

TOWARDS A (TAMIL) LEFT PERSPECTIVE ON THE ETHNIC CRISIS IN SRI LANKA¹

The protracted and brutal ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka shows few signs of resolution or abatement. The conflict itself has drawn a great deal of scholarly attention over the years. Much of the early focus, especially in the wake of the communal pogrom of July 1983, was aimed at explicating the origins and development of an intolerant majoritarian nationalism and its collusion with the Sri Lankan state from at least as early as 1956.² With the gathering strength of Tamil militancy by the late 1980s however, there has been a noticeable shift away from this southern focus on the state and Sinhala/Buddhist nationalism and a new focus on the violence and 'terrorism' of Tamil militancy. Signalled perhaps most powerfully by the emergence of works such as the *Broken Palmyra*,³ the scholarly focus shifted from its earlier predominant focus on the Sinhala south—to include the Tamils in the north and east—and a tendency towards a greater theoretical elaboration and focus on violence and 'terrorism' particularly that instigated by Tamil armed groups.⁴ This new scholarly focus despite its many contributions has also served to deflect attention away from the earlier interrogation of the Sri Lankan state and perhaps most importantly to the earlier constructive and critical engagement with the 'national question.'⁵ Aside from a heralding series of 'anthropographies' focusing on this violence, recent scholarly trends have not at the same time sought to explicate the causes that sustain this kind of violence and militancy. Perhaps best signalling this trend, a recent work by Rajasingham-Senanayake has even suggested that the cycle of violence and destruction caused by the two sides to the conflict has made any further exploration of the causes of the conflict irrelevant nor any proposal for devolu-

tion of power, ideal a solution. As she argues in the context of bemoaning the polarization of earlier, more hybrid identities in Sri Lanka:

Sri Lanka's armed conflict has generated a momentum and logic which exceeds its root cause—often glossed over as ethnic conflict—even as it has invented new collective identities. Yet, few of the numerous analysis of the conflict have asked how war transforms identities, borders and territories, or generates the ethnicization and polarization of hybrid collective identities.⁶

Thus, while the question Rajasingham-Senanayake poses in the current “constructivist” language seems sensible and progressive, what appears to be dangerous is its over extension, that is, the suggestion that it is the ongoing conflict or the war that has created these ethnic identities in the first place and that devolution or power sharing might even further polarize identities. That is, if not for the conflict or the war, nor even the alleged “atavistic” violence of the Tamil Tigers, we would all be ideal cosmopolitan, hybrid citizens of a new globalizing neo-liberal Sri Lankan order. It is such assertions that make it urgent that we interrogate the class basis and metropolitan locations of these claims of transcendence over ethnic identifications as well as what appears to be an excessive need to celebrate hybridity. Needless to say, this scholarly tendency to focus on violence and “terrorism” has been both paralleled and amplified in the state controlled media in Sri Lanka, particularly in the English and Sinhala newspapers—which again have often tended to reduce if not collapse the Tamil struggle to nothing more than a nagging ‘terrorist problem’ and as the central obstacle to the progress of an otherwise ideal neo-liberal cosmopolitan order based on progress, democracy and freedom.

The upshot of all these developments is that any serious discussions on the national question have been more and more eclipsed and elided by discussions on the ‘terrorist problem.’ Thus, the very moral and ethical basis of the struggle for Tamil

rights has become occluded by these developments. It is against this background, and in part inspired by recent scholarly trends that despite their increasing theoretical sophistication and claims of progressivism and “leftism”—though, surprisingly, without at the same time attempting to recall or consider the voices of the left on this issue—that this paper seeks to narrate the trajectory of the Tamil left perspective on the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka. It is hoped that this exploration of left perspectives on the national crisis may help provide a radical and critical handle on the national question and the ethnic crisis—while at the same time not eschewing or dismissing a genuine call for internationalism or cosmopolitanism.⁷

It is now fairly well known that the left had been one of the earliest defenders of minority nationalities in Sri Lanka. It was, after all, the left that was the first to oppose the efforts to disenfranchise the plantation sector Tamils in 1948, as well as resist the now infamous “Sinhala Only” policy in 1956. There were left leaders like the prominent Trotskyist leader of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Colvin R. de Silva, who then warned the government most prophetically, “One language, two nations and two languages one nation.”⁸ How and why did the left retreat from such noble and principled stands on the national question? What were the perspectives of some of the Tamil left leaders to these unfortunate developments? Curiously, there have been far few efforts by historians to find answers to these questions. Fortunately for us, a veteran left academic with a great deal of expertise in working on the trade union and left movements in Sri Lanka has focussed some of her early work on this very subject. I am thinking here of Kumari Jayawardena’s work, *Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka*⁹ and the relatively more recent research article, “The Left and the National Question in Sri Lanka.”¹⁰ Though focused mostly on the southern and predominantly Sinhala left, Jayawardena does a wonderful job narrating the twists and turns of the major left parties from their early days as principled de-

fenders of national minorities to their slow descent from the late 1950s into compromising with Sinhala/majoritarian nationalism—a shift that occurred as a result of their entry into coalition politics with ‘bourgeois’ nationalist parties such as the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its *Mahajana Eksath Peramuna* (MEP) consisting of many Sinhala nationalist elements. This move towards aligning with ‘bourgeois nationalist’ parties and choosing the parliamentary path to socialism was a major turning point in the history of the left movement and signalled the beginning of the left’s dangerous descent into Sinhala/Buddhist majoritarianism. These moves of course followed ‘revisionist’ shifts in international communist party policies that now urged the left parties to follow the parliamentary path to socialism even if it meant working with ‘bourgeois’ nationalist parties. However, this move by the left parties in Sri Lanka as elsewhere led to tremendous internal dissensions leading to splits and breakaway parties. The breakaway parties often held on to their more revolutionary ideals including the defence of minority nationalities.

The central argument informing Jayawardena’s work is that the left failed to debate seriously or adequately theorize the national question and instead followed a policy informed by pragmatism.¹¹ There is also more than a hint that the positions on the national question taken by these parties were merely carbon copies of those taken by the international Marxist leadership—rather than being arrived at through a serious consideration and analysis of the local Sri Lankan socio-cultural reality. For example, she writes that in the 1940s the LSSP and the Ceylon Communist Party (CCP) at an abstract level accepted Lenin’s line on the rights of nations to self-determination adding that the CCP, in addition, accepted Stalin’s more mechanistic formulation that had led the Indian Communist Party (CPI) to concede such a right to the Muslims in India.¹² This she argues enabled the CCP to speak of a Tamil nation and advocate regionalism long before Tamil nationalist parties like the Federal Party. However, she adds that these

were “all merely routine and obligatory” and there was no serious debate.

For Jayawardena then, three factors played a pivotal role in the unfortunate trajectory of the left’s engagement with the national question. One was the actual “proletarian” constituency of the early left in Sri Lanka, which was predominantly “immigrant” from South India—so much so that the CCP became labelled the Kochi party—as around half the trade union support for the CCP was from the Malayali urban workers in the South (Kochi derived from the word for Cochin). Such identification with ‘alien’ groups, plantation workers, and the Tamil language, “in addition to (them) being seen as irreligious and unpatriotic cosmopolitans,” for Jayawardena partially explain the left’s anxieties to jettison this image and embrace the Sinhala masses through a compromise with Sinhala nationalism.¹³ No doubt the disenfranchisement of a substantial number of the plantation workers—, who ceased to be a factor in parliamentary politics from around 1948, helped this process. The second factor she cites is the class nature of the leaders and intellectuals of the left. Here, she suggests that many of them, particularly the prominent leaders of the early LSSP, were from the upper classes, not only English educated but often educated abroad. The other major factor that she uses as the most loaded explanatory category for explaining the left’s drift towards Sinhala chauvinism was the infiltration of the lower levels of the party leadership by the petit bourgeois and by petit-bourgeois ideology.¹⁴ According to her, from 1935 to around 1960 the left had taken a principled internationalist perspective; but from the 1960s the ideology of the petit bourgeoisie—the Sinhala-Buddhist Dharmapala ideology—lying dormant for a long time had resurfaced.¹⁵

Writing in the 1980s, when left academics were taken by surprise by the level of violence brought about by the ethnic conflict, it is not surprising that there is an impatient and often critical tone in Jayawardena’s work. Given the scope of the subject, she

had naturally focused on the overall policies of the parliamentary left parties and thus it is difficult to disagree with the main contours of her findings and arguments. The policies and perspectives of the significant breakaway parties including the Ceylon Communist Party (Peking wing) led by Sanmugathan which was especially popular in the North and its various splinters, as well as the views of many of the Tamil left leaders did not figure prominently in her review. It is precisely this space that I seek to fill through this initial exploration. This exploration is done not so much to refute the findings of Jayawardena but to complement her work.

