

Report of the Fact-Finding Committee on the Byadagi Chilli Market Incident

The Byadagi (Dry) Chilli Market in Haveri district of Karnataka was started in 1956. It is one of the largest government trading centers in Asia. The dry chilli market at Byadgi Taluka is operated by APMC.

Farmers from not only Karnataka but also from some of the districts of neighboring Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states depend on this market. They believe and are confident that they get better/remunerative prices at this market so they bring their produce from as far as 300-400 kms away.

Such a famous market saw unprecedented events on 11.3.2024, including attack on the APMC office. The attackers focused on the APMC office and set it on fire; some records were burnt; Office equipment was destroyed; the vehicles of staff were set on fire; the fire engine that came to douse the fire was set on fire. According to the press, the attack resulted in loss of crores of rupees in damage, few motorcycles and one garbage-sweeping vehicle were also burnt down and many farmers were arrested.

Reacting immediately to these events, the AIKMKS-affiliated Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (KRRS) constituted a fact-finding committee. It is headed by KRRS State President R.Madhava Reddy, with advocates Chaganuru Mallikarjuna Reddy and Veerendra Patil, Bellari district, Kurugodu taluk Rythu Sangha secretary Surendra, Hasiru Sena leader Omkara Gowda and Srinivasulu as members. Davanagere farmers' leader Ravi Swamy and M. N Naik worked with the committee. The committee visited Byadagi town on March 15, 2024 and gathered information about the incident. It enquired the people there and ascertained the following facts.

Many said that the main reason for the attack was the sudden drop in prices in the market. The prices of some varieties of chillies, which hitherto used to be around Rs 20,000, have suddenly dropped to Rs 10,000 and Rs 8,000. Unable to digest the huge drop in the prices they heard from the mouths of the traders, the farmers walked in droves, shouting and crying out about the drop in prices, towards the APMC office, as if they want to question someone. Videos on social media also prove this fact. They expressed their genuine anger through yelling and shouting. According to the police, more than a thousand people entered into the APMC office and damaged it. The government departments must impartially ascertain what exactly has happened in the melee.

The local police have registered four cases (crime numbers 61 to 64) against over 1,000 unidentified (anonymous) farmers who are not only from Karnataka but also from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. By March 15th, nearly 80 farmers were arrested and sent to jail. Most of these 80 farmers in jail are from Bellary, Rayalaseema and Telangana.

This fact-finding committee went to the Byadagi APMC office on 15.3.2024 and first met APMC secretary, H.Y. Satish. According to him - this attack started at around 4 pm and went on till 7 pm on 11.03.2024. While talking to him, the committee observed that he felt sad that the accident had occurred while he was officiating. The key points from his words are:

1. He said they were not aware of the sudden fall in prices.
2. On that day, about 306 middlemen and 375 traders participated in the business.
3. 33,127 lots came to the market that day, making up for a total of 3,13,000 bags.
4. The prices of chillies per quintal on that day are:
Kaddi variety chillies - Rs. 29,000
Dabbi variety - Rs. 34,509
Guntur variety - Rs. 12,189
5531 variety - Rs.4000 to Rs.11,500.
5. The total quantity of chilli that came to the market is 4,09,120 quintals.
6. On the previous week i.e., on 4.3.2024, the price of chillies was much higher than on 11.3.2024 when the incident took place.
7. The official said the damage caused by the riots was to the tune of Rs 2-4 crore.

From the words and conduct of the officer, it was evident that the peasants did not do it intentionally and that some mafia was behind the riots.

The committee then met the police and lawyers and gathered their views. A local man who did not wish to be named said:

1. This is a conspiracy hatched by chilli mafia.
2. The traders from the State of Gujarat came here well planned and conspiratorial, reduced the prices.

Some of the Observations made by the Committee:

The committee thoroughly examined the site of the riots and the market yard. The rioters set fire to the APMC's governing body building. A fire engine vehicle that had come to douse the fire was also set on fire. Only vehicles of the APMC governing staff were set on fire. Not a single shop in the APMC market has been set on fire. The piles of chillies in front of the shops were not at all touched. Observations reveal that petrol and diesel were used to ignite the fire.

The Opinion of the Committee:

After its investigation the Committee gave the following opinion.

1. It is natural on the part of farmers to display their anger towards the traders for reducing the prices. What is observed here is that not a single trader has been attacked. Not a single shop was set on fire. Even the goods purchased by the traders were not set on fire.
2. The Byadgi police, who registered cases against nearly 1,000 people, have not arrested any of the locals. The farmers said that police made arrests not on the basis of evidence from CCTV cameras etc., but rather arrested those who fell into their hands.
3. Majority of those arrested are only innocent farmers.
4. The riots were the result of the mafia of chilli traders and middlemen, under the guise of farmers, who had turned the anger of the farmers towards the APMC.
5. If the peasants had really indulged in riots, they would have attacked everything in their way, not selective targets. Shops and goods would have been burnt down. But not a single trader was injured.
6. This was a strategic attack on the governing body of the APMC alone.
7. The chilli mafia deliberately burnt down the APMC governing building using petrol and diesel they tactically arranged beforehand. The farmers seen in the videos have nothing but headscarves in their hands. Naturally farmers are averse to do these kinds of things.
8. The mafia escaped cleverly from the spot and caused the arrest of innocent farmers.
9. Above all, the anti-farmer black laws brought in by the BJP regime (those passed in the Karnataka Assembly) are still continuing even after the Congress government came to power. The present Karnataka government repealed some other laws but how can it continue these farm laws which are destroying the farmers?
10. Neither the officials, traders nor the locals open their mouths even though they know who is responsible for the attack. The truth sleeps.

Farmers! Think!!

Whichever party comes to power, there are tears in the eyes of the farmers. Lakhs of rupees, mostly loaned, is spent on cultivation expenses. If Rs. 10,000 per quintal is lost due to price drop, a farmer who sold 10 quintals is cheated of Rs 1 lakh. How much is being looted from crores of farmers every year over all crops? Who asked for the alms these governments throw in the bank accounts before the elections? As Prof. Nanjunda Swamiji says "The peasants are never the debtors to anyone, instead the governments are". It can be understood that the governments convert the lakhs of crores of remunerative prices denied to farmers into the wealth of a few. So, the real fault lies in the policies of the government. Such incidents cannot be completely avoided without changing the root causes.

Yours,

Byadgi Fact-Finding Committee,
Temporarily Constituted by
Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha (AIKMKS affiliate)

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