

THE WISDOM OF HINDSIGHT: SANMUGATHASAN, THE LEFT AND THE NATIONAL CRISIS IN SRI LANKA¹

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, far from diminishing, has over the years become normalized and integral to the political-military and even socio-economic balance and dynamic of Sri Lanka. This steady “normalization” of the war has been facilitated by the fact that the main theatre of carnage has been confined largely to the relatively restricted, predominantly Tamil and Muslim strongholds of the north and east of the island. Boasting a steady economic growth rate amidst and despite an ongoing civil war,² Sri Lanka continues to attract an extraordinary amount of foreign aid and capital for a host of reasons, including its strategic location both geographically, commercially and culturally, and as an attractive West-friendly tourist and commercial hub in the Indian Ocean. The apparent contradiction between what appears to be a modern, pro-western, rapidly globalizing Sri Lankan society— that for all its modernity and easy westernization is also at the same time prone to regular bouts of mass insurrections and pogromist violence—makes understanding contemporary Sri Lanka or the ongoing ethnic conflict all the more daunting.

Scholarship on the crisis has developed and transformed over the years reflecting in the process, aside from other factors, the changing dynamics of the conflict itself. If the dominant scholarly trend in the early years reflected a left/liberal bias that sought to locate the conflict within the wider national and international context of post-colonial Sri Lankan history and the rise and collusion of a virulent form of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian nationalism with state power, more recent scholarship seems to have come full circle³ with its focus on the local and the ‘fragment’ and has been more ethnographic in orientation.⁴ The shift towards the

normalization of the war has also helped shift the focus to Tamil violence and 'terrorism' which has come to be seen as the major irritant and impediment to an otherwise stable and prospering neo-liberal democracy in South Asia. Accompanying and paralleling this shift towards ethnography has been a trend towards an increasing, theoretically sophisticated, scholarship that no longer attributes the causes of the conflict to basic material and ideological struggles over access to jobs, resources and land but towards a more rarified and fundamental failure of the imagination—albeit of Sri Lanka's ruling classes and policy makers.⁵

It is against the background of these theoretically sophisticated and often obtuse scholarly developments that it would be instructive to invoke and consider a relatively more simple and straightforward analysis of the conflict—an analysis presented by a major trade union and communist party leader, N. Sanmugathasan, whose perspective on the crisis though quite simple and straightforward, and inflected by the language of Marxist orthodoxy, is still refreshingly prescient and insightful. It is also important to note here that given the significant role Sanmugathasan played in the Left and trade union movement in Sri Lanka, both as a leader and an outspoken ideologue and critic—influencing in the process successive generations of Left and trade union activists in Sri Lanka—it is surprising that Sanmugathasan has so far received little scholarly attention.⁶ Sanmugathasan's writings certainly deserve attention as his vision was above all informed and grounded in long and active political experience as a major trade union and communist party leader that spanned almost the entire period of post-colonial Sri Lankan history, when much of these tragic developments took place.⁷ What also makes his perspective particularly valuable is his understanding of the conflict as part and parcel of a broader unity of developments in Sri Lanka—developments that had led Sri Lanka from its earlier standing as one of Britain's 'model colonies' into political authoritarianism, militarism, ultra-nationalism and militant separatism. It is in the context of this failure that Sanmugathasan's writings

and perspective are particularly important and relevant. Recalling and perhaps affirming at least at the level of political economy, K. M. Panikkar's rather disparaging depiction of Sri Lanka as an island and a people thoroughly permeated and overwhelmed by colonialism and colonial culture,⁸ for Sanmugathasan the key to understanding much of the unfortunate trajectory of modern Sri Lankan history lay in the distinctly pro-imperialist and comprador character of Sri Lanka's ruling elite and political culture from the time well before formal independence to the present day.

Sanmugathasan, known as Shan by his associates, was certainly one of the most remarkable if not controversial figures in the history of the Left movement in Sri Lanka. He had risen to prominence as one of the most articulate champions and leader of the faction that broke from the parent Ceylon Communist Party (CCP) over its 'revisionism' and advocacy of the parliamentary path to socialism in the early 60's. The splinter led by Shan was of course much more radical and militant. Therefore, it was hardly surprising that it was under Shan's watch that the leader of the militant Jantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Rohana Wijeweera, joined the party becoming the leader of the youth wing before breaking off to form the JVP and launch what came to be one of the most bloodiest campaigns to seize state power in modern Sri Lankan history. Despite the fall out and setbacks from such adventures it is evident that Shan's role in the trade union movement and the Ceylon Communist Party was informed and radicalized by the broader role he played as a brilliant theoretician, doctrinaire ideologue and defender of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism among Marxist theoreticians and strategists in Sri Lanka and beyond. It was this commitment to what he considered the "correct principles" of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism that both underlined his steadfast if not dogged resistance to and rejection of the parliamentary path to socialism embraced by the major parliamentary Left parties in Sri Lanka. Shan's powerful critique and rejection of this 'revisionist' path—the parliamentary path to socialism—has special relevance to the present discussion

since it was this move by Sri Lanka's mainstream Left parties that is blamed not only for the betrayal of the working class, the fragmentation and demise of the Left as a potent force in Sri Lanka but also for the parliamentary Left's embrace of communalism and as the final straw in Sri Lanka's dangerous descent into extremist nationalism and full-scale ethnic conflagration.⁹

Hailing from relatively humble beginnings that marked him out from many of his left contemporaries,¹⁰ Shan had formally joined the Ceylon Communist Party (CCP) in 1943, right after graduating from the University of Ceylon and a year after it split from its parent Trotskyist, Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP).¹¹ Right from the beginning Shan was engaged with trade union work and in his life long role as a leader of some of the most powerful trade union organizations in Sri Lanka gained a reputation as one of the most militant trade unionists in Sri Lanka. This engagement with trade union work does not appear to have detracted from Shan's role as a great Marxist internationalist or his frequent international travels and familiarity with many of the leading international left figures and trade union leaders of his time.¹² Perhaps, it was this peculiar combination of being deeply tied to the workers struggle while at the same time being passionately engaged with the political and ideological debates gripping the international Marxist movement that gave him his radical edge and formed the basis of his unique Left vision and political ideology.

It was with the second major split in the Left movement in Sri Lanka, as a result of what was considered Khrushchev's 'revisionism' that included the advocacy of parliamentary path to socialism, that a significant segment of the party under Shan's leadership broke away to found the breakaway Ceylon Communist Party (Maoist). Shan had been the most articulate leader of the opposition to this 'revisionism' within the party and the breakaway group prided itself as the local representative of the 'correct' principles of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism—best represented at that time by Maoism and hence the party came to be identified

as the CCP (Maoist).¹³ This split had both local and international causes. While the international context of the split has been well documented by many writers including Shan, what appears to be relatively unknown is the fact that there may have been local factors and incentives for this split within the Sri Lankan communist movement. Though Shan himself has remained silent on the internal factors, perhaps for obvious political reasons, there is reason to believe that both the dominant left parties in Sri Lanka, the LSSP and the CCP, by the early 1960s, in their efforts to woo the majority community under the rules of parliamentary politics had themselves or at least a segment of the leadership come under the influence of Sinhala/Buddhist chauvinism. Hence the split led by Shan was thus not only a result of the international context but an attempt by a segment of the party including Shan to free itself from the rising tide of communalism within the party itself.¹⁴ It was this split and the resulting leadership position that gave Shan greater prominence and brought him into the national political limelight.¹⁵