When one goes back and begins to read closely the writings and work of individual Tamil left leaders one often gets a perspective that seems to get lost in such broad narratives about the left. The work and writings of these Tamil left leaders reveal a creativity, passion and engagement with the ethnic issue that inevitably get lost in such a broad study of the twists and turns of left party policies, be it in the hands of Robert Kearney¹⁶ or Kumari Jayawardena. Perhaps there is no better reminder of this failure than the powerful and moving speech given by P. Kandiah of the Communist Party (CCP) in the debates in parliament before the passing of the Sinhala Only Act in June 1956. Not only is the speech a carefully crafted and brilliant counter to Bandaranaike's arguments, but it betrays a passion and engagement with the building of a united Sri Lankan identity without at the same time denying his own particular attachment to his identity as a Tamil. Arguing against the bill he had stated:

My views in opposition to this Bill are not based solely on the fact that I am a Tamil. As a Tamil I believe that this Bill robs me of all that is dear to me. It denies me my past, and present and denies... my children and their descendants a future.... Neither this government nor any other government nor even the worlds worst tyrant can forbid me from talking to my parents to my wife and children in Tamil, in the language in which my mother sang to

me when she fed me, the language in which my wife trained my child to express its first joys and grief's... a hundred laws cannot stop me.¹⁷

The speech is certainly a far cry from the dispassionate rhetoric generally associated with many of the upper class “anglicized” left leaders.

Arguing that Ceylon is the only country that runs counter to the ideals and practices of newly independent countries in its denial of a “matter so fundamental to democracy as the right of a people to use its own language in the business of government,”¹⁸ Kandiah provides what is essentially a Fanonian argument for why such a sentiment is glaringly absent in Sri Lanka, pointing of course to the fact that there was no popular anti-colonial movement that wrought freedom for Sri Lanka: “People who have fought for freedom will not lightly countenance a step where one section of them sought to deny its fruit to another.” Only such a struggle would provide an “abiding sense of comradeship between the different racial and linguistic groups.”¹⁹

Perhaps what is most striking about Kandiah’s speech in parliament is his almost prophetic warning of the unity of feelings among the Tamils generated by the bill and the consequences that would follow if the Bill were to be passed. Speaking of this unity, he had asserted:

... the entire people are united, all political parties, all castes, religions urged on by the belief that the cause they fight is as urgent as it is just You will never crush the spirit of a people fighting for its existence. You will never make a tribe forget its history ... outside, the battles of the working class for its rights and its life. I cannot think of a fight more righteous, or ennobling than the one which the Tamil people today are beginning for their language.²⁰

What is more, Kandiah sensed a novel development among the more subaltern classes as a result of the Bill:

I point out also that there is something new to be seen in the Tamil

areas...It is not so much Tamils who have studied English, but the majority who have never studied it or any other foreign language who are leading the struggle. The resistance today comes less from the rich, middle sections of the Tamil people who you may hope, may eventually acquiesce than from the lower sections²¹

Adding quite perceptively: “Similar changes have taken place among the Sinhalese which is the reason for this government to come to power.”²² What Kandiah was suggesting here was that it was only through a similar awakening among the Sinhala masses that the Sinhala nationalist parties had come to power—riding on the wave of the “Sinhala Only” policy.

A factor that often gets overlooked in such broad surveys as Jayawardena’s, is that when assessing the left’s engagement or contribution to the national question, the left’s struggle and critiques of other political forces and political parties of the time are not taken into account. Many Tamil left leaders offered quite in-depth and powerful critiques of what they considered to be chauvinist political forces of the time advocating an exclusive emphasis either on Sinhala or Tamil chauvinism. An early example of such left attitudes towards such narrowly ‘communalist’ parties is evident during the debate in parliament on the Sinhala Only bill in June 1956 when the same CCP member, Kandiah, observed in a fit of what appears to be exasperation: “it is very curious but true that there are only two national parties in this country, namely the LSSP and the CCP and that all other parties have given up their national character, having become sectional parties.”²³ What he was suggesting here was that parties such as the UNP, the SLFP and the FP were basically ethno-nationalist parties.

Although one may critique the Left’s uncompromising position towards parties such as the Tamil Congress and the Federal Party, one still needs to take account of their critical engagement with the politics of these parties. The point is that what is often presented as merely the struggle for power between the left par-

ties and parties such as the Tamil Congress, the Federal Party or the UNP has to be also taken for what it also clearly was—a struggle over alternative ways of dealing with the national question or in this case the Tamil problem. While all the left parties critiqued nationalist parties I will use some selected examples here to illustrate how this critique by some of the Tamil left leaders offered a great deal of insight into the politics of such parties as the Tamil Congress and the Federal Party. One of the best known and articulate examples of this is offered in the writings of the LSSP leader V. Karalasingam, which first appeared as a series of articles in the *Young Socialist*, the official organ of the LSSP in the 1960s and was later published as a collection of essays under the title *The Way Out for the Tamil Speaking Peoples*.²⁴ In it Karalasingam masterfully critiques the politics of Tamil political parties such as the Tamil Congress (TC) and the Federal Party (FP).

The ever-increasing and systematic discrimination against the Tamils was a real enough phenomena for Karalasingam as he states quite bluntly in the opening pages:

It is no exaggeration to say that the Tamil speaking peoples have been reduced to the position of an oppressed national minority. This oppression is manifest in all fields—in open legislation, in concealed administrative actions and regulations, and finally in direct connivance at, if not open connivance by these capitalist governments of pogromist activity against the Tamil speaking people.²⁵

He then proceeds to provide a comprehensive list of these oppressive policies, which even includes the recently much disputed²⁶ discriminatory land colonization schemes:

In the administrative field the scarcely veiled effort of the UNP to pursue discriminatory land colonization policies in the Northern and Eastern Provinces is now the declared policy of the Government. The purpose openly canvassed at less guarded mo-

ments, of such land colonization is the gradual reduction of the Tamil speaking people to a minority in these areas.²⁷

What was so tragic for Karalasingam was that the Tamils did not have the right leadership to deal with this grave and challenging situation. They had instead been misled by the politics and political strategy of the exclusively Tamil, Federal Party just as they had been by the Tamil Congress before. It was for Karalasingam a kind of politics and strategy that had been learned on the lap of the British imperialists—from the tradition of imperial nominations of representatives from various communities. Put in a nutshell, this strategy hinged on the “conception that the fight for the rights of the Tamil speaking people is the responsibility solely of the Tamil speaking peoples themselves and it is only the Tamils who can wage this fight and that they must do so as Tamils.”²⁸ It was a political strategy that was not based on any alliances with other progressive forces or the working classes in the island. For Karalasingam, this helps explain why despite the massive mandate from the Tamil people and despite decades of struggle under this leadership, Chelvanayagam their leader, only could exclaim towards the end of his career, “Only God can help the Tamils from now on.”²⁹ The fundamental problem or flaw for Karalasingam was the political strategy of the Federal Party.

Karalasingam mounts a powerful critique of this political strategy making his arguments through a cold and sober calculation of such factors as the actual numerical strength of the Tamils, their dispersal throughout the island and the meagre natural resources and cultivable land in their traditional areas of habitation. For Karalasingam, these all combined to limit seriously their ability to use either an electoral or economic muscle under a Westminster style Parliamentary system—a situation quite unlike the case of East Pakistan, which had substantial demographic and economic clout. He argued that since the FP could only ever return a maximum of 21 seats in parliament out of a total of 151, it was

soon reduced to adopt a strategy of opportunistic politics allying with either of the major political parties to form a majority government as long as it promised to safeguard Tamil rights—regardless of the actual political or ideological orientations of these parties. It was a strategy summed up by the FP motto, “We can make or break governments.” This focus on numbers devoid of politics was for Karalasingam in the situation of Ceylon not only futile but positively dangerous.

