

Tamil Nationalists and Latin America

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(December 02, New Delhi, Sri Lanka Guardian) I fear that the attitude of supporters of the Tamil cause towards Latin America is rather subjective, and that their approach is still sentimental. I will come to that later in my response, but, before that, the Tamil nationalist, especially pro-LTTE, claims need to be studied with care.

Firstly, accepting the right of Tamils in Sri Lanka to self-determination is correct. But the national question is far more complex than supporters of the Tamil cause in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere in India are made to understand. I have elaborated on this in my long essay which Radical Notes published as a book. Secession is still not the answer and the call for secession in 1976 was thoroughly ill-considered.

Secondly, the history of Tamils in Sri Lanka is being willfully distorted. A most objective version of ancient history exists in the recent work of Dr K Indrapala, a Tamil, now in Australia. The point that comes out is that there is evidence of Tamil settlements in the island much earlier than acknowledged in the past. But that does not mean that the present-day Tamils are their descendants. The Jaffna Kingdom on which Tamil nationalists lay their claim to Tamil statehood is something of the Second Millennium A.D. which ceased to be nearly 5 centuries ago. There were, however, Tamil chieftains and despotic rulers in the Vanni who survived until the British moved in early in the 19th Century. Part of the Vanni was under the 'Sinhalese' Kandyan Kingdom.

The Sinhalese have had a longer history in terms of kingdoms ruled by 'Sinhalese'. (Not all rulers were really Sinhalese. At least one was from Kalinga. Several were Tamils or Telugus). But what does all of this prove? Not a lot.

The reality is that in the course of modern history, two Sinhala-speaking polities that had a separate existence for 450 years merged into one to serve certain class interests. Tamil-speaking polities ended up as three nationalities with distinctions in many ways and with problems for which Eelam was not an answer. The attitude of the Tamil elite in early 1900s alienated the fisher folk of the west coast of the island and let them accept a Sinhala identity. In course of time the Tamil identity of the Colombo Chetties and the Paravar communities was lost. The main reason for these was that the Tamil leadership (of Jaffna mainly to which the Vanni and the East got added much later) was dominated by the Vellala Saivaites (equivalent of the Pillai/Mudaliyar etc. of Tamil Nadu, Nayar/Pillai/Menon of Kerala, Patels of Gujarat etc.)

To talk of a Tamil nation comprising 25% of the population is incorrect. The Tamil nationalists nominally represent about 10%, but they truly represent the interests of a fraction of it. When the armed conflict escalated in the 1980s, the elite fled and it was the oppressed that bore the brunt of intensifying chauvinist oppression and war. The elite are abroad, living in comfort, and want to prolong the conflict to pursue their pet project of 'Tamil Eelam'. The vast majority of the Tamil Diaspora has been misled by a few nationalists (pro-LTTE and now the vociferous pro-government groups). What I like to stress is that history has been successfully distorted on all sides to serve narrow interests and to divide the people.

Thirdly, the LTTE was on the one hand the only remaining armed resistance to state oppression. But

on the other they systematically failed the people. Their dominance of Tamil politics came about mainly by brutal repression of all opposition, rivals and potential rivals. That continued until their ultimate fall. The genuine left still treated them with some deference for being the only defence that the Tamil people had against state repression; but the LTTE was undemocratic, acted to please imperialism (especially since antagonizing India), never believed in people's struggle, and relied on military victory led by their army. They recruited children by force especially as their fortunes faded. They let the rich get away by paying off while the poor had to send their children to join the LTTE ranks. All these are factors that contributed to their defeat. But that does not in any way justify any of the cruel and at times barbaric acts of the state.

Yet, failure to criticize the LTTE for its attacks on civilians (not just Sinhalese) has done a lot of harm. Rivals of the LTTE with Indian and Sri Lankan state patrons have been just as guilty. A section of the genuine left criticized the LTTE's faults while defending the struggle and denouncing state oppression.

