



O B I T U A R Y

Tribute: G. Veeraiyan (1932-2018)

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With the death of G. Veeraiyan at age 86 on November 18 this year, our link with a defining chapter of India's agrarian history has been severed. GV was the last survivor of his generation of leaders of the movement of poor peasants and agricultural labourers against landlordism, caste oppression, and agrarian servitude led by the Communist Party in the east Thanjavur region (comprising the present districts of Nagapattinam and Tiruvarur and parts of the present district of Thanjavur). In the early 1940s, the Communist Party began to work among agricultural workers and peasants to break the system of feudal landlordism in the region. For the next several decades, it led a militant struggle of the rural poor against the tyranny of landlordism and was subjected to violent reprisals against its activists and leaders. One of the movement's notable successes was in putting an end to the entrenched system of agrarian bondage and servitude. The struggle was also directly responsible for statutes – like the Tanjore Tenants and Pannaiyal Protection Act 1952 – that brought life-altering change to those who suffered such oppression.

GV was a leading participant in the east Thanjavur agrarian movement from the late 1940s until his death. He joined the Communist Party as a boy and rose to become a major leader of this inspiring agrarian movement. He was State President of the Kisan Sabha and Agricultural Workers Union, and an office bearer of the All India Kisan Sabha. He was elected twice as Member of the Legislative Assembly from the Nagapattinam constituency, and was a member of the State Secretariat of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

The account of GV's life and struggles that follows is taken from an extended interview – his last major interview – that he gave me in March 2017 (see Menon 2017). He had by then retired from day-to-day political activity and was living with his son and family in Sithadi village. Though frail and hard of hearing, GV was

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otherwise fine – eager to discuss politics, and more than willing to talk about the past, present, and future.

GV was born on November 20, 1932 in Tiruvarur to Govindasami and Muthuletchmi. He spent his early years in Sithadi village, where his father worked for a landlord of Serukalathur village as caretaker of the landlord's estate, while also cultivating four acres of land on share rent. His childhood was spent more in farm work than in school. He had only four years of formal education.

He recalled the circumstances that led to his joining the Communist Party, having been first approached by a Party worker when he was 13, and then again when he was 18.

I joined the Party in 1949 in Mannargudi. The person who enrolled me had been jailed in Vellore jail under preventive detention laws and had got married to a girl from my village. He first tried to enrol me in 1944. I was only 12 and he, Kuppuswami, was 25. He tried to get me into the Kisan Sabha, but my family was very loyal to the mirasdar. I told Kuppuswami, "I cannot join the Party and oppose the landlord." But he did not give up. While on parole from Vellore jail, he would stay in Manali Kandasamy's house. Because of his persuasion I agreed to join the Party.

The 18-year old recruit threw himself into political work, although initially in a restricted way, since the Communist Party was banned and its leaders were being hunted down. Section 144 of the Indian Penal Code was in force, and the entire district had been occupied by the Malabar Special Police. "There was patrolling throughout the day and night," he recalled.

The police, he said, had announced a high reward for information on the whereabouts of B. Srinivasa Rao and Manali Kandasamy, the two most wanted Communist leaders in the area. "One night the police entered Sittadi village," GV recalled. "A carpenter was asleep outside Manali Kandasamy's house. He woke up and began to shout when he saw the police. 'I am an *asari* (carpenter),' he shouted. The policeman did not believe him and said 'If you are a carpenter, then I am one, too,' and gave him chase. The carpenter climbed a mango tree and escaped arrest. The police also arrested GV's father, who nonetheless managed to escape. He kept running till sunrise, and stopped only when he looked back and saw he was not being followed.

One of GV's earliest political tasks was that of selling *Ulagarasiyal* (World Politics), a pro-Party publication. The formal newspaper of the Communist Party, the weekly *Janasakthi* (People's Power) was banned. "I took the agency of the publication and had to sell 20 copies every week at two annas a copy. My task was to identify those who were interested in politics. While selling, I would recruit sympathisers [to the Party]," he said.

For the first two years after he became a Party member, that is, from 1949 to 1951, the Party had to function underground, and GV could not work openly for the Party. “I started a Grama Munnetra Sangam (Village Progress Association) in Sithadi in which anyone could enrol. I was its Secretary.”

By 1950, the primary demand of the peasant struggle in east Thanjavur was against agricultural bondage, although the demands of tenant farmers, who were charged high rents and could summarily be evicted by landlords, were also taken up by the Kisan Sabha. GV pointed out that the unique feature of the struggle was that it raised the demands of two distinct classes, namely the *pannai adimai* (farm “slaves” or bonded farm servants), who were Dalit, and small tenants, who were mainly from the backward classes. The agrarian movement brought these two classes to a common platform. “It was B. Srinivasa Rao who united them and who led the struggles between 1943 and 1953,” GV said.

In Thiruthuraipoondi, landlords tried to evict tenants, and the party held a meeting attended by 60,000 people who demanded that eviction come to an end. In a resolution, the meeting declared that all tenants would continue ploughing their land.

