

Continuing Conflict

T G Jacob

The most obvious result of the latest military offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and Tamil people by the Colombo government is that a deeply political question of national self-determination of the Tamils in Sri Lanka has been temporarily converted into a humanitarian one. No doubt there are serious humanitarian angles involved in the present offensive but it will be short sighted if anyone reduces it to those angles alone. The Tamil question in Sri Lanka was and very much remains a serious political issue in South Asia and its implications are by no means limited to the geo- political boundaries of the island nation but can have wide ranging ramifications in the subcontinent. The vanquishing of the military capability of the Tigers by the clearly superior military power of the Sri Lankan state with the active connivance of external forces does not mean the vanishing of the Tamil national question which has got a very long history and is very much rooted in well entrenched objective factors which are multidimensional in nature.

It was during the heydays of the Tamil empire builders of ancient days that the outward thrust from the Tamil land of the Indian subcontinent occurred and often this took the form of military expeditions through sea and the significant migration and settlements in parts of Sri Lanka occurred in this manner. What it means is that the Tamil question in Sri Lanka is almost a millennium old. It was much later, during the 19th century when the British colonialists opened up tea plantations in Sri Lanka, that the colonial planters transported large numbers of indentured laborers to work as semi-slave workers in the plantations. These people and their descendents came to be known as Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka and they predominantly belong to the Dalit communities of Tamil Nadu. The issues concerning these people revolved on the question of citizenship and are distinct from the historical question of the Sri Lankan Tamils which clearly belong to the realm of nationality question. There is little scope for confusing between these two peoples who are both of Tamil origin. In fact the citizenship issue of the Indian Tamils had been resolved to a large extent by the Indian and Sri Lankan governments agreeing to a pact during the Sirimavo period to share the 'burden' of these people on a 50:50 basis.

The rationale for demanding a separate Eelam is not at all complicated. When the erstwhile Ceylon gained freedom from colonialism in 1948 it was clear to the Tamils that they constitute only a minority and as such will never be able to control their own destiny in a unitary Sri Lanka because of the brute majority of the Sinhalese and soon after gaining freedom this fact was borne out in practice. Hence, the demands for constitutional provisions to safeguard the interests of the minority Tamils were put forth by the moderate sections immediately after the gaining of political freedom. But what actually happened in Sri Lankan politics was the undisguised emergence of diehard Sinhala chauvinism as a means to gain dominance in power politics by ruthless power brokers whose corrupt credentials were exposed by the JVP uprising against all-round corruption and its bloody suppression during the early 1970s. During the 1970s and 1980s this ruthless

play of power politics gained all-round ascendancy in Sri Lankan politics and society. Tamil baiting became a convenient tool for the corrupt Sinhala power brokers to remain or capture political power in Colombo. The Tamils were pointed out as the 'other' for all the ills of the society and accordingly horrendous riots were engineered against them as means of crisis management. Large numbers of Tamils in southern Sri Lanka were forced to flee, especially from the capital city. Simultaneously, attempts were made to derecognize Tamil as one of the national languages and impose the majority language as the one and only language for the whole country. This was rightfully taken by the Tamils as efforts to institutionalize them as second class citizens. The language question was and remains the most important catalyst which precipitates the separatism of the Tamil people. Let us not forget that in spite of the bonds of religion it was the language question that resulted in the struggle for Bangladesh way back in the early 1970s.

