

Theoretical organ of the New Democratic Party

New Democracy

September 2006 22

The Current Political Climate

NDP Central Committee Statement

The Left & the National Question

Ravi Vaitheespara

Poetry: *Mary Ayad, Sanmarga*

“ From the Editor’s Desk ” Sri Lankan Events
“ International Events ” NDP Diary ” Book Review

A Poem for the Children of Palestine (Dedicated to Abdel Karim) by **Mary Ayad** April 11, 2003

I am a silent witness.

I am a voice for those whose voice has been silenced, deafened, drowned out and defeated.

The music of playing children in a schoolyard is silenced by tanks, helicopters, bullets, shouts, and echoing screams that slice into the bright morning hour.

The sweet melody of children's voices is silenced by violence. I see what they see: horror, war, occupation, bloodshed, trauma, fear, and terror, they cannot speak and if they do, who hears?

Intruding green tanks litter their path with bloodied corpses, wounded bodies, and falling homes; the soldier shouting at a grief stricken mother drowns out her baby girl's wail as a wall crashes down on her.

In my confusion and shock I can only stagger to keep my balance, to keep from screaming as my mind is flooded with images. Is this really happening?

I see through the eyes of the innocent little ones, whose vulnerability leaves them no protection from the nightmares they experience, both in their lived reality and those written on their inner landscape.

A little girl has nightmares of being shot at and chased by soldiers, as images of death wake her up terrified in the dark of the night.

How can I comfort her? How can I lie to a child and say everything will be OK?

I am a silent witness for children whose lives should be peaceful and tranquil, filled with play and days at school and time at home with their parents.

Checkpoint soldiers enforcing road closures keep children from going to school or returning home forcing them to take rocky side roads through mountains and hills, risking getting shot for taking shortcuts when they have no other choice.

I am overwhelmed by despair from the sense of injustice.

A Female student and her grandfather are being harassed and humiliated at a checkpoint.

I feel ashamed for what they have to endure.

A fallen book bag lies at the side of the road, covered in dusty footprints, trampled into the mud.

A white scarf fluttering in the wind is covered with dirty tire marks.

The winding roads are filled with broken dreams, broken lives. Will their story be forgotten?

Instead these children watch their futures truncated both literally while hearing and witnessing destruction, violence and death and figuratively when the inking that this is what life is and their opportunities for further education, work, peace, life and play may be non-existent.

Tanks and helicopters entering towns in the early hours of the morning shake and collapse walls to the ground.

There stand long lines of students at checkpoints, unable to attend classes due to closures.

What dreams can they have of becoming a doctor, or lawyer or teacher?

I am a silent witness for children who are one third of the population, malnourished.

An empty feeling in the pit of the stomach, fatigue from hunger, inability to concentrate, a sense of foreboding dread fills the consciousness of an elementary school class that discovered their classmates had been shot at while in a car.

(CONTINUED ON INSIDE BACK COVER)

From the Editor's Desk

The escalation of the armed conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE over the past year is moving rapidly towards its logical conclusion. The Government and the LTTE declare that the current acts of hostility do not constitute war. To complement this mockery, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) has declared that the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) is still alive. It makes one wonder whether the CFA is a brain dead but clinically alive patient.

The attitude of the 'International Community', meaning the big powers, has been highly cynical. The EU ban on the LTTE this year was neither a miscalculation as the Norwegians would like us to believe nor an act of approval of the actions of the Mahinda Rajapaksha government. The imperialist West has its global agenda and its policies are not based on the interests of the Sri Lankan state or of the LTTE, and even less the plight of the Tamil people or for that matter any section of the Sri Lankan population.

The peace process has been used by the imperialists to manipulate the country into total submission to the process of globalisation, while the Indian hegemon finds in the conflict a tool to assert its dominance over Sri Lanka. While India has been a reluctant supporter of the peace process and probably has a stake in keeping the conflict alive, Pakistan has of late taken advantage of Indian reluctance to give unqualified military support for the Sri Lankan state, owing partly to popular resistance in Tamilnadu to such support. This has added a further international dimension to the Sri Lankan tragedy.

The conduct of the armed forces towards Tamil civilians has been brutal from early this year and has been outright wicked in recent months. The armed forces have taken advantage of its air power, with its Israeli-supplied Kfir bombers, and used it not merely to attack LTTE positions and bases but also to attack civilians. What seems worse than the mass murder of seventeen NGO workers in Muthur and the killing of school children by the bombing of a children's home in Mullaitivu is the way in which the government explained the former by first blaming the LTTE and then undermining a credible inquiry into the killings and defended the latter by declaring falsely that the children were LTTE cadres and therefore legitimate targets. The International Community has expressed its protest at the incidents and its concern about the deterioration of the human rights situation in the country,

but has not given the slightest impression of taking firm action or even made a threat to that effect.

The success of the armed forces in capturing Mavilaru and Sampur in the east, advancing the forward defence line in the Jaffna peninsula, and the failure of the LTTE to strike back at the bomber aircraft have made the opponents of peace even more cocky so that the demand for abrogation of the CFA and the abandoning of the peace process has grown stronger among the vociferous sections of Sinhala chauvinists, mainly the JVP and the JHU. Whether all-out war will lead to the final defeat of the LTTE is questionable, but it is certain that, with prolonged conflict, the armed struggle will assume new forms that cannot be dealt with by conventional warfare. The failure of the all mighty US and its allies in Afghanistan to subdue a once battered and bloodied Taliban has lessons for the advocates of a military solution in Sri Lanka.

Whatever may be the case, the continuation of the present state of affairs is bad and innocent people have been made victims of an armed conflict, which could have easily excluded them. The suffering imposed on the well over a hundred thousand newly displaced and the denial of essential supplies to a people who have yet to recover from the ravages of a two-decade long war and the tsunami of 2004 December is totally unacceptable.

There cannot be a military solution to the national question and every attempt to weaken the 'enemy' by subjecting the ordinary masses to terror makes peace more elusive and the unity of the country more fragile. It is time that the peace-loving people of the country united in mass campaigns against the war and, in the process, mobilised the oppressed masses against the real enemies of the people of the land, of their unity and of their well being.

The Current Political Climate

An Assessment by the Central Committee of the New Democratic Party

Although it is claimed that there is a Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) between the Government and the LTTE since 2002, activities of both sides have been reported as breaches of the CFA. Kidnappings, arrests, killings and attacks continue.

Since October 2005 the attacks have intensified. A Tamil MP, Tamil journalists, and Tamil traders and personalities have been killed. There has been no information about many Tamil who have been kidnapped. In the North-East, claymore attacks have been aimed at the armed forces.

The Governor of the North-East Province is a former army officer. This goes to show the dominant role of the army in administrative affairs as well.

