

DEFEATED PAST, UNCERTAIN FUTURE

'Tamil Eelam' not a Dead Issue

T G Jacob

The military defeat of the Tamil guerrilla army in what is called Eelam War-IV and the herding of large numbers of Tamil people in concentration camps to prevent any renewed guerrilla activity has given rise to a general belief all over the world that the long civil war for a separate country is once and for all decimated decisively. The settling of chauvinistic sections of the Sinhalese people in the traditional Tamil areas is aimed at permanently changing the demographic composition of these areas; it is a strategic step towards obliterating the Tamil issue which is actually centuries old. What people are witnessing now is the implementation of a fascist programme as the solution to deep rooted ethnic, national issues. Like any fascist programme the ultimate success of this specific one is also extremely doubtful in the long run.

A defeat of the sort that happened in Sri Lanka is no doubt a traumatic experience for the Tamil people concerned. Their defeats of this nature are not at all improbable, justice of the cause by itself has never guaranteed success. In any political fight for national liberation success also crucially depends on the correctness of the strategy and tactics of the fight, though justice of the cause is a precondition. The histories of liberation struggles unambiguously suggest that only a combination of the three can result in success. This is by no means a pedantic assertion, it is a historic lesson. It is also a historic truth that defeats are never absolute. On the other hand, there is any number of examples in world history of defeats being turned into victories. The histories of the national liberation struggles of China, Vietnam and Cuba are classic illustrations of this truism.

There is little doubt that the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Diaspora of Sri Lankan Tamils and their well wishers across the world will be seriously introspecting on what led to the latest defeat and how to overcome the possibility of such defeats in the future. Any such introspection is bound to be painful, but it is of utmost necessity. 'This is especially so in the present context when almost the entire world, as represented by the governments, in demonising the Tamil fighters as 'terrorists' distinct from the political status of being fighters for national liberation. Politically, the label of terrorists can be quite damaging to the actual cause. The Sinhala chauvinist government in Colombo could take maximum- advantage of this labelling as is clearly shown by the impressive line-up of support by powerful governments in the fight against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. No less than seven governments ranging from India, China, Israel and the USA actively aided the Sinhalese government to crush the Tamil guerrillas. The political justification advanced was that it was a fight against 'terrorism'. Today everybody knows that justifications can be manufactured because illustrations of such manufacturing are galore in the contemporary world.

The misinformation concerning the 'Tamil issue in Lanka is such that even countries like Cuba and Venezuela, along with other ALBA countries in South America endorsed these manufactured justifications. The position of a country like China is understandable because she is very clearly driven by narrow national chauvinistic capitalist/imperialist interests. But what can be the possible reasons for countries like Cuba and Venezuela, who are hailed by sections of the progressive world as harbingers of 'twenty-first century socialism,' to endorse the genocidal actions of an out-rightly anti-people regime? Of course, ignorance of the reality is no excuse in this age of information. That leaves perspective lacunae on important questions concerning national liberation of oppressed peoples as a possible valid reason. Compulsions of international diplomacy due to the nature of economic relations with China can also be an important reason. In this case, the 'model' of 'twenty-first century socialism' comes in for serious questioning.

It may be naive to look at the question of the Tamil nation in Sri Lanka divorced from the global political and economic background. Most basically, people in third world countries are witnessing a period of aggressive imperialist globalisation propelled by the systemic crisis of global capital, which is showing no signs of resolution. This systemic crisis is one of the production and reproduction of capital, the character of which has undergone significant changes since the Second World War. The crisis of global capital has assumed a near permanent character having similarities as well as dissimilarities to the inter World Wars period. Any national liberation struggle has to take into account this crucial characteristic of the contemporary world.

Looking back at the recent past of the Tamil nation question in Sri Lanka, rather at the period from 1948 onwards, there is no doubt that the question is a national question, and on this broad level the fight for sovereignty is very much a national liberation struggle. The longer history of the evolution of the Tamil national question with its historical vicissitudes is dealt within the text of the book itself, something that is of great value to serious students of the national question, particularly the Tamil question.