Given these developments, it is hardly surprising that the CCP (Maoist) under Shan's leadership doggedly rejected the coalition and alliance politics with 'bourgeois' nationalist parties that both the mainstream left parties, the LSSP and the CCP (Moscow), had embraced from the late fifties. Though this strategy of the CCP (Maoist) may have closed the doors to avenues of state power, it also enabled it to be free from constraints such political power imposed. It thus opened the door to working with groups and issues that were not so practical or feasible for the parliamentary Left. For example, it opened up the possibility for Shan to organize the plantation workers of Indian Tamil origin in the tea estates, many of whom had been disenfranchised by the policies introduced by the first government in power into the famously militant 'Red Flag Union. The parliamentary Left was increasingly indisposed to organize these predominantly Tamil workers, who constituted Sri Lanka's largest proletariat population at the time, for fear of losing favour among the majority Sinhala com-

munity.¹⁶ Similarly, the CCP (Maoist) under Shan's leadership boldly took up the struggle of the highly oppressed 'untouchable' *Panchamar* castes among the Tamils in the Jaffna region.¹⁷ Given that the so-called untouchable castes in Jaffna were a minority with respect to the higher castes in all the electoral districts in the north meant that any political force dependent on its electoral strength could not afford to alienate the majority community. It is through his work with the Red Flag Union and his work in coordinating the militant anti-caste struggle in the north that Shan gained a reputation for his radicalism and militancy. It is in the context of such revolutionary militancy that when the JVP's violent mass insurrection surfaced in the early 1970s, Shan was arrested along with many other Left leaders and held in detention for about a year.

Although Shan had been a regular writer and contributor to the various party journals and newspapers,¹⁸ it was during his detention that he wrote his first major monograph length work, titled, *A Marxist Looks at the History of Ceylon*.¹⁹ In this and the final monograph-that he wrote towards the end of his life entitled, *The Memoirs of an Unrepentant Communist*,²⁰ as well as the essays²¹ that he wrote during his final days, Shan provides a unique perspective on the trajectory of modern Sri Lankan history and politics. Hailing not just from the Left but from a dissident Left perspective that was critical of the politics of the parliamentary Left in Sri Lanka, Shan's writings touch on a variety of subjects ranging from Sri Lanka's transition from colonialism to independence; the origins and trajectory of the Left movement in Sri Lanka; the leaders and politics of the two dominant political parties in Sri Lanka; the insurrection and politics of the JVP; and finally on the ethnic conflict and Tamil youth militancy and separatism. Given Shan's unusual and unique political location and experience, the perspectives he offers on these important subjects certainly deserve careful attention.

Independence or Neo-colonialism

One of the most striking and persistent themes in Shan's writings on modern Sri Lankan history is his overarching emphasis on the distinctly pro-imperialist and comprador character and orientation of its ruling classes and political culture. Contrasting this sharply with India, Shan in much of his writings drives home the point that the Ceylonese elite were decidedly much more pro-imperialist than was the case in India, and that there was very little of the kind of popular anti-colonial nationalism that was animating India at the time. As he explains quite bluntly in his *Memoirs*, "Ceylon had no national bourgeoisie and no revolutionary movement as in India."²² Unlike the case in most colonies, where one could expect both a comprador, pro-imperialist bourgeoisie to exist alongside a nationally oriented bourgeoisie, Shan asserts that there was only one kind and that it was distinctly pro-imperialist in character and orientation.²³ For Shan, it was only well after formal independence that a nationally oriented bourgeoisie emerged in Sri Lanka (in 1951) and that too from the very same elite, feudal class background that had spawned the comprador bourgeoisie. For Shan, this split in the ruling class had only occurred as result of personal rivalry and was largely motivated by political opportunism and populism.²⁴

Thus for Shan, the nationalist movement in Sri Lanka was not only rather weak from the start, but even the little that was there was largely inspired by the neighbouring popular Indian nationalist movement. For Shan, even this rather weak, largely imitative nationalism in Sri Lanka was primarily spearheaded by the anti-imperialist sentiments of the early Left leaders in Sri Lanka who also happened to be its most ardent supporters. Shan recalls for instance witnessing the future prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru flanked by some of Sri Lanka's early Left leaders, address a mass public rally at Colombo's main Galle Face Green in the early 1940s.²⁵

Similarly, Shan traces many of the founding fathers of the parliamentary Left to the same propertied and wealthy upper classes, “almost all of them invariably rich”²⁶—their parents having the means to send them to the West for an education. It is there they had first encountered anti-imperialist and Marxist currents of thought and that too only in the context of the great intellectual ferment taking place in places such as Cambridge in the face of the increasing threat of fascism and Hitler. There is thus a strong suggestion in Shan’s narratives that the Marxism that these founding fathers had imbibed was strongly conditioned by this context and that it was thus inseparable from their anti-imperialism and nationalism. It is in such a context that one needs to understand Shan’s rather backhanded allusion to the early leaders of the Trotskyist parliamentary Left party, the LSSP: “The LSSP leadership was Ceylon’s counterpart to the left wing of the Indian National Congress. They were the Nehrus and Boses of Ceylon.”²⁷ Thus, there is a suggestion here that the early Left in Sri Lanka was largely nationalist and social democratic in orientation.

It is in the same vein that Shan offers an analysis of the momentous events of Ceylon’s formal independence from Britain in 1948. Preferring to see this not so much as a moment of rupture but as a period of transition from colonialism to neo-colonialism, Shan depicts the new political configuration engendered by this event as an uneasy compromise between the imperialists and the native bourgeoisie. As he explains:

British imperialism which had been badly weakened (by the war)...could no longer continue to rule its colonies in the old way by direct force. It decided to arrive at a compromise with the native bourgeoisie... who had also begun to be alarmed that if the national liberation movements were to be allowed to develop in too revolutionary a way, it too would be swept away along with imperialism....This is the sham commodity that was passed off as independence in 1948 to countries like India, Burma and Ceylon. In 1948 Ceylon passed from colonial to neo-colonial rule.”²⁸

In fact, Shan goes even further to suggest that under this neo-colonialism there is even greater exploitation:

The same old colonial exploitation, with slight modification continued. In some cases, it was even strengthened. It is a fact that today there is more foreign imperialist investment in Sri Lanka than during the colonial period. But now the imperialists remained in the background. They took the back seat, while the native bourgeoisie was given the driver's seat. All the external trappings of independence—the national flag, the national anthem and, after some time, a Sri Lankan as Governor General—were there. But the strings of the puppets continued to be manipulated from Whitehall and Washington. This is the method that US imperialism had already perfected in Latin American countries.”²⁹

This neo-colonial character and orientation was central to Shan's analysis of Sri Lanka's post-colonial history. It was for him plainly evident in the policies pursued by independent Ceylon's first political party in power, the United National Party (UNP), which, as he points out, managed to obtain even this semblance of independence only after signing a defence pact with Britain.³⁰

This then is how Shan sets the stage for the emergence of a nationally oriented bourgeoisie and a bourgeois nationalist party in Sri Lanka. Thus for Shan, the UNP's pro-imperialist economic policies soon led to serious economic and political crisis and set the stage for the emergence of a more nationally oriented bourgeois party in 1951—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (SWRD). However, for Shan, this was hardly a revolutionary event, as it is often portrayed—its architect SWRD, hailing from the same class background as the ruling UNP leaders—and was for Shan principally motivated by personal rivalry, political opportunism and populism.³¹ As he explains, the split had occurred as a result of personal rivalry between the UNP leader D.S. Senanayake and SWRD who was “ the scion of one of Ceylon's leading pro-imperialist and aristocratic families and was married into a leading Kandyan feudal family.”³² Thus, for Shan,

even the emergence of this bourgeois nationalist party did not signal a significant departure from the political culture of neo-colonialism.