Late last July, the LTTE stopped the water supply from the Mavilaru Reservoir in the Eastern Province. The LTTE explained that this action was as a result of the Government's refusal of permission for the construction of a water supply scheme that the Asian Development Bank had agreed to provide for the Tamil people of the region who did not have water supply facilities and the refusal of the Army to allow the transport of essential goods by the Tamil people of the region, and stated that the water supply will be restored when the Government acts to address these matters.

Following the closure of the sluice gate of Mavilaru, the Government bombed not only Mavilaru and the adjoining Sampur region, but also in the Kilinochchi region. Severe battle ensued between the Government and the LTTE in Mavilaru. Consequently, the LTTE launched attacks in the Muthur region to capture it and left it after two days. Muslims in Muthur were displaced as a result of the fighting as were Tamils from Muthur East. Muslim leaders accuse that the Muslims were ill treated by the LTTE and that 52 persons suspected to be members of a group called the 'Jihad' has been arrested by the LTTE and not still released.

It is said that the LTTE carried out attacks in Muthur to distract the Army and the LTTE claims that it restored the water supply from Mavilaru while the Government claims that the Army did it.

The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) has stated that the Government commenced the fighting while negotiations were under way with the LTTE to restore the water supply and that even after the LTTE had restored the water supply the Government has not ceased attack in the region.

The Government announced that the LTTE had established new military camps during the period of ceasefire and that the attack will not cease until the camps are destroyed and the region is brought under government control.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan Air Force is carrying out bombing attacks in the Kilinochchi region. The Government claims that the attacks are not carried out as acts of war but as counterattack against attack by the LTTE. The LTTE has stated that it is counterattacking against attacks by the Government. The Government continues to claim that it is not its intention to capture LTTE-controlled territory, and the LTTE that it is not its intention to capture Government-controlled territory. Both sides are, for reasons known only to them, claiming that the attacks are in defence or are counterattacks. But what take place are air attacks and missile attacks.

Air attacks, missile attacks and bombings are taking place continuously in the North-East. Curfews continue. People are killed. Air attack by the Government on a children's home managed by the LTTE in Mullaithivu has killed 61 students and injured over a hundred. This attack took place when the students were being given lessons in first-aid.

Seventeen activists of an NGO with its head office in France have been killed while they were in their office in Muthur. People are leaving their homes in large numbers. People are suffering without water and food. If this is the consequence of counterattacks, it is hard to imagine what the consequences of war, as understood by the two sides, will be.

The LTTE leader V Pirapakaran has informed Norway that it will stop attacks and agree to negotiate. President Mahinda Rajapaksha has informed Norway that the Government will stop its attacks. Having made the statement he flew to Britain. While it was said to be a private visit, he met the British premier Tony Blair during the visit. It is reported that President Rajapaksha has asked the British premier to secure India's support for Sri Lanka.

On return to Sri Lanka, President Rajapaksha, when addressing the Congress of the SLFP on 4th September, expressed joy that the government forces had captured Sampur, and claimed that the capture of Sampur shows that the Government will not submit to terrorism. Even after the capture of Sampur, the government forces continued their attacks in that region and in the Jaffna Peninsula.

Meantime, the Co-Chairs for the Sri Lankan Peace Process are scheduled to meet in Brussels on 12th September to analyse the current situation in Sri Lanka. Reports say that the Co-Chairs comprising the representatives of the US, EU, Japan and Norway are to ask President Rajapaksha to put an end to the fighting, commence negotiations and resolve the humanitarian problems faced by the people affected by the fighting.

Steve Mann, Chief Deputy Commander for US affairs in Central Asia had stated that the parties concerned should honour the dedicated tasks carried out by NGOs to provide relief to the affected regions. It is also reported that the Co-Chairs have expressed their concern about the killing of 17 activists of an NGO with its headquarters in France and the killing of 61 young people in Sencholai.

A situation has arisen where the NGOs cannot function in the North-East. Besides relief from the state not reaching the Tamil People, the activities of the NGOs are also being blocked. The bank accounts of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation have been frozen on the instruction of the Central Bank. Thus the humanitarian work that has been carried out too has been stopped. It is well known that the structure for providing relief to Tamil people affected by the tsunami (PTOMS), to which former president Chandrika Kumaratunga consented after much wrangling was scuttled by a Supreme Court order.

Relief and humanitarian aid have been prevented from reaching the affected Tamil people. Prolonged curfews and shortage of money have made it difficult for people to purchase goods. Hunger and starvation have been thrust upon the people in the same way that a war was thrust upon them. Meantime, people displaced from Muthur are passing their time waiting for relief from the Government.

Against this background the Co-Chair countries that are to meet on the 12th September could issue a statement critical of both the Government and the LTTE and ask both sides to end hostilities and start negotiating. That would be the outcome of that meeting.

The Anti-War Front held a procession and a meeting on 17th August, demanding an end to the war. Chauvinists attempted to wreck the meeting. An attack on them put an end to their efforts to wreck the meeting. Kumar Rupasinghe, Chairman of the Anti-War Front said that a massive rally opposing the war is to be held on 21st September. Although this is an NGO activity, the activities of the chauvinists have built up to the level of wrecking it.

Meantime, in the Tamilnadu state of India, a rapid rise in sympathy for the Sri Lankan Tamils is noticeable among the people and among organisations. Consequently, the central government of India is under pressure from Tamilnadu to intervene in Sri Lanka to end the war. It is understood that the Indian government has sent to the Sri Lankan government its 'Sarkaria Proposals' to resolve the Sri Lankan national question on the basis of power devolution in India. Besides, India has expressed its willingness to send humanitarian aid to the people affected by war.

The Sri Lankan government announced that the explosion in Kollupitiya in August was aimed at the outgoing Pakistani High Commissioner Bashir Wali Mohammad. The Government had suggested that the attack could have been by the LTTE since the Pakistani government was providing the Sri Lankan government with considerable military assistance. Meanwhile B Raman, former chief of RAW accused Pakistani members of the Air Force of directing the aerial attacks in the North-East. He claimed that the officials resident in Colombo are giving advice.

Air Vice Marshal (Retd.) Shehzad Aslam Chaudhry, of the Pakistan Air Force has been nominated as the new High Commissioner for Pakistan. The new Deputy High Commissioner is also said to be a former officer of the Air Force. Raman has accused that the outgoing Pakistani High Commissioner and his successor are responsible for a variety of terrorist acts in India. Raman has recommended that India should surpass Pakistan in aiding Sri Lanka.

A leading Pakistani newspaper had gone on record to suggest that RAW could have been behind the attack on the Pakistani High Commissioner. The outgoing Pakistani High Commissioner Basheer Wali Mohammed has claimed that the attack was not by the LTTE but by RAW.

It appears that the current war situation has transformed Sri Lanka into the playing field of not only the Co-Chair countries and India, but also as the

playing field of Pakistan. All of them pose to be helping the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil people. This is because the Sri Lankan government believes that the Co-Chair countries, India and Pakistan are supporting it. The Tamil people still seem to hope that India and the Co-Chair countries would be supportive of them.

