

*[Comrade S.K. Senthivel was invited to Paris to address the K. Daniel Commemorative Symposium organised by Uyirnzhal-Exil, Assaie Literary Movement for Social Change, Europe and East Co-ordination Centre (CDC) and the Europe Branch of the Thesiya Kalai Ilakkiyap Peravai and held on 12.5.2002. We give below a summary of the address.]*

## **The Marxist Leninist Approach to Resolving Contradictions**

*(Summary of the address by Comrade S.K. Senthivel at the Comrade K. Daniel Commemorative Symposium, 2002)*

### **The Marxist-Leninist approach and method of struggle**

To identify social contradictions on the basis of the social structure, to analyse the different modes of oppression, to struggle against the main mode of oppression while uniting with people struggling against other modes of oppression, to link their struggles with the main struggle, and to determine who the enemy is and who the friend is, so as to carry the struggle towards final victory, comprise the underlying policy and tactic of any struggle. That is also the Marxist-Leninist approach.

It was on the above basis that mass struggles were launched under the leadership of the Marxist-Leninists in the early 1960's against caste oppression, which was the manifestation of the sharp contradiction among the Tamil people and carried forward along the revolutionary path. The basis for the rise and advance of those struggles was the people referred to as those of the depressed castes who comprised the fundamental forces of class struggle and the section of the population who faced caste oppression. They were the main fighting force. The struggles of the time did not merely limit themselves to the narrow confines of equality. They were also struggles waged against the caste system that was jealously guarded and defended as the two millennia old burden of tradition and a machinery of oppression.

The struggles made the elite and the dominant forces among the Tamils tremble, and rendered shaky the position those who exercised monopoly over the political affairs of the Tamils. At the opposite pole to this was the school of thought that deflected the younger generation that would have advanced along the path of progressive thinking on the national question. It persuaded the youth to mouth slogans of extreme nationalism and think in terms of support from Israel, US and India. The net consequence of this is the negative experiences on the struggle of the Tamil people. This needs to be dealt with in detail on another occasion.

### **The legacy of the caste system: India and Lanka**

The caste system that is prevalent in India, Lanka and other South Asian countries has lasted as a two millennia old burdensome legacy and a cruel system of oppression. Recent studies indicate that the basis for the caste structure preceded the era of Aryan-Dravidian interaction and has its sources in early tribal societies. The caste system that was defended by the interests of the economically dominant classes and state power has been protected to this day through a system of endogamous marriage system.

A caste system that was defined initially by one's profession and which established itself as a system of rights and responsibilities assigned to each caste group has continued to survive as a system that defines one's caste by one's birth. The ideological tradition that supports its survival is interwoven with the lives of each member of society. It is therefore necessary to view the caste system from a historical point of view rather than in a superficial manner. It has to be identified with social contradictions. It is only then that it will be possible to link caste oppression with other forms of oppression.

Whereas in India, it was Brahminism that was the standard-bearer and defender of the caste system and the practice of untouchability, in Lanka Saiva-Vellaala domination upheld and defended the caste system and untouchability. This was further consolidated by the dominant land owning classes among the Tamils. The position of this elite was reinforced by the services and contributions of Aarumuga Naavalar. Not long after, the Saiva-Vellaala elite was joined by the upper layers of the Vellaala Christians. While this unique situation is distinct from that obtaining in India, the Saiva and Christian Vellaala elitism played the principal role in marginalizing the members of the depressed castes in the fields of politics, economy, culture and education, and exercising caste oppression over them.

### **Struggles against caste oppression**

Struggles in the modern era against the caste system date back to the 1920s and have taken a variety of forms. Of these struggles, the firm position taken by the Jaffna Youth Congress against untouchability was particularly remarkable. At the same time, a few educated and socially conscious Christian members of the depressed castes too had spoken out and worked against the caste system.