For Karalasingam, the exclusive and elitist Tamil political formations such as the Tamil Congress and the Federal Party not only allied with pro-imperialist forces, they also by the very nature of their exclusive emphasis on Tamil communal politics encouraged majoritarian Sinhala nationalism, and brought together the presently divided Sinhala forces which are opposed to the Tamil speaking peoples. As he explained:

Tamil political monolithism must sooner or later beget Sinhalese political monolithism and the first victims of the latter would be those parties and forces most sympathetic to the legitimate demands of the Tamil speaking people...just as the first victims ... were the Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party.... It may yet succeed in unifying and cementing the presently divided forces which are opposed to the Tamil speaking people at the cost of eliminating their real allies.³⁰

In a later essay entitled “Postscript: 1977,” he wrote with remarkable lucidity about how the current impasse Tamil youth came to be. For Karalasingam, Tamil youth militancy was not merely the continuation of the politics of TC, FP and the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) but had also inherited the political ideology or orientation of these elitist communal parties. If in terms of ideology it was the same, in method it propagated a similar exclusively self-reliant ‘three musketeers approach’ to the challenges facing the Tamils. The solution for him was to ally with the progressive forces among the Sinhalese and other communities

of Sri Lanka instead of aligning with the pro-imperialist forces or relying solely on Tamils or Tamil nationalism. Encouraging the Tamil youth in this direction, he had observed:

Somewhere along the line, the politics which they are pursuing took the wrong turn; while it is true that they bear no responsibility, it nonetheless behoves them to ascertain where it took the wrong turn The fatal turn was when under the leadership of Mr. G.G. Ponnambalam they forsook the anti-imperialist movement and relied on minority communalism as the answer to majority communalism of Sir Baron Jayatilake and D.S. Senanayake.... In time this leadership found the UNP (the home of Sinhala communalism) their ally and the forces of anti-imperialist movement their enemy.... This evolution of the Tamil leadership reveals a lot and shows the bond of property is far stronger than the professed concerns of the TULF leadership for the rights of the Tamil speaking peoples. If the Tamil youth will but understand its true significance, assimilate its full meaning and fearlessly draw the conclusions that follow, they would overcome their inner crisis and would be ready to take their rightful place to not only achieve their national rights but even more important, their legitimate place in the world movement against imperialism.³¹

It is rather unfortunate that despite Karalasingam's bold message to the Tamil-speaking peoples, he was not able to garner a significant following nor was he able to influence his own party, which had chosen the parliamentary path toward socialism and begun embracing Sinhala majoritarian nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Karalasingam's own ambivalence and lack of clarity on the question of Tamil rights to self-determination no doubt played a significant role in these developments.³² As mentioned earlier it was not just Karalasingam or the LSSP that made such criticisms of nationalist political parties, many left leaders and writers did so. One of the most trenchant criticisms of this opportunist style of politics of accommodation of the FP has been offered in a recent publication in Tamil by a writer associated with the breakaway Communist Party (Peking Wing).³³ It offers a

searching and systematic assessment and criticism of the FP pointing out that far from allying with the progressive anti-imperialist forces, many of the FP policies were not only against such progressive policies but was decidedly pro-imperialist in its foreign policy orientation, something that was for the author particularly illustrated by the support the FP extended to the pro-US policy of the UNP during the Vietnam war.

I would like to turn next to the intervention of a Tamil left leader who like Karalasingam belonged to the parliamentary left but, quite unlike Karalasingam, not only gave vent to his disaffection with the left's failure to adequately address the ethnic issue but also took decisive steps towards finding an alternative movement. With rising Tamil youth militancy and increasing state repression beginning in the 1970s, V. Ponnambalam who belonged to the parliamentary CCP (Moscow wing), had not only come to question his party's failure to seriously address the ethnic issue but also sought to build a left party that would squarely address it called the *Senthamizhar Iyakkam* (Red Tamil Movement). Astonishing many of his left friends and contemporaries, he and his organisation forged alliances with the Tamil nationalist parties including the TULF in the 1970s. In 1978 Ponnambalam also published a booklet in Tamil entitled, *Senthamizhar Aagividuvom* (Let Us Become Red-Tamils) explaining not only his disaffection with the parliamentary left but the reasons and thinking behind what appeared to be his pro-Tamil nationalist political moves.³⁴

Composed in the form of a dialogue with questions and answers, the work attempts to systematically present Ponnambalam's reasons for his disaffection and his reasons for building a new Tamil left party that in his view took seriously the fight for Tamil rights while still holding onto the principles of Marxist-Leninism. What is most striking about the work is its powerful and innovative Leninist critique of the parliamentary left's policies on the ethnic question. While affirming and conceding that it was his own party, the CCP, that had been in the forefront

in recognizing Tamils as a distinct nationality, with a right to self-determination as early as 1944, he argues that it nevertheless did not take this issue seriously enough nor seek to instil this among the masses or even emphasize its urgent importance.³⁵ Suggesting that it was largely party polemics without substance, he goes on to say that even the more recent trend of the parliamentary left to accept the right of self-determination in principle but with conditions and stipulations—such as only within the context of a united Sri Lanka—makes it difficult to consider such positions as being anything more than mere eye-wash.³⁶ Thus what emerges from his criticism of the left is its failure to take the struggle of the Tamil people for their rights with any degree of seriousness or in terms of any sustained campaign or concerted action beyond merely articulating principled positions.

Many of the arguments he deploys in his book hinge on Lenin's sensitive contribution to Marxist theories of nationalism, particularly Lenin's emphatic warning against majoritarian nationalism even among leftists (a phenomena which he termed Great Russian chauvinism). Lenin had also particularly emphasized the difference between the nationalism of the oppressor and the nationalism of the oppressed. Clearly making a sharp distinction, Lenin had argued for the need for Marxists to support the nationalism of the oppressed even if their ideology is purely nationalist.³⁷ This deployment of Lenin's ideas certainly became useful when Ponnambalam mounted a powerful critique of the Sri Lankan left's position toward Tamil nationalist parties such as TC and the FP and for his own bold support for them. Thus explicitly invoking Lenin, Ponnambalam argued that the nationalism of the oppressor community cannot be regarded in the same light as the nationalism of the oppressed, suggesting instead that because it is against oppression it has some democratic potential and thus should in most cases be supported.³⁸ It is in the same vein that he utilizes Marx's famous statement regarding slavery in the United States, "Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white

skin where in the black is branded,” to argue that in a situation of ethnic inequality among workers the class struggle cannot be advanced. He thus wrote “that the right of self-determination far from weakening the workers struggle will strengthen it.”³⁹ Thus, unlike the majority of the left leaders, Ponnambalam adopts a fairly conciliatory position towards the Tamil nationalist parties. What is, however, surprising is that he did this with so little reservation or caution.

Despite these innovative critiques of the ‘official’ left party policies on the national question, Ponnambalam’s abrupt and what appeared to be desperate political moves did not bear fruit. Tragically they ended up not only alienating him from his own party but he was also let down by the Tamil nationalist coalition he had sought to work with.⁴⁰ What is evident from this tragic episode is that there were in fact increasing disillusion with the left’s position on the Tamil question at least among sections of the progressive elements and that Ponnambalam was able to capture and articulate this disaffection albeit for a brief period.

It was, however, the voices of the breakaway factions of the parliamentary left parties that remained outside the lure of coalition and parliamentary politics had greater credibility in the eyes of many among left sympathizers in the Tamil region. One of the most popular left parties in the Tamil north around this time was the break away wing of the Ceylon Communist Party led by the well known trade union leader and senior communist party leader N. Sanmugathan, which came to be known as the Communist Party (Peking Wing) to distinguish it from the remaining rump in the north, known as the Moscow Wing. The work and writings of some of the leaders of the Peking Wing are especially interesting and relevant for the present discussion, as many of them including the highly respected senior party leader N. Sanmugathan and M. Karthigesan were well-known personalities among the left-oriented Tamils in Sri Lanka.

Sanugathan, affectionately known to his friends as Shan,

was the leader of the group that broke away from the 'official' communist party. Shan was perhaps the most brilliant and strident critic of Sri Lanka's "official" left parties—which for him had chosen the 'revisionist' parliamentary path to socialism and in the process not only capitulated to Sinhala/Buddhism but in the process destroyed the chances of the left ever being a significant and potent force in Sri Lanka. Aside from this powerful critique of the official left, Shan's understanding of the ethnic crisis within a broader neo-colonial context and as the latest in a series of manoeuvres by which Sri Lanka's neo-colonial ruling classes sought to deflect attention away from their pro-imperialist and neo-colonial economic policies certainly deserves serious consideration.⁴¹ Despite this rather brilliant analysis of the trajectory of the post-colonial history of Sri Lanka, Shan was unusually reticent when it came to the issue of Tamil rights and the national question and had even argued that Tamils were not a nation, since they did not fulfil one of Stalin's major requirements for a nation—that they share a common economy and that they were "yet to qualify as a nation."⁴² It was only after the catastrophic 1983 pogrom against the Tamils that Shan began reversing his earlier stand on the national question. Thus, Shan though recognizing the rising tide of Sinhala/Buddhist majoritarianism failed to call for any significant steps against it until after the 1983 pogrom.

Despite Shan's reluctance to take significant steps at the time, there were some members of the Peking Wing in the Tamil north who were clearly troubled by the increasing drift towards violence and separatism occasioned by the rise of Tamil youth militancy, on the one hand, and the increasing Sinhala racism and violence unleashed by the state on the other. There were serious attempts to engage with this issue by a segment of the senior members of the Peking Wing. In 1976 one such effort produced a long article published in the form of a Tamil pamphlet entitled, *Ilankayin Inraiyai Arasiyal Nilamaiyum Thesiya Sirupaanaimai Inna Pirachanayum* (The Current Political Situation in the Country and the Problem

of the Minority Nationality).⁴³ What is remarkable about the article is not simply the evidence it provides of concerted efforts by a left party to engage seriously with the rising ethnic problem, but it's fairly comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the political developments that had led to the ethnic impasse.

It conceded, for example, that the parliamentary left had by the 1960s, failed the national minorities. It also provides a clear analysis of the strengths and limitations of the Federal Party's politics and concludes that when in the early 1970s, many started realizing the Federal Party's ineffectiveness, they had very few alternatives, be it in the form of the mainstream left parties or even under their own breakaway wing led by Sanmugathasan. Writing particularly of this failure they seem to reluctantly concede that despite Shan's achievements as an outstanding communist leader for much of his life, in his later life he was quite ineffective as a practical revolutionary leader.⁴⁴ They argued that his preference for purism and dogmatism in theory did not allow him at this stage to utilize the opportunity presented by the failure of the FP to lead the disaffected youth and unite the progressive forces in Sri Lanka in a new direction.⁴⁵ Instead they argued, his leadership style by the late 1960s had caused a lot of internal dissensions within the party, which not only led to a great number of people leaving the party including its youth wing (which broke away to form the now infamous Sinhala nationalist-left Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the late mid-1960s but also many other splinter groups. One important splinter group in the north was led by K.A. Subramaniam, which came to be known as the Sri Lanka Communist Party (Left) and later changed its name to the New Democratic Party (NDP), becoming the strongest of the various splinters to emerge out of the Communist Party (Peking Wing) in the North.⁴⁶

It is clear that the group led by the late K.A. Subramaniam and currently led by S.K. Senthivel has seriously attempted to come to grips with the ethnic conflict and fill what it concedes

had been a major lacuna in left politics in Sri Lanka—the need to both adequately theorize and deal with the national question. Towards this end sought to take careful stock of the political developments that had led to the current impasse and also most importantly to theorize the national question through their numerous writings, publications and annual Congresses.⁴⁷ A publication that came out of the Fourth Congress of the NDP held in 2002 is quite illustrative and instructive in this regard.⁴⁸ The pamphlet provides a window to its approach as well as perspectives towards the various players in the crisis including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which by now had become the dominant player among the Tamils. Presenting Sri Lanka as a multi-ethnic state comprising of four main nationalities, the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Hill Country Tamils, along with those they considered the national minorities including the Burghers, Malays and the Attho (Vedda), it argues that the right to self-determination of each nationality must be mutually respected. This position is the correct Marxist-Leninist position, and the NDP has held this difficult position despite facing tremendous challenges including threats and assassinations of their members from various quarters including the Tamil militant and paramilitary groups.

What is perhaps most remarkable is the attempt at balancing a critical and qualified support for the Tamil militant struggle maintaining its own autonomy and commitment to a Marxist-Leninist program. It justifies this qualified support on two grounds. Firstly, it argues quite forcefully and clearly that the cynical use of Sinhala chauvinism and nationalism had over the years made the main contradiction in Sri Lanka the national rather than class contradiction. It was for this reason that despite its central engagement with class struggle the party feels it has to extend support to the rights of oppressed minorities even when this may take a purely nationalist form. Thus recalling Lenin's own attempt to steer such a delicate balance, it attempts to steer a fine balance between the right of self-determination and the quest for an equi-

table class and caste less society. This effort towards a careful balancing is evident in its own political program:

From the outset, our party has had a clear position on the war, and has always pointed to the class basis of the national contradiction and the consequent oppression. Our assessment has been that this national contradiction does not constitute a fundamental contradiction and that it evolved into the main contradiction owing to the intense chauvinistic oppression that transformed it into a war. While the Party accepted the need for struggle in resolving this main contradiction, it emphasized the position that at some stage there should be negotiations and a just political solution.⁴⁹

Secondly, the party attempts to explain its critical and careful support for the Tamil militant struggle by emphasizing the class dimension of the militant struggle. As the party pamphlet explains:

The class-related fact that the overwhelming majority of the young men and women, workers, peasants, fisher-folk and others who lost their lives in the struggle against chauvinistic oppression have been from families of socially depressed working masses should be clearly understood...the upper class elite and the upper middle-classes have sent abroad their offspring. Let us also remember that those who faced the various forms of oppression and suffered losses were mostly the ordinary working peoples. It is necessary to take into account the class based contribution of the people to the struggle that has been carried out as a national struggle. That is why the Party sees the nineteen years as not just concerning the struggle of the LTTE but also the oppression of the people.⁵⁰

There is thus a qualified endorsement of the Tamil struggle including the LTTE's determination to fight against "chauvinistic military oppression." Fully aware that its position is an unpopular one and one liable to bring harsh criticisms from many quarters it write:

...our party critically supported the relentless struggle carried out

by the LTTE on behalf of the Tamil people. As a result we were branded as 'Tigers' by elements speaking on behalf of the rulers and forces hostile to the LTTE. We nevertheless, did not fail to support what was just and what was right at any stage. Equally we did not hesitate to oppose what was wrong and against the people. This has been our Marxist Leninist position.... The other Tamil parties have compromised with chauvinism, and sing the praise of Indian hegemony and kowtow before it.⁵¹

Thus despite being aware of these criticisms and its own ambivalence and distrust of the LTTE's exclusive politics of Tamil nationalism, the NDP continue to support the Tamil militant struggle, albeit informed by a strong criticism of the LTTE:

...the LTTE deserves strong criticism and condemnation for its monolithic approach, denial of democracy and certain high handed actions. Their political ideology is Tamil nationalism. Despite some progressive features, they have been unable to cast aside Tamil conservatism and the political cultural trimmings that went with it. Its leadership remains a petit bourgeois leadership⁵²

This brief survey of the various Tamil left perspectives on the national question reveals that there were indeed some serious and passionate engagements with the national question and the ethnic crisis even from such members of left parties that had ultimately succumbed to majoritarian nationalism. The case of V. Ponnambalam particularly serves to underline how the left parties in Sri Lanka failed to heed Lenin's dire warning against what he saw as the Great Russian chauvinism within his own party. Perhaps Ponnambalam's greatest contribution was in pointing out the 'official' left's failure to go beyond the level of rhetoric and to take concrete and substantial actions based on the principles mechanically espoused. This brief survey also serves to remind us that to a great extent the entire left movement in Sri Lanka has been unfairly blamed for the failure of what were essentially the actions of the parliamentary or 'official' left parties. In fact, it is

the politics of this 'official left' as well as that of the JVP that has often been used to criticize the entire left movement both by the right wing as well as nationalists on both sides.⁵³ Despite their many failures, it is hoped that this exercise in recovering and recalling the left's perspectives on the national question and the ethnic crisis may be not only useful for understanding the complex political developments that have led to the tragic impasse in Sri Lanka but also serve as a first step in developing a critical handle and an ethically informed perspective on the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka.

This survey also alerts us to the fact that there was considerable movement in the left's attitude to the national question particularly with the escalation of the ethnic conflict. More recently, even the parliamentary left has attempted to distance itself from its earlier open collusion with Sinhala majoritarian nationalism and instead attempts to speak the language of self-determination—although this shift by all indications seems to be only at the level of rhetoric and lacks any real substance as Ponnambalam had so clearly observed.⁵⁴ Of the parties that remained outside the lure of coalition politics, it is only the NDP, the NSSP and some other smaller coalition of left parties that have self-consciously attempted to not only reassess the factors that have led to the ethnic conflict but also to re-examine and retheorize the national question.⁵⁵ This re-examination has in turn led to abandoning earlier recourse to outdated Marxist theoretical concepts on nation and nationalism such as the concept of historic and non-historic nations or even Stalin's five point criterion for a nation—which had been used earlier in efforts to deny the right of self-determination to minority nationalities in Sri Lanka.

