

Sri Lanka

# For the right to self-determination of Ilankai Tamils

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**The Sri Lanka government is carrying out an undeclared war against the Tamil people. The government of Mahinda Rajapaksa has consistently breached the 2002 cease-fire agreement with the LTTE. The anti-war opposition has been put under extreme pressure. Tamil MP Nadaraja Raviraj was gunned down in Colombo on November 9 and other activists have received serious death threats. At the heart of this secret war is the issue of the historic right to self-determination for the Tamil people.**

The right of self determination of the Tamil speaking people is the foremost issue in modern Lankan society. Though it is related to the Tamil vs. Sinhala conflicts narrated in various chronicles, the present form arises out of an inability to construct a democratic, plural, civil society. Though Sri Lanka (the Sinhala equivalent of Ilankai) is considered a nation by the United Nations, Sri Lankan nationality is yet to be recognized by the masses here. People in Lanka consider themselves as Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burger, Veddha, etc. and rarely as Sri Lankans. In that sense it is a Society of Nationalities. As a Marxist, I consider nations are really built on a capitalist market economy. I refer to a community as a nationality if that community of people is in conscious struggle to be a nation but not yet matured fully as one.

The word nation is loosely used to represent any group of people with a common language. But such a definition is not useful in understanding problems of nationhood in modern society. The identities Sinhala and Tamil were used in Lanka for a long period of time stretching as far back as 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. But the entity represented by the term Tamil or Sinhala is very different at different times.

For example, Sinhala was used in the Anuradhapura period to represent a Vansa, a clan of people associated with a particular agriculture based on a special irrigation system. These people were considered to be of Aryan descent. Aryans were the nomadic people who invaded India around 2000 BC and overran Dravidian clan societies clustered around the Indus valley and elsewhere. It is widely believed that around 500 BC some Aryan people came to Lanka and overpowered the Dravidian society that existed there. Thus there were Vansa clashes in that early period of history. These Vansa clashes continued until the end of the Rajarata Civilization and the emergence of semi-feudal society in the wet zone. In this society divisions were based more on trade caste groups.

When we look at the Kandyan kingdom before the takeover by the British, we see that the word Sinhala is used to represent the ruling elite. The Radala-Mudali elite referred to themselves as the Sinhala. In this scenario not only the other caste groups in the Kandyan areas were left out of the Sinhala identity, but also the entire community in the low country who spoke Sinhala Language as their mother tongue. At this stage caste was more important than any other clan identity. The word jathiya, the Sinhala word used in general today to represent a nation, was used widely at that stage to represent caste. Even today if one asks a Kandyan villager about his jathiya he may assume that

as a reference to his caste. In any case at that time and until recently people in Lanka were more loyal to their caste group than any other form of community. Sinhala royalty always thought it is better to marry some one from Tamil royalty than to a lower caste person from Sinhala kingdom. This thinking was not confined to the royalty but common to almost all caste groups. Even today such thinking exists in spite of Sinhala vs. Tamil national clashes.

I explain all this in order to show that the Tamil or Sinhala nation as we know today did not exist in the past. Nation building is a relatively new phenomenon. It means that a community with the same language and tradition will unite to work democratically. This is the positive side of an emerging nation, its ability to break down caste and other parochial barriers to unite a community with equality and fraternity. In the recent past we saw the emergence of several nationalities in Lanka. Sinhala nationality emerged with the temperance movement under Anagarika Dharmapala. Parallel to this there were movements launched by Aarumuga Naawalar and Siddhi Lebbe. The Veddha community also asserted its identity under Thissahamy and others.

Thus when the British went away in 1948, Lanka remained a prison house of several nationalities. Power was concentrated in the hands of the English speaking elite that behaved like a separate nationality. A tiny community of less than one million fake Anglo-Saxons, who relished the chance to imitate Anglo-American upper classes, appropriated and held all economic, political and social powers in their hands.

Tamil upper classes consider themselves a part of this elite. In fact early leaders who collaborated with the then British rule were famous Tamils such as Sir Ponnambalam Ramanadan. It was in their interest to build a state power on the basis of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism. This policy was started by D.S.Senanayake and continued with vigour by the Bandaranaiques. They de-franchised Tamil plantation workers and made the majority of the working class state-less. A consistent campaign of discrimination was aimed at Tamil speaking people. While English remained the language of the rulers, Sinhala was made the sole official language to be used as a device for discrimination.

Sinhala Colonization schemes were established in Tamil areas to create communal disharmony and fool the Sinhala poor masses. So called media wise standardization was used to discriminate against Tamil students. All this pushed the Tamils in to protest and rebellion. As early as 1930, even the Tamil elite had to break away and put separate demands to the British Raj. Then they demanded 50/50 in the legislative assembly, meaning that Sinhala majority should get no more than 50% of seats. Later the Federal Party was formed with the demand for Autonomy for the North and the East.

