

P. SAMPATH

Experiences of Struggles Against Untouchability in Tamilnadu

For the past ten years, the CPI (M) and other mass organisations in Tamilnadu have been concentrating on movements against caste oppression and for eradication of untouchability. Efforts towards eradication of untouchability have intensified after the formation of the Tamilnadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF) in May 2007. District units of the TNUEF are present and active in all the 32 districts of Tamilnadu today.

Many class and mass organisations like CITU, AIKS, AIAWU, DYFI, AIDWA, SFI and the Tamilnadu Progressive Writers and Artists Association have been associated with the TNUEF. Industry wise trade unions and employees' federations functioning in sectors like banking, insurance, telecom, education, railways, power, transport, construction, tailoring and pharmaceuticals have also been associated with the Front. Similarly, 18 Dalit Organisations functioning at the state level and 45 dalit organisations functioning at the district level are active participants in the activities of the TNUEF. As a whole, the TNUEF is functioning as a wide and broad platform for the struggle against the caste oppression and for eradication of untouchability.

The struggles and movements carried out by the TNUEF have

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had a significant impact in Tamilnadu. The State Government has been forced to intervene and restore the rights of dalits in many villages and initiate welfare measures for dalits following direct action by the TNUEF. The Front has been able to make advances and has gained the confidence of wider sections of dalits in the state. Sensing this, many dalit organisations have come forward to work with TNUEF jointly. The unique feature of this Front lies in drawing non-dalits along with the dalits in its activities and direct actions. In contrast to the perception that the oppression of dalits can be fought by dalits alone, the TNUEF has successfully organised the dalits and non-dalits together in the struggle against caste oppression, which has paid rich dividends in getting the needed relief. The activities of the Front have been widely covered by the media and have won the appreciation of broader democratic sections including human rights organisations.

CHALLENGE OF CASTE OPPRESSION

The caste system, which emerged 3000 years ago, has struck deep roots in Indian society. The struggle against caste oppression also has a long history in this country. Noted social scientist Vidya Charan Dube writes: "No other system evoked such condemnation, struggles, ideological campaign against it as the caste system did in India. Despite that, the caste system faced everything opposed, adjusted and effected certain changes and could still stand firm." This assessment is correct. Marxist social scientists have always held that in the Indian context, caste oppression has been intertwined and integrated with class exploitation. D.D. Kosambi had argued that the *varna* system evolved out of the primitive class processes of Indian society. While the caste system got consolidated in India under the feudal order, it was patronized by the British colonialists too and well protected by the capitalist ruling class after independence. The inequality inherent in the caste system has dovetailed the class interests of the exploiters. Even today, caste oppression and class exploitation remain intertwined and integrated.

However, the weakness of the democratic movement in India lies in the fact that struggles against caste oppression have not been carried out integrating the same with the struggles against class exploitation.

These struggles have rather been conducted in isolation from each other. Struggles against the caste oppression which have ignored the class outlook have failed to make much dent against the caste system. At the same time, working class struggles conducted without any clear perspective against caste oppression – which erodes the unity of the working class – have failed to make big advances. Is it possible to build the unity of the working class without waging struggles against caste oppression and untouchability? This is a vital question thrown before the working class movement. The need of the hour is to simultaneously organise struggles against caste oppression and class exploitation and build mutual ties and links between those struggles.

The organisations which struggle against caste oppression should recognise the prevailing nature of class exploitation and champion class demands including land reforms, land for dalits and fair wages. On the other side, the mass organisations conducting class struggles, should raise their voice against caste oppression and actively work towards eradicating untouchability. With this perspective, the TNUEF has been developed as a platform for the joint working of class/mass organisations and dalit organisations in Tamilnadu. The struggles of the TNUEF based on the perspective of combining the struggles against caste oppression and class exploitation have yielded positive experiences.

The prevailing caste system in India has engendered inequality and discrimination against a large section of the people and inflicted repression. Except for those belonging to the upper tiers of caste hierarchy, all others suffer discrimination and repression in one form or other. Casteism as an ideology treats human beings not on the basis of her/his capacities and talents; rather the caste in which one is born into determines her/his social status. The casteist ideology has survived the significant economic and technological changes that have occurred under capitalism. Among the myriad forms of caste oppression and discrimination, untouchability is the worst and the most cruel, under which the dalits are stigmatized as untouchables and denied human rights. Vocations considered to be more wretched and obnoxious are thrust on them.

Despite great social reformers like Periyar having lived and worked in Tamilnadu, various forms of untouchability continue to prevail in thousands of villages. The TNUEF along with the associated mass

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organisations and the CPI (M) carried out a survey on prevailing forms of untouchability in 1849 villages of 22 districts of Tamilnadu. This survey revealed various forms of untouchability and atrocities against dalits which are prevailing today.