The next stage of the struggle that opened in the early 1940s saw the founding of the Sirupaanmaith Thamizhar Mahaasabai (Society of Minority Tamils), which united the people of depressed castes. This organisation functioned with the support of leftists, members of the communist movement in particular, and carried out campaigns within a limited scope. The campaigns of the Mahaasabai against the caste system and untouchability in the 1940s and 50s initiated awareness among the people subject to caste oppression. But, even there, the reformist parliamentary approach tended to dominate.

However, since the split in the Communist movement since 1963 along the lines of the parliamentary road and the revolutionary road to socialism, the struggle against caste oppression entered a new phase. Marxist-Leninists mobilised itself along the revolutionary road under the leadership of Comrade N. Sanmugathan, and the Communist Party of the Marxist-Leninists took upon itself the task of carrying out a struggle against the caste system. The situation where the issues were seen as 'their problems' and 'their struggles' was radically transformed when the Communist Party of Marxist-Leninists, which was the vanguard of the oppressed people, decided to take responsibility for and carry forward the struggle. The consequent historical turning point occurred when the uprising of 21st October 1966 was launched under the red banner proclaiming, "Let the caste system be destroyed! Let egalitarian justice rise high!" On that basis, mass campaigns advanced along the revolutionary path to launch attack on the bastions of caste domination.

Another important aspect of the struggles of the period 1966-72 was the Mass Movement for the Elimination of Untouchability that was set up to carry forward the mass struggles. This organisation was unlike the caste based organisations of earlier times. It is remarkable that this organisation broadly united the progressive and democratic forces that were opposed to the caste system and untouchability. It was the Communist Party of Marxist-Leninists that provided leadership and guidance to the Mass Movement for the Elimination of Untouchability.

The rights that were denied for centuries to the people of the depressed castes were won through the struggles against the caste system and untouchability. The social status of a people that comprised a third of the Tamil population was established beyond the control of caste domination. Awakening and new thinking started to take hold of their economic, social, cultural and educational conditions. The new position that "We are equal citizens of this

country and will not allow ourselves to be subjugated ever again” came about because of these struggles.

### **Implications for the struggle against national oppression**

These struggles also led to changes in the approach to the national question that got aggravated with time. The method of armed struggle used in the mass struggles led to new thinking among the Tamil youth. It made them wonder why, if the people subject to caste oppression could win their rights through struggle, the Tamils, the youth in particular, could not struggle against national oppression to secure their rights, and made them act on those lines.

Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism, rather than seek a political solution to this problem, unleashed armed oppression upon the Tamils. The state used the armed forces to go on a murderous spree to oppress and dominate the Tamils. Under these conditions, the armed struggle of the Tamil youth developed along nationalistic lines. Several youth organisations came forward to take up arms. But their ideology and policies were clouded by narrow nationalism. The youth were tempted to join these organisation by romanticising the carrying of weapons and emphasising the need to oppose the armed forces of the state. The armed struggle of the Tamils advanced without any long-term view of social liberation. Thus, there is a need to carefully review it and subject it to criticism and self-criticism. It will only then be possible to get the next phase of the struggle for self-determination on the right track.

### **National oppression overshadows caste oppression**

The upsurge of the nationalist Tamil youth against chauvinism meant that the struggle against the caste system was put on hold after succeeding in securing some of the basic rights of the people of depressed castes. National oppression became the dominant contradiction. Since it was the struggle against the caste system that paved the way for the Tamils to unite as a nationality, it is important to ask ourselves to what extent the national struggle has contributed in the past twenty years to eliminate caste ideology from amidst the Tamils or to weaken it. Even today, there are temples here and there in various regions, including the Vadamaratchi region of the Jaffna peninsula. Clashes have taken place because of caste fanaticism. Those who dominated society based on caste seek to exploit the present climate of peace by using their financial might and control through land ownership to continue to oppress the people of depressed castes. Acts based on caste domination are common not only in schools but even in the University of Jaffna.

