

# **Sri Lanka: Comrade Shan and the Tamil Militant Armed Struggle**

Wednesday 15 July 2020, by [JEYARAJ David Buell Sabapathy](#) (Date first published: 11 July 2020).

**The China of today is vastly different to the China that I knew of in my younger days. Thinking about the China of those times evokes memories of many things like the cultural revolution, red guards, the great leap forward, the red book of Chairman Mao's thoughts and above all Mao Zedong himself who was known then as Mao Tse-Tung. In the post-Deng Xiaoping China, very little is stated publicly about Mao Zedong the founding father of the Peoples Republic of China. Modern China is rapidly progressing along the "Capitalist High Road" that was so forcefully denounced by the Chinese Communist leader of yore. As far as Sri Lanka is concerned, Mao seems to be virtually forgotten nowadays.**

There was however a time when a vigorously vibrant leftist political party espousing the policies and ideology of Mao Zedong known as Maoism flourished in Sri Lanka. It was known as the Ceylon Communist Party (Peking Wing) to denote its pro-China leanings as opposed to the other pro-Soviet Union Communist party (Moscow Wing). Beijing was spelled as Peking then. In its heyday, the Ceylon Communist Party(Peking Wing) controlled many trade unions in the mercantile, industrial, agricultural and plantation sectors. It also spearheaded a massive socio-cultural movement that greatly helped to abolish the cruelty of caste oppression in Jaffna. The party was also the nursery in which Rohana Wijeweera the founder-leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna(JVP) was nurtured. After the demise of Mao and rise of Deng, the Sri Lankan Communist Party remained faithful to pristine Maoism and condemned the new revisionist line. Despite suffering several splits, defections and declining membership, the party along with other like-minded international Marxist-Leninist groups formed the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement(RIM) to re-affirm Maoism. Subsequently the party re-invented itself as the Ceylon Communist Party (Maoist).

The co-founder, leader and driving force behind the Pro-China communist party in Ceylon/Sri Lanka was Nagalingam Sanmugathasan, a Sri Lankan Tamil hailing from Manipay in Jaffna. "Comrade Shan" or "Shan" as he was known functioned as leader at the helm of the party from its inception in 1964 until his death in 1993. "Comrade" Shan was arguably the last great Maoist of Sri Lanka. His name was spelled in English as "Sanmugathasan" in his birth certificate. However in common usage his name was pronounced "Shanmugathasan" and he became known as "Shan". He was born a hundred years ago on July 3 1920. This article is therefore a birth centenary tribute to "Comrade" Shan.

At the outset I want to state that I am writing this article mainly due to the "gentle" persuasion of Veeragathy Thanabalasingham my former colleague at the leading Tamil daily "Virakesari" where I cut my journalistic teeth. Thanabalasingham who later became editor of the "Thinakkural" is a consultant at the Express Newspapers group which publishes both the Virakesari and Thinakkural now. He was (and still is) a loyal disciple and follower of Shan. So great was his devotion to Shan that he once turned down an offer to work in his native Jaffna as an editor because he did not want to leave Colombo where Shan was living. In those days he would visit Shan at least once a week and spend some hours with his mentor. My introductory meeting with the Maoist leader was through

Thanabalasingham who first took me along with him to Shan's residence at 23/7 Schofield place in Kollupitiya.

### **First Meeting With "Comrade" Shan.**

My first meeting with "Comrade" Shan was in early 1987. I was then the Colombo correspondent of the Indian English daily "The Hindu". I was also engaged in a study of the evolution and growth of the Tamil militant movement in Sri Lanka, for the International Centre of Ethnic Studies (ICES) in Colombo. My discussions with Shan were mostly about the politics of Sri Lanka and India, Tamil militancy and international affairs. I began to meet Shan regularly from early 1987 until late 1988 when I left Sri Lanka for the USA. I used to go alone as well as with Thanabalasingham to see him. Talking or rather posing probing questions and listening to his erudite answers was both pleasant and profitable. I would take notes at times and later write the points down in detail. I learnt a lot from Shan in those days.

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During these conversations I discovered something about Shan which delighted me immensely. I found that like me, he too was or had been, a film buff. The popular Tamil cinema actor and Tamil Nadu chief minister M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) died on December 24 1987. I was then writing for "The Island" also. Since the following day was Christmas and I had to go home to Kurunegala, I hurriedly wrote a light-weight article about MGR focusing on some interesting highlights of the actor-politico's life.

Some days later when I went to see Shan I found that he had read the piece and was most disappointed. "I thought you should have written about MGR differently" said Shan and went on to elaborate. He pointed out how MGR projected himself as a champion of the poor and underprivileged by enacting such roles in his films and portrayed himself as a hero who would help the downtrodden to redress their grievances and achieve their aspirations. As Shan reeled off sequence after sequence and song after song in MGR's films in support of his basic premise, I realized that he had seen most of the MGR films of the fifties and sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When I asked him about it, Shan admitted with a shy smile that he had indeed been an avid film goer from his student days until his incarceration by the Sirima Bandaranaike govt. in the aftermath of the JVP uprising in 1971.