There are two denominations of Tamils in Sri Lanka: the Sri Lankan Tamils and the so-called Indian Tamils (also called Up-Country or Hill Tamils). Both these sections have Tamil as their mother tongue, but they are divided among themselves on many other counts. The fight for the Tamil nation was predominantly confined to the Sri Lankan Tamils whose history on the island is very ancient, while the history of the section of people called Indian Tamils in the island is only five to six generations old. This is not the only dividing point though it is a serious one. The Indian Tamils are the descendants of the indentured workers taken by the British colonial government to work under sub-human conditions in the tea plantations opened up by the colonial planters in the central hilly region. They were the erstwhile untouchables from the Tamilland in mainland India. 'These Dalit workers played a very significant role in the development of the plantation economy of the island, which means that their contribution to the economy as a whole is not at all negligible. In fact, their contribution is very important.

The colonial policy in Sri Lanka, like in any other colonies, was also based on the policy of divide and rule. The division between the majority population, the Sinhalese, and the Sri Lankan Tamils was incessantly sought to be exploited by the colonialists to serve their goal of domination over the entire island. And they were successful to a large extent in the sense that both the Tamil and Sinhala leaderships failed to overcome this serious social division. Moreover, the indentured labour, by no means a small number, could be kept isolated both from the Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils. Towards the fag end of colonialism organisations could develop among this section but there was no unity between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Indian Tamils. This lack of unity had much to do with the widely prevalent caste system under which the upper castes among the Sri Lankan Tamils looked down upon the Tamil Dalit plantation workers and kept them at a distance. After political independence they were rendered a stateless people and they continued to be so for quite some time. The political leaderships of both the Sri Lankan Tamils and the majoritarian Sinhalese vehemently opposed the granting of equal citizenship rights to these millions. Their position was that these Tamils are Indians and they should go back to India. Some of the first anti-Tamil riots were against these people. Except for some inconsequential attempts by the Fourth International affiliated Marxists there were no serious attempts from any side to integrate these people into the political process as active agents.

The point at issue here is that there were no attempts from the side of the Sri Lankan Tamils to unite with their working class brethren in the plantations, actually and potentially a crucial component of the Sri Lankan economy. From the point of view of a genuine national liberation movement of Tamils this was a strategic mistake. It is sheer irony that, even after it became absolutely obvious that Sinhalese chauvinism had been established as the reactionary ruling ideology, there were no attempts to rectify this grievous error. Adding to this distortion of the national struggle of the Tamils there was also the backward looking approach to other minorities like the Muslims, mainly of Indian origin, who at one point of time were forcibly uprooted by the Tamil militants from their habitats in the north and east of the island. A national struggle ought to forge the broadest possible front; isolationist programmes can be suicidal.

The Sri Lankan government had proved their bloodthirsty character even as early as 1971 when a widespread rural youth and working class rebellion occurred there. This rebellion was crushed through an annihilation campaign with the active aid of China, India, Pakistan, the US and a number of European countries. It was the Sinhalese youth and working class who were the target of this bloody extermination campaign and the toll of this and the subsequent one in 1988–89 was no less than what is recorded in the anti-Tamil riots and wars. There is an important lesson from this part of Sri Lankan history: Dubbing all the Sinhalese as reactionaries and chauvinists is ahistorical; it closes broader and multiple possibilities of destabilising the enemy. A national liberation struggle simply cannot afford such luxuries. All the possible utilisations of all the contradictions enmeshing the enemy ought to be aimed at, but this can happen only if there is comprehensive programmatic clarity on the issue at hand. Of course, an independent Tamil nation is recognised as the principal slogan, but such a slogan cannot and could not hold on in a vacuum divorced from the other major contradictions in the bigger collective.