Neither the Co-Chair countries nor India can bring the war to an end or rid the people of their misery. They can only pretend that they will take steps to bring the war to an end or rid the people of their misery. Whatever one may say, in the current climate of war, the foreign forces are acting to serve their own interests. They are clear about their purpose, but it is the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people who do not seem to be aware of it.

In this climate of war, the President had announced that he would appoint an international commission to inquire into kidnappings, killings and arrests. This is rather strange. He has also called upon the two main parties the UNP and the SLFP to join to form a National Government. That would be an attempt to push the country towards an anti-democratic and authoritarian situation. Anyone who knows the history of these two parties which imposed war upon the Tamil people would know that their unity would only adversely affect the Tamil people. Also, the two parties which have endorsed globalisation are likely to unleash oppression upon the workers and peasants of the country.

Not only the government of Rajapaksha but even earlier governments thought that they could defeat the struggle for self-determination by heaping misery on the Tamil people. Although those thoughts were incorrect, they keep surfacing from time to time. Struggles will continue in a variety of forms until self-determination is established.

On the basis of these lessons, all democratic, left and popular revolutionary activists, and those involved in various ways in the struggle for the self-determination of the Tamil people should carry forward in a peaceful way people's movements to exert pressure against war and for a political solution on the basis of the right to self-determination, autonomy and equality for the Tamil people and other oppressed nationalities. Such movements should not function according to the schemes of foreign forces but as people's movements.

7th September 2006

Revisiting the Left and the National Question in Sri Lanka¹

by

Ravi Vaitheespara

Assistant Professor

Department of History, University of Manitoba, Canada

Today, when the left movement in Sri Lanka is merely a shadow of its former self—fragmenting into ethnically distinct camps, it seems difficult to look back at the years when they had played a dynamic and progressive role in Sri Lankan politics. It seems even more difficult to imagine that it was the major left parties that were once the strongest defenders of minority nationalities. It was, after all, the left, which was the first to oppose the efforts to disenfranchise the plantation sector Tamils as well as resist the now infamous “Sinhala Only” policy in 1956. There were left leaders like the prominent Trotskyite and a 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”. Yet despite all

¹ Paper presented at the conference, *Tropes, Territories, and Competing Realities: Tamil Studies Conference* held at the University of Toronto, Canada, 11-14th May 2006. I would like to thank Mark Gabbert, Henry Heller, Eliakim Sibanda and V. Geetha 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 Sivagurunathan, S Kadirgamar, SK Senthivel, J Uyangoda and Bala Tampoe on the Sri Lankan Left.

these achievements, the confidence in the left today has been seriously undermined generally and particularly among the island's ethnic minorities.

Why and how did the left fall from such grace? How and why did the left retreat from such noble and principled stands on the national question? Given their earlier record, how and why did this happen? Was it merely empty phrases and opportunist politics? 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 working on the trade union and left movements in Sri Lanka has focussed some of her work on this very subject. I am thinking here of Kumari Jayawardena's work, *Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka*² and the relatively more recent research article, "The Left and the National Question in Sri Lanka"³. Given her experience and familiarity with the subject, Jayawardena does a wonderful job narrating the twists and turns of the major left parties from their early days as principled defenders of national minorities to their slow descent from the late 50's into compromising with Sinhala/majoritarian nationalism--a shift that occurred as a result of their entry into coalition politics with Sinhala Nationalist parties such as the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) coalition and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). This move away from their more revolutionary goals to the politics of coalition followed 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 and principles 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.⁴ There is also more than

²Kumari Jayawardena. *Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Sanjiva Books, (6th printing), 2003.

³ 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.

⁴ Ibid. p. 233.

a hint that the positions on the national question taken by these parties were merely carbon copies of those taken by international Marxist leadership rather than being arrived at through a serious consideration and analysis of the local Sri Lankan reality. In this she echoes the familiar critique and refrain against the Sri Lankan Marxists that if it rains in Moscow, umbrellas would automatically be opened in Colombo. For example, she writes that in the 1940's 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 which had led to the Indian Communist Party (CPI) to concede such a right to the Muslims in India.⁵ This she argues enabled the Sri Lankan CCP to speak of the existence 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, 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 is source Malayalam name for Cochin). Such identification with “alien” groups, plantation workers, and the Tamil language “in addition to being seen as irreligious and unpatriotic cosmopolitans” may for Jayawardena partially explain the left's anxieties to jettison this image and embrace the Sinhala masses through a compromise with Sinhala nationalism.⁶ No doubt the disenfranchisement of a substantial number of the plantation workers—who ceased to be a factor in parliamentary politics, helped this process. The second factor was 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 —although she does not really explain precisely how this affected their policy reversals. The other major factor which 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

⁵ Ibid. p. 231-33.

⁶ Jayawardena. “The Left and the National Question” p. 249.

leadership by the petit bourgeois and by petite bourgeois ideology⁷. According to her, from 1935 to around 1960 the left had taken a principled internationalist perspective; but from the 1960's the ideology of the petit bourgeoisie—the Sinhala-Buddhist Dharmapala ideology—lying dormant for a long time had resurfaced.⁸

Writing in the 80's, 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. It is difficult to disagree with the main contours of her findings and arguments. However, one needs to keep in mind that in such a broad narrative it is difficult to convey the complexity and nuances of the facts. One of the unintended consequences of the work, however, is that it serves to further entrench the general cynicism toward the left that has been developing in the wake of the ethnic conflict--something that had resulted not just by the opportunism and hypocrisy of the parliamentary left but also through the negative propaganda promoted by conservative nationalists on both sides of the divide.

This state of affairs, combined with the ascendancy of post-structuralism and cultural studies in the academia more generally around the same time has led to a general disenchantment with the left –one that seems to have translated into a widespread belief that there is little to learn from the left on the national question or even that it may be a logical starting point for seriously thinking about the ethnic question in Sri Lanka. Does the failure of the left really mean that there is really little to be gained from what those left thinkers had to say and write about this subject. This is the question that I would like to address in this paper. I do this by going back and looking at the perspectives on the national question adopted by some of the Tamil left leaders in the various left movement. This preliminary exploration is done not so much to refute the findings of Jayawardena but to open greater discussion and debate on the subject and perhaps add further depth and understanding to this important and complex subject.

When one goes back and begins to read closely the writings and work of individual left leaders one often gets a perspective that seems to get lost in broad narratives about the left. The work and writings of certain Tamil left leaders reveal a creativity, passion and engagement with the ethnic issue that

⁷ Ibid. p. 250.

⁸ Ibid. p. 253-255.

inevitably get lost in such a broad study of the twists and turns of left party policies be it in the hands of Robert Kearney or Kumari Jayawardena. Perhaps there is no better reminder of this failure than the powerful and moving speech given by Pon 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 Bandaranayake'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 Tamil identity:

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.⁹

The speech is certainly a far cry from the dispassionate rhetoric associated with the stereotypical "alienated, anglicized, cosmopolitan" mentality that some have come to associate with elite left leaders.