The Bandaranaike Revolution

It is against this background that one needs to understand Shan's reading of one of the most crucial periods of modern Sri Lankan history, fixed in the majoritarian nationalist imaginary as the 'Bandaranaike revolution.' This period is commonly portrayed with a great deal of ambivalence due to its paradoxical achievements, both as a movement towards decolonization, nationalization and the liberation of the ordinary Sinhala speaking common man from the tyranny of the 'Black-English man'—and also as a movement heralding the rapid rise of anti-Tamil communalism and that brought in its wake the dramatic institutionalization of the "Sinhala Only" policy and the first major anti-Tamil pogrom in 1958.

Though Shan concedes that the coming to power of SWRD with a hotchpotch alliance of anti-UNP groups called the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) "represented a water-shed in the recent history of Sri Lanka"³³, he is much less generous of its achievements and is even more critical of its impact—certainly in comparison to what is found in many extant accounts inspired in part by accounts of the parliamentary left—which tends to portray it as a people's revolution or even as a victory of the common man. Declaring that such assertions are not merely exaggerations but are utterly false and misleading,³⁴ Shan attributes the victory not just to SWRD's highly successful and populist "Sinhala Only" campaign and his appropriation of the radical slogans popularized by the left, but also, more ominously, to the work of a key segment of the MEP alliance, the Eksath Bhikku Peramuna, consisting of a group of radical young Buddhist priests who went all out on behalf of the MEP in their election campaigns and effectively used the influence of the Buddhist Sangha to rally the peo-

ple. Though hardly ever a sophisticated theorist of culture or nationalism, Shan here is clearly pointing to the enormous impact that the stirring up of Sinhala/Buddhist chauvinism had on the victory of the SWRD-led alliance and that signalled a major turning point in the political history of Sri Lanka. Underlining this mechanism and method of the bourgeois nationalist takeover, he writes: “Never before or after in recent times had the Buddhist priesthood played such a role in Ceylon politics.”³⁵

Thus for Shan, there was a great deal of populist chauvinism and opportunism in the SWRD-led victory despite the fact that once in power SWRD did in fact introduce some moderate reforms. Shan points out for example that there was indeed a shift to the left in terms of international diplomacy and a move towards the camp and politics of the non-aligned movement, resulting in more friendly relations with communist states than was the case previously.³⁶ The Left presence in government under the SLFP and its successors also ensured a certain degree of effort made towards encouraging a multi-ethnic Sri Lankan nationalism, which though giving primacy to Sinhala-Buddhist traditions still encouraged the development of other vernacular traditions as long as they endorsed a Sri Lankan identity.³⁷ However, Shan was careful in his praise:

Definitely a shift of power from the comprador bourgeoisie to the national bourgeoisie, from the Western oriented, English speaking, pro-imperialist minded section of the bourgeoisie to the national and anti-imperialist sections. But there was no revolution in the sense that the class structure of society was not disturbed... nor did the ...victory in any way affect the strangle hold of foreign imperialism on the economy.³⁸

This carefully worded and nuanced evaluation of the both the difference between the two major political parties in Sri Lanka as well as their underlying similarities certainly rings true if one looks closely at their policies, be it in terms of economic policies or the national question.

It was precisely due to such paradoxical outcomes that for Shan the “Bandaranaiake revolution” was in some sense far more dangerous since it along with the parliamentary Left tried to run capitalism better than the openly pro-imperialist capitalist class. Thus, for Shan, the greatest achievement of the “Bandaranaiake revolution” was to “contain behind what he called his ‘middle way,’ the potentially dangerous anti-UNP currents, to blunt its revolutionary edge and to divert it into the harmless channel of bourgeois parliamentary democracy.”³⁹

Urging the reader not to be misled by the halo and the legend that had been built around Bandaranaiake and his so-called ‘Middle Way’ which, in any case, he felt was an illogical and unscientific concept, he wrote:

The choice for Sri Lanka was between the slavery of neo-colonialism and genuine national independence. Bandaranaiake could not see this. When he died the chains of neo-colonialism were riveted on Sri Lanka even more firmly than when he took power. The exploitation to which the mass of the people were subjected remained just as severe. Not a single economic problem had been solved. The concept of a middle way is really an attempt to prettify the continuance of the status quo and an explanation for postponing radical change.⁴⁰

Thus, as far as Shan was concerned, people could be forgiven if they saw the UNP and the SLFP as essentially “A and B division of the same club.”⁴¹ His criticism of the SLFP was clearly driven by what he saw as its ability to subvert the efforts of the genuine Left parties in Sri Lanka. He was particularly troubled by the influence that the MEP victory had on the Left movement. He had, for example, written: “The desire to emulate the 1956 election victory of the MEP robbed the leadership of the LSSP and CP of whatever revolutionary pretences they might have had and converted them into faithful worshippers at the shrines of bourgeoisie parliamentary democracy.”⁴²

50 Years of Sri Lankan Left History

Shan's critique and perspective on the Left movement in Sri Lanka is perhaps his most original and noteworthy contribution. This critique is quite simple and straightforward, so much so that it risks being overlooked. For Shan, one of the cardinal principles of revolutionary Marxism-Leninism is that the state is first and foremost the instrument of the ruling classes. Any move to topple this ruling class and bring about significant social change and revolution cannot proceed without a violent overthrow of this state machinery and its instruments of repression. As he explains:

The entire left movement accepts Marxism-Leninism as its ideology—at least in words. Now a cardinal theory of Marxism-Leninism is the Marxist theory of the state which teaches us that the state, is the instrument of oppression of one class by another...Lenin has emphasized in his "State and Revolution" that without "smashing by force" this state machinery, it would be impossible for the working class to proceed to socialism; and also that the working class cannot take hold of the existing state machinery and use it for its purpose.⁴³

Thus, Shan's powerful critique of the Left movement in Sri Lanka hinges and rests on its failure to observe this fundamental principle of Marxism—it was a failure that for Shan had serious repercussions and consequences for the entire history of the left movement in Sri Lanka. Taking a clearly Maoist line, Shan, squarely blames this move on the impact of Khrushchev's ascendancy. It was

[Khrushchev] who had with a great ballyhoo...propagated the theories of peaceful coexistence with imperialism, peaceful competition with capitalism, and peaceful transition to socialism through parliament. Through his notorious visit to the USA, he inaugurated the era of political collusion with US imperialism and the consequent betrayal of all national liberation movements.⁴⁴

It was the Left's capitulation to this 'revisionism' that had spelt disaster to the entire Left movement in Sri Lanka. Shan was quite convinced that "modern revisionism is the final force that world capitalism has drawn up from within the working class movement."⁴⁵ It is through this powerful but logically simple explanation that Shan explains how the Left despite its promising beginnings in Sri Lanka went on to make a series of disastrous blunders that have not only discredited the whole Left movement but ruined its chances of being a potent revolutionary force. The list of blunders that he enumerates includes the failure to organize and the abandonment of the most exploited plantation Tamil workers for fear of reprisal from the majority community; breaking strikes in alliance with the United Front governments; the deafening silence over the mass butchery of the JVP youth; open communalism against the Tamils under the UF government; the narrowly communal and discriminatory 1972 republican constitution; and the so-called standardization of university entrance.⁴⁶ Thus for Shan, it was the Left's abandonment of the fundamental principles of Marxism-Leninism and its opportunistic embrace of the revisionist credo that had not only corrupted the Left but brought disaster to the whole nation. As he remarks rather impatiently towards the end of his life: "We have had more than fifty years of this tomfoolery of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. Yet at the end of it, the neo-colonial exploitation of Sri Lanka is worse than the colonial exploitation fifty years ago."⁴⁷

As mentioned earlier, Shan took particular aim at the alliance of the parliamentary Left parties with the Sinhala nationalist coalition led by the SLFP in a UF in 1968. As he explains:

"Marxism-Leninism teaches us that the working class must never accept the leadership of the bourgeoisie in any United Front...should always take care to safeguard its independence...The left in Sri Lanka did just the opposite. Its reformism and revisionism culminated in its total surrender to the SLFP...Once the left movement started slipping down the path of opportunism, there was no end to it."⁴⁸

Citing a powerful example of this surrender—the deafening silence during the mass slaughter of thousands of mostly rural Sinhala youth during the JVP insurrection—a time when both the LSSP and the CP was represented in government, he wrote:

Let us agree that the JVP was misguided and misled. Does that justify the massive slaughter of thousands of youth that took place? Can all the waters of the Mahaweli wash away the silence of the left parties at that time? Do the Sinhalese chauvinists of today realise that many more Sinhalese youth were slaughtered in 1971 than by the so-called terrorists last year?⁴⁹

Thus the official Left's primary concern with parliamentary power and the politics of majorities had, as Shan explains, "led them to a situation where they have come to decide issues not on whether they are right or wrong but whether they meet the approval of the Sinhala masses."⁵⁰ This is also the way he reads the Left's increasing flirtation with the politics of communalism:

That is why, except for the attempt by the Marxist-Leninists to organize the Red Flag Union, in the 1960s, the other parties have neglected plantation labour. It is not an organizational defect. It is a matter of politics. It is for the same reason that the LSSP and the CPSL have refrained from making a bold and revolutionary call in the matter of the Tamil problem. It is not without significance that so far they have refused to call for the withdrawal of the army from the North and East.⁵¹

Shan essentially points to at least two major reasons for this failure and why the official Left from a very early period "got dragged into the mire of parliamentary opportunism."⁵² First of all, he explains, "It was pushed in this direction by the relatively easy won victories to the state council at the general election of 1936 and the good showing at the first parliamentary elections of 1947. But the worst influence came from the MEP victory in 1956. The left leadership got fooled into the belief that what Mr. Bandaranaiake did they could do."⁵³ Secondly and perhaps more

importantly, Shan felt that this, “reformism and revisionism” of these official Left parties “really spring from their class character.” As he further noted:

Most of the left leaders were not only intellectuals but came from rich families (some of them feudal) who could afford to send their sons to Europe for higher studies. On their return, these men accumulated a fair amount of capital from whose investment they were able to lead a comfortable life....It is this contradiction of being wedded to big capital and at the same time pretending to espouse the cause of the working class and to stand for the abolition of the very source of wealth that gave them their own comfortable life [that] characterizes most of the left leadership.⁵⁴

He had added rather cynically, “These people played at revolution. Revolution was not in their class interest.”⁵⁵

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)

Perhaps it was because he had been partly blamed for the emergence of the JVP—since it was under Shan’s watch that Rohana Wijeweera had joined the Communist party and soon became the leader of its youth wing before splitting to form the militant Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Peoples Liberation Front) in the late 1960s Shan turned out to be one of its most insightful and far-sighted critics. As noted earlier the JVP insurrection against the centre-left United Front government in the early 1970s resulted in the wholesale slaughter of thousands of rural Sinhala youth and was the biggest blood bath in the modern history of Sri Lanka. One could easily argue that the radicalism of the JVP, even though misguided, was very much in the spirit of Shan’s own radicalism and perhaps ensured that he undertook a clear analysis of both its strengths and weaknesses. In his writings, Shan portrayed the insurrection as a misguided and badly planned adventure and was even quite convinced that it was a plot by Soviet and other

revisionist forces to oppose the growing influence of Maoism in Sri Lanka.

He was however careful to speak of its accomplishments as well as its errors.⁵⁶ He essentially located the JVP insurrection in context of the growing impoverishment and unemployment of predominantly rural Sinhala youth in the South who had not only become disenchanted with the record of successive governments but also in the promises made by the recently elected centre-left United Front government. It was this disgruntlement that Rohana Wijeweera and his small cohort of lieutenants were able to manipulate and mobilize. Arguing that the JVP ideology was essentially a romantic and petitbourgeois ideology much like that of Che Guevara with whom they identified, Shan argued that the JVP:

popularised the theory...that a relatively small group of armed bravadoes...could capture the state machine and afterwards attract the people to itself; and that this could be done irrespective of the maturity or otherwise of the revolutionary situation in a given country...and without a revolutionary party to lead the people.⁵⁷

Thus, the focus of Shan's powerful critique of the JVP was on its leadership with its "ridiculous personality cult" with no "democratic centralism," and the way it "lent itself to be manipulated by reaction"⁵⁸ and ended up largely as a counter-revolutionary movement. Its rank and file members, however for Shan, were "honestly revolutionary minded with a sense of dedication ... willing to sacrifice even their lives—unheard of before in Ceylon... He had, however, concluded, "The pity is that such sacrifice was in vain."⁵⁹ Thus for Shan, the JVP insurrection was one of the greatest misadventures and lost opportunities of modern Sri Lankan history, but yet reflected even in its utter failure and its counter-revolutionary end "the genuine desire of the youth for revolutionary change," and the general "breakdown of the faith in bourgeois parliamentary democracy."⁶⁰

One of the major outcomes of the insurrection was that the government was able to utilize the opportunity to suppress all the genuine revolutionary forces in the country. Thousands were arrested. Shan along with many Left party and trade union leaders were arrested. Shan was held in detention for nearly a year on charges of suspicion of involvement. While Shan has offered one of the most insightful analysis of the early JVP insurrection, which certainly warrants further scholarly attention, what is more pertinent to the present discussion is his analysis and foresight about the later transformation of the JVP as a virulently anti-Tamil Sinhala/Buddhist “neo-fascist” movement.

Though Shan had from the start observed that the JVP had been a “racialist” party from its inception, especially in its treatment of the plantation Tamils, it was only after being banned on suspicion after the 1983 pogrom that he felt that it had become dangerously anti-Tamil. As he explains:

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...In fact 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.⁶¹

Viewing the JVP brand of communalism as particularly dangerous since it is so “mixed up with the left impulse”, Shan had observed, “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.”⁶² It was in this sense that Shan saw the JVP as 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.⁶³

It is indeed difficult to believe that Shan could have written this farsighted observation before his death in 1993, long before the JVP had transformed itself wholesale as the most vociferous campaigner against the Tamil right to self-determination. It certainly confirms Shan's capacity for astute and far-sighted analysis.