It was in this period of interaction with Shan that the Indo-Lanka accord was signed by Rajiv Gandhi and J.R. Jayewardene on July 29 1987. The Indian Army described as the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) came to Sri Lanka. Soon the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was at war with the IPKF. The proscribed JVP too launched a campaign of violence described as Anti-Indian. Shan was somewhat sympathetic towards the LTTE fight with the IPKF but hostile towards the JVP's anti-Indian campaign.

This was best illustrated in late 1988 at a lecture cum discussion at Fr. Tissa Balasuriya's Centre for Society and Religion in Maradana. The LTTE and JVP opposition to the Indian army was being debated. Kumar Rupasinghe's brother Ajith Rupasinghe - a Maoist himself - was trying to "trap" Shan in a friendly argument. Ajith's position was that if Shan approved of the LTTE fighting the IPKF

then he should not disapprove of the JVP. Likewise, if Shan was critical of the JVP then he should condemn the LTTE too. But the veteran polemicist refused to be caught. Shan did not budge. He neither condemned the LTTE nor praised the JVP. This was the last occasion on which I saw Shan.

### **Evolving Attitude Regarding LTTE**

Shan's position on the LTTE fighting the IPKF caused many a misunderstanding and even rifts among his admirers, party members and fellow political travellers. It has even been misconstrued as support for terrorism and separatism. His stance was also surprising to many because Shan had on earlier occasions condemned Tamil militancy as "individual terrorism". Furthermore people expected the veteran Marxist to be sympathetic to the Tamil groups regarded as "leftists" like the Eelam Peoples Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) as opposed to "rightists" like the LTTE. Though somewhat confusing, Shan's evolving attitude regarding the LTTE requires a more detailed explanation. It must be understood that though appreciative of certain aspects of the LTTE, Shan had no illusions about the tigers or any other Tamil armed group for that matter.

I think it was this perception of the LTTE vis-a-vis India which influenced Shan into adopting a favourable attitude towards the tigers

There was one incident which I recall even now. Much of the literature put out by the Tamil militant groups in the early days for propaganda purposes had a lot of leftist discourse and Marxist-Leninist jargon in them. Once while conversing with Shan, I asked him whether this suggested that the armed groups were left-oriented and were supportive of a Socialist Tamil state. He was dismissive. Shan said that the "boys" had taken to the gun first and then looked around for an ideology that would justify their violence and that they had found it in Marxism. However he did say that whatever the reason, their choice of Marxism was not to be faulted. But Shan was not sure whether their commitment was really genuine. He was also doubtful as to whether they had made a thorough study of Marxism or acquired only a superficial understanding adequate for cosmetic purposes.

On another occasion I was relating some of my experiences as a student in Jaffna in the early seventies. I told him that there was a lot of Tamil graffiti in those days quoting Mao, about political power growing out of the barrel of a gun. Shan immediately retorted that Mao had also taught that the gun must not be allowed to command the party and that the party must always dictate to the gun. What Shan emphasized was, that politics should guide the fighters and not vice versa. Three decades later when I look back with the wisdom of hindsight, I recognize the intrinsic value of what Shan said then. The fate of the LTTE which let the gun determine politics instead of letting politics guide the gun is enough proof of that. The Tamil Self -Rule Party formed by former Kayts MP, V. Navaratnam in 1968 contested the 1970 Parliamentary poll advocating a country for the Tamils. It was routed at the hustings. However the Ilankai Thamil Arasuk Katchi (ITAK) and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) came together and formed the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in 1976. The Tamil Eelam declaration was formally adopted on May 14 1976. Even before that, starting from the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the ITAK in 1974, the separate state demand was being bandied about by Tamil nationalist politicians. They were talking of realizing their objective through a non-violent struggle. Among those who vehemently challenged the notion of a separate state, was Shan.

### **Dharmar-Shan Debate In Chunnakam**

In 1975 a public debate was organized between ITAK MP for Uduvil ( later Manipay) Viswanathar Dharmalingam (Father of PLOTE Leader D. Siddharthan MP) and Nagalingam Shanmugathan of the Communist Party (Peking wing) in Chunnakam, then regarded as a leftist citadel. The debate was chaired by retired school principal, "Orator" C. Subramaniam who had taught both. The pros and

cons of a separate state were extensively debated. After making fun of the idea of a separate state being established through a non-violent struggle, Shan challenged Dharmar to reveal the action plan through which a separate state was going to be set up. Dharmalingam prevaricated by saying it was a top party secret. There was a loud outcry from the audience that Dharmalingam should give a concrete answer. "Orator" Subramaniam saved Dharmalingam from a tricky situation by intervening and saying that the ITAK Parliamentarian could not be pressured into disclosing a party secret. Thus the debate ended in a "draw" but everyone knew Shan was the victor.