Arguing that Ceylon is the only country which 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"¹⁰ 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."¹¹

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 7.

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 the unity of the Tamil people in opposition to the bill he stated:

... 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.¹²

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 sections¹³

He further added quite perceptively: "Similar changes have taken place among the Sinhalese which is the reason for this government to come to power."¹⁴ Meaning of course 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.

Another factor that often gets overlooked in such broad surveys when assessing the left's contribution to the national question is the left's struggle and critique of other political forces of the time, forces which, though utilizing the nationality question had at least from the left perspective, an elite, narrowly communal, pro-imperialist agendas. What I want to underline here is that when assessing the left's contribution or lack of contribution one also needs to take into account their critical engagement with what they

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 23-24.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

considered 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.”¹⁵

Although one may critique their 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 parties 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. This crucial fact is not stressed enough in the extant literature. While all the left parties critiqued nationalist parties I will use some selected examples here to illustrate how this critique often offered a great deal of insight into the developments that led to the ethnic impasse. 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 60’s and was later published as a collection of essays under the title *The Way Out for the Tamil Speaking Peoples*¹⁶. In it Karalasingam masterfully critiques the politics of exclusive 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

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 6.

¹⁶ V Karalasingam, *The Way Out for the Tamil Speaking People (including Postscript: 1977)*. Colombo: International Publishers, 1978.

governments of pogromist activity against the Tamil speaking people.¹⁷

He then proceeds to provide a comprehensive list of these oppressive policies which even includes the much disputed 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 moments, of such land colonization is the gradual reduction of the Tamil speaking people to a minority in these areas.¹⁸

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 them. 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."¹⁹ 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, Chelvanayakam their leader only could exclaim "Only God can help the Tamils from now on" 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 denying the Federal Party a role in deciding which party ruled the country. The fundamental problem or flaw for Karalasingam was the political strategy of the Federal Party.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 15.

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 where East Pakistan 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 seats that it was soon reduced to adopt a strategy of mercenary politics allying with the either of the major political parties to form a majority government as long as they made the right noises about taking care of the Tamil issues—regardless of the actual political or ideological orientations of these parties. This strategy was 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 also encouraged majoritarian Sinhala nationalism, and brought together the presently divided Sinhala forces which are opposed to the Tamil speaking peoples. As he explains:

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.²⁰

In a later essay entitled “Postscript: 1977” he writes with remarkable lucidity about how the current impasse that the Tamil youth find themselves 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

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 23-24.

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. Thus imploring the youth he wrote:

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. GG Ponnambalam they forsook the anti-imperialist movement and relied on minority communalism as the answer to majority communalism of Sir Baron Jayatilake and DS 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.”²¹

It is 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 so called parliamentary path toward socialism, from sliding dangerously into the kind of compromises it made with Sinhala majoritarian nationalism in the 60’s and 70’s. Karalasingam’s own ambivalence and lack of clarity on the question of Tamil right to self-determination no doubt played a role in these developments.²² As mentioned earlier it was not just Karalasingam or the

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 58.

²² He 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 is: does it aid the struggle against imperialism?” *ibid.* pp. 54-55.

LSSP which offered such criticisms of nationalist political parties,' almost all the left parties and their leaders did so. One of the most trenchant criticisms of this mercenary style of politics of accommodation of the FP has been offered in a recent publication in Tamil by successors to the tradition of the Communist Party (Peking Wing).²³ 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 movements as the trade union or anti-caste movements in the north but it was also decidedly pro-imperialist in its foreign policy, 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 its failure to adequately address the ethnic issue but also took decisive steps towards finding an alternative strategy. With rising Tamil youth militancy and the increasing state repression beginning in the 1970's, 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 sought to squarely address this issue called the *Senthamizhar Iyakkam* (Red Tamil Movement). Astonishing many of his left friends and associates, he and his organisation forged alliances with the Tamil nationalist parties including the FP and the TULF in the 1970's. 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.²⁴

Composed in the form of a dialogue with questions and answers, the work attempts to present systematically Ponnambalam's reasons for his disaffection with the mainstream left parties and his reasons for building a

²³ 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.

²⁴ V Ponnambalam, *Senthamizhar Aagividuvom* (*Let us become Red-Tamils*). Jaffna: Varathar Veliyeedu, 1978.

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 the right to self determination as early as 1944, he argues that it nevertheless did not take this issue seriously enough to popularize and instil this to the masses or emphasize its urgent importance.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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 hinges on Lenin's sensitive contribution to Marxist theories of nationalism particularly Lenin's emphatic warning against majoritarian nationalism even among leftists (what he termed great Russian chauvinism) and hence his emphasis on 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.²⁷ This deployment of Lenin's ideas certainly becomes useful when Ponnambalam mounts a powerful critique of the left's position toward Tamil nationalist parties such as TC and the FP and 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

²⁵ Ibid. p. 47.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 50.

²⁷ Michael Lowy among others have pointed out this distinctive contribution of Lenin to Marxist theories of nationalism in his more recent evaluation of Marxist theories of nationalism. See Michael Lowy, *Fatherland or Mother Earth? Essays on the National Question*. London: Pluto Press, 1998.

should in most cases be supported.²⁸ 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 does this with so little reservation or restraint.

Recalling Marx's famous statement regarding slavery in the United States: "Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black is branded" Ponnambalam argued again utilizing Lenin's views that in a situation of ethnic inequality among workers the class struggle cannot be advanced. He wrote "that the right of self determination far from weakening the workers struggle will strengthen it."²⁹

Despite these innovative critiques of left party policies on the national question, Ponnambalam's abrupt and 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.³⁰ What is however 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.

²⁸ Ponnambalam, *Senthamizhar*. pp. 51-52.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 38.

³⁰ 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. 284-86. Kadirgamar provides a sympathetic portrait of Ponnambalam and suggests that his failure was aided by betrayal from certain elements within the SLFP-Left coalition. 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. 265-94. 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 SK Senthivel, *Vadapalaththu Pothuvudamai Iyakkamum Thozhar Karthigesanum*. (The Communist Movement in the North and Comrade Karthigesan) Colombo: Puthiya Poomi Publications, 2003. pp. 123-24.

It was, however, the voices of the break away factions of the major left parties that remained outside the lure of coalition and parliamentary politics that 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, CCP, initially led by the senior communist leader N Sanmugathan which came to be known as the Communist Party (Peking Wing) as opposed to the Communist Party (Moscow Wing), now Communist Party of Sri Lanka, CPSL, whose remaining rump in the north was 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 M Karthigesan were working in the Tamil north during this time of increasing communalism and ethnic conflict.

