

South Asia

Sri Lanka and Nepal : A Tale of Two Conflicts

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Both Sri Lanka and Nepal have faced long periods of insurgency, but the armed conflicts concerned different issues and the degree of success in resolving them differs vastly. They, nevertheless, have lessons for each other. Important social and political differences between the two tower over obvious geographical factors, despite the importance of the geographic location of each to its course of social and political development. Sri Lanka's strategic location in the Indian Ocean caused it to be subject to one of the longest, (if not the longest) uninterrupted colonial rules, by three successive colonial masters, lasting over four centuries. Landlocked Nepal, although subject to British Colonial domination from the 19th Century, was only a protectorate, declared independent in 1923 by treaty with Britain.

Modernisation of the Sri Lankan polity started in the late 19th Century under colonial rule, much after the Kandyan Kingdom, the last feudal monarchy, ended early that century. But vestiges of feudalism like the caste system and modes of agricultural production remained untouched by colonialism, which also created an elite class of landed gentry with feudal links. Nepal was slower to modernise; and the Indian successors to the British Raj, helped to restore the Shah dynasty in 1951 and dominated Nepal, whose geography made its trade and hence economy dependent on India.

Sri Lanka had universal suffrage in 1931, three years after Britain, an influential left party soon after, and a mature political party system when the British left in 1948. But, failure to address the national question made chauvinism and narrow nationalism emerge as major forces, and only the left was truly national in approach. Nepal had its first general elections in 1959, but royal interference ensured that, despite popular protests leading to restoration of democratic elections to parliament, the monarch prevailed and elected governments were dismissed at will. Thus democracy itself became a central political issue.

The Sri Lankan national question was deliberately aggravated by Sinhala chauvinists to degenerate into war by 1983. Despite heavy blows to the economy by a quarter century of war and untold suffering of the people, especially in war-affected regions, the dominant players lack the will to resolve the national question. Nepal, besides its complex national question, faced oppression by class, ethnicity, religion, caste and gender, certainly more severe than in Sri Lanka at any stage. Attempts to resolve some of the grievances were frustrated by the monarchy aided by the ruling elite and reactionary political parties. The withdrawal of the Maoists from parliament in 1995 to launch its People's War in 1996 transformed Nepal's political landscape in one decade.

Sri Lankan parliamentary democracy though severely eroded is still formally intact. The weakening of the Sri Lankan left started in 1964 with its bulk losing its way in parliamentary politics. The left failed the working class and the minorities, since electoral alliances with bourgeois parties meant compromise and accommodation of policies pandering to base communal sentiments. Its decimation at the 1977 elections demoralised the working class; and the reactionary government that came to power in 1977 escalated the ethnic conflict, and used it as a smokescreen to negate the achievements of progressive and popular struggles led by the left, including democratic and fundamental rights, and to introduce a disastrous open economic policy. The Nepali left was, in

electoral terms, stronger than that in Sri Lanka , but it too indulged in parliamentary folly. The parliamentary left failed to learn from the royal subversion of its short-lived government in 1992, and the country paid the price.

The first and only successful armed struggle in Sri Lanka was the Marxist-Leninist mass campaign (1966-1970) against caste oppression in the North. Care for the safety of the masses ensured that the number of deaths was small. Since then, the adventurist insurgencies led by the chauvinistic Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna in 1971 and 1987-89 claimed nearly 100,000 lives, anti-Tamil violence several thousands, and the war of national oppression and internecine killings since 1983 well over 100,000. The war also displaced around a million internationally, besides up to 500,000 displaced internally. But there is little to show by way of progress on the national question, despite various political deals up to 1983, and efforts since 1983 to resolve the armed conflict, including the Indian intervention in 1987 and the Ceasefire Agreement of 2002, ritually abandoned early this year. In contrast, ten years of armed conflict in Nepal cost 13,000 lives, with the state's armed forces answerable for over 10,000; and a peace process, born of a crisis created for the parliamentary political parties by the monarch who assumed absolute power, made way for the securing and consolidation of important victories for the people and an end to the monarchy.

Escalation of national oppression, war and armed struggle in Sri Lanka , along with the weakness of the Sinhala left, let the initiative be with the Sinhala chauvinists, irrespective of party label, and the Tamil militants. With the genuine left in disarray and chauvinism dominating politics in the South, and democracy denied on the pretext of the armed conflict in the North-East, the national question remained over-simplified as a Sinhala-Tamil conflict to the neglect of all else. The war, now portrayed as war against terrorism, takes precedence over mounting economic problems and the denial of democratic, human and fundamental rights. All peace initiatives including the failed ceasefire came about under external pressure; and subject to interference by hegemonic powers. Negotiations did not progress beyond formal cessation of hostilities and a vague demarcation of domains of authority that allowed the two sides to conserve and rebuild. Where even humanitarian relief to the victims of war and tsunami has faced stiff chauvinist resistance, efforts to resolve the national question will certainly be sabotaged by disruptive forces within the country and without. As long as the present group of players dominate the scene, there is scant hope for any peace and even less for a solution to the national question; and foreign intervention will use pretexts of human rights and democracy to control the country rather than resolve the national question.

In Nepal, a mass struggle aimed at ending a dictatorial monarchy under a leadership with a working class perspective also dealt constructively with several contradictions, some hostile like that between landlords and agricultural labour, and others 'friendly' like those based on identity. But there can be no complaisance since vested interests will kindle ethnic, caste and religious conflict, as seen in the Terai region a year ago, and the opportunist 'left' joining hands with the right to undermine the people's democratic structures secured through mass struggle. Besides subversion in the form of foreign investment, 'development projects' and 'aid', the corrupting influence of the bourgeois parliamentary system on individuals is a potential danger from within. Yet, even if the new democratic structure anticipated by the Maoists fails to materialise, the politicisation and empowerment of the masses through struggle will act as an immune system to combat attempts to subvert democratic rights and restore oppression by class, gender, ethnicity, caste and religion.

Sri Lanka's hope could be embedded in its impending tragedy. The deterioration of the political situation will sooner than later make it necessary for the entire people to struggle for democratic and fundamental rights against a reactionary repressive regime backed by one hegemonic power or another. Given the record of narrow nationalism on all sides thus far, only a genuine left leadership can show the way out of the morass.

The lessons for Nepal can be from the experiences of the Sri Lankan left and the dangers of allowing issues of identity dominate over issues of class and class struggle. Such a risk can be averted only through the Maoists holding on to their revolutionary initiative.

P.S.

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