 27 years, their wish to own land has remained a distant dream. "The government released us from bondage then. But, now with no land to cultivate, we are forced to return to the same landlords, requesting them to take us back as labourers," said Lakshamma.

Annual pay of ₹5
Members of 110 families of the Scheduled Caste (SC)



Dalit families of Ganguru in Arkalgud taluk have been waiting for land since 1994. ■ PRAKASH HASSAN

community in the Dalit colony of Ganguru village worked as bonded labourers for decades. The issue caught the attention of the State government after Dalit Sangharsha Samiti leader Chandraprasad Tyagi and others raised their

voice seeking justice for them. Then Deputy Commissioner of Hassan Mahendra Jain, after visiting the village, passed an order on September 26, 1994, releasing 91 people from bondage. It was

found that as low as ₹25 was adjusted towards the loan borrowed after the worker completed a year. "Initially, for a few years, I worked only for the food offered by the landlord. Later, my annual pay was fixed at

₹5, which was increased gradually," recalled Govindaiah Javaraiah, 65. He worked for nearly 20 years. Madamma, who lost her husband within a few years after marriage, continued to work as a bonded labourer in place of her husband to earn ₹10 a year.

Ravi Ramaiah recalled that the government assisted the families with financial aid as they had no source of income. The government allowed them to cultivate a part of Gobbali Reserve Forest area near the village until an alternative land was identified and allotted to them.

'Stopped from entering' All these years, they grew ragi, cereals, and tobacco in the land. The Forest Department took back the land on April 1

this year amid protests by the families. "We struggled hard to protect our land, but could not succeed as Forest Department officers had come to the spot with 22 earthmovers. An army of police personnel stopped us from entering the field," said Sannamma.

Following this incident, they staged protests in Hassan and Arkalgud, seeking grant of land. Deputy Commissioner R. Girish, Arkalgud tahsildar Renu Kumar have assured them that an alternative land would be identified soon.

"The government should grant the land that we cultivate all these years. If it is forest land, let the government hand over equal extent of land in some other place to the Forest Department," demanded Mr. Javaraiah.