Sri Lanka is a neo-colonial entity and in South Asia it is a country with enormous economic and military strategic importance. A very significant part of global shipping is facilitated by this island, an important reason why the big powers of the world would never willingly let it go from their clutches. The emerging power of Asia—China—is digging in there in a big way and the other big boss of the region, India, would certainly not like to be left in the lurch. These two powers of Asia are competitively involved in Lanka apart from other global players. For India, there is an important additional internal compulsion to prevent the emergence of any independent or even autonomous Tamil entity in Lanka. The Tamil national question in India is certain to become live, if there is an independent Tamil nation in Lanka. After all, the geographical distance is only a few kilometres and the historical and contemporary linkages are strong. Tamil 'separatism' may be dormant in India now, but it is not necessary that it will always remain so. The history of Indian involvement in Sri Lanka is self-revealing as a series of expansionist manoeuvres.

Initially, Delhi tried to convert the Tamil militant groups into its monkey's paws by organising military training for them in Tamil Nadu. There is nothing very imaginative or innovative in this 'love' for the suffering Tamils in Lanka. It was only a repeat performance of what India tried in East Bengal. The idea was clearly to heavily infiltrate and control the Tamil militant groups and subsequently consolidate strategic control over the northern and eastern parts of the island. This expansionist scheme was seen through by the politically more advanced militants, who dispensed with Indian benevolence and launched guerrilla war on their own. It was when the initial scheme suffered such a setback that India found a way into the island by manipulating an invitation from the Colombo government to militarily aid the suppression of Tamil guerrillas and pacify the Tamil dominated areas.

The LTTE fought the more than hundred thousand strong Indian army and did not give up an inch. The humiliating withdrawal of the Indian army was ably facilitated also by the widespread protests by the Sinhalese people, who also saw through the Indian game plan. The atrocities committed by the Indian army in Lanka were no less, if not worse, than those committed by the Sinhalese army and it was these that resulted in the assassination of the Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in Tamil Nadu by LTTE guerrillas.

The Indian adventurism was a fiasco on all counts. India was the first country to outlaw the Tamil militants as 'terrorists,' a reaction partly to hide its misadventure and save face. Not only did India outlaw the Tigers, but it viciously went on a global campaign to get them outlawed by other countries. Subsequently, India became a key partner in the war against the Tamils. If anyone expects India to become the 'saviour' of Tamils in Lanka it is ridiculous because her stake in not allowing a separate Tamil nation on the island is directly political and hence much more serious. A clear understanding of this situation is vital for the reorganisation of the movement for a Tamil nation. The Diaspora and their well wishers can lose sight of this only at the peril of the fundamental cause itself.

Various explanations are currently being offered to explain the total defeat of the LTTE armed forces. Most of them hold the overwhelming superiority of the state forces to be responsible for the inevitability of

the outcome. But this cannot be accepted even as a military explanation. The fact that the LTTE could survive the earlier military onslaughts and establish an alternative government in a limited area shows that the defeat cannot be fully explained by the superiority of the state forces. The transition from mobile guerrilla war to positional war was untenable as is shown by the nature of the final stage of the war. The lessons of the guerrilla war waged under the leadership of Mao and the Vietnamese experience seem to have been lost on the leadership of the LTTE. It was a classic case of encirclement and extermination from which the guerrillas could not break out and shift the theatre of war to different, newer areas. In such a scenario the relationship between the people and the combatants is of paramount importance. What was the character of the relations between the guerrillas and the people is something that has to be freshly looked into. Experience on the global level proves all too clearly that one-sided emphasis on military capability or attaining military capability can easily slide into militarism, which will not be able to sustain for a length of time.

Analysing a civil war is a very complex task and it is going to take much more time and effort to fully unravel what has recently happened and is happening in Sri Lanka. The present isolation of the Tamils in Sri Lanka is on a global scale and it is ideological as well as political. □□□

(This is a slightly shortened version of the preface to the forthcoming book, *Tamil Nation in Sri Lanka* by Ron Ridenour)