On the Ethnic Conflict and Tamil Separatism

Shan's perspective on the rise of Sinhala/Buddhist chauvinism and the ethnic crisis is quite consistent with his overall analysis of the trajectory of modern Sri Lankan history. Clearly placing the blame at the doorstep of Sri Lanka's pro-imperialist and neo-colonial ruling classes, Shan had once sharply observed, "It has to be noted that the neo-colonial domination over Sri Lanka and the problem of the Tamil speaking minorities continue to be at the heart of Sri Lankan politics."⁶⁴ Thus, for Shan the scapegoating and oppression of the Tamils was simply the latest in a series of manoeuvres by which the Sri Lankan ruling elites sought to deflect attention away from their corrupt pro-imperialist and neo-colonial economic policies that served only themselves and their foreign imperialist master while denuding the country of its resources and impoverishing the masses.

Shan had traced the rise of Sinhala/Buddhist nationalism to the early 1920s when the earlier class and caste alliances of the Sinhala and Tamil elites begin to fracture in the context of the increasing devolution of power by the British. The fight over communal versus territorial representation that broke out between the Tamil and Sinhala elites in the early 20's, followed by D.S.

Senanayake's pan-Sinhala ministry in 1935, the move by Senanayake to disenfranchise a million upcountry Tamils in 1947, and more ominously the SWRD and MEP victory through courting Sinhala/Buddhist chauvinism, were for Shan some of the milestones in this early history of Sinhala/Buddhist chauvinism.⁶⁵ As mentioned earlier, Shan essentially saw these developments as an attempt by the neo-colonial Sinhala elites to deflect attention away from the worsening economic condition that their neo-colonial policies were producing. Thus, for Shan, even the language crisis had been produced by this worsening economic crisis and unemployment among the majority Sinhala community. As he explains:

...the economic issues were at the bottom of the language crisis. Before 1956, knowledge of the English language had been the passport to service under the government....Compelled by the pressure of unemployment the Sinhalese wanted Sinhala only to be the official language—thus giving them the best chance of service under the government. Because in a non-industrialised country like Sri Lanka, government...is also the most gainful occupation, the battle of the languages was in reality a battle for government jobs for the respective middle classes. That is also the reason why no solution other than an economic one can ever bring lasting results.⁶⁶

Though hardly a persuasive or sophisticated theorist of culture or nationalism, it is evident that Shan here is pointing to the complex conjuncture of economic woes and incipient Sinhala/Buddhist chauvinism that began in earnest with the MEP victory and that proceeded to harness and exploit the ideology of Sinhala/Buddhist 'race' as the 'chosen people' and periodically utilizes anti-Tamil pogromist violence as a way of both unifying the Sinhala masses and deflecting them away from thoughts of rebellion against the state or focusing on class struggle.⁶⁷ It is a phenomenon and trajectory that has since been well documented by

scholars such as Kumari Jayawardena, N. Shanmugaratnam, A. Sivanandan and Stanley Tambiah.⁶⁸

Shan's perceptive and farsighted analysis of the rise of Sinhala/Buddhist nationalism and the subsequent oppression of the Tamils did not, however, translate into support for Tamil nationalism. Instead, Shan appears to have been quite content to merely critique both Sinhala/Buddhist nationalism and what he regarded as the narrow bourgeois Tamil nationalism that had sprung up to oppose it. His writings up until at least the 1980s reveal that he sought to distance himself from any talk of Tamil nationalism or even on the more theoretical question of the Tamil right to self determination. In fact, in his grand narrative of the history of Sri Lanka, Shan does not even attempt to interrogate the popular Sinhala/Buddhist understanding of Sri Lanka as the birth place of the glorious Sinhala/Buddhist hydraulic civilization. It is also in the same work that he had declared rather boldly that Tamils do not constitute a nation as they do not fulfil the five point requirements set out by Stalin.⁶⁹ Thus, it appears that Shan, perhaps in his efforts to present himself first and foremost as a national leader able to transcend narrow ethnic affiliations, particularly one that belonged to the minority community, sought to project an image of himself as someone without any sense of Tamil ethnic particularism or loyalty. Even during the brutal and heavy-handed state repression of the Tamils in the late 1970s, Shan had remained largely silent and failed to take any concrete action. His failure on this issue is particularly striking given the fact that a number of his own senior party leaders and cadres had repeatedly called for such an intervention.⁷⁰

It may be conjectured that Shan and his party's failure to seize this opportunity has had a profound impact on the nature of the Tamil militant struggle that followed. Had Shan and his party seized the opportunity, they perhaps could have provided the crucial organizational, ideological and intellectual leadership that was badly needed for the Tamil struggle and, furthermore, could have served to check the excesses, the undisciplined and

internecine conflicts within the Tamil liberation struggle itself. Shan's as well as the Left's failure to seriously take up this issue may have also served to further weaken the popularity of the Left movement among the Tamils.

The 1983 pogrom against the Tamils was clearly a decisive turning point for Shan. Having personally witnessed the carnage, apparently from an upstairs window in Colombo, he had become finally convinced not only of the extent of state collusion in the violence but also of the incredible gulf that had been created as a result between the two communities. It was from this point on that Shan adopted a much more sympathetic if not strident reading of Tamil militancy and of indeed the Tamil struggle for self-determination. On the first anniversary of the 1983 carnage, as if echoing his own conversion experience, he had observed:

The anti-Tamil holocaust of July 1983, in which nearly 2000 Tamils died while thousands of others lost their houses and property... [meant that] Most Tamils finally lost the hope that they could ever peacefully live among the Sinhalese as equals. That many of them are still living among the Sinhalese is true. But they are living as second class citizens—in perpetual fear of another holocaust.⁷¹

Despite this about turn, Shan still clung on to his critique of the earlier politics of the Tamil bourgeois parliamentary parties. For Shan now, the turning point of the Tamil struggle had been the realization by radical Tamil youth that the Tamil bourgeois parliamentary parties despite their defiant rhetoric constituted an impotent and bankrupt force, which could never deliver on its promise to safeguard the Tamils. He thus presents the Tamil struggle and its gradual transformation into a violent armed struggle as a logical and inevitable outcome given the long history of oppression endured by the Tamils.⁷² His only major reservation was that the Tamil youth did not adequately study or follow the Marxist-Leninist path of a liberation struggle. As he explains:

It is true that, for pragmatic reasons they first resorted to armed struggle and thereafter went in search of an ideology that would justify such action. Naturally they found it in Marxism-Leninism. There is nothing wrong in this except that most of the Tamil militant groups did not seem to have studied Marxism-Leninism sufficiently and deeply...⁷³

Thus, after decades of ignoring the legitimate basis for a Tamil struggle, Shan after the 1983 pogrom began to publicly endorse the Tamil militant struggle. Defending such a position at the first anniversary of the 1983 pogrom, he had observed:

The Marxist-Leninist attitude to individual terrorism is quite clear. We do not support it because it is based fundamentally on romantic and petit-bourgeois ideology which is characterised by a lack of faith in the masses. It places its main reliance on a brand of swash buckling 'Three Musketeers' type of bravado...But at the same time, the phenomenon of terrorism must be examined in the context from which it arose. We cannot make a blanket condemnation of terrorism. Otherwise, we would be like the Israelis who condemn the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as a terrorist organization. The militant youth of Jaffna took to terrorism because of the repression and the harassment practiced by the predominantly Sinhala army...⁷⁴

This rather ambivalently worded support for Tamil youth militancy after decades of inaction did not mean that Shan was uncritical in his support. What distinguished Shan's support from many of his Left contemporaries was that not only did he now enthusiastically endorse the Tamil militant struggle but urged that any criticism of them should only be made "while standing on the same side of the barricades" as the militants. He made this clear while writing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) struggle against the Indian Peace Keeping Force:

The LTTE has made tactical blunders in both policy and practice. But they are fighting the main enemy the Indian expansionists.