FORMS OF UNTOUCHABILITY

Various forms of untouchability and discriminatory practices prevail in Tamilnadu as revealed by the TNEUF survey. The dalits are prevented from: (a) walking on the public road; (b) wearing chappals; (c) riding bicycle; (d) wearing dhotis folded or polyester dhotis; (e) wearing towels on shoulders; (f) wearing cloth headgear; (g) sporting thin line moustache and (h) getting clothes washed or ironed. In some laundries, there are two almirahs – with one earmarked for the clothes of dalits. Many refuse to cut the hair of dalits and some provide separate chairs for them. In many tea stalls there are separate tumblers for higher and oppressed castes; two tumblers in some for dalits and non-dalits and even four tumblers in some for upper castes, BCs and sub-castes among dalits. Dalits are not allowed to sit on benches in hotels or tea stalls. They are offered tea only in coconut shells in some places which they can drink only by squatting on the ground. Even water is offered, not in cups, but by pouring water in cupped hands. Dalits are either prevented from drawing water from public taps or separate time is allotted for them to draw water. Dalits are prevented from taking bath in public tanks and there are separate bathing ghats for them.

The dalits are not allowed to take food along with upper caste persons during marriage ceremonies. When dalits get married, they are often prevented from taking private marriage halls for rent. Even affluent dalit families cannot get houses for rent in urban areas. In villages they are forced to live in separate colonies.

During festivals, dalits are not allowed to fire crackers. The temple car is not allowed to pass through the streets inhabited by dalits. They are not allowed entry into many temples and separate places of worship are provided in some temples (some churches too). Dalits do not have the right to receive the deity during festivals. They are also forced to offer goats for free to the dominant castes. During the festive period, nobody the dalits are not supposed to even show their faces to upper caste persons. Their offerings at temples are accepted only after

sprinkling water over it. Social functions presided over by dalit officials are often boycotted.

The dalits cannot cremate the dead in the common cremation ground. In many places there are separate pathways to the common cremation ground for the dalits. They are forced to remove deadbodies and attend funeral rites. When a person dies, dalits are supposed to convey the message of death to the relatives of the deceased.

The dalits are prevented from sitting under the shelters in village bus stops. They are not allowed to watch TV programmes in village panchayats. There are either separate ration shops for dalits or separate dates to make purchases from the ration shops. They are not allowed to speak or sing at any public platform. The postmen do not deliver letters to dalit households in some villages; they have to obtain it themselves from the post office on getting information. Dalits are also prevented from rearing cattle or keeping male dogs.

Dalits from the Arunthathiyar community are forced to carry human excrement. Even the State Government appoints only Arunthathiyars in menial jobs like sanitation workers. These employees, working as daily wage workers, are asked to bring their own plates during lunch time. Even in schools, children from this community are forced to clean lavatories. Dalit students are denied admission in many schools. Children from the dominant castes are taught to call elderly persons from dalit communities by their names in a derisive manner. In private educational institutions, dalits are prevented from occupying any administrative position.

Walls are built to prevent the dalits from using public streets which are used by upper castes. Uthapuram in Madurai district had a 600 metre long wall. The land allotted to dalits (*panchami* lands) have been occupied by persons belonging to dominant castes who refuse to return them. Panchayats led by dalit persons are also discriminated against by the State Government, which refuses to allocate funds. The dominant castes do not allow the elected panchayat representatives from the dalit communities to function. The dalits are also not allowed any share in the common property of the villages.

ATROCITIES AGAINST DALITS

Tamilnadu has a long history of brutal violence against dalits, starting from the Kilvenmani massacre of 1969 when 44 landless dalit labourers

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were burnt alive by upper caste landlord goons because they were demanding better wages. This trend has continued till recent times, with the massacre of the dalit panchayat president and others in Melavalavu in 1997. In September 2002, at Kaundampatti in Dindigul district, a dalit agricultural worker was forced to drink urine for having lodged a complaint of trespass with the police against a person from a dominant caste. In May 2002, two dalits were forced to eat human excreta in Thinniyam village in Tiruchi district. Such atrocities continue even today, with dalits being severely punished and tortured if they violate the caste codes established by the dominant castes.

Dalits are not allowed to marry outside their castes. There are instances where dalits have been punished through social boycott for inter-caste marriages and even forced to commit suicide. In Anthiyur, Erode district, there was an instance of dalit households being attacked after they had insisted and used a community centre. Even after the wall blocking the pathway for the dalits was broken in Uthapuram at the initiative of the TNEUF and the CPI (M), the dominant castes have used all means like household material and stones to obstruct the pathway and prevent the dalits from using it.