In the 1950s, the Marxist movement led by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party fought against this fraud and stood for equality, democracy and socialism. The Communist Party in early 50s passed a resolution accepting the Right of self determination for the Tamils, but nothing was done to take this to the public. Tamils and other national minority groups showed much faith and expected fair-play from them.

Later, however, LSSP/CP leaders made a fundamental mistake and joined the capitalist government of Mrs Sirima Bandaranaike. Once in power they also became pawns in the hands of Sinhala chauvinism. In fact Dr. Colvin R de Silva, who once said "One language - Two nations" became the man who formulated the Buddhist theocratic constitution. This total betrayal led to much disillusionment among Tamil youth. The failure of the old left movement against Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism opened the stage for violence against the Tamil people. Racial riots broke out several times, the worst of which was in 1983. All this led to the liberation struggle of the Tamil people.

Today Lankan Tamil nationality is a complex entity. Firstly, so called native Tamils of the north and

east have developed as Eelam Tamils with a recognizable homeland. Their national consciousness has developed to a high degree. They form the basis of the existing armed struggle for Tamil liberation. Though the Sinhala army of the Mahinda regime is in occupation of certain strategic areas of the Tamil homeland, it has failed to get the upper hand. Under the MOU signed by Ranil Wickramasinghe in 2002, more than one third of the Tamil home land was accepted to be under the direct control of the LTTE.

Secondly, the plantation Tamils of up-country, descendents of south Indian Tamil workers brought to Lanka by the British-raj, have not identified entirely with the Eelam liberation struggle. Certainly the youth is highly influenced by the struggle in the north and east. But their demands are different, being very largely socio-economic. Land and citizenship rights, greater autonomy for Tamil areas, and greater Tamil participation in local administration, are some of their demands.

Thirdly, there is a substantial Tamil community living in Colombo and its suburbs. They are a combination of native and Indian Tamils. Except for the recent refugees, others are more interested in getting equality and justice than supporting the liberation struggle. However, in spite of these divisions all Tamils are living under fear and repression. On the other hand, the war has its effect on all Tamils irrespective of their actual connection to the liberation struggle.

The Nava Sama Samaja Party, from its inception defended the Right of Self Determination of the Tamil speaking people. Before becoming a party, as a group within the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, in 1974 we came out with our analysis of the Tamil National Question. We explained that Tamil nationality is emerging fighting for its self determination. the only unity possible is the voluntary union of the two nationalities. For this, recognition of the right of self determination of Tamil people is a precondition. Acceptance of equality, autonomy and the Right of Self Determination is the only basis for a democratic unity.

Since 1974 we have been fighting for this position in all our political campaigns. In spite of many difficulties, we have managed to take this message among the Sinhala people. We have influenced the thinking of almost all political parties of Lanka. Concepts of equality, autonomy and the right of self determination are now very widely discussed. Understanding of the masses has increased tremendously. And now there is widespread resentment against the war efforts of the government.

In 1994 Vasudeva Nanayakkara and a few others broke away and collaborated with SLFP led governments. Though they pay lip service to the Tamil Liberation, in practice they have become a part of the treacherous group led by the CP and LSSP. This coalitionist left has become the cover for the killer regime of Mahinda Rajapaksa.

It is clear that the Western powers are now backing the chauvinist Mahinda regime. We explained all along that it is futile to expect the Global Capitalist powers to intervene here to safeguard the interests of Tamil and Muslims or any other minority.

Many Tamil leaders believed that Indian Rulers would help them to achieve freedom from discriminations and oppression. In fact they appealed for military intervention. However, the Indian intervention became a nightmare for the Tamils. Today Sinhala chauvinist, such as Gunadasa Amarasekara openly claim that the Indian intervention was a god sent chance for them and regret that it was not fully utilized to crush the LTTE.

Now, the same thing is repeated in relation to the Western powers led by the Americans. Tamils have to accept that it is foolish to expect support for the Tamil struggle from the West against the Mahinda regime that collaborates with the Development Programme of the West.

The Mahinda Regime while paying lip service to the peace project is hell bent on crushing the Tamil uprising. On the other hand the LTTE appears to believe that suicidal attacks by the Tamil youth can achieve liberation. So far no efforts are made to take the issue among the left democratic forces internationally. Left Front (NSSP) will take the issue of Tamil Liberation among Left Democratic Forces both locally and internationally. We shall show that Mahinda Regime is a total failure not only on the Tamil National problem but also by becoming a vassal of Global Capital.

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