Besides this, the caste system is being protected and practised among the Tamil émigré population. While there are exceptions, caste ideology seems to represent the main trend. Inquiry into caste origins and endogamous matrimony seem to be the fundamental factors favouring its continuation. Thus, emigration has not ended the caste system. In the same way, the economic advancement of the émigré population supposed to belong to the depressed castes did not lead to the disappearance of the caste system. It is true that they have elevated their class status a little by economic advancement, but nothing else has been achieved as far as caste is concerned. Some indulge in building temples and erecting towers and boundary walls for the temples to trumpet their social status. At the same time, the people who have for long been at the lowest level as a caste and as a class continue their meagre existence in shacks without the most basic of facilities. The chauvinistic war has pushed down their living conditions a few steps further.

Another matter should be mentioned at this point. The dominant forces among the Tamil people demanded Tamil Eelam proclaiming “What is improper about those who ruled wanting to rule again?” but those who staked a claim for Tamil Eelam, their offspring and their kith and kin have gone off in all directions. It is the children of the ordinary workers, peasants and members of the depressed castes who are fighting against the chauvinists in the battlefield. The martyrs and those who bore the scars of sacrifice to become crippled are the youth of ordinary families.

### **From war to ceasefire to lasting peace?**

It is said that, over the past two decades, 16,700 fighters belonging to the LTTE have been martyred. Nearly another 10,000 more who set out to struggle for liberation have been killed by the armed forces, as a result of bitter internecine rivalry and internal contradictions within the different movements. I.e., over 25,000 lives have been lost under the class of militants. It is estimated that around 75,000 civilians in the North-East have been killed. Thus a hundred thousand Tamils have been killed during the liberation struggle, property worth many millions has been destroyed, and an estimated one million Tamils have been displaced within the country or are living in exile as refugees.

The memorandum of understanding between the government and the LTTE has come about under these conditions and there is a ceasefire in place. This is most welcome. However, let us not forget that the UNP is the part loyal to big capital, chauvinism and imperialism. There is still uncertainty as to what is to be put in place is an interim council or a lasting solution. The internal and external situations have compelled both parties to arrive at a memorandum of understanding. Nevertheless, the ceasefire and the lifting of various restrictions have offered the people a sense of relief.

At the same time, one cannot fail to notice that America and India have stepped into the arena to advance their global and regional interests, respectively. Therefore, our party has been emphasising the need to preserve the climate of peace and the establishment of autonomy in the traditional homeland of the Tamils in the merged North-East, and based on the principle of self-determination. What form the political, economic and social solutions for the four modes of oppression concerning class, nationality, caste and gender would assume is the question that follows from there. What are the policies and ideological positions for dealing with these issues? These are matters for all of us to ponder.

### **Contribution of comrade Daniel**

It is important to say a few things about the late comrade Daniel in this forum held in his honour. Comrade Daniel was an important activist of the communist movement and a fighter against the caste system. When I was a student in the 1960's, he published a booklet entitled “Let us smash the fetters of slavery” by him. That booklet demonstrated the vehemence with which he wanted a struggle against caste oppression.

To his last breath, comrade Daniel identified himself as a communist rather than a *dalitist*. There are, however, criticisms about his position and about his writings. However, the question of the standards that should be used to assess one's social contributions, position in struggle and writings is of prime importance. We view the contributions of comrade Daniel as 70 parts positive and 30 parts negative. This assessment is based on Marxist-Leninist standards. What concerns us are his contribution to the struggles against caste oppression and untouchability.

Comrade Daniel came from a rural family that was kept low down by caste and class oppression. As a result, he instinctively possessed strong feelings of hostility towards oppression and militant tendencies. If comrade Daniel, who left school after primary education, could emerge as an excellent mass orator, a popular writer and fighter in the caste-ridden Jaffna environment, one cannot deny that it was the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the Communist Party that provided the basis for it. At the same time, most of the efforts of comrade Daniel were exerted through the communist movement in the movements against the caste system and untouchability. Thus, today, and especially in the context of life in exile, there is meaning and necessity in remembering comrade Daniel.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude and good wishes to the four organisations and their office bearers for inviting me and enabling me to participate in this full-day symposium.