The state administration itself acts in a biased manner against the dalits and is fully complicit in the discriminatory practices. In Tiruchi district there were instances where the police ensure that the dalits are forced to use separate pathways to the common cremation ground. Whenever the dalits demand equal rights, they are brutally repressed by the police. Police firing and atrocities have occurred in Nalumoolaikinaru, Kodiyankulam, Sankaralingapuram, Uthapuram and Manjolai. Temple entry by the dalits was forcibly prohibited by the police in Thiruvallur and Sivagangai districts. The general attitude of the police is to refuse to lodge FIR in cases of atrocities against dalits and rather insist on compromises with the dominant castes. If the dalit victims insist on FIRs, counter cases against them are also lodged on the basis of false charges. Witnesses in such cases are terrorized and forced to retract.

Although untouchability is illegal and those who practice it are supposed to be punished for the crime, the fact remains that the practice is still prevalent in many villages. The pattern of untouchability, discrimination and atrocities against dalits varies across villages. In some places untouchability is practiced in a silent low profile

manner. In other villages it often acquires very violent forms. The provisions of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act are violated by the police itself, in league with the dominant caste groups. We are reminded of Dr. Ambedkar's saying: "Untouchability is abolished legally according to the Constitution. But I see, before my own eyes, my people are ill-treated, humiliated, assaulted, their houses are burnt, our women are targeted and sexually harassed. These are happenings of the day in our country. The laws alone can not establish their rights and livelihood. People should unite and struggle for their rights along with democratic minded sections."

When the TNUEF or other democratic organisations raise their voice against the practice of untouchability, the stock reply of the dominant castes is that "there is no untouchability in our village. We are living here as members of one family. You are raising these issues to provoke clashes between us." The state administration also reflects the same sentiments. The dalits continue to remain subjugated to the dominant castes in the villages due to lack of awareness. However, in the recent times there is a new upsurge and militancy against caste oppression visible among the dalits. They are coming forward to fight for their democratic and human rights in many places. Many dalit organisations, democratic organisations like TNUEF and human rights organisations have played a significant role in bringing about this upsurge among the dalits.

Following the survey, the TNUEF carried out direct actions for eradication of untouchability in many places. The experiences gained from such direct actions are manifold. The TNUEF had to face the violent attacks of the dominant casteist forces, discriminatory approach of the state administration, brutal repression by the police, foisting of false cases against our activists and the negative role played by a section of the media. Despite such attacks and challenges, the struggles waged by the TNEUF have registered successes in many places.

STRUGGLE AGAINST UNTOUCHABILITY WALLS

About twenty years ago, upper caste Hindus in Uthapuram, Madurai district and Periyar Nagar, Coimbatore district, had built "untouchability walls" for prohibiting usage of common passage by dalits in areas inhabited by the upper castes. Similarly, in Vellore city, a big iron

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gate was constructed between upper caste houses and dalit inhabited dwellings in a crowded main road. The TNEUF, as soon as it was launched, had brought this to the attention of the State Government. Demonstrations with the participation of dalits and other democratic forces were organised. The State Government was told that if it fails to remove the Iron Gate in Vellore, it will be brought down through direct action. Subsequent to this announcement Government intervened and removed the Iron Gate. Similarly, public passage for the dalits was established after breaking a portion of the long wall built in Uthapuram and Periyar Nagar. Through these actions, right to use of a public passage by dalits, which had been restricted for a long period of time by the upper castes, has been retrieved. This has generated enthusiasm and optimism. CPI (M) General Secretary Prakash Karat's visit to Uthapuram during the breaking of the "untouchability wall" in May 2008 greatly enthused the people of Uthapuram.

Breaking of a portion of the wall in Uthapuram angered the dominant caste groups. They misled the people of the upper castes into vacating the village. For several days upper caste residents stayed at an open space nearby, in order to create an impression that people are suffering due to the TNEUF action. Sections of the media exaggerated those sufferings and took a stand against the dalits. While no administrative official had ever cared to notice the existence of the wall for the past twenty years, denying the rights of the dalits, the administration went overboard to placate the upper caste families when they were protesting against the breaking of the wall.

Even after the breaking of the wall and securing the public passage, the Uthapuram dalits have not been allowed to use the passage freely by the upper castes. They have obstructed the free movement of dalits by laying their household belongings, stones, sand and rubble on the public passage. When a complaint was lodged against the upper caste groups with the police, it was the dalits who had to face enquiry and harassment. Eventually there was brutal lathi charge on the dalits injuring the women, children and the elderly. There were plans to arrest hundreds of dalits. The TNUEF and the CPI (M) organised powerful protests demanding a judicial enquiry into the incident.

Thereafter, the Madurai unit of AIDWA filed a writ petition in the Madurai bench of Tamilnadu High Court, demanding judicial

enquiry into police atrocities on Uthapuram dalits and sought compensation to the victims and punishment to the culprits under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. The High Court appointed a commission consisting of two judges to inquire into the incidents and directed to report its findings to the High Court. The Commission in its report noted indicted the police for excesses against the Uthapuram dalits and recommended Rs 15 lakhs compensation for the victims. While the Tamilnadu government objected to the findings of the report, the High Court has passed an interim order to pay compensation to the victims to the tune of Rs 10 lakhs. This interim order has come as a notable victory in the legal battle.

PAPPAPATTI, KEERIPATTI PANCHAYAT ELECTION

Elections could not be held for 10 years for Pappapatti, Keeripatti, Nattarmangalam in Madurai district and Kottakachiyendal in Virudhunagar district. The reason being that these panchayats had been reserved for dalits. The dominant caste forces did not accept this and preventing the dalit candidates from filing their nominations; they even prompted their own men among the dalits to file nominations and later forced them to withdraw. In an election at Pappatti, a dalit was elected but those dominant caste forces forced him to resign.

Many dalit organisations including Viduthalai Chiruthaikal Party took serious efforts to end this situation and for holding of elections in proper manner and elect Panchayat Presidents in those villages; but the dominant caste forces were putting block to their efforts. The State administration exhibited lack of interest. In such a situation, the CPI (M) and mass organisations entered the fray. The activists of these organisations, in a planned and systematic pattern of work, worked among the dalits and campaigned in deep penetration among them to raise their consciousness and awaken them. They also campaigned in the most democratic way among the people belonging to higher castes. A list of persons of dominant caste forces who prevented from holding elections had been prepared and given to the Collector for taking action.

The CPI (M) legislators raised this issue vociferously in the Tamilnadu State Assembly. The State Government had been toying

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with the idea of getting those village Panchayats in a rotation system to put in the general list for election. The CPI (M) protested against this and announced a programme of fasting under the leadership of the State Secretary of the Party. Only after that the Government changed its stance and announced those villages would continue to be under reserved category; steps were taken to hold the elections in a democratic manner. To hold this election, which was not held for 10 years, in the most democratic way, the CPI (M) and other mass organisations did their field work effectively. The CPI (M) fielded its members and supporters for the candidature of President in Pappapatti, Keeripatti and Nattarmangalam Panchayats and also for many of Panchayat ward members. Then only, elections were held fair and dalit leaders were elected as Presidents in those four Panchayats. Till this day, they have been functioning legally. Not only the people of those four villages but very large sections of the people also appreciate the role played by the CPI (M) and other mass organisations on this issue. It should be noted that Keeripatti Panchayat President Palraj Samy is a member of the CPI (M) and many of these three Panchayats' members also Party Members and supporters. .

STRUGGLES FOR TEMPLE ENTRY

During this period many successful struggles have been carried out to enable the dalits entry into the temples, which right had been denied to them for a pretty long time. The CPI (M) and TNUEF led the dalits entry into Agneeswarar temple in Tamarapakkam village, Koothandavar temple in Vedanthawadi village both in Thiruvannamalai district, Kaliamma temple, Ayakkudi in Dindigul district, Pandhappuli Mariamma temple in Nellai district, Kalkeri Anjaneyar and Kirahammal temple in Krishnagiri district, Droupathi Amman temple, Kangaiyanur in Villupuram district, Sivan temple, Chettipulam in Nagai district, and Mariamma temple, Manachur in Tiruchi district. The DYFI cadres led the dalit people for their entry into Mathur Mariamma temple in Nagai district and Nedi temple in Villupuram and Angaleswari Temple in Kongurayapettai in Namakkal districts. While the CPI (M) and TNUEF leaders led the dalits to enter into the Pavali Kamatchiamman koil in

Virudhunagar district, the police refused to permit entry. Later the Higher Court decreed that dalits should be allowed entry to that temple whenever the temple is kept open.

This movement while facilitated the entry of dalits into those temples which denied for several decades had deep and strong impact in the psyche of Tamilnadu and provoked intense debate throughout the State. One section of the media – some newspapers and journals – characterised it on the belief in God by the Communists that made them to lead the dalits' entry into the temples; some provoked a debate that leading dalits to enter the temples would nurture superstition. But these aspects were explained during the struggle. It was not the question of belief in God or not; it was the denial of democratic and human right for the dalits to enter the temple while all other people of different castes were allowed and that was the violation of their rights and it could not be accepted.

