

# The meaning of Melavalavu

By George Mathew

**M**ELAVALAVU is slowly receding from our memory. The gruesome murder of the president of Melavalavu panchayat, Murugesan, the vice-president, Mookan, and four others in broad daylight on June 30, 1997 will soon become part of history; part of statistics; one more data for social science research.

Murugesan and Mookan were elected through the democratic process. According to the Constitution, a panchayat is an institution of self-government. But these people's representatives were not only not allowed to function but also not allowed to live. They were "punished" with death for participating in the election and getting elected. Their sin was their low caste — Adi-Dravida — and they showed the temerity to contest.

A visit to Melavalavu in Madurai district, Tamil Nadu, is heart-rending. Six bodies have been buried in a row near the main road in the Dalit colony. The men and women of the village have no work. The Thevans and Kallars have stopped employing them since the mass killing. When this writer visited the village, they were surviving on a few bags of rice provided by the local administration as well as the Harijan Seva Sangh. About 80 children (5-12 years) sit under a tree with one teacher, all of them were earlier in the main village school, but after the murder of the Dalits, they felt insecure and stopped going there. The only rice mill in the area is closed. Murugesan's wife gave birth to a baby 38 days after his killing. The widow of Murugesan's brother Raja (who was also killed along with Murugesan) is expecting. Although there is some activity for constructing houses for each of the dead and a two-room school building, a pall of gloom has descended on the village.

The main area of Melavalavu, where the dominant backward classes live, has a posse of policemen in the village hall. Not a single male member of the community is there. All men fled after the massacre. All petty shops are closed; children roam about. Women despair of the state of affairs. It is nothing more than the peace of the graveyard, but the menfolk may be happy that they have redeemed their pledge that no one, other than their own caste, will rule the village — democracy or no-democracy.

When Melavalavu was declared a panchayat reserved for the Scheduled Castes in the October 1996 elections, the dominant

backward class resented and the poll could not be held. The second attempt to hold was also foiled by violence and booth-capturing. Finally, when the elections were held on December 30, the Kallars boycotted them. Six seats were filled and three are vacant. Murugesan, in his mid-Thirties, and Mookan, in his Twenties, were elected but they were never permitted by the dominant caste to enter the panchayat office, a new building. Murugesan's name was prominently painted on the building, but today it is smeared with cowdung. The massacre, coming within weeks of the Madurai Corporation Councillor Leelavathy's murder, in Villapuram, raises several questions.

Madurai district — Melur taluk in particular — is a volatile area of caste relations.

---

*When the panchayats had neither power nor finance, their membership was just a status symbol. Now that they have both, they are perceived by the traditional powerful groups as a threat.*

---

About Melavalavu, Swami Anand Thirth, regional officer of the All-India Harijan Sevak Sangh, wrote in 1952: "At Melavalavu, when I went to a tea shop with two Harijan boys, a group of people threatened to assault me and drove away the boys. A glass tumbler was wantonly broken by the tea shopkeeper and they all demanded that I must pay for it on penalty of being thrashed."

Today, a few days before the Melavalavu tragedy, Dr. Krishnaswamy, MLA, in a report submitted to the Human Rights Commission of Tamil Nadu, had this to say: "During the local bodies elections, elections could not be held in many of the reserved constituencies because of dominant caste blockades. At Melavalavu Panchayat, (a reserved constituency) the Dalit candidate could not contest. I personally intervened and fought; however, the elected Dalit representative Murugesan has not been allowed to go to his office to execute his work. I have complained about the same several times, including during the Assembly session, but in vain". There is no denying that the district administration was aware of the tension prevailing at Melur and Melavalavu. The villagers told this writer that the authorities, in fact, persuaded Murugesan and

his friends to send in their nomination papers in the face of the threats and violence and assured them protection. But that protection was not forthcoming. Just posting a few policemen won't do in circumstances of such known social tensions.

It would be a blunder to see the Melavalavu killings as one more instance of caste tension. It was a serious attack on the institution of panchayati raj, which has the potential of changing the powerful rural groups. The new panchayats are perceived by the traditional powerful groups as a threat. When the panchayats had neither power nor finance and existed in form without content, their membership was just a status symbol. Now they have status plus power. The panchayats control local re-

sources and their presidents are the first citizens of the villages and during temple festivals they are honoured.

Democracy is nothing new to India but in many cases it was used to perpetuate the power of the dominant class. When real democracy at the village and ward level is ushered in today, it is accompanied by violence and bloodshed. The question is, after Independence what kind of political and social education has been taking place in our villages? While empowerment of the weaker sections, organising them to fight for their rights, was happening as a natural reaction to oppression, there was no concomitant move to educate the dominant caste about the changing times, the values of democracy, social justice and equity. No serious reform movement has been launched among the dominant castes of southern Tamil Nadu in recent times.

While in 1981 180 Dalit families at Meenakshipuram converted to Islam to escape torture and humiliation, in 1996 the Dalits participated in the democratic institutions and democratic process and that action is met with daylight murder. The question coming up again and again is: where are we heading for? Towards a civilised existence or

a society where the norm is might is right.

Melavalavu also speaks about how the political parties keep castes or villages as their vote banks. After the tragedy, small and big party functionaries of all hues visited the village. They come, express their grief, make promises and go. No permanent solution is sought for the malady. The culprits also hide behind the protective shield of the parties. Caste as a vote bank has been the bane of society. With every Parliament and Assembly elections, it was perpetuated and not really attacked. The panchayat elections have the potential to break this caste vote bank, but the way the parties are exploiting these tragedies without trying to find a lasting solution leaves the question wide open.

Madurai has a sizeable number of Gandhian organisations and institutions have been in existence for a long time. Tamil Nadu has no dearth of voluntary organisations. Then how come these horrendous incidents are repeatedly taking place? When the government fails, could the civil society take an oath that Melavalavu will not repeat in any region, district and the State?

After the Leelavathy murder, the CPI(M) swung into action, further strengthened its base, took all measures politically and financially to support the victims' family and spread the message of grassroots level democracy. But all this is weak or almost absent in Melavalavu. The disunity and factionalism of the Dalit movement and the lack of a concerted move by the ideological spectrum to prevent the loss of life in the tension-ridden area are a matter of concern.

The six two-room houses coming up in the Dalit colony and the school building (a simple structure without any amenities) will stand testimony to the fact that two elected representatives and their supporters had to give their life to get these small mercies. People will remember it as a story of forgotten promises.

Melavalavu and similar villages are paying a price for not holding the panchayat elections regularly and strengthening the foundations of democracy. I was told in Madurai that the Keeripatti and Pappakudi panchayats in Usilampatti and Maruthan-gudi in Kallikudi panchayat union have not held elections till today because of social tensions. Will the State Government wake up?

(The writer is Director, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi)