

WHEN the ruling leaders of Tamilnadu address public meetings, one may get the impression that they are all Vivekanandas. They address the gathering as "mothers, sisters, brothers, parents." This is the dravidian ethos firmly established in the oratorial world. But when they act under ruling class compulsions, they suddenly remember to show the women "their place." And when these women happen to be connected with the "accursed naxalites", the barbarous police come out with their fangs and claws.

Jaya's ordeal began five years ago. She is a dalit woman of Athiyur village, near Tirupattur of North Arcot district. It was all because of Seeralan, a CPI (ML) activist who was hiding with a companion in her village, since the police in Tirupattur had filed a case against him. Three policemen, who entered the village to collect their liquor bribes, spotted Seeralan and caught him. They tied him to a tree, roped a yoke around his chest and dragged him about. They then killed him and carried the body three miles away, just as people would carry a slain pig, his hands and legs bound to a pole. Petrol was poured on the body and it was set on fire.

Then it was the turn of Jaya, who had happened to be an unfortunate witness of the incident. She and her husband Velu were hounded out of their house, stripped naked and publicly abused. The policemen amused themselves by pushing ants into Velu's penis and holding matches to its tip. They shoved a stick into Jaya's vagina and tore the hair from her scalp. Later, they were thrown into prison on a number of charges. The police threatened to murder their three year old son in their presence. They even brought him to the lock-up and began preparations to burn him. Then they showed the parents some ashes, saying the child had been burnt, though this was not actually true. This kind of torture and intimidation went on unabated for years. It was only towards the end of last year that Jaya was released on bail. And there are many who have shared Jaya's fate.

The story of Valambal of Soundara Cholapuram village near Pennadam of

K. MANOHARAN, SUNILA SINGH

Three Brave Women of Tamilnadu

South Arcot district is a saga of human endurance in the face of terror let loose on her by the Q branch police who are an anti-naxalite police force. Valambal is the wife of Kaliaperumal, a Tamil scholar who became a militant CPI (ML) organizer of peasants and workers. He is still languishing in Madras central prison. Valambal has seen the arrests of her husband, two sons, her sister, her



Valambal

husband's brother, and two of his cousins, and also the inhuman tortures meted out to them. She herself was arrested, humiliated, filthily abused and kept in prison for nearly three months. For weeks no one was allowed to see her. For some months when she was in a sub-jail, she was not even permitted to change her clothes during menstruation. Her 80 year old father was threatened with dire consequences if he dared to help her. Her elder brother was bashed up so badly that his nervous system has been completely damaged. The villagers were told not to till her lands. Her crops were burnt, her house was raided and her husband's precious collection of books destroyed.

The real ordeal began only after all her family members who had been arrested were tried, convicted and sent to various prisons in Tamilnadu. She had to go from prison to prison, from Vellore at one end to Palayamkottai at the other end of Tamilnadu, to see her kith and kin. During the hard years, she heard the news that boiling water mixed with chilli powder had been thrown on her son and her husband, and her sons had been mercilessly beaten up. Then there was the Q branch which interfered with the normal jail administration, so as to restrict the visits of relatives, lawyers, friends, and virtually blocked all communication with the outside world. She also had to live under the constant threat that her daughters would be raped.

All this did not deter her from approaching civil rights activists, lawyers and journalists to bring to light the inhuman atrocities of the police and jail authorities. She did not lose courage. Today, thanks to the intervention of the supreme court, caused by a writ petition filed by Ghanshyam Pardesi, a Delhi-based journalist, many restrictions on her relatives have been removed. Her sister Ananthanayaki has been released. Her eldest son Valluvan has been granted two months' parole. He is seeing the outside world after 12 years of life in the horrid hole. Today, Valambal beams with pride, and rightly so.