Having not allowed the dalits to enter the temples for a long period of time, the dominant caste forces indulged in activities to counter this movement of temple entry. In Chettipulam of Nagai district those forces instigated caste hatred, forced closure of shops and attacked not only the dalits who tried to enter the temple but the Police force which had come there to protect the dalits with sticks and other weapons. After kindling violence, they forced the authorities to issue prohibitory orders. On the other side, during the dalits' entry into Kangaiyanur temple, the Police force acted in support of dominant forces and attacked those dalits who tried to enter the temple. Many including G. Latha, M.L.A., were brutally attacked and they sustained injuries. 110 Activists including K. Balakrishnan, President, State Unit of AIKS and State Secretariat member of CPI(M), Anandan, District Secretary, CPI(M), Villupuram district committee were arrested and incarcerated in Cuddalore jail. Despite this development, the State administration with the help of the Police force had to take the dalits to all these temples after this struggle. In many other centres, the temple entry of dalits had taken place braving the onslaught and disturbed conditions created by the dominant caste forces.

Following that struggle, statewide campaign was conducted to condemn the police attack and the violence perpetrated by the dominant caste forces. But the Government did not take any action against them. Later G. Latha preferred a private complaint against

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District Superintendent of Police and other officials. On the basis of that complaint, the Tamilnadu Government has ordered an enquiry by Revenue Divisional Officer, These struggles for temple entry and against the repressive measures and the success recorded in those struggles have impacted ardour and enthusiasm among the dalits and democratic movements.

RESERVATION FOR ARUNTHATHIYARS – SUB QUOTA

Arunthathiyars considered to be the most backward and wretched of the dalits live in an appalling repressive socio-economic conditions in Tamilnadu. Considerable section of this population work as agricultural labourers in Western districts of the State; in other districts they work as menials and cobblers; gathering human excrement, removing obstructions in the underground drainage, removing carcass and dead human bodies, working in cremation grounds are some of the ugly and demeaning tasks forced on them. Because of their work and living conditions, considerable section of this population can not impart even a reasonable level of education for their children. More than 30 lakhs is the population of Arunthathiyar community; but for them it is quite rare to get the benefits of reservation for education and employment opportunities. Though Arunthathiyar Organisations had been through many struggles for more than 25 years demanding sub quota within the reserved quota for dalits, the State administration ignored that demand. In this background, the CPI (M) and TNUEF studied their demands and their living conditions decided to project their demand for sub quota and their other demands and organised struggles. The TNUEF and CPI (M) organised a massive rally of Arunthathiyars with 20000 people on June 12, 2007. Many Arunthathiyar Organisations joined this rally. Following this, picketing programme was carried out in 15 districts, participated by more than 10 thousand people; thousands and thousands participated in the district conferences held in this regard in 12 districts; dharna programme was held in 100 blocks in the State. Arunthathiyar Organisations participated in all these struggles. Touched by the heat of this movement, the State Government appointed a Commission headed by Justice Janardanan to study this issue and submit the report. This Commission recommended 3% reservation for Arunthathiyars

as a sub quota within the general quota for reservation for dalits. After having had consultation with the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and getting the consent in all parties meet, the Tamilnadu Government announced in the State Assembly 3% sub quota reservation for Arunthathiyars. This is a deserving victory for Arunthathiyars and their organisations and for CPI (M) and TNEUF for their consistent campaign and struggles. The success of this struggle has created great upsurge and enthusiasm among the Arunthathiyars.

For having successfully brought out the sub quota for Arunthathiyars through various struggles and campaigns, many Arunthathiyar Organisations complimented CPI (M) and TNUEF and organised functions to felicitate them at Coimbatore, Virudhunagar and Dindigul. In all these functions, thousands of Arunthathiyars participated.

The experience gained during those struggles have to be specified here.

Earlier Viduthalai Chiruththaikal Party led by Thol. Thirumavalavan opposed this sub quota; after having seen the resurgence and awakening of Arunthathiyars, that Party had to change its decision. This Party has gone to the extend of conferring Dr. Ambedkar Award to the Chief Minister for granting 3% sub quota reservation for Arunthathiyars.

Even though the 'Puthia Thamilagam' Party led by Dr. Krishnasamy and some other dalit organisaions oppose to this 3% sub quota reservation, that did not register impact in a big way among the dalits.

Arunthathiyars have been expressing their faith and confidence with CPI (M) and TNUEF consequent to the success recorded in the sub quota struggle. Many Arunthathiyar Organisations work jointly with TNUEF at several centres. Being unable to recognise this success of CPI (M) and TNUEF and in a fit of anger and intolerance, the DMK using their political power and an organisation close to their Party organised a felicitation function for Chief Minister in the name of that organisation. In that meeting Karunanidhi averred that none made the demand for sub quota to him and he himself had placed the demand and then implemented it. But this self-publicity of Chief Minister could not cut ice among the Arunthathiyars and

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their organisations. Only as a counter reaction to this speech of the Chief Minister, felicitations to CPI (M) were carried with much verve and vigour.