This gradual movement towards a greater acceptance of the multi-ethnic nature of Sri Lanka and the right of self-determination itself suggests that the Sri Lankan left, much like their Indian counterparts was from the start exclusively state-centred if not majoritarian nationalist in its orientation. Recent work that lo-

cates the origins of the left movement in Sri Lanka diverse strands of anti-imperialist and nationalist currents such as the Suriya Mal movement makes this hardly surprising.⁵⁶ A variety of reasons have been offered for this state ‘centeredness’ of left parties in both India and Sri Lanka. One obvious reason may be that Marxism in India or Sri Lanka did not truly become indigenized, nor was there substantial effort made in this direction as was the case in some African countries. It certainly does not seem to have adequately theorized or grasped the multi-ethnic reality of South Asia—as much as it did in places such as Guinea-Bissau under left leaders such as Amilcar Cabral. This fact is certainly borne out by the observation made by an Indian left writer while reviewing the documents of the early Indian CPI. He had suggested that the major focus of these documents was “national unity of one nation—rather than the national unity of a multiplicity of nations” and goes on to charge that, “there never was a serious understanding of the heterogeneous nature of the Indian social formations, the Brahmanical idea of Arsha Bharatha, converted into the comprador ideology of Indian nation, was imbibed by communists of the period.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Kancha Ilaiah in his recent writings has commented wryly of the latent nationalism of the Indian left and called it a genuine variant of Indian nationalism—for which he had even coined the term “Brahminical Communist nationalism.”⁵⁸ Focussing mostly on the political trajectory of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI (M), Aditya Nigam has similarly attempted to illustrate how the CPI (M) had come to be “completely hegemonised by the dominant discourse of nationhood and national integration.”⁵⁹ Needless to say, other recent left academics in India have made similar observations including Sumanta Banerjee and Javeed Alam.⁶⁰

Sanmugathan’s political career itself offers a good example of a movement from a state-centred perspective to a more sympathetic reading of the Tamil struggle for self-determination. With the rising scale of the ethnic conflict, Sanmugathan, like many

left leaders, had moved considerably from his initial position on the national question and his earlier reluctance to endorse the Tamil militant struggle. Other more recent works of a similar persuasion have even gone beyond Sanmugathan in critiquing the nationalist bias of the Indian communist parties.⁶¹ A work in Tamil focusing on the life of the well known Tamilnadu communist leader and member of the CPI (M), P. Jeevanandan (commonly known as Jeeva), similarly charges that due to Jeeva's sympathies for some of the anti-caste reformist strands of Tamil nationalism and the Dravidian movement, many of the Brahmin leaders of the Marxist parties in Tamil Nadu were fearful and distrustful of him.⁶² In addition, the author, a former CPI (M) member, laments how the Brahmin leadership of the CPI (M) had intervened many times in the Sri Lankan crisis to make statements on behalf of a unitary state and against federalism and the Tamil liberation struggle.⁶³ More recently, V. Geetha, well known for her work on the Dravidian movement, has similarly observed, "As early as the 1940s left ideologues have resolutely opposed the demand for a separate Dravida Nadu by anti-caste radicals from Tamil Nadu, and failed to engage with the social and economic justice issues that lay at the core of this demand."⁶⁴ She also added, "In the Indian left context, as the historian Uma Chakravathy had noted that communist ideologues were far more attracted to building a secular ideal, bringing together Hindus and Muslims, than to building a communist block across caste and linguistic groups."⁶⁵

If there is evidence of statist or nationalist bias in the Indian parliamentary left parties as well as some work on the connection between the elite caste leadership of the Communist parties and their nationalist or state centred orientation, there is little comparable work on the Sri Lankan left. It is clear that many Sri Lankan left leaders harboured a similar statist if not Sinhala/Buddhist nationalist orientation.⁶⁶ What is important to consider here, is how this statist orientation and the latent nationalism of many of the left leaders translated in terms of the group rights or em-

powerment or disempowerment of certain groups and classes. Which groups, for example does the thinly veiled dominant discourse of national unity and national integration really serve, be it in India or Sri Lanka? If the state-centred vision of India (which is essentially synchronous with a Brahminical vision of India) held by many Indian communist leaders is so resistant to change, it is hardly surprising that the official left in Sri Lanka despite its Marxism had a vision of Sri Lanka as essentially an Indo-Aryan, Sinhala Buddhist civilization occasionally invaded by the nasty and dark skinned Dravidians (read Tamils).

It is in this context that Sanmugathan's writings on the transformation of a segment of the left in the South, the JVP, deserve special attention. He had noted that the JVP had been a "racialist" party from its inception, especially in its treatment of the plantation Tamils. However, he had noted that it was after being banned on suspicion for the 1983 pogrom that it had become dangerously communal and anti-Tamil:

It was during this period of illegality that the JVP went back to its former communalism and emerged as the most racist of the Sinhala parties...Infact the JVP provided the ideological leadership to the anti-Tamil chauvinist movement which was at the same time anti-UNP. This enabled it to draw near the SLFP and even attract to itself the support and sympathy of the rank and file of the SLFP as well as sections of the more chauvinist Buddhist clergy. It was a combination of these forces that joined together to form the Defence of the Motherland Organization in order to oppose the Presidents proposal for provincial councils...It was the JVP that provided the theoretical leadership to this movement.⁶⁷

Writing towards the very end of his life and conceding now that the JVP brand of communalism is particularly dangerous since it is so mixed up with the "left impulse," Shan had noted, "Having risen from the left, Wijeweera is using the current volatile communal atmosphere in Sri Lanka to promote a neo-fascist tendency—much in the way Mussolini did in Italy."⁶⁸ He had also added

that the JVP was particularly hostile to the Tamil struggle for self-determination:

The JVP's hatred of the Tamils and the armed struggle of the militants is almost paranoid... Their strategy is not that of revolution but a military putsch, carried out by the lower ranks of the armed forces and supported by the Buddhist clergy... The JVP is an anti-working class, anti-Tamil, counter revolutionary and potentially fascist force.⁶⁹

Having written this just a year or so before his death, one wonders whether Shan was finally beginning to compensate for his earlier silence on the extent to which Sinhala/Buddhist communalism had infected the body-politic of the southern left in Sri Lanka.

Epilogue

Despite the many failures and challenges in the left's handling of the national crisis in Sri Lanka, the left perspective, particularly in its ideal Leninist manifestation, which continues to inspire at least a segment of left thinkers in Sri Lanka, remains perhaps the most sensitive and ethical approach to dealing with the national question.⁷⁰ As a recent work on the nationalities policy of the formative Soviet "Affirmative Action Empire"⁷¹ between the crucial years of 1917 and 1923 suggests, there are indeed invaluable lessons to be learned from left attempts to negotiate between the demands of autonomy and safeguards for national minorities and the goals of equity and socialism—in this case the attempt to both safeguard the Soviet empire's numerous national minorities from Great Russian chauvinism and at the same time carry forward the socialist mandate. Lenin's dire warning against the dangers of what he termed the Bolshevik's own Great Russian chauvinism and his passionate plea to be generous to the national minorities in the face of severe opposition from figures such as Georgii

Piatokov and Nikolai Bukharin, who saw them simply as agents of counter-revolution, provides an abject lesson for many left leaders today who seem to have all but forgotten these important lessons from the Soviet experience.⁷² Lenin had argued that it was only by being respectful to the various nationalities that one could ensure that they do not fall into the hands of counter revolution nor deflect attention away from class struggle to struggles against national oppression. As Terry Martin notes of Lenin's argument, "Class would become the politically dominant social identity only if national identity was given proper respect."⁷³ Lenin's argument that the communist party had "inherited the psychology of great power chauvinism from the tsarist regime" and his clever quip "scratch any Communist and you will find a Great Russian chauvinist"⁷⁴ certainly should resonate for any thoughtful student of the vicissitudes of left history, particularly in Sri Lanka and India.⁷⁵



Shan in China

Selected Bibliography

Abhayavardhana, Hector. *Hector Abhayavardhana: Selected Writings*. Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 2005.

Alam, Javeed. "Communist Politics in Search of Hegemony," in Partha Chatterjee, ed. *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation State*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 180-206.

Amarasinghe, Ranjit. *Revolutionary Idealism and Parliamentary Politics: A Study of Trotskyism in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2000.