Ananthanayaki, elder sister of Valambal, is the widow of Viswanathan who for two terms represented Jayamkondam constituency as a Congress MLA. Now in her midsixties, she was, till very recently, the only

woman naxalite sentenced to life imprisonment in Tamilnadu. She is still unable to forget the day of her arrest, how she was humiliated by the police and beaten by Q branch inspectors: "From the village near Ariyalur of Trichy district where I was arrested right down to Pennadam were I was kept in illegal custody, the police officer who brought me kept raining blows on me with his boots."

Ananthanayaki used to run an orphanage in the village where she was arrested. When the police were hunting for Yalambal's family members, her daughters took shelter in their aunt's orphanage. This enraged the police who were determined to destroy the whole family. Ananthanayaki is filled with rage when she remembers the first four days she was kept in illegal custody in Pennadam police station. She was asked to raise both her hands behind her head and the policemen hit her lips with the leather straps of their lathis. With blood dripping from her lips, she cried for water and was told to drink her urine. She was overcome with shame when she tried to tell us that she was stripped naked and beaten up.

The betrayal by the leaders of the party to which her husband belonged is still fresh in her mind. When Valambal's daughters were being continuously harassed by the police, she sought the protection of a close political friend of her husband, and the leader of the Congress legislature party. This "patriotic" leader shouted at her: "Why do you want me to help the daughters of a traitor?" Her answer that these innocent girls had nothing to do with the "treason" of their father was of no avail. She then ran to a union minister. He assured her he would tell the police to treat the girls decently. A few days later, the police descended upon her. One of them told her: "Oh, so you thought you could be protected by the minister. Politicians are not permanent. Only we are permanent. So the only force that can protect anyone is the police. Do you understand?"

All this happened during the DMK rule but the AIADMK rule of MGR was no better. The government failed to give her decent treatment for her diabetes and

cataract. The review board for recommending her release was not set up, though there is a provision that women prisoners who are 55 and older, should be released.

But she learnt a lot during prison life. She started reading newspapers and then some marxist literature. It was in prison, that, for the first time in her life, she learnt something about the "naxalites" and the



Ananthanayaki

ideals they pursued. She became convinced of the need to mobilize the toiling masses and organize them into a mighty force which will sweep away the dirt and muck of our society.

Today, Ananthanayaki is a free woman. The supreme court preempted the Tamilnadu government's move to dodge the question of her release, by ordering her release on permanent parole. Subsequently, the government announced her release. She has gone back to the village where her 95 year old father is dying slowly. What is she going to do now? She replies: "I am too old to do anything of a serious nature now. First of all, I will sit near the bed of my dying father and give him all the care and affection which he has missed for the last 11 years. Secondly, I will go back to the orphanage and try to mobilize funds for the welfare of the children. Thirdly, I will do my best to fight for jail reforms and better treatment of women prisoners." Her life in prison has told her that jails are nothing but extensions of this society we live in, where women are permanently kept under contempt, insult and humiliation. □

WOMAN POET

He said that

He was a poet.

His poems were published.

He wrote on

A variety of subjects.

He saw more.

He experienced more.

He wrote like a poet.

Not just like a man.

He went beyond the man.

His poems went beyond the man.

Then he said that

I wrote like a girl.

A girl-woman.

I wrote feminist poetry.

I wrote mainly on

One subject—

A tied woman

A bound woman.

I saw less.

I wrote like a woman first

And didn't go beyond.

Yet, I write on

One subject. Mainly.

I scream. I cry.

I struggle. I burn.

And you watch the screams

Without hearing.

You watch the tears

Without tasting.

You watch the struggle

Without feeling.

You watch skin burn

Without smelling.

You watch from afar.

The day you come near,

The day you

Hear, taste,

Feel, smell

My words,

That day—

That day I'll go beyond.

—Joy Deshmukh

END OF ALL THINGS

This is an extract from the letter of a family friend of ours, to his friend. He is an elderly father of two daughters.

"My younger daughter who is now 23 years old, will be getting married to a doctor's son in January 1982. She is an MA and has studied so many things in her life. I do trust that all will end after her marriage. Praise God!

—Suman