What the Sinhala government is now trying to do to the Tamil people is nothing new. Exactly the same thing was done in Vietnam by the US army. At that time it went under the name of *hamletisation*. Nearer home Salwa Judum under the instruction of the government is executing a similar program in Chattisgarh. It was the policy of herding the people to concentration camps so that the guerillas will be isolated. As a preparation for physical liquidation the Nazis had done the same thing to the Jews in Poland and other countries in Europe. The US policy in Vietnam, though it heaped horrendous suffering on the people, became an abject failure because the guerillas could successfully infiltrate the concentration camps and wreck them from within. There is no reason to suppose that the Sri Lankan government will fare any better in the case of the Tamils. The offensive has clearly taken the form of genocide and can rightly be called a crime against humanity but this does not mean that the struggle for national self-determination of the Tamils is anywhere near its end. On the other hand, it is more possible that newer methods of struggle will emerge incorporating the lessons from the past. The Colombo government is perpetrating manifestly illegal means like cluster bombs and chemical weapons against Tamil civilians while at the same time silencing democratic opinions among the Sinhalese, minority communities like Muslims and especially journalists who dare to expose the corruption and human rights violations of the government. Sri Lanka has one of the most gruesome track records in modern history for eliminating journalists who stick to the truth, whether they are Sinhalese or Tamil. The cluster bombs and chemical weapons being now used with impunity on totally helpless and starving civilians are clearly supplied from outside the country. The suppliers can be as varied as India, China, Pakistan or Israel.

The Sri Lankan economy is in doldrums since quite some time. The state of civil war existing for many years has driven out one of the main income channels—international tourism—which in any case was nothing but sex tourism and drugs. The tea economy is facing severe crisis and mindless globalization has played havoc with the entire economy. Since the open door economic policy was adopted in 1978 many of the successfully running public enterprises have been sold out to Sri Lankan and international predators, unemployment has increased while the heavy militarization for sustained war efforts has entailed enormous

expenditures for the government. Since the current global recession started the migration to West Asia has slowed down resulting in further unemployment. The government is crucially dependent on aids and loans even for its day-to-day functioning. In short, the economy is bankrupt. All-round corruption for which the Sinhala politicians are notorious and gross economic mismanagement are probably the main reason behind this bankruptcy. In the past, popular uprisings had broken out against this corruption. Any humanitarian aid from donor agencies has to go through the government which is often diverted for other purposes and exceptions are dealt with by hit men. The whole political system is a complex web of hit men, ceaseless military actions, and politicians who are well trained in self aggrandizement. This system has proved itself unsustainable and the Tamil people are being targeted as whipping boys. Now the guns in the hands of the looters are turned against the Tamils and democratic minded fearless individuals. Tomorrow the war will possibly be against so-called own people when they rise up against the gross mismanagement that is raging in Sri Lanka. It is a coterie which includes the three brothers of the president that is ruling Sri Lanka and this coterie always created scapegoats for its misrule. A civil war itself is bread and butter to them. It is an absolutely inhuman regime thriving on sleaze and pimping.

It is whimsical to assume that New Delhi will intervene in any forceful manner to save the situation in Sri Lanka. Once earlier, it had burned itself very badly when the Indian Peace Keeping Force, which was also called Indian People's Killing Force, was deployed in large numbers in Sri Lanka for the ostensible reason of ending the crisis. Not only the then Indian prime minister was publicly beaten up in Colombo but he was subsequently assassinated on Indian soil itself by an LTTE suicide bomber. The casualty rate of the Indian army at that time in Sri Lanka was the highest it had experienced in any war and in the face of combined opposition from the Sinhalese as well as Tamils it had to stage a humiliating retreat. This lesson is not liable to be forgotten that easily. At that time the idea behind this deployment was nothing but Indian expansionism which badly misfired. Presently the scope for any such intervention is far more remote though underhand manipulations in support of the Sri Lankan government are very much there. This expansionist coyness failed not only in Sri Lanka but also in Nepal and Bangladesh. Moreover, currently there are many potential players in the Sri Lankan arena and it will be naive to assume that countries like China will remain a mute witness to any Indian thrust there. Past history unmistakably proves that Indian ruling class can never be a dependable ally to any of its neighbors. The initial support given by New Delhi to Tamil militant groups in terms of material support and training was very soon exposed as manipulations to put in place a stranglehold over the island nation.