It is clear from their writings that many members of this wing were 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 at least 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 Nilaimaiyum Thesiya Sirupaanmai Ina Pirachanayum (The Current Political Situation in Sri Lanka and the Problem of the Minority Nationality)*. What is remarkable about the article is not simply the evidence it provides of concerted efforts by this 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 60's, 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 70's, many started realizing the Federal Party's ineffectiveness, they had very little alternatives, be it in the form of the mainstream left parties or even under their own breakaway wing led by Sanmugathan. Writing particularly on this failure they seem to reluctantly concede that despite the fact that Sanmugathan had been an outstanding communist leader in his early life, in his later life he was quite ineffective as a practical revolutionary

leader.³¹ They argued that his ‘bookish Marxism’ 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.”³² Instead they argued that his leadership style by the late 60’s 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 called the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the late mid-60’s but also many other splinter groups. One important splinter group in the north was led by KA Subramaniam which came to be known as the Sri Lanka Communist Party (Left) which later changed its name to the New Democratic Party (NDP) and ended up becoming the strongest of the various splinters to emerge out of the Communist Party (Peking Wing) in the North.³³

It is clear that the group led by the late KA Subramaniam and currently led by SK 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. To this end they have sought not only to take careful stock of the political developments that had led to the current impasse but also most importantly to theorize the national question through their numerous writings, publications and annual Congresses.³⁴

³¹ 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 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.

³² *Ibid.* p.20.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 12.

³⁴ 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. (Second edition).

A publication that came out of the Fourth Congress of the NDP held in the year 2002 is quite illustrative and instructive in this regard.³⁵ The pamphlet provides a window to their approach to the ethnic crisis as well as their perspectives towards the various players in the crisis including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which by now had become the major players among the Tamils. Presenting Sri Lanka as a multi-ethnic state comprising four main nationalities, the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Hill Country Tamils along with national minorities including the Burghers, Malays and the Attho (Vedda), they argue that the right to self determination of each nationality be mutually respected. This position they regard as the correct Marxist-Leninist position (in contrast to what they perceive as other left parties that claim to be left but do not take a principled stand on this issue) and furthermore claim that they have held on to this difficult position despite facing tremendous challenges including threats and assassinations of many of their members from various quarters including the Tamil militant and paramilitary groups.

What is perhaps most remarkable is their attempt at balancing a critical and qualified support for the Tamil militant struggle and the LTTE while at the same time they attempt to maintain their own autonomy and commitment to a Marxist Leninist vision for Sri Lanka. They justify this qualified support of the Tamil militant struggle on two grounds. Firstly by arguing quite forcefully and clearly that the cynical use of Sinhala chauvinism and nationalism by the Sinhala ruling classes had over the years made the main contradiction in Sri Lanka--the national contradiction rather than the class contradiction. It was for this reason that despite their central engagement with class struggle they feel they have to extend their support for the rights of the oppressed minorities even when this may take a purely nationalist form. Thus recalling Lenin's attempt at such a delicate balance they intend to steer a finely balanced path between the right of self-determination and the quest for an equitable class and caste less society. This program of a careful balancing act is evident in their political report:

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

³⁵ New Democratic Party, *Political Report of the Fourth National Congress* (8, 9-2002). Colombo: Puthiya Poomi Publications, 2002

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.³⁶

Secondly, they also attempt to explain the party's critical and careful support for the Tamil militant struggle by also emphasizing the class dimension of the Tamil 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 year war as not just concerning the struggle of the LTTE but also the oppression of the people.³⁷

There is thus a qualified endorsement of the Tamil struggle and of the LTTE, particularly for LTTE's determination to fight against "chauvinistic military oppression". Fully aware that their position is an unpopular one and liable to bring harsh criticisms from many quarters they 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

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 19.

compromised with chauvinism, and sing the praise of Indian hegemony and kowtow before it.³⁸

Thus despite being aware of these criticisms and their own ambivalence and distrust of LTTE's exclusive politics of Tamil nationalism they continue to support the Tamil militant struggle all be it with 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 petite bourgeois leadership³⁹

The above brief survey of the perspectives of various left party figures and parties on the national question reveals that there were indeed some serious and passionate engagements with the national question and the ethnic conflict even from members of parties that had succumbed ultimately to majoritarian nationalism. Thus, despite these failures, recalling their thinking and writings—particularly on the conduct of narrowly “communalist” parties offer great insights into the political developments that led to the ethnic impasse as well as broaden our understanding of the complex factors involved in this issue. V Ponnambalam's intervention on the other hand served to demonstrate how the left parties failed to heed Lenin's dire warning against Great Russian chauvinism—almost always guilty of doing violence to local smaller nations, and thus to distinguish between the nationalism of the oppressor and the nationalism of the oppressed. Perhaps Ponnambalam's more damaging critique of the left was to point to its failure to go beyond the level of rhetoric with respect to the national question and to take concrete and substantial actions based on such principles.

Above all, this brief survey suggests that there was considerable movement in the left's attitude to the national question with the increasing pace of the ethnic conflict. As a result, even the parliamentary left has attempted to distance themselves from their earlier open collusion with Sinhala majoritarian nationalism and speak the language of self determination—although this shift by all indications seem only at the level of

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 18-19.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 18.

rhetoric and seems to lack any real substance as Ponnambalam had earlier observed.⁴⁰ Of the parties that remained outside the lure of coalition politics, it is only the NDP and to a lesser extent the NSSP that has self-consciously attempted to not only to reassess the factors that had led to the ethnic conflict but also to re-examine and re-theorize the national question.⁴¹ This re-examination often led to abandoning earlier recourse to outdated Marxist theoretical concepts like historic and non-historic nations or even Stalin's five point requirements for a nation—to deny the right to self-determination to minority nationalities in Sri Lanka.

This movement towards a greater acceptance of the multi-ethnic nature of Sri Lanka and the right to self determination itself suggests that the Sri Lankan left much like their counterpart in India were above all state-centred if not nationalist in their orientation from the start. Recent work that locates the origins of the left movement in Sri Lanka to diverse strands of anti-imperialist and nationalist currents such as the Suriya Mal movement makes this hardly surprising.⁴² It is thus hardly surprising that the left parties in Sri Lanka due to a variety of factors just as their counterparts in India were very much infected by a state centred nationalism that often served to mask the interests of the hegemonic ruling groups, classes and castes in their respective states. A variety of reasons have been offered for this state centred nationalism of the Indian communist parties, one scholar with a focus on caste, Kancha Ilaiah going as far as calling it a genuine variant of Indian

⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ 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. (reprinted in 1986 and 1987); V Thirunavukkarasu, *Perinavathaththin Azhivē Ilankaiyin Viduvu. (Elimination of Chauvinism is Sri Lanka's Salvation)* Colombo: V Thirnavukkarasu, 2005.