STRUGGLE FOR CREMATION RIGHTS

In many Tamilnadu villages, to get the cremation rights remains to be a great problem for the dalits. Dalits are denied cremation in public cremation grounds. Where separate cremation grounds are there for the dalits, it is observed that in many places those grounds have been occupied by dominant forces. Routes to their separate cremation grounds are often obstructed and this also remains as a problem. During this period, the TNUEF intervened on these issues.

Balasamudram village in the Dindigul district had the cremation ground for dalits at one side of a river; for the last 60 years, dalits used to tie the dead body in a rubber tyre and throw it in the water; some youth who knew swimming would plunge in the river and push the corpse to that side of the river where cremation or burial could be carried out. When an organisation called "Tamil Puligal" (Tamil Tigers) intervened on this issue, the State Government did not give its attention to this issue. That organisation came forward to work jointly with TNUEF. State and district leaders of TNUEF visited that place and then intervened; it was brought to the notice of Tamilnadu Government. Struggles were planned for alternate cremation ground. The Tamilnadu Government intervened immediately and allotted land for a separate cremation ground at the other side of the river. 60 Years old demand was settled at the intervention of TNUEF. People in that area expressed their happiness and greeted the leaders on this achievement. It was brought to the notice of the TNUEF that an issue of similar nature in a village at Puducherry State and the TNUEF brought it to the notice of Puducherry Government, the Government has announced that steps are taken to provide alternate cremation ground for dalits.

As the road to the cremation ground was denied for the dalits at Irulakudumpanpatti in Dindigul district, picketing programme was carried out under the leadership of K. Balabharathy, MLA on behalf of TNUEF. The agitation was withdrawn when the State administration assured that they would provide road to the cremation ground.

At Sorisapuram, Thoothukudi district, the cremation ground of 1 acre (100 cents), used by dalits for the last 70 years, was found to be occupied by certain selfish groups. A dharna programme was organised by TNUEF for retrieval of that ground. Dalits of this village participated in this struggle enmasse. It has been declared there that the State Government should retrieve that cremation ground and if they fail to do so, the people themselves would enter and retrieve the ground.

OTHER DIRECT ACTIONS

During this period TNUEF carried out direct actions in many villages for protection the human rights of dalits through various struggles, namely, for the abolition of two tumbler system, for the right to use common path, for the right to use common cremation ground, for the right to ride bicycle, to have the hair cut in saloons, to get their due share in the common property of the village, right to have their clothes ironed, right to proffer religious offerings (Pongal) in temples and to right to have the temple car drawn in the dalit streets. All these rights have been restored. At the Kattalaipatti village in Virudhunagar district, dalits were prevented from using public lavatory. The TNUEF mobilised the people and broke the lock put by the dominant caste forces and paved way for the dalits to use the same.

In all these struggles, the TNUEF did not restrict mobilising the concerned dalits only but also it mobilised all the toiling people belonging to other communities. This has given a sense of confidence and resurgence among the dalits. One thousand non-dalit toiling people joined in the demonstration organised by CPI (M) and TNUEF for the demolition of wall at Uthapuram along with one thousand Dalit masses.

When the untouchability wall was demolished at Periyar Nagar in Coimbatore district, a woman instigated by caste zealots tried to prevent the demolition; but an youth of DYFI who is a close relative to that woman stopped her and took her home. This incident, an act of full and complete integration with dalits and their causes, evoked a sense of happiness and goodwill among the dalits.

Even though many dalit and Arunthathiyar organisations acted jointly with TNUEF during those struggles, we have had the experience of some dalit organisations taking a negative stand. They

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questioned in their writings as to why the Left which was organising class struggles should organise or take part in caste struggles. Dalits themselves would solve their own problems and there was no need for the support of the Left – some wrote like this in a mocking tone. We replied that untouchability is not a dalit problem but a national problem; the problem of democratic movements; to eradicate that was the task of all toiling people. While giving this reply it was affirmed that no force could stop the Left from carrying out struggles for the socio-economic freedom of dalits. All the struggles were carried out with this explanation to the critics. Because of the continued struggles of CPI (M), TNUEF and other mass organisations, dalits are getting mobilised under the leadership of the Left; these short sighted organisations could not stop that. That is our experience. In fact those leaders' influence and self-interests are getting dissipated. This is also one of the reasons for their opposition to the struggles of CPI (M) AND TNUEF.

