

# **A struggle against caste-discrimination in Sri Lanka. Caste OF Cemeteries, Caste and Communists**

Wednesday 4 October 2017, by [KADIRGAMAR Ahilan](#), [SENTHIVEL S. K.](#) (Date first published: 1 August 2017).

Caste relations and conflicts have taken varied forms at different times in Jaffna. The recent conflicts around upper-caste cemeteries in proximity to oppressed caste dwellings resulted in a major protest on May 13<sup>th</sup>, opposite the Jaffna Bus Stand. In Kalaimathy village in Puttur, historically a Communist stronghold in Jaffna, some 23 villagers are in remand custody and 30 people including 11 women are out on bail, following an intensified struggle against a cemetery in the middle of their village. A Satyagraha campaign is continuing for weeks now in Kalaimathy, calling for the removal of all cemeteries next to people's settlements. People from other oppressed caste villages are also participating in the Satyagraha and many others are coming to express their solidarity. S. K. Senthivel, General Secretary of the New Democratic Marxist Leninist Party, shared his views on this recent conflict, their work in Kalaimathy village lasting close to four decades and the history of anti-caste struggles in Jaffna.

**Q: You have a long relationship with Puttur and particularly Kalaimathy village that is in the heat of struggle today. Could you elaborate on this conflict?**

A: The people of Kalaimathy village, which has about 700 families making a population of about 4,500 people, are continuing with a Satyagraha struggle supported by the Mass Movement of Social Justice. With the demand that all cemeteries next to people's settlements should be removed, large sections of the Puttur people from Kalaimathy village are participating day and night and taking forward a powerful conscientious struggle. These villagers have taken a collective decision, that even as they continue their daily wage work, each day, different persons are taking days off and contributing their energies towards organising this struggle.

Those who observe this struggle, wonder about the commitment of the village people towards this struggle, including the history and tradition of this village. And it is indeed, a different kind of activism here, compared to other villages. While there is one consistent leadership in this village for the Community Centre, Women's Society, Sports Society and other village institutions, there is also a politics to the thinking of these people. The basis of their struggle is that for hundreds of years, the people in this village have been oppressed on the basis of caste.

**Q: Can you speak about the history of this cemetery that people want removed?**

A: The cemetery is very old. But in those days, there were no settlements near it. The lands next to it were not used for agriculture with wild over growth. But few decades ago, there was a government settlement scheme which also used some of the cemetery land amounting to 15 lachams (150 perches) and settled some of the villagers. Eventually other villagers also started building houses on the cemetery land as land was scarce and there was no boundary.

As people settled near the cemetery, some practical environmental problems came up in the 2000s. As bodies were burned in the cemetery, the ashes and the smoke began to trouble the people.

Animals ran around with half burned body parts that remained. The people began to oppose the existence of the cemetery, and by the 2010s there emerged a widespread opposition to the cemetery. The last body was perhaps burned three or four years ago.

Early this year, one body was brought and it was turned back by the villagers who convinced them to burn it in another cemetery close by, which was distant from people's settlements. That a dominant caste body was turned back has troubled some people, and they want to prove a point. Next, another family had tried to bring a body, this was of an oppressed caste person, but backed by the dominant castes, and this became confrontational. The courts and the police have intervened. The Judge wanted a high wall built with a gas incinerator. As the confrontation escalated, the villagers broke the half-built wall around the cemetery that was being built in defiance, creating a tense situation and further police action.

**Q: What is the education level in this village and how do they earn their living?**

A: It is only in recent times that students have begun to study O/L and A/L, which reflects the educational backwardness of this village. Until 1975, they could not even attend the Puttur Somaskanda College that was just half a kilometre away, and so their educational access had remained low. They mostly ended their education with grade five, but now there is a young woman who has finished her university education from Kalaimathy. There is now a thirst for education in this village.

The village people are involved in many forms of day wage labour. An interesting characteristic of Valikamam East is that it is a red soil region. But there are stones on top of that soil, and these villagers go as groups of four or five and break and remove the stones and prepare it into farm land. Then there are tree climbing workers. Currently, there are over hundred men who are involved in marketing fish on bicycles. Thus such bodily labour is what they depend on for their incomes. We can also see hundreds of women from this village who go for wage labour in the red soil region of Achchuveli and Valalai.

**Q: I have seen women go in groups to work in such farms. What are the social and economic conditions of workers and how are their wages?**

A: Agricultural work has been necessary for women, because they are unable to sustain their families with the wages of men. The women are involved in planting and harvesting onions. However, there is a great difference in the wages received by men and women. If men receive around Rs. 900 a day in wages, women may only receive half the wage.

The important issue in this village is that they have been landless. And landlessness, caste oppression and economic deprivation, lead to class oppression including low wages.

In this background, in 1979, there was a serious incident of caste violence. Casteist thugs claimed the oppressed caste people had drawn water from their wells and beat them mercilessly.

The oppressed caste people lived in fear, they would say, we work on their land, we live under their trees, we cannot oppose them.

It was with this incident that our Party started working in that village. About twelve youth from that village, with strong anti-caste views, came and spoke to us about their predicament. We talked to them about possible efforts, and that without the support of more people from their village, we cannot do anything; we cannot oppose caste oppression, we cannot gain land, we cannot raise the wages.