Arasaratnam, Sinnapah. *Sri Lanka after Independence: Nationalism, Communalism & Nation-Building*. Madras: U. Madras, 1986.

------. "Nationalism in Sri Lanka and the Tamils," in Michael Roberts, ed. *Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited, 2*. Colombo: Marga Institute. Balakrishnan, Janaki. *Communist Karthigesan*. Colombo: Janaki Balakrishnan, 2002.

Canagaratna, A.J. ed. *Regi Siriwardena, Vol. 2 Politics and Society*. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies. 2006.

Civacekaram, Ci. *Marapum Maarkciyavaathikalum* (Tradition and the Marxists). Chennai: Chennai Books, 1989.

Connor, Walker. *The National Question in Marxist Leninist Theory and Strategy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

C.R.D. (Committee for Rational Development), eds. *Sri Lanka: The Ethnic Conflict: Myths, Realities and Perspectives*. New Delhi: Navrang, 1984. David, Kumar, A. "Marxism and Ethnicity: Rethinking the Fundamentals," *Pravada*, Vol. 3, No. 7, Oct-Nov.1993, pp. 15-21

------. "Sri Lanka: Is there a way out?" *Capital and Class* 40 (1990): 1971-1976. Siri Gamage & I.B. Watson eds. *Conflict and Community in Contemporary Sri Lanka: 'Pearl of the East' or 'Island of Tears'?* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999.

Gamage, Siri. "Radicalisation of the Tamil Middle Class and Ethnic Violence in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* (Stockholm) 24, no.2 (1994), pp. 161-78.

-----, "Post-Independent Political Conflicts in Sri Lanka: Elites, Ethnicity, and Class Contradictions." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* (Nedlands, Western Australia) 20 (1997): pp. 359-95.

Ilaiah, Kancha. "Towards the Dalitisation of the Nation," in Partha Chatterjee, ed. *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation State*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Imayavaramban. *Suyanirnayam Pattri* (On Self Determination). Colombo: Puthiya Poomi Publishers, 2001.

-----, *Thanthaiyum Maintharum: Thamilarasu Katchi Araciyalin Vimarsanam* (Father and Progeny: A Critical Review of the Politics of the Federal Party). Colombo: Puthiya Poomi Publications, 2000.

-----, *Ina Odukkalum Viduthalai Porattamum: Aaiyvu Katturaikal*, Madras: South Asia Books, 1995.

-----, *On National Relations in Sri Lanka*. Madras: Chennai Books, 1988.

Jayawardena, Kumari. "The National Question and the Left Movement in Sri Lanka," *South Asia Bulletin* (Albany, NY) 7, No.1-2 (1987), pp. 11-22

-----, *Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Sanjiva Books, 2003.

-----, "Class/Ethnic Consciousness," *Seminar* (New Delhi), 337 (1987), pp. 19-25.

-----, *Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association and Sanjiva Books, 2003.

Jothylingam, S.A. *Ilankeyil Araciyal Katchimuramai* (Political Party System in Sri Lanka). Colombo: Kumaran Press, 2001.

Kailasapathy, K. "The Cultural and Linguistic Consciousness of the Tamil Community in Sri Lanka." in *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1979, pp. 107-20.

Karalasingam, V. *The Way Out for the Tamil Speaking People*. Colombo: Wesley Press, 1978.

Kadirgamar, Santhasilan. "Jaffna Youth Radicalism: the 1920's and 30's," Paper presented at *Trans/Formations: A Conference on Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism*. Dec. 16-19, 2004, Colombo.

-----, "The Left Tradition in Lankan Tamil Politics," in Rajan Philips, ed. *Sri Lanka: Global Challenges and National Crisis*. Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue and Social Scientists' Association, 2001, pp. 265-94.

Kearney, Robert N. "Ethnic Conflict and the Tamil Separatist Movement in Sri Lanka." *Asian Survey* 25, no. 9 (1985), pp. 898-917.

-----, "The Political Party System in Sri Lanka." *Political Science Quarterly* 98, No.1 (1983), pp. 17-33.

-----, "The Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Disrupted United Front Path to Socialism." *Asian Thought and Society* 1, No. 1 (1976), pp. 18-23.

-----, *The Politics of Sri Lanka*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1973.

-----, *Trade Unions and Politics in Ceylon*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.

-----, *Communalism and Language of Politics in Ceylon*. Durham Duke University Press, 1967.

Kuppusamy, Pu Ar. *Thozhar Jeeva: Maraikappatta Unmaikal. (Comrade Jeeva: Hidden Truths)*. Coimbatore: Vidiyal Pathippakam, 1997.

Lerski, Jerzy J. *Origins of Trotskyism in Ceylon: A Documentary History of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party 1935-1942*. California: Hoover Institute, 1968.

Manogaran, C. & Pfaffenberger, B. eds. *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity*. Westview Press: Colorado, 1994.

Martin, Terry. *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

Menon, Dilip. "Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: EMS Namboodripad and the Pasts of Kerala" in Daud Ali, ed. *Invoking the Past: the Uses of History in South Asia*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 55-90.

Moore, Mick. "Leading the Left to the Right: Populist Coalitions and Economic Reform." *World Development*, 25, No.7 (1997) pp. 1009-28.

Murray, Nancy. "The State against the Tamils," *Race & Class*: (London) 26, No.1 (1984), pp. 97-110.

Mutthiah, Wesley and Wanasinghe, Sydney, eds. *Two Languages One Nation-One Language Two Nations: The Lanka Sama Samaja Party On the State Language*. Colombo: A Young Socialist Publication, 2005.

New-Democratic Party. *Political Report of the Fourth National Congress*, Colombo: Puthiya Poomi, 2002.

Aditya Nigam. "Communist Politics Hegemonised," in Partha Chatterjee, ed. *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation State*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 207-37.

Ninaivukkuzhu. *Thozhar Pon Kandiah*. (Comrade Pon Kandiah). Colombo: UK Printers, 2003.

Nissan, Elizabeth & Stirrat, R.L. "The Generation of Communal Identities." in Jonathan Spencer, eds *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*. London Routledge, 1990.

Nithyanandan, V. "The Economics of Tamil Nationalism: Evolution and Challenge," Paper presented at *Trans/Formations: A Conference on Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism*. Dec. 16-19, 2004, Colombo.

-----". "An Analysis of Economic Factors behind the Origin and Development of Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka," Charles Abeysekera and Newton Gunasinghe eds, in *Facets of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*, Social Scientists' Association, Colombo, 1987, pp.100-171.

Ponnambalam, Satchi. *Sri Lanka: National Conflict and the Tamil Liberation Struggle*. London: Zed Books, 1983.

Pushparajah, S. *Eela Porattathil Enathu Saatchiyam* (My Testament in the Struggle for Eelam). Chennai: Adaiyalam, 2003.

Obeyesekera, Jayasumana. "Revolutionary Movements in Ceylon." in K. Gough & H. P. Sharma eds, *Imperialism & Revolution in South Asia*, New York: Monthly Review, 1973, pp 368-98.

Roberts, Michael. "Narrating Tamil Nationalism: Subjectivities and Issues," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, April 2004, pp. 87-108.

Sanmugathan, N. "Sri Lanka: The Story of the Holocaust." *Race & Class*: (London) 26, no.1 (1984):63-82.

------. *Political Memoirs of an Unrepentant Communist*. Colombo: N. Sanmugathan, 1989.

------. *A Marxist Looks at the History of Ceylon*. Colombo: Sarasavi Printers, 1972.

Senthivel, S.K. *Vadapulaththu Pothuvudamai Iyakkamum Thozhar Karthigesanum* (Socialist Movement in the North and Comrade Karthigesan). Colombo: Puthiya Poomi Publications, 2003.

------. *Illankai Idathusari Iyakkathin Aimbathu Andukal* (50 Years of Sri Lanka's Left History). Madras: Surya Acchagam, 1995.

Siriwardena, Regi. *Working Underground: The LSSP in Wartime*. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1999.

Sivanandan, A., Kumari Jayawardena & N. Shanmugaratnam "Sri Lanka: Racism and the Authoritarian State," *Race and Class* 26, no.1 (1984).

Sivathamby, Karthigesu. *Sri Lankan Tamil Society and Politics*. South Asian Books, 1995.

