

A major backlash hampers...

Melavalavu's government-in-exile

In areas where upper caste dominance has been pronounced, the declaration of some panchayats as "reserved" has had a backlash. In some cases, there are no candidates at all even when the panchayat is reserved. They are too scared to contest. Doing so could invite terror. A striking example is Melavalavu, close to Madurai, which P. SAINATH visited.

CASTE OFF



Posters with pictures of those slain – and also one of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar – still greet visitors to the village. The panchayat now functions from the colony's television room as its office building is in upper caste territory which is inaccessible.

P. Sainath

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"We still cannot draw water from the well," says Veeran. "And even now we have stand while travelling by bus to make way for them. The curbs on funerals and going to a temple persist. Our goats cannot graze here."

In a sense, adds Pandi of the same colony, "the curbs on education also exist. The school is in the upper caste area. Our children have been attacked so quite a few here have stopped going. We want a separate school."

The upper castes were furious when the panchayat was declared a reserved one. That challenged their dominance. In many other panchayats that have been reserved, too, such anger exists. In Melavalavu, it exploded ... in violence.

South Tamil Nadu presents a seemingly intractable problems for the government. Even well-intentioned measures seem to get bogged down. Probably because of an insistence on viewing the region's troubles purely as a law and order problem.

Conscious of a caste bias in the police force, the Government began posting senior officers in these districts who were not from the local castes and in some cases, not even from the State. Some are, by origin, from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan.

This certainly lent the force some credibility. Senior police officers were posted in Tirunelveli, Tuticorin, Madurai and elsewhere. With no caste axe to grind, they were and mostly seen as being above the fray. Yet the violence continued. The government then extended the principle of having officers not belonging to local castes right down to the sub inspector level.

"We cannot extend it below that," says a senior officer in Madurai. "At the base, it's very difficult to exclude the local people. You cannot recruit a constable in Chennai and post him in Madurai district. That would require salaries you cannot afford. Besides, thevaras and dalits form over half the population. How can they be excluded?"

Trying to solve it on an administrative basis has its limits. There are strong social barriers to law enforcement. Worship takes place on a caste basis. Even *Jallikattu* (a form of bullfighting) is organised on a caste basis."

But while caste tensions are old, the spiral of violence itself, in its present form, is relatively new. What are the new reasons for the clashes?

Dr. N. Sethuraman, leader of the Tamil Nadu Thevar Peravai, insists that the state of caste relations rests on myths. There is also "reverse discrimination" against the higher castes. "Even if dalits surpass all others, caste reservations will remain another 100 years. No party will dare scrap them. But we do not object. As you can see, we are the real democrats." He dismisses the point that the impact of job reservations must be limited in a community where large numbers of children do not go to school.

"Congress people instigated the clashes between the dalits and the Thevars from the

point of view of history," Dr. Sethuraman told us at his clinic in Madurai. "This technique became a model of how to get dalit votes. Seventy per cent of communal clashes are instigated by politicians or their stooges in dalit groups."

"Secondly, personal agendas are converted into caste disputes." Dr. Krishnaswamy of the Devendrakula Vellalar Sangham is an example of being this type of a leader. "Untouchability has been eradicated by about 90 per cent in Tamil Nadu. There are only some 'grey areas'. Inter-caste marriages is one. Does it make one casteist to seek a spouse from the same community? If a thevar went to a Brahmin's house and asked for his daughter's hand in marriage, what would he say?

Isn't that really up to the daughter, if she is an adult, we asked? Dr. Sethuraman dismisses such views as being exceptions. "We are followers of the late Muthuramalinga Thevar," he says. "He did a lot for dalits. It is the political parties who create mischief."

"What parties?" asks Pandi in the dalit colony of Melavalavu. "The murdered panchayat president Murugesan was a loyal DMK activist. But the DMK has said nothing and done nothing. The parties here are divided on a caste basis. But if the upper caste people die, then officials and parties make a lot of noise."

