

N. Shanmugathan, a veteran in Sri Lanka's Left movement, passed away in London in February, 1993. The following essay, hitherto unpublished, was written by comrade Shan in 1991. It chronicles one of the major social movements evolved in Sri Lanka in the sixties, the struggle against caste oppression in Tamil society.

CASTE STRUGGLES IN NORTHERN SRI LANKA

N. Shanmugathan

This is an essay about the caste system as it prevails in Northern Sri Lanka. Of course, the caste system exists all over Sri Lanka, but it is practiced in different ways among the Sinhalese as distinct from the Tamils.

Among the Tamils in the Northern part of Sri Lanka, there is one set of castes that are more or less synonymous with the castes as prevalent among the Sinhalese. Roughly, equivalent to the *Goigama* are the *Wellala*, while the equivalent of the *Karawe* are the *Karayar*. But the difference among the Tamils is that apart from these castes, there is a whole set of castes of people who are considered virtually sub-human, and referred to as 'untouchable.' Such are *Pallar*, *Nalavar*, *Pariah*, etc., who are considered to be a species below normal society.

They are not permitted to enter the houses of the 'high castes' or to mix with them in any other way. Marrying into a depressed caste is completely out of the question. They are not allowed to draw water from the well—even from public wells. A very striking incident comes to my mind. My grand-father was very caste-conscious. He did not permit any member of the so-called depressed castes to draw water from our well. But, he did, without question, draw the water himself and give to them.

These 'depressed castes' were not allowed to enter tea boutiques or to use the same cups as used by the 'high castes.' The crowning indignity was that they were not even allowed inside the temples to worship the same God. To this extent it could be said that 'untouchability' is one of the worst forms of inhumanity by man to man.

In India, the untouchables form the vast majority. They are broad based and support a narrowing structure with the Brahmins at the top. In Northern Sri Lanka, the position is the reverse. The high castes form the majority while the untouchable castes form roughly only 1/3 of the population. This has led to severe exploitation of untouchable castes which cannot be believed to exist in modern society.

Of course, the 'untouchables' have revolted against this oppression several times and in several forms. But they have always been crushed by the 'higher' castes, with the aid of the state power which was in their hands. The barbarity of the oppressive measures can hardly be believed. Being poor, these 'untouchable' castes have their huts thatched with cadjans. Whenever they showed any signs of rebelling, it was easy for the 'high' caste to burn down these cajan huts. Their wells were also poisoned. They were driven out from their land as they always lived in land belonging to the society called high caste because no untouchable was allowed to own land.

I remember an incident in my village which brought home to me this fact very sharply. Near my house, about half a mile away, there was a land in which some 'untouchable' castes had been living for years - as far back as I could remember. These 'untouchable' castes had prospered during the Second World War by selling their services and skills to the military, as carpenters etc. When the owner of that land, who lived next to my house, wanted to sell this property, the low castes who were living there offered to buy it. This scandalized the other 'high' caste people living in the area. One of them, (a relation of mine), offered the price of the land to my neighbour and bought the property without allowing the 'untouchables' to buy it. But having bought the property he did not evict the 'low' castes living there. They were allowed to continue in residence, but the property continued in the hands of the 'high' caste. This was a meaningless exercise, but one that explains the severity of the caste system.

Other forms of persecution were linked to dress. For example, any woman of the 'depressed' castes who dared to cover her upper part of the body with a jacket, would have had the jacket ripped open. And the men were not allowed to wear a shawl on their shoulders. If they did, they had to remove it at the sight of a 'high' caste person.



One of the areas in which 'depressed' caste fought the 'high' caste was over the right to cremate their dead in the same public cemetery as the high caste. All these attempts were put down severely.

Of course there was no social contact between the high castes and the depressed castes. The untouchables were not allowed to enter homes of the high castes. None of the high castes did ever contemplate dining in the homes of the low castes.

One aspect of the caste system as it prevailed in Northern Sri Lanka was that the untouchable castes and the high castes lived in virtual water-tight compartments without any kind of social contact except when a necessity arose, for instance when weddings or funerals took place. There were certain tasks which the untouchable castes had to perform as feudal duties to the upper castes; the beating of drums during funerals was one such feudal duty. Otherwise they lived separately without mixing up even in social gatherings. But, of course, there were certain activities in which these castes mixed. One such activity was the drinking of toddy. An untouchable caste called the *Nallavars* were coconut pluckers; part of their means of living was to tap toddy, which they sold to all castes alike, under the palmyrah trees. They fashioned receptacles out of palmyrah leaves from which all castes took their turn in drinking toddy.