⁴² 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.

nationalism, what he dubs as “Brahminical Communist nationalism.”⁴³ Other noted Indian left academics such as Javeed Alam also sense a similar preoccupation in the Indian left though are loathe to blame this on the socio-cultural roots of its leadership but instead traces it to the statist assumptions of its revolutionary theories. He for example writes:

One of the key features of the organized politics of the left in India today is its exceptional concern with fighting the menacing growth of ‘communalism, on the one hand, and attempting to be in the forefront as defenders of the national unity of India ... (they) looked at the build-up of the revolutionary potential in Indian society...primarily through, working on the state ... such an orientation to politics in turn led to a withdrawal of attention from society as such—its institutions, values and particular modes of articulation⁴⁴

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.”⁴⁵

The well known and highly respected CCP (Peking Wing) leader Sanmugathan’s political career itself offers a good of example of a movement from a state-centred perspective to a more sympathetic position on the national question. Like many Tamil left leaders: Sanmugathan for most of his career had been loathe to consider the Tamils as a nation, publicly arguing at one point that since they did not fulfil one of Stalin’s major requirements for a nation—that they share a common economy, that they were yet to qualify as a nation.⁴⁶ However, by the mid to late 80’s one

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ 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. p. 207.

⁴⁶ Sanmugathan asserts this in his interesting but rather formal if not Sinhala nationalist account especially of early Sri Lankan history. His coverage of the

can detect a progressive hardening of his attitude toward the Sri Lankan state and what he dubbed the “official left”. Towards the end of his life there was an almost about face change in his attitude towards the national question as well as Tamil youth militancy and the LTTE. Writing with a great sense of bitterness about the increasing racism and reluctance of the Sri Lankan state to even concede minor concessions to the Tamils, his later writings affords a very sympathetic reading of the Tamil militant struggle. For example, writing approvingly of Tamil youth militancy he credits them for the small but hard won gains made by the Tamils:

There is no doubt that the increasing success of the guerrilla struggle was instrumental for the government of Sri Lanka to improve its offer to the Tamils. Men who had sworn that they would give nothing more than District Development Councils to the Tamils, now proposed Provincial Councils⁴⁷

Pointing out that even this concession was masked to appear to the Sinhala masses not as a real concession he goes on to write approvingly of the stubborn and steadfast position taken by some of the Tamil militant groups in the face of the twin pressures brought to bear by the Indian government under Rajiv Gandhi and the Jayawardane government. Now, for Sanmugathasan at the heart of the failure of the negotiations was the Sri Lankan state’s continuing reluctance to recognize the right of the Tamils for some semblance of self determination:

The basic reason for this failure is 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 this right is accepted and acknowledged there can be no solution to the current Tamil problem”.⁴⁸

modern period however 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 or even Sinhala nationalist interpretation of early Sri Lankan history. N Sanmugathasan, *A Marxist Looks at the History of Ceylon*. Colombo: Sarasavi Printers, 1972. p. 64.

⁴⁷ N Sanmugathasan, “The National Problem or the Problem of National Minorities”, Unpublished papers, p. 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 20.

What is clear from this is that with the increasing ethnic conflagration, like many left leaders, Sanmugathasan had moved considerably from his initial position on the national question and reluctance to endorse the Tamil militant struggle.

Sanmugathasan also blames the statist orientation of the Indian communist parties to their coming under the influence of revisionist left forces from an early stage-- first coming under the influence of the British revisionist communist parties and later under the Russian revisionist leadership which as he points out had even gone to the extent of ordering the Indian communists to support Indira Gandhi during the infamous period of emergency rule in the mid-70's.⁴⁹ Some writers including Sanmugathasan have also pointed out how the policies of the Indian communist parties not only had their echoes and counterparts in the official left in Sri Lanka but have also played an important role in suppressing the genuine struggles of the oppressed minorities and the working classes in Sri Lanka. Writing of this phenomenon in relation to the Indo-Lanka peace accord, Sanmugathasan wrote:

It was therefore no surprise to us that over the Sri Lankan question both the communist parties of India blindly supported Rajiv Gandhi without fulfilling the international duty of supporting the interests of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority and its working classes.... both the Indian communist parties along with the Sri Lankan revisionist parties have issued a joint statement not only praising the JR-Rajiv accord but also calling for its strict implementation, including the surrender of their weapons by the militant groups. There is of course... no mention of the plight of the Tamils who have fallen from the frying pan into the fire. There is also no condemnation of the thousands of innocent people killed or of other atrocities.⁵⁰

Other more recent works of a similar persuasion have even gone beyond Sanmugathasan in critiquing the nationalist and Brahminical bias of the Indian communist parties.⁵¹ A work in Tamil focusing on the life of the well

⁴⁹ N Sanmugathasan, "The Sri Lankan Problem and the Indian Communists!" (Private unpublished papers). p. 5.

⁵⁰ Ibid. pp. 5-6.

⁵¹ 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 argue sought to re-inscribe a positive place for Brahmins and the Indian nation in light of

known Tamilnadu CPI(M) leader Jeeva (P Jeevanandam—who in addition to being an ardent party worker had sympathies for the anti-caste struggles of Periyar and understanding towards the Dravidian movement)—through its narrative of the life and times of Jeeva explores how the socio-cultural location of many of the Brahmin leaders of the Marxist parties led them to be fearful and distrustful of party workers such as Jeeva who had a solid basis among the Tamil population and worked hard to empower them.⁵² The author, a former CPI(M) member, also laments how the Brahmin leadership of the CP(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.⁵³

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 the hegemonisation of the communist parties by the dominant discourse of nationalism and national integration, there is little comparable work on the Sri Lankan left. It is clear that many Sri Lankan Tamil left leaders themselves, despite their increasing concern with the rising ethnic conflict had been subjected to a similar hegemonisation by the dominant discourse of nationalism and national integration. In this regard, even Sanmugathan's own pioneering 1972 work, *A Marxist Looks at the History of Ceylon*, particularly its brief section on pre-colonial Sri Lanka provides a useful example. In the brief section on pre-colonial Sri Lanka, though attempting in many places to dispel a narrow communal reading of Sri Lanka's past what comes across is very much a standard and uncomplicated Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist account of the achievements of ancient Sri Lanka with liberal quotes from the highly

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

⁵² His 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.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 42.

celebrated Sinhala nationalist archaeologist S Paranavithana.⁵⁴ If one compares this with the more recent account of pre-colonial Sri Lanka by the NSSP leader Vickrambahu Karunaratne⁵⁵ it becomes clear that the left's version of pre-colonial Sri Lanka itself has come a long way thanks to the ethnic conflict. In a rather revealing passage while speaking of the influence of Hinduism on Buddhism in the Island, Sanmugathanan had written:

