

The Marxist

Volume: 18, No. 01

January-March 2002

CPI(M)'s intervention against caste oppression in Tamil Nadu

P. Sampath

The 17th Tamil Nadu state conference of the CPI(M) took place in Coimbatore during February 11 -14. At the conference, the Party's political and organisational work of the last four years was subjected to a close scrutiny. However, our Party's interventions against the problem of untouchability and caste oppressions in Tamil Nadu was an important subject for active discussion by delegates from all the districts.

Harkishan Singh Surjeet, CPI(M) General Secretary, who addressed the delegates said, "The Tamil Nadu unit of the Party intervened commendably against untouchability and caste oppression; that one third of the total members of the Party in Tamil Nadu are dalits is unparalleled in India". (of the 87,609 Party members, 28,548 are dalits)

And the political and organisational report of the 17th Party Congress commended the Tamil Nadu and Andhra units of the Party for their struggles against caste oppression and placed their experiences before the entire country.

In this article an attempt is made to give an account of our Party's intervention in Tamil Nadu during the last few years against the scourge of untouchability and other forms of social oppression and the experiences gained.

Caste Conflicts And Our Intervention

Caste conflicts have occurred off and on in different parts of Tamil Nadu since 1985. Hundreds of people were murdered and thousands maimed; scores of women were raped and property worth crores of rupees was damaged and looted. All these conflicts occurred between the backward caste people and dalits. The worst affected were dalits who were agricultural labourers and other manual workers. Sizable section of the backward caste people were also poor and humble workers. And these belligerent sections had common problems which required them to wage fierce struggles with unprecedented unity. Nevertheless, conflicts erupted between them frequently.

The state committee of the CPI(M) which made an analytical study of these caste conflicts reached the revealing conclusion that "the incidence of untouchability was the root cause of these caste conflicts". And the Party declared that unless the oppressive system of untouchability was rooted out it

would not be possible to avoid caste conflicts and create unity between these sections of the people. The Party undertook many campaigns throughout the length and breadth of the state stressing the need for unity and abolishing untouchability. Such slogans as 'abolish caste oppressions' , 'avoid caste conflicts' and 'save people's unity' were raised during the campaign. The district committees were given direction to conduct district level conferences with a view to abolishing untouchability and building up unity between these sections of the people. To focus on this issue and plan our intervention, the state committee constituted a sub-committee for dalits and tribes.

Of the 34 districts in Tamil Nadu, such conferences were conducted in 20 districts besides a state level conference at Chennai. In the campaigns against untouchability conducted before and after the conferences, the class and mass organisations were encouraged to actively participate. In 10 districts, dalit women's conferences were held. In the districts which witnessed caste conflicts, DYFI and AIKS cadres plunged into extensive campaign to restore peace and normality. These campaigns were a huge success in rural area as well as mofussil towns, and the dalits were greatly attracted by it.

Attacks On Dalits - Our Intervention

Many areas in Tamil Nadu experienced the discriminating attitude of state administration and the police force against the dalits. Police entered many dalit villages and brutally tortured women, children and the old; their houses and possessions were wantonly destroyed; hundreds of dalits, including women, were arrested on framed-up charges and put behind the bars. Such dalit villages as Kodiankulam, Nalumoolaikinaru and Sankaralingapuram have become by-words for police atrocity. When Mancholai tea estate workers, majority of whom are dalits, assembled at Tirunelveli Collectorate with their families for a demonstration to highlight their demands, they were brutally lathicharged by the police, who chased them into the Tampraparni river and killed 17 persons including a few children. The district secretary of our Party, Palani, sustained severe head-injury in the lathicharge and was almost dead when he was taken to the hospital. Intensive medical care and treatment saved his life. Our Party and mass organisations waged a series of struggles against this police brutality on the tea estate workers.

The Party took up the cause of the dalit victims of police excesses at Nalumoolaikinaru. The issue was taken to the Supreme Court by the All India Democratic Women's Association and based on the court verdict, Rs. 23 lakhs was given as compensation to the affected dalits. And 82 police personnel including DIG, SP, DSP and Sub-Inspector were suspended from service and punished.