Any criticisms of the LTTE therefore must be made while standing on the same side of the barricades as the LTTE...⁷⁵

This greater endorsement did not come without criticisms of especially the methods and policies of the Tamil militants. Shan was essentially interested in moving forward Tamil militant resistance towards what he envisioned as a full fledged liberationist struggle. He had for example observed:

From the beginning, the militant groups committed serious tactical errors. In the first place they were not united. Five major groups sprang up and constantly collided with each other. Because of this disunity, the Indian secret service (RAW) was able to influence them and use one group against the other and thus weaken all groups. Secondly they did not learn the lessons taught by Mao about how to conduct people's war. Nor, did they understand Mao's teaching about 'making use of contradictions (among the enemy), win over the many, isolate the few, and defeat your enemy, one by one.' Faced with the temporarily superior might of the Sri Lankan state, it was folly to have played into its hand and isolate themselves from the Sinhalese by wanton and in-excusable killings of innocent Sinhalese. They also refused to arm the people and make them participate in a people's war. The political maturity of the militants was very low although some of them mouthed Marxist slogans... They reversed Mao's teaching that the gun must never be allowed to command the party; the party must always command the gun... But perhaps their most serious strategic mistake was to negate all ideas of self-reliance and to completely rely on India.⁷⁶

This rather perceptive and in-depth criticism of Tamil youth militancy certainly indicates that Shan was not simply overcompensating for his earlier reluctance to endorse Tamil militancy.

Shan was also particularly wary of India using the ethnic conflict towards its own expansionist aims. He had observed: "...it is now clear that India's support to the Tamil militants was given with the ulterior motive of using them to destabilize Sri Lanka and help bring about India's hegemony in Sri Lanka."⁷⁷ It is in

this context that he seems to have cultivated a particular appreciation of the LTTE's independent and self-reliant orientation:

The LTTE despite its many mistakes, is the only force in the field that is resolutely standing up to fighting the fourth largest army in the world...Of the other militant groups, except PLOTE, all other groups like the EPRLF, TELO, ENDLF etc. have sold themselves into bondage to the Indian expansionists and have become not only their agents but even their informers. This treachery will neither be forgotten or forgiven by the Tamil people.⁷⁸

Shan's preference for the much more nationalistic LTTE, over the much more left-oriented movements such as the EPRLF and ENDLF is certainly surprising. Aside from the Indian factor that may have influenced his preferences, it may point to the fact that Shan was not entirely persuaded by the Marxist credentials of the more left-oriented militant groups such as the EPRLF and ENDLF. This is in a sense borne out by his observation cited earlier where he says that the militant Tamil youth took up arms first and only later "went in search of an ideology that would justify such action,"⁷⁹ or even the observation cited above, "The political maturity of the militants was very low although some of them mouthed Marxist slogans." There is thus a strong suggestion in Shan's writings that he was not entirely persuaded of the Marxism espoused especially by the more left-oriented Tamil militant movements.

Shan's endorsement of Tamil militancy, however, did not mean he favoured separation. He now felt that the path to unity lay in first recognizing the Tamil right to self-determination:

The basic reason for this failure is that that the Sri Lankan government and the Sinhala chauvinist leadership refused to accept the fact that the Tamils are a nation who have lived in contiguous territories in the northern and eastern provinces for a very long period of time and that therefore they are entitled to the right of self-determination. Unless the right is accepted and acknowledged there can be no solution to the current Tamil problem.⁸⁰

Once this recognition is conceded, however, the demand for a separate state could become less insistent:

Once the right is accepted, it can there after become possible for progressive Sinhalese people to request the Tamils in the name of uniting all of the revolutionary forces of Sri Lanka, not to exercise their right of self determination...but to exercise it in the form of a federal state or full regional autonomy for a Tamil speaking linguistic region consisting of the northern and eastern provinces.⁸¹

For Shan, the solution would certainly not be possible under the neo-colonial political culture of the two major political parties in Sri Lanka, the UNP and the SLFP. It would lie ultimately in uniting the Sinhala and Tamil revolutionary forces:

But such a development cannot take place inside the present neo-colonial context or under the leadership of either the UNP or the SLFP...That is why the urgent task of the hour is for the Sinhalese revolutionary forces to make common cause with the Tamil revolutionary forces and unite a common struggle against reaction and repression. It is the masses of the Sinhalese and the Tamils who are paying the price for the costly war against the Tamils. The billions of rupees spent on this costly war against fellow citizens do not come out of the pockets of either Jayewardene or Athulathmudali...The winning of the right of self determination is part of Sri Lanka's democratic revolution which must bring together the revolutionary forces from among both the Sinhalese and the Tamils particularly workers, peasants and radical intelligentsia—irrespective of language, caste or creed.⁸²

Concluding Remark

It is evident from this brief survey that Shan's analysis and observations on the trajectory of modern Sri Lankan history and the ethnic crisis are certainly daring and provocative. Though scholars have since his time elaborated if not fine tuned some of his insights, this often has been at the expense of the powerful and

unified perspective on Sri Lanka's post-colonial history that Shan's own writings present. Shan's explanatory framework rests on three or four recurring themes that can be found throughout much of his writings. First and foremost is Shan's insistent emphasis on the unusually pro-imperialist and comprador nature of Sri Lanka's ruling elite. A related theme is that given this dominant comprador orientation of Sri Lanka's ruling elite, the emergence of a nationally oriented bourgeoisie not only had to wait till well after formal independence, but that when it did emerge, it was cut from the very same cloth as the pro-imperialist bourgeois class. Having hailed from the very same class, this nationally oriented bourgeois-leadership had to resort to the cynical manipulation of a populist Sinhala/Buddhist chauvinism to gain ascendancy. It is in this sense that Shan's bold pronouncement that Sri Lanka's two major political parties the UNP and the SLFP are essentially "A and B division of the same club" makes sense and is particularly resonant for any contemporary observer of Sri Lanka politics. It is also in this context that we need to read Shan's rather astute observation that the "neo-colonial domination over Sri Lanka and the problem of the Tamil speaking minorities continue to be at the heart of Sri Lankan politics." Certainly the haste in which both the UNP and SLFP-led governments have used the slogan "war against terror" and "war to preserve the motherland" to unleash harsh and oppressive authoritarian rule, slash social services, break up strikes and the power of labour unions, privatize former state enterprises and essentially open up Sri Lanka to foreign neo-imperialist capital appears to confirm Shan's rather critical view of the politics of Sri Lanka's two main national parties.

Given Shan's over half century experience as a Left leader, his critique and observations of the parliamentary Left and the JVP certainly deserves serious consideration and careful scrutiny. His critique of this reformist and 'revisionist' tendency in the Left from its very inception is quite persuasive and powerful.⁸³ Similarly his analysis and critique of the JVP, particularly its later

manifestation as an anti-Tamil neo-fascist organization, appears to be extremely far sighted and important.