Fourthly, leaving alone the anti-democratic and even terrorist acts against civilians, the LTTE and its supporters among the Diaspora have much to answer for the failure of the peace talks (although the government is the main culprit); its reliance on the US (which used the peace talks to get the better of India in Sri Lanka while undermining the LTTE in collaboration with the UNP leadership); and its failure to protect the people.

The LTTE cannot escape the charge that it led 30,000 to the slaughterhouse and 300,000 to what are open prison camps. That tragedy could have been averted had the LTTE let the people go after the fall of Kilinochchi in December 2008. If they did not drag along with them the 100,000 or so from the Kilinochchi District, the government forces could not have advanced fast without clearing the District, and that would have allowed the LTTE leadership to change their strategy. Also there would have been political issues that would have arisen preventing the government from taking people out of their homes. That was water under the bridge when the people were taken to Mullaitivu and compelled to live a life of misery, with the government curtailing if not blocking the supply of essentials. But what justification was there to forcibly prevent the people from leaving when they could not bear the agony anymore? I have heard from people who escaped before the fall of the LTTE about the anti-people methods used by the LTTE to keep the people with them?

Did they seriously think that they could reverse their military fortunes? Did they expect meaningful foreign intervention? If so, in what form? There is substantial circumstantial evidence that they were given false hopes by a section of the Tamil elite among the Diaspora about some form US/UN led intervention (to save the LTTE leadership even if not to save the Tamils). Many such questions are being carefully avoided by the Tamil nationalists.

Thus the blame lies with firstly the Government, secondly with the Tamil nationalists as a whole and the LTTE in particular, and thirdly the forces of foreign intervention (the US and India especially) for the tragedy of 2009.

To turn to Latin America

Objectively, Latin America is increasingly facing US-led threats (The Honduras coup and the Colombian bases are additions to an existing threat). Human rights have consistently been used by the West to undermine defiant states. The US, which uses one set of rules for the Palestinians, a different set of rules for the Kurds of Turkey, and a slightly different one for the Kurds of Iraq, also encourages secessionist forces in the wealthy parts of Bolivia and Venezuela). Latin America sees the issues in terms of a global reality that it faces.

The UNHRC resolution was a pre-emptive response to an anticipated resolution that the US, UK, Germany and Mexico (of all countries!) were planning. Why did Sri Lanka become an issue to them? It was to punish Sri Lanka, not for killing Tamils or denying Tamils their basic rights, but because the government was drifting out of US control. (Indo-US rivalry too has been a factor). USSR and China even during their socialist days had steered clear of UN intervention (and have hopefully learnt from their mistake of allowing meddling in Afghanistan and let the invasion of Iraq pass).

The basic guideline for countries confronting US imperialism is to do what is possible to prevent US meddling in any form. To imagine that a resolution denouncing the Sri Lankan government would have brought relief to the Tamils is fantasy.

Then there are subjective reasons, which cannot be ignored.

Leading Tamil nationalists of all shades have cared little for struggles for justice internationally. (Anton Balasingham, the LTTE 'theoretician' had even denounced the struggle in Kashmir as trouble making as he did the resistance in eastern India). The LTTE has not denounced the oppression of the Palestinians or US aggression anywhere, much in line with their political forebears in the Federal Party who denounced the Vietnam struggle as communist trouble making. The SLFP had an anti-imperialist past, but had been dodgy after the 1980s. Of late, the government has occasionally stood up for the Third World on important issues; the role of Dayan Jayatilleka (whose politics is not necessarily genuine) during his short spell as Sri Lanka's UN ambassador has made an impression in Latin America. I do not think that the Tamil nationalists have had a moral right to ask for support from any country outside the imperialist world and India whom they loyally served. The tragedy is that they have left the Tamil people badly isolated.

By isolating themselves from the left governments, the Indian, especially Tamil, friends of Latin America will achieve nothing. They should have sought to discuss the matter with some of the Latin American embassies before jumping to conclusions. Taking decisions one-sidedly without reference to their friends is not healthy practice. It will be the progressive forces of India who will lose most by such kneejerk action.

P.S.

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