Our Party exposed the police brutality on the dalit people in Sankaralingapuram village and conducted movement against it. We have filed

a case in the Madras High Court in this connection. And conducted struggles jointly with many dalit organisations and human rights associations. As a result of these struggles, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu herself visited Sankaralingapuram hamlet and distributed Rs. 14 lakhs as compensation. Also, the trumped-up cases filed against 160 villagers were withdrawn.

On the Kodiankulam issue, too, the Party filed a case in the Madras High Court besides waging many struggles. During the period, our Party took up the cause of the dalits who were attacked in other dalit villages by caste Hindus as well as the police force.

Attempts At Joint Movement And The Result

When caste conflicts were raging in many districts in Tamil Nadu and the CPI(M) was in the thick of struggles against such conflicts, the posture of some bourgeois political parties in Tamil Nadu left much to be desired. The leaders of such political parties were in virtual inertia during the period. Worse, some leaders even instigated the caste conflicts. The cadres of these parties divided into antagonistic groups based on their caste affiliations and fought each other. But the CPI(M) made hectic efforts for building up a peoples movement along with the CPI and other Left organisations with a view to abolishing untouchability and avoiding caste conflicts. The leaders of DMK, Tamil Maanila Congress also participated along with the CPI(M) and CPI leaders in the anti-untouchability conference conducted by our Party. Thousands of people attended such conferences. The speeches delivered by the political leaders, including our comrades, and the resolutions passed at the conferences had a positive influence on the participants. These initiatives substantially contributed to restoring peace in the conflict-ridden areas. The Tamil Nadu government felt compelled to convene an all party meeting and evolved measures to abolish untouchability and avert cast conflicts. In the all-party meeting, the CPI(M) state secretary represented our Party, and the suggestions put forward by him found acceptance from all sections. Later, the Tamil Nadu government declared with much fanfare a programme of action to abolish untouchability which was, however, not implemented wholeheartedly. Nevertheless, our initiatives and the measures announced by the government went a long way in creating and strengthening an awareness amongst the people against untouchability.

Thus, in the backdrop of the caste conflicts, which were caused by the practice of untouchability in many parts of Tamil Nadu, the Party played an active role in involving the other political parties as well as the government of Tamil Nadu to abolish this social stigma.

Studies On Untouchability

However, it would be wrong to jump to the conclusion that in Tamil Nadu caste oppression has come down, or, that the chances for caste conflicts have disappeared. The conflicts are just dormant. Though caste conflicts have

considerably come down lately, our Party is very serious about waging a continuous struggle against caste oppressions and untouchability.

The CPI(M) is not just content with our interventions as and when untouchability manifests itself in diverse forms and the dalits are attacked. Our work has progressed to the stage of identifying the villages where untouchability is practised and involving itself in direct interventions. And our Party has undertaken analytical studies on the prevalence of untouchability in such districts as Tirupur, Coimbatore, Virudhunagar, Trichy, Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, Namakkal, Salem, Pudukottai, Tiruvannamalai, Ramanathapuram, Sivagangai, Theni and Dindugal.

That untouchability is prevalent in hundreds of villages in diverse forms was ascertained. At village tea stalls, dalits are given tea in separate tumblers, they are neither allowed to enter into temples nor take water from common taps. Besides, they are not allowed to ride bicycles on village roads and to put, in public, towel on their shoulders. Common burial grounds are denied to dalits; they are not even allowed to use common pathways to their own separate burial/cremation grounds. Even the dalit elders are disparagingly addressed by the children of caste Hindus. In the panchayat raj institutions, dalits are denied equal treatment and many impediments are created to prevent the election of dalits to the panchayat reserved for them. Dalit girls are sexually abused. At village schools, dalit students are not allowed to drink water from the common pot and basic amenities are refused to be provided in dalit villages. The study has brought to light that untouchability is prevalent in one form or another in every village that was subjected to the study. This was made known to the outside world by the Party district committees through press releases. And district administrations were petitioned to intervene and take measures against these evils. In Virudhunagar and Thoothukudi districts, our Party mobilised thousands of people who went in a procession and submitted petitions to the district administration which was widely reported in the press. These measures of the Party were acknowledged and appreciated by the dalits. But, no wonder, the oppressive forces got angered and many bureaucrats felt annoyed. And district officials, in some places, released statements contradicting the truth that our studies brought to light.