What is, however, surprising in Shan's analysis and critique of the Left movement is his reluctance and hesitation to directly address the question of nationalism and identity politics within the movement itself. Given the fact that there is evidence to believe that, as a minority leader of a national party, Shan himself came under increasing pressure and perhaps even incidents of discrimination—if not from ordinary cadres but from others in leadership positions—there is hardly any allusion to this in his writings. What one finds instead are indirect allusions usually in the form of cynical references to certain left leaders courting popularity through public obeisance to Buddhism. This reticence on Shan's part should not perhaps be seen as an isolated case but rather as typical for a generation of Left leaders—who in their efforts to conform to the ideals of a largely Euro-centric Marxism with its primary emphasis on class and class struggle failed to adequately theorize the complex ways in which earlier non-class identities intersected with class struggle in colonial societies. While the progressivism of Shan cannot be questioned, it is clear that his position would have been on a much stronger footing if he had adequately studied and attempted to theorize the local socio-cultural reality in light of his understanding of Marxism in the fashion of Afro-Caribbean figures such as Amilcar Cabral or even Frantz Fanon.

It is perhaps with these limitations in mind that one needs to understand Shan's dramatic reversal of his earlier stand on the national question and his later endorsement of the Tamil militant struggle after the 1983 pogrom. Though Shan provides a persuasive argument for endorsing the Tamil militant struggle at the same time as he provides an excellent critique of some of the methods and tactics of the Tamil militants, he leaves unanswered the question as to how precisely to address the contradictions between a movement impelled primarily by nationalism, albeit of a defensive kind, and the struggle for national liberation. These limita-

tions, however, should not detract from appreciating Shan's insightful and farsighted commentary on the tragic fate of Sri Lanka's post-colonial history.

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End Notes

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² Several scholars have noted what appears to be this paradoxical economic growth. Some argue that the civil war itself has become an important vehicle of economic growth. See for example, Rajesh, Venugopal, 'Tamil Nationalism in the Era of Neo-Liberalism: The Changing Global Parameters of Self-Determination and Statehood', Paper presented at *Trans/Formations: A Conference on Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism*, Colombo, 16–19 Dec. 2004; see also, Deborah Winslow, and Michael D. Woost. *Economy, Culture and Civil War in Sri Lanka*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004.

³ I have pointed this change in the approach to the conflict in my earlier article on the historiography of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka. See, 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.

⁴ A trend best exemplified in the work of Valentine Daniel. see Valentine E Daniel., *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

⁵ The basic argument proposed here is that Sri Lankan policy makers need to free themselves from Euro-centric epistemological categories and models of governance when negotiating Sri Lanka's difficult transition to modernity. I am thinking here of the arguments presented in recent works on post-colonial Sri Lanka and the conflict by scholars such as Qadri Ismail and David Scott.

⁶ Aside from a few brief sketches of his life and a couple of critical essays on him in Tamil, there is no substantial essay or monograph length work devoted to Sanmugathasan in the English language. Professor N. Shanmugaratnam's Review of Sanmugathasan's 'Memoirs' is a brief but excellent sketch of Sanmugathasan's life and career. See N. Shanmugaratnam. Book review: Political Memoirs of an Unrepentant Communist *Race & Class*, 1 1990, Vol. 31, pp. 89-92. There is also a booklet devoted to Sanmugathasan in Tamil in the form of two critical essays on Sanmugathasan's role in the Left movement by two of his former associates and comrades. See, Vehujan and Imayavaramban, *Communist Iyakkathil 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. There is also a brief but interesting reminiscence of Sanmugathasan by R. Cheran, See R. Cheran, *Uyir Kollum Varthaigal*, (Life Giving Words), Chennai: Kalachuvadu Pathpagam, 2001. See also my earlier essay which attempt to place Sanmugathasan's views on the

national question within the broader left movement in Sri Lanka, "Towards a Tamil Left Perspective on the National Crisis in Sri Lanka" in R. Cheran, D. Ambalavanar, and C. Kanaganayakam, eds. *History and Imagination: Tamil Culture in the Global Context*, Toronto: TSAR Publications, 2007, pp. 90-123.

⁷ Shan's political career spanned almost the entire span of official left history in Sri Lanka and coincided neatly with the full breadth of post-independence history from around the early 1940s to his death in 1993, when much of these crucial events and transformations took place.

⁸ Panikkar had suggested this in his early work. See K.M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance : a Survey of the Vasco da Gama Epoch of Asian History, 1498-194*, New ed., 1959.

⁹ As is now well known the Sri Lankan Left had not only played a significant and progressive role in the formative period of post independent Sri Lankan history but was also one of the most staunch defenders of Sri Lanka's minority nationalities. It had only capitulated to Sinhala/Buddhist nationalism from around the early 1960s when it began to embrace the politics of coalition and advocate the parliamentary path to socialism in its quest for political power.

¹⁰ Shan's father, hailing originally from Jaffna, had worked as a rubber maker in an estate. Shan began working for the Ceylon Trade Union Federation from the joined the communist Party. See, N. Sanmugathan, *Political Memoirs of an Unrepentant Communist*, Colombo: N. Sanmugathan, 1989, pp. 42-43.

¹¹ The origin of the Left movement and its first official political party the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) is traced to the early 1930s when a loose coalition of individuals with nationalist as well as Left orientations came together to form a political organization. Many of its prominent early leaders had been educated in the West where they had been first exposed to and came under the influence of anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, nationalist and Marxist currents of thought.

¹² In his 'Memoirs' Shan describes his frequent visits and easy familiarity with communist leaders in places such as the Soviet Union, Europe, India, China and Albania, including his memorable meeting with Mao. See, *Political Memoirs*, pp. 73-80.

¹³ Shan devotes a whole chapter to explaining this split. See, *Political Memoirs*, pp. 134-56.

¹⁴ I owe this interpretation of the split to Professor N. Shanmugaratnam. Shanmugaratnam at that time was a member of a student socialist body at the University of Peradeniya, which was allied to the Communist Party. He recounts that during this split some members supporting the Moscow wing of the party had both secretly and openly attacked Shan on a communal basis, based on his Tamil ethnicity. There is also the much spoken example of the CCP leader Pieter Keuneman, who often referred to Shan as Nagalinam Sanmugathan to emphasise his Tamil identity in the 1960s. (S. Sivasekaram, personal communication). Shanmugaratnam attributes the emergence of this kind of communalism within the Communist Party to its flirtation with parliamentary politics and the politics of majoritarianism. from the late 1950s. Shanmugaratnam also recalls that by this time many even among the rank and file of the party believed that

the leader of the Communist party should be chosen from the majority community (personal communication). See also Samuthiran (alias N. Shanmugaratnam), *IlnkaiDesiya Inap Prachanai* (The Ethnic Problem of Sri Lanka), Bangalore: Kavya and Padigal Publishers, 1983, pp. 60-61.

¹⁵ This assertion was made in the collection of essays by 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.

¹⁶ Shan describes his party's attempts in this direction including his organization of the Red Flag Union in detail in his memoirs. See, *Political Memoirs*, pp. 159-70.

¹⁷ He describes this in some detail in the section "The Struggle against Caste" in *Political Memoirs*, pp. 159-70.

¹⁸ His articles appeared mostly in the two party weeklies, *Kamkaruwa* and *Thozhilali*. The former was briefly a daily. (S. Sivasegaram, personal communication)

¹⁹N. Sanmugathasan, *A Marxist Looks at the History of Ceylon*. Colombo: Sarasavi Printers, 1972.

