

# COMRADE SINGARAVELU

## THE PATH FINDER OF COMMUNISM IN SOUTH INDIA

– Komarayya

Com. Singaravelu is considered to be the first communist and the father of communism in South India. His intense activity during his life time is an everlasting inspiration to those who immerse themselves in the working-class politics and communist revolution. It is particularly note-worthy that he made his communist views felt in every sphere of his activity, in the working-class struggles, in the Congress Party, in the self-respect movement, and in civic affairs as well.

Singaravelu was born on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1860, in a fairly well-to-do family of fishermen in Madras. He graduated, studied law, and became a lawyer at Madras High Court.

Before becoming a lawyer, Singaravelu visited England in 1902, in connection with a trade deal of his family, and spent over six months in London. During his stay in London, he attended a World Buddhist Conference. Singaravelu's interest in Buddhism and his visit abroad led him to question the prevailing practices among Hindus and the fundamental tenets propagated by the orthodox in Hindu society.

Singaravelu had contacts with the extremist Congress leaders, among whom the great Tamil poet Subramanya Bharati was a member. They were followers of Balagangadhar Tilak, representing the urge for more militant action against British imperialism. They were inspired by the news of the 1905 revolution in Russia. Along with this group, Singaravelu attended the Surat session of the Indian National Congress in 1907.

The outbreak of the imperialist world war in 1914 accentuated the problems of the people. So naturally, Singaravelu began to participate in social service activities and fought for the betterment of the conditions of the Indian working class. During the outbreak of plague in the fishermen's colony, he helped with the anti-plague campaign measures and organised a communal kitchen at his own house. He was at the forefront organizing protective measures and relief in the influenza epidemic from 1917 onwards.

Singaravelu became active in the national movement of the country. After the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and Gandhiji's call for a national movement, he became the leader of the volunteer corps in Madras city and led processions in many parts of Madras city with volunteers singing national songs and shouting anti-imperialist slogans.

He became a member of the All-India Congress Committee at that time and one of the most important leaders of Congress in Tamil Nadu, and he attended the Gaya session of the Congress as a delegate in 1922.

By this time, Singaravelu had become a great admirer and follower of Marxism, the victorious October socialist revolution, and the great Lenin. He met S.A. Dange in a Congress session held in Gaya in December 1922 and had contact with him. M.N. Roy was in correspondence with him. Abani Mukherjee is said to have come to Madras twice and established contact with him on behalf of the Communist International.

Singaravelu formed the Hindustan Labour Kisan Party in 1923 and held the first May Day meeting in India at Madras City. He published "Labour Kisan Gazette", a fortnightly in English and "THOZHILALAN" (worker) in Tamil.

He was an accused in the "Kanpur Bolshevik Conspiracy Case" and was arrested in 1924. The case against him could not proceed since he was seriously ill for five months, and it was dropped.

Singaravelu presided over the first Communist Conference held in Kanpur in 1925.

Being the councilor of Madras Corporation from 1925, he moved the corporation to present an address to the communist leader Sakalatwala, MP, when he visited Madras in 1927.

The Labour Kisan Party under the leadership of Singaravelu, in January 1924, mourned the death of Lenin by flying the red flag half-mast at its premises. In an article in the Labour Kisan Gazette, tributes were paid to Lenin.

In the Gaya session of Congress in Dec. 1922, the Indian National Congress appointed Singaravelu as one of the six members who were to assist the A.I.T.U.C., since he was taking active interest and fighting for the cause of workers. From 1922 onwards, Singaravelu participated in the struggles of workers at B&C mills in Madras and was in the forefront of organising the workers and their unions. From 1926 onwards he directly and actively participated in working-class struggles. He was active in the Kharagpur Bengal Nagpur railway strike in 1927 and the loco-work shop strike in East India Railway. He organised the South Indian Railway workers and led their historic strike in 1928. Police foisted a conspiracy case on Singaravelu with other leaders of the South Indian Railway Workers' Union, and he was sentenced to 10 years of rigorous imprisonment.

In August 1927, Singaravelu organised a protest meeting against the death sentence passed on Sacco & Vanzetti in the trumped-up case against them in USA. In 1928 when Simon Commission visited Madras, Singaravelu held a Black flag demonstration. He tied an entire black saree over the terrace of his house when Simon Commission passed along the beach, a huge black cloth fluttering over the terrace of his house.