Suny, Ronald Grigor and Martin, Terry eds. *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

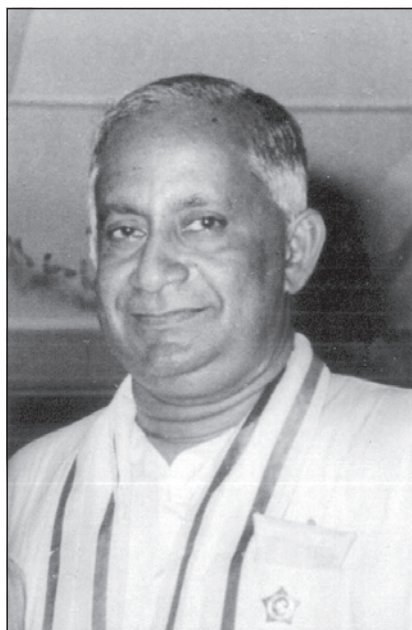
Tamil Arts & Literary Circle. *Marxisamum Thesiyamum* (Marxism and the National Question) London: Vasan Litho Publishers, 1995.

Vaitheespara, Ravi. "Beyond 'Benign' and 'Fascist' Nationalisms: Interrogating the Historiography of Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. XXIX, No.3, December 2006, pp. 435-58.

van der Kroef, Justus M. "Ceylon's Political Left: Its Development and Aspirations," *Pacific Affairs* 40, No.3-4 (1967-1968): pp.250-78.

Warnapala, W.A. Wiswa. "The Marxist Parties of Sri Lanka and the 1971 Insurrection," *Asian Survey*, 15, No.9 (1975), pp. 745-57.

Uyangoda, Jayadeva. "Review Essay: Reinterpreting Tamil and Sinhala Nationalisms," *South Asia Bulletin*, Vol. 7, 1987, pp. 39-46



N. Sanmugathanan

End Notes

¹ This is a modified version of the paper presented at the conference, *Tropes, Territories, and Competing Realities: Tamil Studies Conference* held at the University of Toronto, Canada, 11-14 May 2006 which has since been published in the conference volume. A preliminary version was also published in *New Democracy* (Sept. 2006). I would like to thank S. Sivasegaram, Mark Gabbert, Henry Heller, Eliakim Sibanda, V. Geetha, E. Thambiah, R. Cheran, M.S.S. Pandian, Rajan Kurai and J. Uyangoda for comments and helpful suggestions on earlier versions of this paper. I also am grateful for the interviews and discussions I had with S. Sivasegaram, K. Sivathamby, N. Sivahurunathan, S. Kadirgamar, S.K. Senthivel, J. Uyangoda and Bala Tampoe on the Sri Lankan Left. I am grateful to P. Thambirajah, chief librarian at ICES, and V. Thanabalasingham, editor of *Thinnakural*, who provided invaluable assistance in collecting materials for this study.

² Perhaps the best example of this early trend is the series of articles that appeared as a special issue at the first anniversary of July 83 in the journal *Race & Class* (Vol. XXVI, Summer 1984, No.1) including a hefty bibliography on the National Question in Sri Lanka by H.A.I. Goonetilleke. Other publications included those by the Social Scientists' Association, Colombo.

³ Rajan Hoole and Daya Somasundaram (eds.), *The Broken Palmyra: The Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka—An Inside Account*. Claremont: The Sri Lanka Studies Institute, 1988.

⁴ See my earlier work on the trajectory of the historiography of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka: Ravi Vaitheespara, "Beyond 'Benign' and 'Fascist' Nationalisms: Interrogating the Historiography of Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. XXIX, No.3, December 2006, pp. 435-58.

⁵ By the "national question" I mean the structure and organization of the relation between various communities within a nation state.

⁶ Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, "The Dangers of Devolution: The Hidden Economies of Armed Conflict," in Robert I. Rotberg, ed. *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1999, p. 57.

⁷ I am grateful to V. Geetha for helping me to clearly articulate this position.

⁸ This phrase by Colvin has been so widely cited that a book on the role of the LSSP in the language crisis with this phrase as a title has recently been published. See, Wesley Mutthiah and Sydney Wanasinghe, eds., *Two Languages One Nation—One Language Two Nations: The Lanka Sama Samaja Party On the State Language*. Colombo: A Young Socialist Publication, 2005.

⁹ Kumari Jayawardena, *Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Sanjiva Books, 2003.

¹⁰ Kumari Jayawardena, "The National Question and the Left Movement in Sri Lanka." in Charles Abeysekera and Newton Gunasinghe, eds., *Facets of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*, Social Scientists' Association, Colombo, 1987.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 233.

¹² Ibid., p. 231-33.

¹³ Ibid., p. 249.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 250.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 253-55.

¹⁶ See for example, Robert N. Kearney, *Communalism and Language of Politics in Ceylon*, Durham Duke University Press, 1967.

¹⁷ P. Kandiah, *Communist View on the Language Question* (taken from the Official Debate in Parliament, June 11, 1956),, Colombo: Seya Print & Prints, 2002, p. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 23-24.

²¹ Ibid., p. 24.

²² Ibid.,

²³ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁴ V. Karalasingam, *The Way Out for the Tamil Speaking People (including Post-script: 1977)*, Colombo: International Publishers, 1978.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

²⁶ Michael Roberts has been the latest to refute the claim that traditional Tamil areas were systematically colonized under government sponsored plans. He does this in the context of a review of Wilson's work on Tamil nationalism. See, Michael Roberts, "Narrating Tamil Nationalism: Subjectivities and Issues," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. XXVII, No.1 (April 2004), pp. 87-108.

²⁷ Ibid.,

²⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁹ He had said this when, towards the end of his life, the SLFP-led alliance swept the polls with a two-thirds majority, thus enabling a Sinhala-dominated coalition to amend the constitution at will and thus deny the Federal Party a role as king maker (S. Sivasekaram, personal communication).

³⁰ Ibid. pp., 23-24.

³¹ Ibid. p., 58.

³² Karalasingham felt the call for Tamil rights was itself inspired by the forces of reaction and imperialism and thus argued that "Marxists, can under no circumstances, be champions of the right of self determination. A common language and a contiguous territory in themselves are totally inadequate. The key question for him was reduced to the question: does it aid the struggle against imperialism?" *ibid.* pp., 54-55.

³³ Imayavaramban, *Thanthaiyum Maintharum: Thamilarasu Katchi Araciyalin Vimarsanam* (Father and Progeny: A Critical Review of the Politics of the Federal Party), Colombo: Puthiya Poomi Publications, 2000.

³⁴ V. Ponnambalam, *Senthamizhar Aagividuvom* (We will become Red-Tamils) Jaffna: Varathar Veliyeedu, 1978.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 47.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

³⁷ Michael Lowy, among others, has pointed out this distinctive contribution of Lenin to Marxist theories of nationalism in his more recent evaluation. See Michael Lowy, *Fatherland or Mother Earth? Essays on the National Question*, London: Pluto Press, 1998.

³⁸ Ponnambalam, *Senthamizhar*, pp. 51-52.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴⁰ For a more detailed discussion of this episode see Santhasilan Kadirgamar, "The Left Tradition in Lankan Tamil Politics," in Rajan Philips., ed., *Sri Lanka: Global Challenges and National Crisis*, Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue and Social Scientists' Association, 2001. pp. 286-94. Kadirgamar provides a sympathetic portrait of Ponnambalam and suggests that his failure was aided by betrayal from certain elements within the SLFP-Left coalition. Senthivel on the other hand suggests that his rather hasty intervention merely became a weapon in the hands of the right wing to make a mockery of the left. See S.K. Senthivel, *Vadapulaththu Pothuvudamai Iyakkamum Thozhar Karthigesanum* (The Communist Movement in the North and Comrade Karthigesan), Colombo: Puthiya Poomi Publications, 2003. pp. 123-24.

⁴¹ See, my unpublished working paper, "Sanmugathasan, the Left and the Ethnic Crisis in Sri Lanka."

⁴² Shan had asserted this in his historical work on Sri Lanka while in prison during the JVP insurrection in 1971. N. Sanmugathasan, *A Marxist Looks at the History of Ceylon*, Colombo: Sarasavi Printers, 1972. p. 64. Shan's coverage of the modern period is quite innovative and original and his analysis especially of the parliamentary Left, the SLFP and the MEP is brilliant. However, what is troubling is his rather unquestioning interpretation of early Sri Lankan history.

⁴³ S. Sivasegaram, *Ilankayin Inraiya Arasiyal Nilamaiyum Thesiya Sirupaanmai Inna Pirachanayum*. (The Current Political Situation in the Country and the Problem of the Minority Nationality), Nallur, Jaffna: Navalur Pathipagam, 1976.