Dr. Ambedkar Statue

A statue of Dr. Ambedkar was installed at a common place in the Periapattinam village of Cuddalore district. The dominant caste forces protested at this installation in a place inhabited by them and prevented the inaugural ceremony taking place. The State Administration acquiesced with those casteist forces. A dalit organisation which contested Parliamentary elections in that constituency, keeping in mind the vote bank, agreed to shift the installation of Dr. Ambedkar statue to an alternate space and gave a letter to that effect. The dalits were mentally agonised at this attitude of that dalit organisation. In that situation, DYFI entered into a struggle demanding that there could be no change of place for installation of the statue and it should be installed in the same place for Dr. Ambedkar statue and inaugural function to be organized early.. The State Administration was opposed to this. The Police stopped and arrested the DYFI cadres who marched to garland Dr. Ambedkar statue. The DYFI took this issue to the High Court. The High Court while condemning the attitude of the State Administration, directed that the statue should be there in the same public place as decided earlier and DYFI leaders should be invited to the inaugural ceremony which was later held under the Chairman-

ship of the District Collector. The State Secretary of DYFI, Kannan was given the honour of garlanding the statue first on that day. The fact that Dr. Ambedkar statue was not shifted to a different space and the High Court directive to the State to conduct the inaugural ceremony and very conduct of the ceremony itself have given a lot of happiness to the people of that area. They gathered massively at Virudhachalam town and felicitated DYFI for the good work done by them.

Land, Patta for House Site and Cluster Houses

The State Government should give priority to dalits in distribution of land, Panchami lands should be retrieved and handed over to dalits. Dalits should be given patta for cluster houses and allotted to them. Dilapidated houses under this system should be repaired and given to them. Drinking water, roads, education, medical facilities, and toilet facilities – all these should be provided in the living quarters of dalits. On behalf of TNUEF, a survey was undertaken in Madurai city to study the living conditions of dalits in urban area. This study was undertaken in 25 areas inhabited by 50000 dalits. In this study, the demands pertaining to the sources of their living were compiled. A massive rally was held at Madurai in which more than 2000 dalits and Intellectuals participated. At the end of the rally a memorandum was submitted to the district Collector. Consequent to that; State Government was forced to settle some of the demands in some dalits' living quarters. It has been decided to continue this movement further.

Auxiliary Plan for SC/ST, Reservation in Private Sector and Filling up the Backlog

In the auxiliary plan for dalit/tribals in Tamilnadu, 19% of the funds should be allotted on the basis of dalit population; allotted funds should be properly spent. Reservation should be implemented in the Private sector. Tamilnadu Government should fill up the existing vacancies and also backlog of vacancies. A special conference was held at Chennai focusing those demands. Many Dalit Leaders and Intellectuals participated in the Convention. Thousands of leaflets explaining those demands were issued and campaign was carried on.

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The CPI (M) legislators took up those issues strongly in the State Assembly. Many dalit organisations, Left and democratic organisations also conducted movements on these demands.

In this background the Tamilnadu State for the first time allotted 19% of the 2010-11 Plan allocation to the auxiliary plan for dalits. This is a significant achievement. However there are shortcomings and malpractices in the matter of allocating the allotted fund for the welfare of dalits/tribals department-wise and spending the same. It has been decided to organize continued movements to effect a change in this way of administering things. Our experience is that there is no appreciable improvement in socio-economic conditions of the dalits/tribals despite announcement of various plans for their development.

In the context of globalization when private sector is booming, the dalits cannot have opportunities for development and protect themselves if reservation formulae for education and jobs are not applied to the private sector. There is a need to strengthen the nationwide campaign and movement on this issue. It has also been decided to carry on series of movement to force the Tamilnadu Government to fill up the existing and backlog vacancies.

For the Demands of the Tribals

Land rights of the tribals should be protected. The Tamilnadu Government should implement the Forest Rights Act fully without any deviation. The Tamilnadu Tribals Association has waged many struggles on their demands including the need for issuance of community certificates properly without any delay. This Association has decided to hold special conference joining with TNUEF. After the struggles waged by the Association, community certificates were issued in many districts.

Interventions in Puduchery

A special conference was conducted at Puduchery to focus the demands such as sub quota for Arunthathiyars, reservation for scheduled tribes, inclusion of dalit Christians as scheduled caste and dalit domicile at Puduchery to be recognised as SC and granting them all rights – Dharna, demonstrations were held. Some other

Dalits and Tribal organisations also carried on their movement on those issues. After these struggles the Puduchery Government put the tribals in the Backward classes list. We are insisting that they should be included in the ST list. It has been planned to take up issues related to eradication of untouchability in Puduchery.

Implementation of Prevention of Atrocities Act

We have been waging series of struggles for firm implementation of Prevention of Atrocities (against dalits) Act. On many incidents of atrocities against dalits, we have intervened and conducted movements condemning the same.

On many occasions the attitude and the action of the Revenue officials, Police officials towards the issues pertaining to the atrocities was neither within the legal frame nor with the perspective of social justice in Tamilnadu. When complaints on atrocities are received, the Police officials obtain complaints from the perpetrators of the crime and file cases against the victims of the atrocities. This improper and illegal method of treating the complaints prevails among the Police officials. There are occasions in which they try to work out a compromise calling both the complainant and the accused. Beyond this, if the case is filed, the dalits do not get justice due to Police officials delaying preliminary investigations, dismantling of witnesses and due to lacunae in conducting the cases. Our experience show only in very few cases convictions have taken place.