When they go for work, they are given bread and tea, but tea is given in coconut shells, or half cut bottles. But the people won't oppose such practices at once. We had to first organise and work with the determined youth, and we advised them to start a community centre. Those youth were convinced, and they formed a youth group and worked with us. The community centre became effective, and was run by both the youth aligned with the Party as well as others in the village.

**Q: What kinds of struggles were first taken up in this village?**

A: At that time, there were about 500 families in that village, and we saw that they needed a path for the village. If a sick person or a pregnant woman had to be rushed to the hospital, they had to be carried on footpaths through people's gardens before reaching a vehicle. We asked the landowners for the path, we also asked government officials, we even called MPs and asked them, but all of them said nothing can be done.

Then we explained the situation to the village people, we drew a possible map for the road. Some people who had a humanitarian consciousness gave us part of the pathway. Then one night about 1,000 people, both men and women, worked all night. We arranged ten tractors of sand, and in one night laid the road, with the people spreading the sand through the lands of landowners.

The next morning the landowners were shocked and created trouble. They called the police. A woman called Sinnamma was arrested and remanded by the police, but then the women in the village got even more involved with a sense of responsibility. Eventually, the landowners could not do anything, we opened the road and named the village Kalaimathy.

The next struggle was to form a co-operative store in the village, because most of the villagers used food coupons, which had to be used in different shops. But the co-operative officials refused to create a co-operative store. Eventually, we approached the GA at that time, Devanesan Nesiah. He said, he can help us create an AD (Government Authorized Dealer) shop. So, we formed an AD shop and the villagers brought all their coupon stamps to this shop. The shop worked around the clock, including to serve the workers who returned home late at night.

The success of the struggle for the road and the co-operative store, gave the people confidence. They began to believe they can achieve anything with the leadership of those youth, the support and direction of the Party, and the unity of the people. That was a major victory for us.

**Q: What kind of struggles were there for land? And how and when did they gain their housing land in Kalaimathy?**

A: The people had absolutely no land. Most of the land was owned by a powerful landowning family called Malavarayan. The people who were squatting on their land, even if they gained some savings, and wanted to build even small cement houses, they would not be permitted by the landowners. By the 1990s, the village was mobilised around the land issue, but there were different perspectives on how to approach it. Ultimately, the land deeds were owned by the landowners. So, it was decided that the people would offer to purchase the land. The landowners could also see that the people were organised and they could not be evicted. So, they agreed to sell the land for a small price. The Party suggested a cap of two lachams per family to buy that land, so that all the people in the village could have housing land.

The village had a reputation of high alcoholism and other abusive substances. We tried to direct the village through various activities. We introduced sports in a major way, particularly football and volleyball. We also started adult literacy classes. It is through such daily activities that the village was transformed.

**Q: The Communist Party led major anti-caste struggles for temple entry and equal seating in the 1960s and early 1970s. There were struggles in many villages, but anti-caste and progressive mobilisations in many of those villages did not continue. While your party has a base in Puttur, what is the reason for the decline of the Left in the other villages?**

A: Long before we started working in Puttur, the Communist Party launched the anti-caste campaign in October 1966. Over one thousand people from various villages participated in those struggles. In villages like Changanai, Maduvil, Karavetty, Neliaddi, Alvai, Point Pedro, Manthuvil and Poliyandy, we had people linked to our party. There were about 15 people who died in those struggles that took place between 1966 and 1971. Rising on the strength of those struggles the Party wanted to launch major land struggles, land for the landless and for livelihoods.

But the JVP insurrection of 1971, resulted in tremendous repression of our Party. Many of our leaders were arrested and many of us went into hiding for close to a year. Tamil nationalism was also on the rise in the 1970s, with standardisation and the rise of the Tamil students' movement. Next, many backward Tamil nationalists like Amirthalingam, Sivasithambaram and Naganathan lost in the 1970 election.

They in turn put forward the Tamil Eelam call. They wanted to push a narrow ethnic politics and also defeat the Left with such a call. When Tamil youth took up arms, the already militant oppressed caste youth joined the armed groups that were putting forward Leftist slogans. With the open economic policies, many people from the villages also migrated abroad. With the political space shrinking we used the space where we could. Our work in Puttur focused on the needs of the people and to provide our support to the people. The village people also take their important decisions after consulting us.

**Q: What kind of solidarity are you expecting from people of other communities and the South?**

A: We are a Left party and we have connections with other Left parties in the South. We have been informing them about our struggles. Just as we support progressive struggles in other parts of the country, we want them to see this struggle and support it. We want them to bring out this issue and put pressure on the Central Government.

This is a just and democratic struggle. It is not just about one village, but about all those who are oppressed by caste in different forms.

This is about the daily life of people, and the people in this village have supported progressive struggles. When a people like that are struggling, Leftists, people who work with peasants and all progressives, have a far-reaching responsibility to support this struggle.

View online : [OF Cemeteries, Caste and Communists](#)

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\* Daily News: August 1, 2017:

<http://www.dailynews.lk/2017/08/01/features/123754/cemeteries-caste-and-communists>

\* Interview by Ahilan Kadirgamar