The ban on the Communist Party was lifted in 1952 when the general elections were announced. The Communist Party, a major force in undivided Madras province, decided to participate. GV summed up the outcome for the Party, an outcome that has “never been repeated.”

The first election of 1952 was spread over six months. The undivided Madras State included parts of Kerala, Andhra, and Karnataka. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam did not contest in Thanjavur, and said that they would support us only if we supported their demand for Dravida Nadu. Our Party refused. The Dravida Kazhagam supported us in Thanjavur. Ananda Nambiar won the Lok Sabha seat from Mayavaram, and Tondur Veerasamy the Legislative Assembly seat from Nagapattinam. It was a massive victory for the Left, a milestone victory. Of the 19 assembly constituencies, six were won by Communist Party members, and four by Party-supported independents. It was a victory that was never repeated.

The pressure from the agrarian movement, which raised demands relating to both agricultural labour and poor peasants resulted in the promulgation by the Government headed by K. Kamaraj, the first Chief Minister of Madras State, of an Ordinance titled The Tanjore Tenants and Pannaiyal Protection Ordinance, 1952. This later became an Act. The Act abolished the system of agrarian bondage, specified wage rates for agricultural labour, and gave cultivating tenants protection from eviction by landlords. The recognition of the demands of the peasant movement by law was a major victory. Even though the landlords found various ways of circumventing the provisions of the Act (and the peasant movement had to continue the struggle for its implementation), the system of agrarian servitude and bondage received a body blow from which it would not recover.

GV described the impact of the Act:

It was a major victory. It abolished the system of farm slavery. The bonded farm servant was told, "You are no longer a slave tied to a landlord, now you work for him as an agricultural worker." They could work anywhere. In retaliation, the landlords began to bring in labour from elsewhere, a practice that continued from 1954 to 1960. The main issue facing the movement then was how tenants were to be protected. We raised a demand for a tripartite meeting between landlords, the government, and the Kisan Sabha.

When the DMK was voted to power in 1967, and C. N. Annadurai became Chief Minister, the Kisan Sabha hoped a tripartite meeting would take place. "We believed that Annadurai would work for the poor, but how mistaken we were," GV said. "The DMK too did not convene the tripartite meeting we had been demanding. On October 5, 1967, our Comrade Pakkiri was killed in police firing at Poonthazhamkudi. His post-mortem took place the next day, and he was cremated on October 7. The tripartite meeting was convened on October 8. If it had been called a month earlier, this death could have been avoided."

GV immersed himself in struggles to implement the decisions of the tripartite meeting, especially those relating to increasing wages. According to GV, the mirasdars (landlords) of Thanjavur had decided to defy the wage structure that had been announced. As the Kisan Sabha called for the intensification of the protests, the backlash from the landlords, who used their henchmen to attack protestors, became more vicious. The savage response of landlords to the struggle of the peasantry and agricultural workers for freedom and for the right to form a union culminated in the atrocity at Kilvenmani on December 25, 1968, when 44 Dalit people were pushed into a hut by the thugs of the landlords and the hut set on fire.

It is not easy to measure the contributions of someone like GV to the peasant movement. He devoted his personal and public life to fighting economic and social injustice, unmindful of the dangers that lay in his path or the privations that he had to endure. Consider, for example, his role in the peasant movement in Thanjavur against the institution and practice of caste. The Kisan Sabha took caste oppression head on as it was central to the larger issue of feudal oppression that characterised feudal oppression in Thanjavur. The oral histories of caste oppression in Thanjavur provide insights into the living hell that was the life of a Dalit agricultural labourer — a world of unremitting toil, extreme poverty, and brutal caste subordination (see Menon 2017). The credit for the sea change in social relations in the last four to five decades in east Thanjavur must surely go to the collective efforts of leaders like GV. Yet, in a manner typical of mass leaders of his generation, GV minimised his personal role in the movement. "The struggle for wages and against caste was integrated in Thanjavur," he said. "There is less direct caste discrimination in east Thanjavur today than in other districts of Tamil Nadu."

GV ranged back and forth across the events of his life, and reflected on the impact of the agrarian movement on transforming agrarian relations in east Thanjavur, the theatre of most of his political activity. He noted the decline of manual employment in rice cultivation that had occurred with the advance of mechanisation. The old class of mirasdars no longer existed, but rich landlords and capitalist farmers did, and they controlled the politics of the region.

He spoke self-critically of the progress of the peasant movement. Tenants became landholders as a result of the struggle for land to the tillers. The Left peasant movement, however, had lost political and organisational influence over large sections of the poor and middle peasantry after the tenants became owners. The Left had to maintain live links with the people, he said, and to identify the allies and enemies of the people in the countryside. It had to remember the tasks of class struggle and not confine its activity to mobilising the peasantry against government policies.

Of his political life, this indomitable fighter said:

I have no regrets. I joined the movement 60 years ago, and am proud of working day and night for the movement for those 60 years. I am an ordinary peasant worker who did not go to school – no other movement would have given me the positions of leadership and public recognition that I have received in my lifetime.

REFERENCES

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