

Danger stalks Tamil Nadu's Dalit leaders

Contributed by PC Vinoj Kumar
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Politics is a hazardous business. Dr K Krishnasamy, the founder leader of the Puthiya Thamizhagam (PT), a party fighting for Dalit rights, found that out the hard way on 26 July 2004. The day he was in Tirunelveli to attend hearing on a case in connection with the murder of a tea estate supervisor in 1997

After the court proceedings, Krishnasamy left without his security cover for lunch. It might have cost him his life. In a daring ambush, gangsters hurled four bombs on his Toyota Qualis on the Tirunelveli-Tuticorin highway. Krishnasamy, the party's organising secretary Velusamy and driver N Selvaraj escaped with injuries. "It was a providential escape," says a party leader, adding, "Normally our boys accompany our leader in at least five to six vehicles whenever he goes out. But that day nobody went with him." Splinters hit Krishnasamy, injuring him near the right eye. The police were quick to act and arrested about eight people in connection with the incident. But as a party leader said, "They are just hired gangsters. What's the use of arresting them? The police should arrest those who planned the attack." Although both Krishnasamy and Thol Thirumavalavan of the Dalit Panthers of India have been attacked by mobs before, this is the first time one of them has come under a bomb attack. "It is with great difficulty that we even hoist our party flags in villages. On many occasions the upper caste people have stoned my vehicle," says Thirumavalavan. Once, at a public meeting, stones were pelted on him. Thirumavalavan claims he does not depend on the police for protection, the attacks notwithstanding. "I have never asked for police protection. Nor will I seek in the future. The police treat Dalit leaders without respect. I declare in my public meetings also, if caste fanatics want to kill me, let them," he says. Traditionally, Dalits come under attack from Vanniyars in northern districts and Thevars in southern districts. But with the emergence of Thirumavalavan and Krishnasamy as strong political factors in the state, the Dalits have also started retaliating. M Punitha Pandian, the editor of Dalit Murasu, says, "The government claims untouchability is on the wane, citing decreasing number of cases under the Protection of Civil Rights and SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. But the truth is that the police refuse to register cases." He adds that leaders like Thirumavalavan and Krishnasamy are singled out for attacks, as they are more assertive and aggressive in their demands unlike their Dalit counterparts in the DMK, AIADMK, Congress and the Left. But the attacks have only added to the PT leader's resolve. "I will not be cowed down by these attacks. I will work harder for the uplift of Dalits," Krishnasamy says from his hospital bed in Coimbatore.