Direct Actions To Abolish Untouchability – Our Experiences

The Party evolved a plan for direct action in the villages where untouchability was prevalent. And the mass organisations also actively involved themselves. In this, the work of the kisan sabha and the agricultural workers union was commendable.

Direct action was carried out at such places as Alagapuram in Perambalur district, Iluppur and Mettuppatti in Pudukkottai district, Theni, Batlagundu and Vadippatti in Dindugal district, Chinnanattukulam and Arasur in Viluppuram district, Pothikulam in Ramnad district, Arasanur in Sivagangai

district, Sinkilipatti and Kasimajorpuram in Tirunelveli district, Mankapuram, Mamsapuram, Desikapuram and Muthuchamyapuram in Virudhunagar district. Dharnas were conducted before the tea stalls where the dual tumbler system was practised. Dalits were taken to the temples where they were forbidden entry and they were made to draw water from common village wells and taps. Further they were encouraged to wear footwear and walk on the roads and ride bicycles. These action programmes annoyed the caste Hindus who put up stiff resistance. And their atrocities continued unabated. They worked up the caste feelings and organised counter dharna at Reddippalayam in Tanjore district. At Ilankunni in Thiruvannamalai district they mobilized their womenfolk who were made to create human blockades. At Themmavoor in Pudukkottai district anti-social elements were incited to attack our comrades.

The police in some areas were hand and glove with the oppressive forces and denied permission for our movement citing law and order problems. Sivagangai district secretary of the CPI(M), M. Arjunan, was implicated in a false case under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. These developments dispirited the dalits in some places and, therefore, the movements had to be postponed in such places. Nevertheless, despite such adversities, in most places anti-untouchability movement was a big success. The social rights which the dalits had been denied for hundreds of years were restored to them. That we had taken up their cause and fought unrelentingly for their rights won us approbation from the dalits. And our Party's influence considerably improved among the dalits even where such movements were not taken up.

In Virudhunagar district, dalits from many dalit villages voluntarily participated in the conference on peoples' demands conducted by the Virudhunagar district committee of the CPI(M) after the direct action programme. The mass organisations could mobilize dalit people in large numbers in Tuticorin, Tirunelveli, Dindugal, Cuddalore, Villupuram and Pudukkottai districts. It had a positive reflection in the elections to the Panchayat raj institutions which our Party contested not in alliance with any party. A good number of the dalits who came into contact with the Party during the movement became Party members over the years and are now frontline cadres of the Party and the mass organisations.

In some villages where our Party mobilized dalits into direct action programme to abolish untouchability, the oppressive forces refused to engage them for work. For instance, at Oothuppatti in Tuticorin district and Vellangkuzhi in Tirunelveli district, caste Hindus refused to engage in their fields for agricultural work the dalits who readily came forward to participate in the temple entry programme. At Kayalpatnam, the dominant forces refused to engage the dalits for construction work. Analysing these developments, the 17th conference of the Tamil Nadu unit of the Party made the following observations "..... these experiences strengthens our position that without implementing land reforms and providing land to the dalits or, in other words, so long as the dalits depend on the dominant forces for their livelihood the caste oppressions in villages cannot be eliminated".