But apart from such contacts, these castes lived separate lives - each confining themselves to a task or a trade which custom had confined them to. I remember that, while I was in the University, studying with me and residing at the same hostel with me, was a student from an untouchable caste. When he graduated he did not think of returning to the North even to get a job. He was quite conscious that despite his University degree he had no social status among the high castes of the North. Therefore, what he did was to go to the South and obtain a teaching post in Galle. Here, among the Sinhalese, his caste was neither noticed nor mentioned. These were the situations which even those who had escaped out of the intellectual backwardness of the 'depressed' castes were forced into.

I remember that this question used to figure during some of the Parliamentary elections. Before the Communist Party split up, I remember going to Jaffna to work for the candidature of V. Ponnambalam who contested the Manipay Seat, as a Communist candidate. Of course he put forward a radical programme which included the abolition of the caste system. One of the propaganda gimmicks he resorted to was to arrange for some of his supporters from

the high castes to go to the homes of the untouchables and to partake of meals with them. This was a bold move which certainly offended the high castes. But he won the sympathy of the untouchables. I remember having participated at many such meals. But Ponnambalam did not win the seat, because the majority of the electorate was still the high castes.

As I have already mentioned, one of the areas in which the untouchables challenged the high castes was over the right to cremate their dead in the same common cemetery. But all their attempts were crushed.

Caste and Politics

Even the parliamentary system worked against the untouchable castes. Since the high castes formed the majority of the electorate, no political party - not even a Left-party was willing to offend them by espousing the cause of the 'untouchables.'

The reason for this was because the Delimitation Commission was usually composed of the majority of the high caste people. Therefore, the areas where untouchables were in a majority came to be carved into two and the dividing parts were put into two different electorates so that the untouchables could never elect their own representatives. The first exception was in 1970 when the TULF nominated Mr. Rajalingam, a member of a depressed caste to the Uduppitty Seat which he won.

Despite the fact that the untouchables form nearly a third of the population, they could never elect even a single representative unless they were nominated by a political party of the high castes.

It was parliamentary opportunism which prevented the Left parties supporting the just cause of the untouchable castes. The situation changed with the emergence of the Marxist Leninist Communist Party after the split in the Ceylon Communist Party in 1964. The new Communist Party, which rejected the parliamentary path to socialism, gave bold leadership to the struggles of the depressed castes which broke out into the open in 1966.

The old Communist Party had an organisation to cater to the untouchable castes; it was called the All Ceylon Minority Maha Sabha. Naturally, because of its divisive policies, it could not give the revolutionary leadership to these oppressed people. I remember that in 1966, they called upon these people to observe Sathyagraha in support of their demands. By this time, our Party had organised our own programme to sponsor the demands of the untouchable castes. It was called 'The Mass Movement Against Caste Oppression and Untouchability.' On the 21st of October, 1966, it organised a mass demonstra-



tion from Chunnakam to the Jaffna esplanade where a meeting was to be held in support of its aims. The police obstructed the demonstration and refused to let it proceed. It should be pointed out here that the Police had always come down heavily on any movement of the depressed castes because the police were almost exclusively composed of men from the high castes.

But the demonstrators refused to disperse. The Police charged them with batons, but ultimately allowed them to walk to Jaffna in single file. We held a highly successful meeting at the Esplanade. At that meeting I quoted the advice given to Paul Robeson, the famous Afro-American singer, by his elder brother and repeated by him at a New York Meeting: "Stand up to them and hit back harder than they hit you. When the many have learned that lesson everything will be different."

That was the beginning of the campaign against caste oppression and untouchability. Hundreds of new cadres were thrown up from among the depressed castes in the course of the struggle. Gone were the days of *Sathyagraha*, non violence and *ahimsa*. Imbued with a new spirit they were willing to return blow for blow. The movement mainly centered on the demand for entry into temples and public places like tea shops and the right to draw water from public wells. But there were other forms in which this struggle erupted; some of them were violent.

In this struggle, the entire state machinery—the police, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy—were heavily on the side of the high castes. In addition, they had self-styled leaders, like C. Sunderalingam, ex-Professor, ex-Member of Parliament and ex-Minister, who threw his entire reactionary lot on the side of the high castes and acted as their supreme adviser. He used to go about in his car armed with a pistol with impunity.