²⁰ N. Sanmugathasan, *Political Memoirs*.

²¹ Most of these essays are unpublished handwritten essays, some have been translated in Tamil and published by the Shanmugathasan Centre for Marxist Studies, Colombo. See for example, N. Shanmugathasan, *The Life and Teachings of Karl Marx*. (Essays on Marx and Marxist theory in English and Tamil) 2002; and N. Shanmugathasan, *Sanmugathasan Katturaikal* (Shanmugathasan's Essays). 2003.

²² *Political Memoirs*, p. 31.

²³ *Political Memoirs*, p. 58.

²⁴ *Political Memoirs*, p. 71.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 31.

²⁶ *Political Memoirs*, p. 29.

²⁷ Shan is especially critical of many of the upper middle-class leaders of the Trotskyist party, the LSSP. See, *Political Memoirs*, p. 31.

²⁸ *Political Memoirs.*, pp. 68-69.

²⁹ *Political Memoirs.*, p. 68.

³⁰ *Political Memoirs*, p. 70.

³¹ *Political Memoirs* pp. 71-72.

³² *Political Memoirs*, p. 71.

³³ *Political Memoirs*, p. 92

³⁴ *Political Memoirs*, p. 93.

³⁵ *Political Memoirs*, p. 92.

³⁶ *Ibid.*,

³⁷ The best example of this being the patronage given to organizations such as the Tamil progressive writers association by the CCP.

³⁸ *Political Memoirs*. p. 93.

³⁹ *Political Memoirs*, p. 93.

⁴⁰ *Political Memoirs*, p. 111.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Political Memoirs*, pp. 93-94. Certainly, the politics of SWRD's successors and even the politics of the more recent dispensation under *Mahinda Chintana* certainly appear to confirm much of Shan's cynicism towards the SLFP brand of opportunist, chauvinist and populist politics.

⁴³ N. Sanmugathasan, "Fifty Years of the Left Movement," handwritten unpublished paper, p. 1. This essay has been translated and published in Tamil. See N. Shanmugathasan, *Sanmugathasan Katturaikal*. (Sanmugathasan's Essays) Colombo: Shanmugathasan Centre for Marxist Studies, 2003.

⁴⁴ *Political Memoirs*, p. 135.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁴⁶ *Political Memoirs*, p. 197-98.

⁴⁷ "Fifty Years.," p. 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁵⁶ *Political Memoirs*, p. 199.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 200-202.

⁶¹ N. Sanmugathasan, "JVP and the Tamils," unpublished handwritten essay, pp. 5-6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶⁴ See, *Political Memoirs*, p. 286.

⁶⁵ He had chronicled these and others in his numerous essays on the conflict. See, for example, N. Sanmugathasan, "National problem or the Problem of National Minorities," unpublished handwritten essay, pp. 10-11.

⁶⁶ *Political Memoirs*, p. 105.

⁶⁷ I owe this latter observation to N. Shanmugaratnam's excellent brief booklet on the ethnic conflict. See Samuthiran (alias N. Shanmugaratnam), *IlankaiDesiya Inap Prachanai* (The Ethnic Problem of Sri Lanka), Bangalore: Kavya and Padigal Publishers, 1983, p. 87.

⁶⁸ See for example, the classic work of this kind, Kumari Jayawardena, *Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Sanjiva Books, 2003; and in Tamil, Samuthiran (alias N. Shanmugaratnam), *IlankaiDesiya Inap Prachanai* (The Ethnic Problem of Sri Lanka), Bangalore: Kavya and Padigal Publishers, 1983; or

Stanley Tambiah's famous work, *Buddhism Betrayed*.

⁶⁹ Shan had made this observation in his work, *A Marxist Looks at the History of Ceylon*, Colombo: Sarasavi Printers, 1972, p. 64. Though his coverage of the modern period is quite innovative and original, what is troubling is his rather unquestioning interpretation of the pre-colonial history of Sri Lanka. Despite having focused on history at the university his understanding of pre-colonial South Asian history including Sri Lankan history appears to have been surprisingly conventional and scanty.

⁷⁰ This information was derived from the work by Vehujan and Imayavaramban, *Communist Iyakkaththil Thozhar Sanmugathan: Vimarsana Kannotam* (Sanmugathan's Role in the Communist Movement: a Critical Appraisal) Madras: Puthiya Poomi Publications & South Asian Books, 1994, pp. 19-20. Though conceding Shan's many achievements as a trade union leader and his work in the anti-caste movement, these writers are critical of what they feel was Shan's rather authoritarian and bookish tendencies during the latter part of his career. They argue that these tendencies contributed to his ineffectiveness at this crucial juncture.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷² He had for example written: "The grievances of the Tamils were not confined to government discrimination...they had to face virtual pogroms. In 1958, 1977, 1981 and worst of all July 1983, thousands of Tamils were brutally murdered, women raped, their property looted...The leadership of the TULF was helpless...(against) this onslaught. Their promise to win Eelam by non-violent means through parliament convinced no one—least of all the youth who had seen with their own eyes the bankruptcy of parliament and the impotence of non-violence as a weapon. Gradually they came to reject the parliamentary methods and of non-violence as a weapon. They decided on armed guerrilla struggle." N. Sanmugathan, "National Problem or the Problem of National Minorities," unpublished essay, pp. 10-11.

⁷³ N. Sanmugathan, "Ethnic Problem of Sri Lanka", unpublished essay. p. 4.

⁷⁴ Shan had written these words on the first anniversary of the 1983 pogrom. See, N. Sanmugathan, "Sri Lanka: The Story of the Holocaust." *Race & Class*: (London), 26, No.1 (1984); pp. 81-82. By the late eighties he is even more forthright when he writes, "There is no doubt that the Tamil militants took a correct decision in taking up arms to resist the reactionary and racist Sinhala government. Thereby they saved the self respect of the Tamils and wrote a glowing chapter in the history of the international guerilla struggle." See, *Political Memoirs*, p. 287.

⁷⁵ *Political Memoirs*, p. 287.

⁷⁶ N. Sanmugathan, "Get the Indian troops out of India! Recognize the Right of Self-determination of the Tamil People," unpublished essay, pp. 4-6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷⁸ *Political Memoirs*, p. 286.

⁷⁹ Shan had noted, “It is true that, for pragmatic reasons they first resorted to armed struggle and thereafter went in search of an ideology that would justify such action. Naturally they found it in Marxism-Leninism. There is nothing wrong in this except that most of the Tamil militant groups did not seem to have studied Marxism-Leninism sufficiently and deeply...” N. Sanmugathan, “Ethnic Problem of Sri Lanka,” unpublished essay, p. 4.

⁸⁰ N. Sanmugathan, “The National Problem or the Problem of the National Minorities,” unpublished essay, p. 20.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23.

⁸³ Regi Siriwardena has finely elaborated on this argument regarding Bandaranaike and the SLFP ‘revolution,’ See, A.J. Canagaratna, ed., *Regi Siriwardena, Vol.2 Politics and Society*, Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies., 2006. See especially the essays titled “Anagarika Dharmapala and Marxist Thought” and “Bandaranaike–The Man and the Legend.” pp. 235-42, 262-64.



Shan addressing a meeting in Jaffna during the campaign against caste oppression (probably in 1967). Seated on the platform are S.D. Bandaranayake and K.A.Subramaniam.