Those who are clamoring for Indian intervention to save the Tamils in Sri Lanka are living in a fool's paradise on another very important count too. It is the question of Tamil nationalism in India itself. Tamil language remains a potent issue and the struggle in Tamil Nadu against the attempts to impose Hindi is not that old a history. The reaction to the ongoing genocide in Sri Lanka in Tamil Nadu is strident and spreading. The political pundits in Delhi know it too well that an independent Eelam, or even an Eelam with justifiable autonomy within

Sri Lanka, will act against the interests of a united India by giving a fillip to Tamil nationalism within India. That the present unity of the country is fragile and there is strong objective basis for genuine federation is amply clear from the various developments in the post-47 Indian polity starting with the struggle for linguistic reorganization of States, the bloody struggle for Khalistan, insurgency in the North East, emergence and mushrooming of regional political parties, increasing demand for smaller States and civil war situation in Jammu & Kashmir. Under the given conditions even the possibility of the emergence of Tamil nationalism in India in an articulated form can prove nightmarish for the all-India ruling classes and their unified repressive market structure. What Sardar Patel and Nehru said when the demands for linguistic reorganization were raised in the immediate post-47 period is still valid. What they said was that any linguistic reorganization will weaken the centre and the need of the hour is to build up an Indian nation which did clearly not exist at that time. In spite of the enormous strengthening of the all-India ruling classes in the decades after 1947 the fulfilment of a united nation is yet to be fructified. The growth of the economic clout of the Indian ruling classes itself has created powerful contradictions which are not easy to resolve. No amount of black laws and sloganeering can replace this fragility which is politically evident in major parts of the country.

There is no denying the fact that what is happening in Sri Lanka is stirring up strong passions in Tamil Nadu and the Tamil Diasporas all over the world. It has become an electoral issue in Tamil Nadu, but the self-immolations that happened here point at sentiments beyond any elections. The possibility of the creation of Tamil international brigades to fight for Eelam cannot be ruled out. LTTE's international connections are well known and the overwhelming suppression of the Tigers within Sri Lanka is bound to escalate the Tamil question to these international connections in a more active manner. Already there is noticeable ferment among the Tamils in Malaysia and suppression of Tamils has commenced there too. On a lower intensity the issue in Malaysia which is discrimination is similar to the one in Sri Lanka though there is a certain amount of dissimilarity in their historical lineage. Sri Lankan Tamil refugees are there all over Europe and their number in India is growing. All these factors make the situation even more highly volatile which in all possibility will create new polarizations. The short term military defeat of LTTE cannot at all prevent the Tamil issue from becoming an international one and change to guerilla war within the island. That is why the Sri Lankan political leadership is talking of 'protected' villages. Actually this is exactly what is happening now. The Sri Lankan government through all its barbarity and outrageous double talk is immensely facilitating this process.

The articulation of the strong wave of sympathy and solidarity towards the persecuted Tamil people of Sri Lanka in Tamil Nadu has the serious potential of fanning Tamil nationalism in India. Whether it happens or not will most certainly depend on the type of political leadership that emerges on this count. As such, a sharply defined political spearhead is not visible and many of the vocal advocates of Tamil rights are liable to use the issue for their own short run political ends. The issue gaining importance as an electoral plank here can be taken as an index of this trend. At the same time it is

undeniable that there is a subterranean undercurrent of Tamil nationalism holding the view that Tamils are a distinct nation which is currently in the political boundaries of India. By direct implication this view also means that it need not be always so. The outbreak of widespread solidarity with Sri Lankan Tamils' issue in Tamil Nadu is a clear manifestation of this undercurrent just as the militant language struggle way back in the 1960s was a manifestation of the same phenomenon. All these are essentially rooted in the deeply political feeling of separateness with its strong roots in history and which can have several outlets determined by the developing objective reasons. The Sri Lankan Tamil issue has become one such outlet in Tamil Nadu in spite of the rampant political opportunism pervading this State.