There had been incidents that cases were foisted under this Act against those who fought against atrocities in Tamilnadu. In a spirit of vengeance, the Police have filed cases against Arjunan, District Secretary of CPI(M), Sivagangai and U. Nirmala Rani State Office Bearer of AIDWA under this particular Act. The cases were dropped only after we took steps organizationally and through legal and administrative channels. Many such incidents of abuse of this Act happened in Tamilnadu.

A Public Enquiry session was conducted by TNUEF at Aruppukkottai in Virudhunagar district to expose the inability of dalits not getting justice on their complaints of atrocities. A retired Justice, a lawyer and social activists sat in that enquiry commission as Judges. This public enquiry exposed all matters related to atrocities

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committed by dominant forces, apathy and indifferent attitude of State Administration, wrong approach and attitude of the Police officials. For example, it was revealed as the dalits of Nathampatty village who were firm and united in fighting for their rights, their living area was detached from the Nathampatti village through a resolution in the Panchayat and that decision was implemented; the adjacent Aruppukkottai Municipality Had declared that that area was not merged with it. So the dalit people of Nathampatty village did not belong to any town or Panchayat. No plan or project of the State Government is being implemented to them. Many Dalit Presidents of the Panchayats can not sit in the chair meant for the President in the Panchayat Office. In a village where dalits constructed a community hall against the opposition of dominant caste forces, the land allotted to them was taken back. Many such incidents of atrocities were brought to light in that enquiry. Later it was published in the journals and newspapers. It has been decided to organize movements on these issues.

Meeting with the National SC Commission

When struggles for eradication of untouchability and for the rights of the dalits were going on, the National Commission for SC visited Tamilnadu. The leaders of TNUEF met the Commission, submitted a memorandum and had discussions with the Commission. The Deputy Chairman of the Commission, Sri Kumble, who had come to Tamilnadu leading the Commission raised a strange question – “As untouchability has been abolished legally, what is the need for formation of TNUEF and for its activities?” This question evoked a surprise reaction among those assembled in hundreds there. On behalf of TNUEF, all acts of atrocities against dalits and prevalence of various forms of untouchability in Tamilnadu were explained and our demands noted in the memorandum also were explained. The Deputy Chairman of the Commission while talking to the Press later made critical observations about the state of affairs on the dalit question based on the issues raised by us in the meeting. The National Commission has written to TNUEF stating that they have been enquiring the issues raised in the meeting and they would revert back after getting reply from Tamilnadu Government. Our meeting with

the National Commission at the crucial time found space in the media reports.

March to Chennai Fort

The interventions of TNUEF on dalit issues from the beginning, struggles waged and successes gained, integration of various dalit and Arunthathiyar organisations – all these have good impact in Tamilnadu. It has compelled the State Government to intervene and solve many of the issues focussed by us. Many democratic organisations welcomed our efforts. The TNUEF has emerged and grown as an organisation winning the faith and confidence of dalits widely. This organisation has gained goodwill not only among the dalits but among the non-dalits also. In this background, while the TNUEF organised a big rally marching towards Fort St. George, Chennai on 27th October 2009, in which 15,000 people belonging to dalit and other sections coming from other districts participated in that rally. Leaders of various dalit and Arunthathiyar organisations also took part in the rally. Adding some more issues with the issues already explained a Charter of demands was submitted to the Chief Minister on the day itself.

It was stressed that there should be a SC/ST Commission at State level in Tamilnadu with mandatory provisions and legal status as that of the National Commission. The Chief Minister agreed with the justification behind this demand and assured to take further steps on this question; he announced immediate implementation of some of the demands raised in the memorandum.

After the rally was over, he wrote an article and have it published in all newspapers explaining the talks he had with TNUEF leaders and characterised it as an useful meeting and a meeting that would bring benefits.

State Conference

In the background of the struggles and rich experiences gained, the TNUEF will have its State Conference on May 28-29, 2010 at Pudukkottai. 350 Delegates drawn from all the districts including delegates of 100 dalit organisations and of class and mass

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organisations will participate in the conference. The path traversed by TNUEF for the last 3 years struggles waged, experiences gained – all these aspects will be debated in the Conference. Delineation of future tasks and planning of future struggles will be in the agenda of the Conference. A massive rally focusing anti-caste – eradication of untouchability will be held on May 29, 2010, in which thousands and thousands of people are expected to participate. Prakash Karat, General Secretary, CPI (M) and other state leaders will take part. K. Varadarajan General Secretary of AIKS will inaugurate the Conference.

There is no doubt that this Conference will draw clear perspective and programme to make the TNUEF to grow further in to a broader democratic forum in the days to come.