If one goes to see the ruins of the palace in Polonnaruwa, you will see the ruins of two temples in front of the palace. One was the Buddhist temple at which the King worshipped. The other was a temple dedicated to Vishnu, at which his Indian queen worshipped. Later on Vishnu was admitted inside the temple. Today, even such an out and out Hindu practice as dancing the '*Kavadi*' has become a Buddhist practice. We have heard of Srimavo Bandaranaike dancing the '*Kavadi*' at the notorious Lunawa temple, which is patronized by top society people. The sight would have revolted Lord Buddha and should revolt any genuine Buddhist!⁵⁶

Kavadi, is a dance form of Hindu worship now associated with the more subaltern classes and castes of the Tamils and Sanmugathanan's reference to it here is hardly a flattering account of Hindu-Tamil influence on Buddhism. Though not intending to detract from Sanmugathanan's remarkable achievements and contributions as a Left leader in Sri Lanka, what I would like to note here is that Shanmugathanan's own writings here reveal that he was no doubt under some pressure to appear not to be partisan or offend the Sinhala community—to the extent of indulging in some slights against his own community. This almost apologist narrative of the Tamil communist leader Sanmugathanan then makes it hardly surprising that many of the

⁵⁴ Nor is standard narrative of the Indo-Aryan origins of the Sinhalese interrogated. Mention of Tamils or Hinduism only serve in this narrative to complexify this standard Sinhala nationalist narrative rather than as significant actors or presence in the Island. He had written for example: "(the) brilliant system of irrigation which is a tribute to the engineering skill of the ancient Sinhalese that was the basis of the glories of the ancient Sinhalese civilization.... With the collapse of this system of irrigation—brought about by foreign invasions ... begins the decline of the ancient Sinhalese civilisation". p. 4.

⁵⁵ Vickramabahu Karunaratne, *Tribe, Nation and Assimilation of Nations*. Colombo: World Publications, 1983. (reprinted in 1986 and 1987)

⁵⁶ N Sanmugathanan, "The National Problem or the Problem of National Minorities", Unpublished papers, p. 9.

Sinhala leaders of Sri Lanka's official left, many of them from elite backgrounds slid dangerously towards Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. As Sanmugathasan himself points out towards the end of his life:

Once the left movement started slipping down the path of opportunism, there was no end to it. People who had been re-echoing Marx's statement about religion being the opium of the people, now started visiting Kataragama temple before launching their election campaigns; and of paying homage at the Dalada Maligawa accepting their portfolios. It was nothing but an attempt to cheat both God and Man.⁵⁷

What is important to consider is how these visions of the "nation" and its past held by left leaders translate in terms of the group rights or empowerment 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 this 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 their Marxism had a vision of Sri Lanka as essentially an Indo-Aryan, Sinhala Buddhist civilization occasionally invaded by the nasty South Indians (read Tamils).

Epilogue:

Despite these failures and challenges in the left's handling of the national question in Sri Lanka, the left perspective, particularly in its ideal Leninist manifestation which continue to inspire at least a segment of left thinkers on the national question remains, perhaps, the most sensitive and ethical approach to dealing with the national question.⁵⁸ As a recent work on the

⁵⁷ Sanmugathasan attributes this reversion and opportunism to the class character of most of the parliamentary left leaders who he asserts came from "rich families some of them feudal" who merely "played at revolution as revolution was not in their class interests." See, N Sanmugathasan, "Fifty Years of the Left Movement" Unpublished papers. p. 6-9.

⁵⁸ 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

nationalities policy of the formative Soviet “affirmative action empire”⁵⁹ between the crucial years of 1917 to 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 Soviet attempt to both safeguard the Soviet empire’s numerous national minorities from Great Russian chauvinism and oppression and at the same time carry forward their socialist mandate with its emphasis on class struggle and social and economic equality. Lenin’s dire warning against the dangers of what he termed the Bolsheviks’ 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 have all but forgotten these important lessons from the Soviet experience.⁶⁰ Against Piatokov and Bukharin, 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 observes of Lenin’s argument, “Class, ... would become the politically dominant social identity only if national identity was given proper respect.”⁶¹ 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”⁶² certainly should resonate for any thoughtful student of the vicissitudes of left history in Sri Lanka and India.⁶³

Today” in Michael Lowy, *Fatherland or Mother Earth? Essays on the National Question*. London: Pluto Press, 1998.

⁵⁹ 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 and London: 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.

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NDP Diary

Statement to the Media

NDP Condemns Brutal Attacks by Israel

2nd July 2006

Comrade SK Senthivel, General Secretary of the New Democratic Party issued, on behalf of the Politburo of the NDP, the following statement condemning the Israeli attack on the people of Palestine and Lebanon.

People are daily suffering loss of life and injuries as a result of the continuous brutal attacks carried out by Israel. Important buildings are especially targeted and attacked. Israeli Zionism has thus exposed its true self. The New Democratic Party vehemently condemns the fierce attacks on Palestine and Lebanon by Israel with the blessings of the US. It also expresses its solidarity with the people of Palestine and Lebanon. At the same time it calls upon all genuine progressive, democratic and left forces that uphold humanitarian values, liberation and freedom, and oppose oppression to condemn these attacks and demand their stoppage.

The US regularly makes a big noise about world terrorism. It has committed naked aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan, claiming that its has undertaken the sacred task of combating and defeating terrorism. It is directly warning and threatening Iran and Syria. The same US expresses support to Israeli terrorism, and endorses and justifies carrying out savage attacks on Palestine and Lebanon. The British government is slavishly supporting it. Israel, which was created as a powerful base and a fierce means for facilitating the looting of the oil wealth of the Arab world and for subduing and oppressing the Muslim countries and their people who stand in the way, is today acting as the hand of imperialism.

Israel has been set the task of killing off the Palestinian and Lebanese people who resist the US and the imperialist West. The brutal attacks carried out by Israeli terrorists in the name of defending Israel has killed without limit innocent people including infants. The savage attacks carried out with the backing of the US against the people of Palestine and Lebanon has the

motive of frightening into submission all anti-imperialist liberation struggles. That is why the UN Security Council as well as several governments has failed to come forward to condemn the cruel attacks by Israel or to put an end to it. The NDP joins the people of the world and the progressive, democratic and left forces of Sri Lanka in condemning these attacks and calling for their immediate stoppage.

Statement to the Media

NDP Condemns Killings by Government Forces

25th August 2006

Comrade E Thambiah, National Organiser of the New Democratic Party issued, on behalf of the Central Committee of the NDP, the following statement.

The New Democratic Party strongly condemns the various attacks by the armed forces, including the one on the Sencholai Children's Home where 61 students were killed, the killing of 17 NGO employees in Muthur, and other killings, and demands that the Government should not render the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) totally defunct by carrying out further such brutal attacks.

Over the past year there have been a variety of breaches of the CFA. During the past month the Government and the LTTE have been carrying out attacks, while declaring that they do not comprise war. The Government declares that its attacks are counterattacks while the LTTE calls its attacks defensive action. But people are being killed and displaced in large numbers. This is not a healthy trend for carrying forward the ceasefire or the peace process.