Resistance to Caste Oppression

An incident occurred early in the movement against caste oppression in 1966. In the village of Chankanai, a high caste man fired at a funeral procession of a depressed caste, because he objected to the route along which the coffin was being taken. A member of a depressed caste fell victim to the shot. The assailant was easily recognisable and had to be arrested, but was released on bail for Rs.250/-, an unheard of practice. The Magistrate and the prosecuting police officer were of course high caste people. Due to the public pressure, the Magistrate had to re-arrest the assailant. Nevertheless, as the Police ineffectually pressed the case, the Magistrate acquitted the accused.

On that evening, as the assailant appeared at the market place, very proud of his acquittal, he was shot down like a dog by an unidentified member of the depressed caste. The gun was apparently passed from hand to hand and disappeared. It was never found, nor did anybody

identify the man who fired the shot. That was the nature of the struggle—sometimes violent and sometimes non violent. But the depressed castes had learnt the lesson not to turn the other cheek to receive a slap but to return a blow for the blow. It was the revolutionary leadership of our Communist Party that was responsible for this transition.

This campaign against caste oppression also saw the mobilization of the progressive sections of the high castes in its support. Quite a few of the leaders of the Jaffna branch of the Communist Party were members of high castes. Their leadership of this struggle played an important part in popularising the aims of the movement among all sections of the people. A part of this effort was also to carry out a tremendous campaign among the Sinhalese masses to popularise the demands of the depressed castes. Several public meetings were held in the South while several national newspapers extensively reported this struggle; Radio Peking also lent its support by reporting this struggle.

The movement achieved some success in that several temples were thrown open in many places to the depressed castes. They were also admitted to tea shops and allowed the use of the same cups as those used by the high castes. Earlier they had to stand outside the tea shops and drink their tea in separate cups specially reserved for them.

Temple-Entry Struggle

The campaign to open the temples to the depressed castes was the more popular form of struggle because it involved a large mass of people. The most famous struggle in this connection took place over the right of entry to the Maviddapuram temple which is situated a few miles south of Kankesanthurai. It was a prominent temple in Jaffna and the high castes fought desperately to the last. C. Sunderalingam took the lead on behalf of the high castes. They even cordoned off the inner sanctum of the temple and kept out both the high and the low castes. And they kept the temple closed for some time. But it was one of the temples that was earning high revenue and they could not keep it closed for ever. As a result of mass pressure and direct struggle, the temple's gates were ultimately thrown open to the depressed castes. I remember that it was the late S. T. N. Nagaratnam, a member of a depressed caste and the President of the Mass Movement against Untouchability and Caste Oppression, who led the fight to throw open the gates of the Maviddapuram temple.

The intellectuals from the low castes also played their part in this struggle. I remember the late K. Daniel who was a popular novelist and a Sahitya Award winner, wrote several novels exposing the evils of the caste system. He was also a leading speaker at most of the meetings in support of the movement.



But no support came from the established political parties in Jaffna, like the Federal Party, the All Ceylon Tamil Congress, the L.S.S.P. or the pro-Moscow Communist Party. This was for the simple reason that being Parliamentary parties they did not want to offend the high caste voter who happened to be in a majority.

Militancy

Militant groups sprang up during the last 10 years to champion the rights of the Tamils against Sinhala discrimination. Several leaders of some of these groups came to see me and I tried to persuade them that if they wanted to engage in a people's war and mobilise all sections of Tamil Society in the North, they should enshrine certain basic demands in their programme. One was the abolition of the caste system. The other was the abolition of the cursed system of dowry which had plagued Tamil Society for years. Unfortunately I had no success. It was not that those who came to see me themselves did not agree with my views. But leaders of these militant groups themselves were from the high castes and the reason they put forward was that they would be financially cut off from the high castes.

It was only recently that one group has put forward these demands at one of its meetings. But it still remains to be seen how far they would put them into practice. Of course, there are members of the depressed castes in all these militant groups. Some even occupied leading positions. But they seem to be ineffective.

At this time, the Federal Party was running a big campaign against Sinhalese discrimination. But they turned a blind eye to the oppression of one section of the Tamils by another and shouted to high heaven about the oppression of the Tamils by the Sinhalese.

