

South Asia

Fighting Caste Oppression and Untouchability: A Sri Lankan Experience

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The system of caste persists as an integral part of Hindu society. Colonial rulers let it be and where useful encouraged it. Modernisation made an impact, but did not eliminate it. Although the Hindu Varna system is the reference point for its justification, caste structure and hierarchy vary from region to region. In Sri Lanka, caste is an integral aspect of Sinhala and Tamil societies, and matters in social interactions. Even the Muslims, with claims to a distinct ethnic identity, are tainted by caste, but to a less degree. Untouchability was strictly practiced among the Tamils of the North and less strictly in the East. The Hill Country Tamils of Indian origin are mostly from depressed caste groups and despite caste differences open discrimination has been less prevalent than in the North and East.

This article is on the struggle against caste oppression in the North, the Jaffna peninsula mainly, where discrimination and oppression had been strong from pre-colonial times. The caste system in Sri Lanka differs from that in India in some ways. While the Brahminist ideology holds, the Brahmins play no serious role in caste society; and there are no Kshatriya or Vysya caste groups. Thus, unlike in South India, the caste at the peak of the caste hierarchy is the Vellala (cultivator) caste among Tamils and the Govigama, its equivalent, among Sinhalese. The Vellala are around 40% of the population of the Jaffna peninsula. The depressed caste groups deemed as 'untouchables' form around 30%. The rest belong to middle level caste groups bound by the caste hierarchy.

Although colonial intervention did not dent the caste system, early in the 20th Century missionary schools allowed access to modern education to a few members of the oppressed castes. But the depressed communities remained backward since even primary education was denied to their vast majority. Protests against caste oppression and demands for the right to education and better living conditions started in the early 20th Century with the formation of workers' associations and campaigns for equal treatment. Notably, the Jaffna Youth Congress, a progressive group formed in 1920 and inspired by the Indian independence movement, was supportive of struggles against discrimination.

Social reforms, including the introduction of free education, in the run up to independence from colonial rule in 1948 failed to meet the needs of the depressed castes, especially in the North, since the Vellala elite dominated the social institutions. The initiation of the left movement in Jaffna in 1937 and the founding of the Communist Party there in 1945 gave fresh impetus to struggles against caste oppression. The Minority Tamils Association founded in 1943 that organisationally united the depressed castes was a reformist outfit controlled by moderates. Efforts by communists to make the Association take a more militant stand were frustrated by the moderates. Thus, despite some degree of success of various campaigns, the oppressive caste system and the practice of untouchability remained intact.

The coalition government led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) that came to power in 1956,

despite aggravating the national question by making Sinhala the sole official language, introduced significant social reforms. The election in 1956 of P. Kandiah, the only Tamil communist to be elected MP, helped the oppressed castes of the North in a number of issues. He was instrumental in the passage of the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act in 1957 that made it punishable to deny anyone access to public places by reason of caste. The nationalisation of the schools in 1960 by the SLFP government elected that year loosened the grip of the Vellala elite on schools which were earlier under their control. Yet collaboration of the state machinery with the Vellala elite let the law turn a blind eye to continuing acts of systematic oppression, exploitation and humiliation based on caste.

Social disabilities suffered collectively by the depressed by caste persisted. The Communist Party (CP) successfully led local struggles against oppression in some issues. The reactionary feudal elite resented it and directed thugs to attack communists and militant members of the oppressed community. In response, some leaders of the depressed community prescribed conversion to Buddhism, a move rejected by the CP, failed to win popular support.

The return to power of the United National Party in 1965 in alliance with the Tamil nationalist Federal Party and the Tamil Congress emboldened the upper caste elite to uphold casteism. Earlier pledges to open public wells, eating places and temples to all irrespective of caste were breached, the affected communities had no choice but launch a militant struggle.

The split in the CP in 1964 led to opposed approaches to caste oppression. While the revisionists retreated to a passive approach, the Marxist Leninists took the initiative to launch a mass demonstration against untouchability on 21st October 1967 against a background of oppression by the reactionary elite backed by the police. The demonstration with a sizeable participation by members of the 'uppers castes' was brutally attacked by the police. The Marxist Leninists broadened the campaign to mobilise the masses and lead them under the banner of the Mass Movement to Eliminate Untouchability, an organisation to fight caste oppression that, unlike earlier caste-based organisations, was open to all progressive people.

Mass mobilisation and militant campaigns were launched to win access to public places and facilities that were denied to depressed communities. Expectedly, the reactionary elite took to criminal violence in the form of arson, murder and assault. And for the first time in the history of the island, oppressed masses resorted to armed action against the combined forces of reaction and the state apparatus. Not only the elitist Tamil nationalist parliamentary leaders but also the revisionists denounced the armed action. But support grew even among the 'upper' castes, for the campaign which also gained rising sympathy and support from a wide section of progressive forces across the country, including other nationalities.

Attempts by the upper caste elite to keep the oppressed castes outside public places, especially temples, and to continue with blatant discriminatory practices such as the denial of access to public wells, crematoria etc. were soundly defeated by the campaign that continued into the 1970s. The SLFP-led alliance that came to power consequently amended the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act of 1957 to make it more effective.

The success of the struggle meant that the socio-economic basis for caste oppression and open discrimination and humiliation by caste has been destroyed, and that is no mean achievement. What is particularly important is that a struggle against oppression of a section of a community enjoyed the support of a sizeable section of the community associated with oppression. Thus it has lessons for struggles against other forms of oppression in Sri Lanka and elsewhere on matters of the united front strategy, political mobilisation of the masses, and focussed application of armed action in a way that isolates the main enemy.

This does not mean that caste prejudices and discrimination are over. They are strong among the Tamil Diaspora and exist even in regions under the control of the LTTE. The campaign therefore needs to go on undeterred, not as armed conflict but as social and political activities to isolate the reactionaries defending casteism. The Dalitists who preach caste hatred have no answers nor do the Tamil nationalists. The initiative is still with the Marxist Leninists.

The struggle also has useful messages for those misled by Dalitist movements as well as for the left in India , the most important of which is that there can be no separation between class struggle and struggle against any form of social oppression, and it is harmful to seek such separation.

P.S.

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