It is particularly noteworthy that in 1922, when the employers of B&C mills created a certain amount of division in the working-class ranks in the long-drawn-out B&C struggle, Singaravelu at once properly reacted, emphasized the unity among workers as a source of

strength and pointed out how “the employers created division between caste Hindus and Adi-Dravidas to break up the strike and weaken the working class” and warned workers against such divisions on the lines of caste, of their class-unity.

Singaravelu came out of jail in August 1930. He was already 70 years old. About this time, the self-respect movement started by E.V. Ramaswami had attracted a large number of workers to the movement. E.V.R was a friend of Singaravelu who actively supported the South India railway workers strike of 1928 and other workers’ struggles led by Singaravelu. Singaravelu played a very important role in opening the eyes of several self-respect workers to a wider horizon and of a new path towards a new order in which the toiling people’s liberation will guarantee the abolition of all social injustices and establish a society without any horrors of caste or social domination, ensuring equity for all.

By writing articles in ‘KUDI ARASU’ and addressing conferences held by different units of self-respect movement, Singaravelu explained basic Marxian concepts, putting forward the example of Russia where a successful socialist revolution was able to overcome the hold of religion, superstition, and overcome racial prejudices. He also put forward the importance of a political revolution that can only be carried out by the vanguard of the working-class movement. More progressive younger elements of the self-respect movement, who were nurtured by the exposition of socialist doctrines by Singaravelu in the press and platform of the self-respect movement, had finally organised themselves as the self-respect Samadharma Party. This is a very important contribution he made to the development of the Communist movement in South India. Singaravelu emphatically put across the idea that their movement of social reform and fight against religion, caste, untouchability, and other evils of the present society cannot really achieve its purpose without understanding the October Revolution and the Soviet Union. He also warned that as long as political power remains in the hands of capitalists who believe in individual property, the poverty of the masses cannot be removed, and emphasized that as long as individual property remains, it is clear that socialism cannot be established.

Singaravelu, who attended Gaya Congress in 1922 at the age of 60, had openly proclaimed himself a communist when younger spirits quailed in terror at the prospect of government prosecution and ostracization from the ‘respectable’ nationalism.

Singaravelu, in his wide-ranging address at the First Indian Communist Conference at Kanpur in December 1925, referred to the principles of communism and the need for every communist in India to understand the doctrines of Karl Marx. In his concluding address, Singaravelu specifically warned against caste and religious differences and hoped that the work of the communists in India would help to implement the communist principles and programme and ensure a prosperous future for all.

Singaravelu was a very close friend of the great Tamil poet Subramanya Bharati, who was one of the earliest persons who applauded the Russian Revolution and stood steadfastly in defence of the leaders of the revolution and the new society that was built there.

The eminent communist leader P. Sundarayya was one of the disciples of Singaravelu, among many others.

When M.N. Roy, who had broken away from the Communist International founded by Lenin in 1919, returned to India and visited Madras in 1936, discussed with Singaravelu to convert him to his (M.N. Roy) view point and get support for the new party he was trying to organise, Singaravelu was firm in his adherence to the Communist International, to the fundamentals of Marxism. His loyalty to the communist party did not give a quarter to Roy's wrong ideas.

Singaravelu was a voracious reader and a prolific writer. He had with him a large collection of rare and valuable books; his library consisted of about 10,000 books. He bequeathed his valuable library to the Communist Party of India in Tamil Nadu. He was also a great linguist. He knew Tamil, English, Hindi, Urdu, German, and French.

Singaravelu contributed articles to 'Janasakti', Organ of CP, Tamil Nadu, in Tamil language. He was a valiant and brave fighter in the cause of communism.

Singaravelu died on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1946. Communist Party leaders and workers in red uniform stood by the side of this great leader and paid Red Salute!

Singaravelu's contribution to the development of communist ideas in the national movement and the influence of the communist way of thinking on fellow workers and leaders in the T.U. movement are remarkable. His contribution was indeed immense.

Singaravelu was the pioneer, the path layer of the communist movement in South India.

His life-long activities as a communist are exemplary to sincere communists who aspire to endeavor and make the revolution in India successful!

'Class Struggle' pays homage to Com. Singaravelu with the utmost respect on his 78<sup>th</sup> death anniversary.

Red Salutes to Comrade Singaravelu!