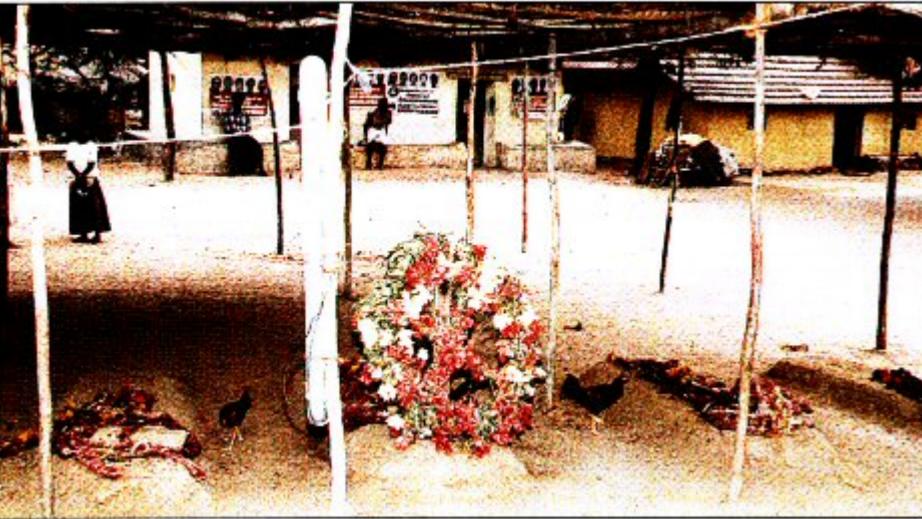
"Actually," says the senior police officer, "40 of the 44 accused in Melavalavu have been arrested. Five are absconding." The prime accused, former panchayat president Alagarsamy, was held under the National Security Act (NSA). "Holding up a public transport bus and massacring passengers on the basis of caste is a very serious matter."

In the region, he sees "a cyclical process. Earlier, the forward castes were dominant and held most of the land. With time, the backward castes took over, driving the Forward Classes (FC) out. From about 40 years ago, the FCs could not live in these villages. The BCs became dominant. Now the dalits are also acquiring small plots of land but challenging the BCs. Their general economic condition is precarious, but they are ready to fight. And where there have been improvements in education, in land, they do".

"The incident at Melavalavu is a typical case of atrocities being committed against Adi-Dravidars. More so where they are economically and politically weak. There is a new element to it, though. We have had outside elements sparking riots before. But two communities in the same village rioting against each other was rare. However, in the past five years, this has begun to happen."

In Melavalavu, the panchayat has begun to function again with Raju – elected unopposed – as president. But, at a micro-level, it is something of a government-in-exile.

"I can't function from the panchayat office," says Raju apologetically. "It is in their area and they would kill us. So we run the panchayat from here – our colony's television room." ■



The spot honouring those who died in the attack. The grave in the centre with the big wreath is that of Murugesan, murdered panchayat president.

Melavalavu, Madurai (Tamil Nadu):

It was a case of being third time unlucky. When the rest of Tamil Nadu's panchayats went to the polls in 1996, Melavalavu didn't. There were many aspirants but no candidates in this Scheduled Caste (SC) reserved constituency. They were not allowed to file their nominations. The only one who did, Kanjivanan, had his house burned down the same night. He withdrew his nomination. No elections.

The authorities held a second round. This time candidates were promised security. So a few did contest. The upper castes boycotted the election. On polling day, the booths were attacked. One of the ballot boxes was recovered from a well. Anti-social elements took the other as a trophy. The elections were suspended.

The third round saw a more determined SC community. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam's (DMK) Murugesan was elected but could not work at the panchayat office. It was located in the upper caste area. As tensions rose in June 1997, Murugesan and other panchayat members went to the collectorate, seeking protection. On their way home, the bus they were in was stopped outside the village. Murugesan and five were hacked to death. The panchayat president's severed head was thrown into a well.

Krishnan was one of those who escaped the

bloodbath – narrowly. "We were returning by bus from the Collectorate. (We didn't get to talk to the Collector). Some of the Thevars boarded the bus at nearby Mellur just as it was leaving. Around two kilometres from Melavalavu, they demanded that the bus stop. They said there was a sick woman. People with knives and sickles were waiting on the road. They boarded the bus and caught Murugesan by the collar. He was dead soon after."

"They said 'all except the Parayans leave the bus'. The others fled. Three of us, – Chinniah, Kumar and ... – escaped with injuries. Moohan, vice-president of the panchayat, was killed. Sevugamurthy, Chelladurai, Bhoopathy and Raja too were slaughtered. At Mellur, another dalit, Sounder Rajan, was stoned to death. That was death number seven."

"Our people informed the village police picket at once. All that the picket policemen did was to warn the village Thevars to get out. They vanished. Finally, the crime was recorded in the words of the police, not the victim."

Even by the standards of the region, this area is special.

Around 1918, the higher castes here issued 'ten commandments' that the dalits were to follow. These were again renewed in 1929.

Dalit elder Veeran recalls the "law". "Dalits would work only in the fields of the (mainly thevar) higher castes. There was forced labour. They could not draw water from the community well but use the public tank. Dalit