A chicken struggling to be born had to peck the egg shell from within, crack it and then come out if it wanted to live

Another incident I remember is a public seminar at the Wellawatte Ramakrishna Hall organized by the Law College Tamil Union in 1976. Shan was one of the speakers. In that speech Shan mocked the idea that a separate state could be achieved through a non-violent struggle. He said that a meaningful change by overthrowing the state was possible only through revolutionary violence. He cited two examples in support of violence as a mode for change. One was about how a chicken struggling to be born had to peck the egg shell from within, crack it and then come out if it wanted to live. The other was to say that according to Hindu mythology even the gods used weapons to eradicate evil through violence. Lord Shiva had his "Soolam" (trident) Lord Vishnu had his "Chakra" (Spinning Disc) and Lord Muruga his "Vel" (Javelin Spear).

Shan however was not supportive of Tamil militancy in its embryonic stage. When armed Tamil youths began gunning down policemen engaged in tracking them down and politicians dubbed as so called traitors, Shan was critical. He regarded those as acts of individual terrorism. He perceived them as romantic adventurism based on petit-bourgeois ideology. His position began to change after President J.R. Jayewardene declared an emergency for Jaffna alone in 1979 and deployed the army. Then came the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983 where he directly witnessed the carnage and destruction in Colombo.

Thereafter Shan was more benign towards Tamil militancy. He began to justify armed Tamil militancy as a "necessary evil" to combat racist harassment and military suppression. Rightly or wrongly, Shan saw the Tamil groups as protectors defending the people from State oppression. In taking this position, Shan was not oblivious to mistakes made in policy and practice by the militants. The disunity among the Tamil groups eventually resulting in fratricidal warfare, was troubling. As a Maoist, Shan was convinced the Tamil militants had to learn from the great helmsman about conducting a protracted people's war. He emphasized the importance of mass organizations. More importantly Shan wanted the militants to desist from engaging in "terrorist" acts and harming civilians. He advised the militants to follow Mao's rules of discipline and conduct for guerillas. Shan wrote several essays in Tamil and English in this regard.

### **LTTE Resisting Indian Expansion**

The advent of the Indian Army had a profound impact on Shan. He was convinced quite correctly that New Delhi had used Tamil militancy to undermine the Sri Lankan state and then stepped in with their "good offices" to sign the Indo-Lanka accord and annexure letters to exercise hegemony over the Island. In that context, Shan perceived the LTTE with all its faults as the only force resisting what he termed as Indian expansion.

I was in Jaffna when war erupted between the IPKF and LTTE. I returned to Colombo with details of how the civilians were being victimised in the war by the Indian army. These accounts were published in the "Sunday Island" then. An interview with the then Tiger deputy leader "Mahathaya" was also published. In a bid to "silence" me, Indian diplomats in Colombo pressured President

Jayewardene into arresting me on the pretext of inquiring about Mahathaya. Due to protests from fellow scribes in Lanka and abroad, I was released on bail later with a “case” pending in court as to whether I had committed an offence or not. There were several dates where the CID said they were still investigating. Later the file went up to the Attorney-General’s dept. Finally the A-G ruled there was no case against me. During this period, Shan was very concerned and kept abreast of what was happening in court. He also questioned me intensively about conditions in Jaffna and the IPKF-LTTE war. I still remember his saying that whatever their flaws the Tigers were courageously defying the Indian army’s aggression. He said India was the main enemy at that juncture. I think it was this perception of the LTTE vis-a-vis India which influenced Shan into adopting a favourable attitude towards the tigers. Besides as a revolutionary advocating armed struggle against the state, it was a case of the Tigers putting into practice what he had envisaged in theory.

The JVP of Rohana Wijeweera too had commenced an anti-Indian campaign in defence of the motherland at that time but Shan was not sympathetic. He would say that the JVP should go to the North-East and fight the IPKF like the LTTE instead of terrorizing the south. He was very angry over Vijaya Kumaratunga’s murder. Shan compared the JVP at that time to Italy’s Mussolini and said the JVP had a neo-fascist tendency. He said Wijeweera was utilizing the anti-Indian feelings in the country to promote communalism in the name of patriotism Shan described Wijeweera’s JVP in Marxist terminology as being “counter-revolutionary”

### **For Self-Determination Not Secession**

Shan’s views on the national question also changed with the passage of time. After going abroad, I learnt from his writings, that he was for the right of self determination for the Sri Lankan Tamils. In earlier days Shan had opined that Sri Lankan Tamils were not entitled to national self-determination as they did not fit Stalin’s conditions of a Nation. “A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.” Though Shan was for self -determination, he was not for secession. He was for regional autonomy where the territorially contiguous Tamil areas of the Northern and Eastern provinces would form a single regional unit.

There are many more things to write about Comrade Shan and his political life. Graduating in 1943 and opting to work as full time for the Communist Party for a 60 rupee salary; the ideological split in the CP and the birth of the Peking wing Communist Party; the battle for trade union control; Rohana Wijeweera’s capture; the mass movement against caste oppression in Jaffna; rise of the dynamic Red Flag union in the plantations; the meetings with Mao; the JVP’s 1971 revolt and the imprisonment of Shan. All these and more need to be written about in detail on another occasion.

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**D.B.S. Jeyaraj**

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**P.S.**

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