At least Chelvanayagam and Naganathan could enter the houses of Dudley Senanayake and J.R.Jayewardene or join with them as equals at the same restaurants. But the depressed castes of Jaffna had to stand outside the houses of Chelvanayagam and Naganathan and were not allowed to enter their homes. I remember that the late Mr. Tiruchelvam, ex-Minister and then a top leader of the Federal Party, accused me of internationalising the caste problem. This was a reference to a Peking Radio report supporting the movement against caste oppression. What seems to have troubled Mr. Tiruchelvam was not the existence of caste oppression, but the fact that our

movement should have made it known to the rest of the world.

At this time, there was a law in Sri Lanka, called the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act, which had been passed by the Bandaranaike government in 1957. It forbade any kind of discrimination on the basis of caste. In fact, by 1967 in terms of the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act all public places like temples and tea shops had to be kept open for all sections of the people irrespective of caste. But this Act was never put into practice, because of the simple reason that those who were in charge of implementing—i.e. the police—were all from high castes and were not interested in its implementation. To this day, it remains a dead law. On the other hand, the high castes carried on a campaign to repeal or amend this act; they even forcibly obstructed the implementation of this law.

The law of the land prohibited caste discrimination and the guardians of the law should have ensured the implementation of the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act. But in fact, the police protected the law breakers.

During this period, the high caste in Atchuvveli closed down a temple in the middle of the annual festival season. When the Government Agent of Jaffna brought about an idiotic compromise by which both high caste and low castes were to worship from outside the temple premises, the reactionary caste Hindus came armed. Despite the presence of the Police, they created a provocation by shooting at and stabbing members of the depressed castes.

At Kodikaman, when one tea shop refused to serve the depressed castes, the police, instead of enforcing the law and forcing the tea shop owner to serve everyone who wanted tea, arrested the members of the depressed castes.

At the Changanai police station, there was an arrogant and caste conscious sergeant by the name of Thamoderam who was earlier giving a lot of trouble to a plantation congress at Talawakelle. He had all members of the depressed caste, whose names were supplied by the high caste, promptly arrested and thrown into the lock-up.

In the same village, the reactionary caste Hindus, encouraged by the open assistance of the police, stoned and seriously damaged the house of Mr. Muttiah, an ex-Chairman of the Changanai Town Council. Muttiah had worked with the movement for the abolition of caste oppression. Armed reactionaries had waited to cause physical harm to him that night. But he did not fall into the trap.



What did the police do? Instead of finding out the culprit who damaged Mr. Muttiah's house, they arrested Mr. Muttiah and soundly beat him up when he was in custody— a cowardly act for which our police is notorious.

That was the situation that had to be faced by the movement for the abolition of caste oppression and arrested those who wanted the law enforced.

It was when faced with such a situation that sections of the depressed castes had to resort to the sacred right of revolutionary self defence. It was an elemental law of survival. If the reactionaries could arm themselves with impunity and let loose a reign of terror in league with the police, the people in turn had the right to resist. Of course, the reactionaries accused us of inciting violence. But it was the brutality of the Police and reactionary caste Hindus that drove the oppressed masses to resort to self defence.

Laws by themselves are not going to change society. It is only a revolutionary change of society that can bring about a change in social conditions. The caste system is

an anachronism and a relic of the feudal ages. And it exists to this day in our country due to the unorganised and distorted form of the development of capitalism. It is only rapid industrialisation with the establishment of factories, where on the work bench different castes would have to work side by side, which alone can ultimately bring an end to this wretched caste system.

But even in the few industries that have sprung up in Jaffna, like the Kankesanturai Cement Factory, the caste system has become part of it. Only Socialism and rapid industrialisation can bring about the quick changes as well as the changes in mental outlook that can ultimately bring an end to the caste system.

There is also no point of forming separate organisations and claiming special status for the depressed castes. They should form common organisations with the progressive sections among the higher castes and fight for their social amelioration. It is only revolutionary mass action by the socially ostracized people, with the help of all progressives, that can regain the lost rights. If thousands go into the temple and into the eating houses, there is no force that can stop it.

If the only two kinds of people are killers and victims, then although it may be morally preferable to be a victim, it is obviously preferable from the point of view of survival to be a killer. However, either alternative seems pretty hopeless...I think there has to be a third thing again; the ideal would be somebody who would neither be a killer [n]or a victim, who could achieve some kind of harmony with the world which is a productive or creative harmony, rather than a destructive relationship towards the world.

Margaret Atwood