The Role Of Dalit Organisations

There are innumerable dalit organisations in Tamil Nadu. Puthiya Tamizhagam headed by Dr. Krishnasamy, Dalit Panthers of India under Mr. Thirumavalavan are the most important of them. Obviously they work among the dalits. The position of the CPI(M) vis-a vis these dalit organisation is very clear. Although they are only engaged in mobilising the dalit masses, CPI(M) does not regard them just as caste organisations. Dalit masses in many places are organised by them against caste oppression. The CPI(M) works jointly with these organisations based on issues and to abolish untouchability. But the activities and approaches of some of the dalit organisations do not serve the cause of the dalits themselves. They do not like the CPI(M)'s interventions against untouchability and caste oppression, and behave as if they have the monopoly right to take up the problems facing the dalit community. Yet, these organisations do not refuse to co-operate and work with us in such places where we have been able to gain substantial influence with the dalits. For instance, when we gained the confidence and support of the dalit tea estate workers at Manjolai as a result of our persistent struggles in support of their demands, the Puthia Tamizhagam shed its hesitation and came forward for joint movements. And, when the CPI(M) took up the issue of police atrocity on the dalits in Sankaralingapuram village, many dalit and human rights organisation showed interest in joint movement. But in places where the dalit organisations had first taken up an issue facing the dalits, they would not even acknowledge the CPI(M)'s support movement. They would criticize and even oppose the support extended by the Left and democratic forces saying that 'dalit organisations alone should seek to resolve the dalit issues'. The CPI(M) has faced such antagonistic postures while working among the dalits.

The CPI(M), on the one hand spearheads social reform movements for the dalits to acquire social rights and, on the other hand, incessantly struggles for land reforms and distribution of land to the landless, including the dalits. Our Party is in struggle for the economic upliftment of all sections of the masses, including the dalits. In other words, the CPI(M)'s position is that the struggle against untouchability and other social evils and the class struggle against economic exploitation are inseparably interlinked. Because the Party has a clear understanding that the caste systems and the exploitative economic system are inter-related and intertwined. Most of the dalit organisations lack in such understanding and, as such, their approach is invariably skewed. They never bother about such issues as land and wage and other issues affecting the dalits' day-to-day lives.

Simultaneously with our direct interventions against untouchability and other forms of social oppression, the CPI(M) conducts ideological campaign among all sections of the masses against caste oppression. But some dalit organisations have taken the perverted position that dalits alone can solve the dalits' problems and sought to create dalit vote banks and make political capital out of it. And our Party is consistently creating awareness among the dalit masses against such skewed approach of dalit organisations even while fighting for their cause.

Over the years, some dalit organisations have transformed themselves into political parties with the object of creating dalit vote banks. Mention must be made of the Puthia Tamizhagam and Dalit Panthers of India in this connection. Of course, the process of mobilising backward caste people on caste lines and later converting them into the caste based political parties had started in Tamil Nadu much earlier. For instance, Vanniar Sangam, a caste organisation of Vanniars became Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) in the mid eighties. Makkal Tamil Desam and New Justice Party and some other caste based political parties were formed just before the last assembly elections. These developments point to the fact that the mobilising of Tamil Nadu people on caste lines has got a boost over the years. On occasions in the past, even the dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu – DMK , AIADMK and MDMK -- did not hesitate to pander to the caste feeling of the people and capitalise on it. Periyar during his life time fiercely fought against caste differences and untouchability. But the leaders of the dravidian parties who declare themselves to be the successors and followers of Periyar keep their mouths tight-shut while the scourge of untouchability manifests itself in different parts of Tamil Nadu. Paradoxically enough, the dravidian parties today compete with each other to align with the BJP which believes in the Varna system of society. In this background, our Party has got to gear up for more fierce struggles against untouchability and social oppressions.

Inner Party Preparations

Over the years, the Party has taken many steps to prepare our cadres to confront the challenges of caste conflicts and other caste-related social issues and to make them participate proactively in the struggle against these evils.

- At different levels of the Party, from the state committee downwards, extensive discussions were conducted and, as a result, our cadres got enlightened on these issues.
- The state committee of the Party prepared a study material entitled “Casteism –genesis, development and problems” and study classes were held in most districts for the benefit of Party cadres.
- Workshops for Party members and cadres of mass organisations were held with a view to sharpening their understanding.
- Pamphlets were printed and widely circulated besides publishing essays explaining our Party position on caste-related issues.
- Party state committee published a letter explaining our position and interventions on caste issues.
- At public meetings and other campaigns not only were political and economic issues spoken about, but such social issues as untouchability were effectively dealt with.
- The abolition of untouchability was the subject matter for discussion in

all Party conferences held prior to the Party's 16th and 17th congress.
All these measures helped the cadres of our Party and mass organisations to participate with verve and resolve in the struggle against caste oppression and untouchability.