⁴⁴ Despite this criticism they point to his brilliant achievements as a major trade union leader; as a theoretician who had clarified the ideas of Marxist-Leninism in the face of Soviet revisionism that had led the old CP to take the parliamentary path to socialism; as well as his role as an outstanding organizer of the anti-untouchability campaigns in the north. See Vehujan and Imayavaramban, *Communist Iyakkaththil Thozhar Sanmugathasan: Vimarsana Kannotam* (Sanmugathasan's Role in the Communist Movement: a Critical Appraisal) Madras: Puthiya Poomi Publications & South Asian Books, 1994. pp. 19-20.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Their list of publications includes a fair number devoted exclusively to the topic of the national question. See for example, Imayavaramban, *On National Relations in Sri Lanka*, Madras: Chennai Books, 1988; Imayavaramban, *Suyanirnayam Pattri* (On Self Determination), Colombo: Puthiya Poomi Publishers, 2001; Ina Odukkalum Viduthalai Porattamum: Aaiyvu Katturaikal, Madras: South Asian Books, 1995.

⁴⁷ New Democratic Party, Political Report of the Fourth National Congress (8, 9-2002), Colombo: Puthiya Poomi Publications, 2002

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 16.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 19.

⁵¹ Ibid. pp. 18-19.

⁵² Ibid. p. 18.

⁵³ I am grateful for S. Sivasegaram and E. Thambiah for pointing this out forcefully.

⁵⁴ The current parliamentary left like its earlier counterparts are part of the ruling coalition consisting of well-known Sinhala chauvinist parties. Although they say it is to wean the government away from chauvinism, it seems quite a lame excuse for political opportunism.

⁵⁵ This attempt at re-theorisation of the national question is evident from their numerous publications on the subject. See for example the already cited works by the NDP; for the NSSP, see for example, Vickramabahu Karunaratne, *Tribe, Nation and Assimilation of Nations*, Colombo: World Publications, 1983. V. Thirunavukkarasu, *Perinavathaththin Azhivē Ilankaiyin Viduvu*, (Elimination of Chauvinism is Sri Lanka's Salvation), Colombo: V. Thirnavukkarasu, 2005.

⁵⁶ See for example the work of Regi Siriwardena, *Working Underground: The LSSP in Wartime*, Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1999; Ranjit Amarasinghe, *Revolutionary Idealism and Parliamentary Politics: A Study of Trotskyism in Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2000.

⁵⁷ K. Venu asserts this in the introduction to the volume by T.G. Jacobs, ed., *National Question in India: CPI documents, 1942-47*, New Delhi: Odyssey Press, 1988, p. 6.

⁵⁸ Kancha Ilaiah, "Towards the Dalitisation of the Nation," in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation State*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 269.

⁵⁹ Aditya Nigam, "Communist Politics Hegemonised," in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation State*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 207.

⁶⁰ See Sumanta Banerjee, "Strategy, Tactics and Forms of Political Participation among Left Parties," in T.V. Satyamurthy ed., *Class Formation and Political Transformation in Postcolonial India*, Delhi: OUP, 1996, pp. 202-37; and Javeed Alam, "Communist Politics in Search of Hegemony" in Partha Chatterjee, ed., *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation State*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 179-80.

⁶¹ See for example Dilip Menon's analysis of the CPI (M) Brahmin chief minister of Kerala, EMS Namboodripaad's interpretation of Kerala history, which he argues sought to reinscribe a positive place for Brahmins and the Indian nation in light of the threat posed by the Dravidian movement. See, Dilip Menon, "Being a Brahmin the Marxist Way: E.M.S. Namboodripaad and the Pasts of Kerala" in Daud Ali, ed. *Invoking the Past: the Uses of History in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 55-90.

⁶² P. Jeevanandam, in addition to being an ardent communist party worker had sympathies for the anti-caste struggles of Periyar and the Dravidian movement. The author's main argument being that despite being Marxists, many of its elite Brahmin leaders were distinctly uncomfortable with anything that smacked remotely of pride in Tamil culture or Tamil regionalism and thus tended to marginalize someone such as Jeeva, who was known for his Tamil literary and oratorical skills and was able to garner much support among the Tamils. See Pu Ar Kuppusamy, *Thozhar Jeeva: Maraikappatta Unmaikal* (Comrade Jeeva: Hidden Truths), Coimbatore: Vidiyal Pathippakam, 1997.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶⁴ This was part of V. Geetha's brief review piece that was published as a response to an earlier version of this paper, which has been published in the successive issues of the left party journal *New Democracy*, Vols. 22 & 23, Sept & Nov. 2006 (Colombo).

⁶⁵ Uma Chakaravarty had conveyed this to Geetha in a personal note. *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Regi Siriwardena's writings on the Sri Lankan left strongly suggests this link between Sinhala/Buddhist nationalism and certain left tendencies in Sri Lanka. See, A.J, Canagaratna, ed., *Regi Siriwardena, Vol.2 Politics and Society*, Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies. 2006.

⁶⁷ N. Sanmugathan, "JVP and the Tamils," pp. 5-6. (unpublished private papers).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁰ Despite these failures there is certainly a renewed interest in Marxist approaches to nationalism, and the national question. There is also renewed interest in Otto Bauer's attempt to theorize nationalism which may be regarded as one of the more sustained and serious Marxist attempts to theorize nationalism despite its failings. For a discussion of this renewed interest, see "The Nation as a Common Fate: Otto Bauer Today," in Michael Lowy, *Fatherland or Mother Earth? Essays on the National Question*, London: Pluto Press, 1998.

⁷¹ The recent scholarly interest in Soviet policy toward their various nationalities perhaps suggests the beginning of a renewed interest in the Left's contribution to the nationality question. See for example, Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001; Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. I am thankful to V. Geetha for pointing these sources to me.

⁷² See, Terry Martin, "An Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest form of Imperialism," in Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 pp. 67-89.

⁷³ These quotes from Lenin are cited by Martin in his excellent discussion of the contest between Lenin and the 'Luxemburgists', *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁷⁴ These quotes of Lenin are cited by Terry Martin in the same article, see *Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁷⁵ A recent brief survey by E. Thambiah of contemporary left parties and their politics in Sri Lanka with respect to the ethnic question only confirms this argument. He argues that many of these parties though they often use terms such as the rights of self-determination opportunistically and are working quite happily in alliance with the current government and its ruling ideology 'Mahinda Chinthana,' which is committed to a strict unitary state and against any form of federal rule let alone the right to self-determination. See E Thambiah, *Suyanirayam Urimai Kurithu Olivumaraivuartra Piracaram Avaciyam* (A truthful and Clear Propaganda on the Right to Self-Determination is Necessary) Virakesari, 18.12.2005, p. 11.

INDEX

A

Alam, Javed, 61
Anderson, Benedict, ix
Athulathmudali, Lalith, 26

B

Bandaranaike, S.W.R.D, ix, 9, 20
Banerjee, Sumanta, 61
Bose, Subhas Chandra, 8
Bukharin, Nikolai, 8

C

Cabraal, Amilcar, 61
Chakravarthy, Uma, 62
Chelvanayagam, S.J.V, vii

D

de Silva, Colvin R, vii, xvi, 42

F

Fanon, Frantz, 28, 46

G

Geetha, V, 62
Guevara, Che, 17

H

Hitler, Adolf, 8

I

Ilaiah, Kancha, 61

J

Jayawardena, Kumari, 21, 42, 44-45
Jayawickrama, Nihal, xvi
Jeevanandam, P. 62

K

Kandiah, P, iii, v, xvi, 45-47
Karalasingham, V, iv-v, xvi, 48-51

Karthigesan, M, 54
Kearney, Robert, 45
Keuneman, Pieter, xvi
Krushchev, 4, 13

L

Lenin viii, 13, 53, 59, 64-65

M

Mann, Michael, ii
Martin, Terry, 65

N

Nehru, Jawaharlal, 7-8
Nigam, Aditya, 61
Nimni, E, i

P

Panikkar, K.M, 3
Perera, N.M, v
Piatokov, Georgi, 64-65
Ponnambalam, V, iv, vi-vii, ix, xvi,
52-53, 54-59

R

Rajasingham-Senanayake, Darini, 40-41

S

Samarakkody, Edmund, vi
Senanayake, D.S, 9-10, 12
Shanmugaratnam, N, 21
Sivanandan, A, 21
Stalin, Josef, 43, 60
Subramaniam, K.A, 56

U

United National Party, ii

W

Wijeweera, Rohana, ix, 3, 16, 17-18, 63