While the government declared that it carried out attacks to secure water supply from the Mavilaru anicut, its carrying out simultaneous attacks in the Vanni and the Jaffna Peninsula amounted to imposing full-scale war on the Tamil people. Indian intervention is on the increase in Sri Lanka, which has been brought under the control of the US, the EU and Norway. Sri Lanka has been transformed into an arena for the Indo-Pakistan rivalry.

Foreign countries and the so-called International Community will as always issue statements and watch in amusement while attending to the establishment of their hegemony.

All the forces that care for the entire population of the country should realise this and unite to carry forward major popular movements to put an end to the war efforts.

Statement to the Media

NDP Condemns Killings by Government Forces

18th September 2006

Comrade E Thambiah, Attorney-at-Law and National Organiser of the New Democratic Party issued, on behalf of the Central Committee of the NDP, the following statement.

The New Democratic Party has emphasised that it is necessary to carry out mass struggles for the prevention of activities aimed at Tamils such as the kidnapping, disappearing, murder and extraction of protection money. It also has pointed out that the conflict between the politicians and traders' associations will only benefit anti-people elements.

One or several armed gangs, like for example the PRRA operating with the connivance of the government during 1988-89, could be responsible for the kidnapping and disappearance of traders, media personnel, shop employees and personalities. It is necessary for the government to take responsible and meaningful action to put an end to the kidnappings and disappearances. War damage and murders have increased in the North-East. Also, since kidnapping, disappearing, murder and forcible extraction of money have become part of their daily life, the Tamil people are subject to severe stress.

Although the government has been saying that it is taking action against kidnapping, disappearing, murder and forcible extraction of money, their occurrence has not diminished. Therefore, it is necessary to unite a variety of forces against them to carry forward broad-based mass struggles.

It is important for political parties, trade unions, mass organisations, traders' associations and shop employees unions to participate in such struggles on the basis of general consensus.

A War by Any Other Name

If one were to believe the Government of Sri Lanka, the LTTE or the SLMM, the ceasefire agreement (CFA) still exists –on paper. What its existence means is anybody's guess.

Until a few months ago, with the ceasefire nominally in place, soldiers were killed in the North, LTTE cadres were killed in the East, political leaders were gunned down, and people disappeared without a trace; but no one was responsible for anything. The failure of the government and the LTTE to adhere to what was agreed at the Geneva talks in April led to further escalation of conflict. The disaster that the Oslo talks in June turned out to be led to open conflict free from of pretence to ignorance.

The government's reprisal attacks on what it claimed to be LTTE bases, firstly for the alleged attempt by the LTTE on the life of Army Commander Sarath Fonseka in April and then in June in response to the Claymore mine attack on a bus that killed 69 people including many children, were unduly harsh, considering the fact that it has still not been established that the LTTE was responsible for the incidents. And the victims of the bombings were mainly civilians.

LTTE's closure of the sluice gates at Mavilaru in August protesting the Government's refusal of permission for an Asian Development Bank funded water supply scheme for the Tamil people of the region in desperate need of water supply and other grievances of the local Tamil population led to military action by the government, which the government claimed was military action with a humanitarian purpose and did not constitute war. It appears that the government had decided some time ago to do maximum damage to the LTTE's military capability before it could sufficiently recover from losses following the split of the Karuna faction and more seriously the impact of the tsunami of December 2004.

The government eventually captured Mavilaru, and Sampur, which posed a real threat to its naval base in Trincomalee, but at the cost of a considerable loss of life and the creation a major refugee problem in the region with the displacement of over 50 000 people from their homes.

The government also bombed the LTTE-controlled Vanni from the time of the armed conflict in Mavilaru and continued bombing even after the capture of Mavilaru and Sampur. Meantime the LTTE had opened a battlefield in the north, reportedly in self-defence, and a fierce battle ensued, with the army claiming that it had advanced its forward defence line in some sectors. But battle is still raging in the north, bombings are continuing in the Vanni, and new fronts are being opened in the Amparai-Batticaloa region in the East. But we are told that it is not war. Not yet, that is.

During the past few months, Tamils from the districts of Mannar and Trincomalee have been fleeing their homes to far away places in their hundreds in the face of attacks and threats from the armed forces and thugs. The situation has been aggravated further by armed gangs, claiming to be members of paramilitary groups, demanding large sums of money from Tamil businessmen, and kidnapping and killing people, often for no known reason.

The response of the government to the killing of civilians by the armed forces has for sometime been one of denial and blaming the enemy. The killing in Muthur of 17 employees of an NGO based in France, the killing of schoolgirls by aerial bombing in Mullaitivu, and the recent hacking to death of 11 Muslims in Ninthavur have badly hurt the credibility of the government, and the clumsy handling of the issues and reluctance to conduct a proper inquiry have not helped either.

While the government and the LTTE are busy stretching the CFA well beyond its endurance limit, and the SLMM and Norway are pretending that all is well with the CFA, the people of the North East are suffering, and their suffering is aggravated by the systematic blocking of essential supplies. In several ways the plight of the people in the regions affected by the conflict is worse than during periods of war.

(written 23.09.06)

Spy v. Spy

The Sri Lankan government has procured arms from varied sources and in recent times Pakistan has been a major supplier, especially after India was reluctant to arm Sri Lanka at a time when there was growing public anger in Tamilnadu about the suffering of the Tamils in Sri Lanka.

When the outgoing Pakistani High Commissioner narrowly escaped a claymore mine explosion in Colombo in August, the Government of Sri Lanka hastily declared that the LTTE was the likely culprit since it resented Pakistan supplying arms to Sri Lanka. A few days later, the leading Pakistani English daily, Dawn suggested that it was the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of India that was behind the attack. Subsequently, the Pakistani High Commissioner for Sri Lanka publicly accused RAW. The charge was denied by the Indian High Commission, but the Pakistani officials were unwilling to accept the denial. Thus a war of words is still going on between the two countries.

Meantime, B Raman, former chief of RAW, in a lengthy article accused Pakistani Air Force personnel based in Colombo of guiding the Sri Lankan pilots in their bombing from high altitude. Raman recommended that India should support the Sri Lankan government so that Pakistan cannot gain foothold in a country which India considers its preserve.

There were also suggestions from various sources that Pakistan was funding Muslim armed groups such as the Jihad in the Eastern Province to carry out attacks against the LTTE. But it is also known that the leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress regularly seeks advice from mentors in India, and it was suspected that Indian agents were behind the Tamil-Muslim clashes in the East three years ago.

The involvement of the Indian High Commissioner Nirupama Rao in attempts to prevent the management of the Appollo Hospital in Colombo changing hands from the Indian parent group of companies to a Sri Lankan business drew sharp criticism from the Minister of Tourism, Anura Bandaranayake. Although the government dissociated itself from the views of the minister, many in the government privately and publicly commended the minister, as the growing Indian domination in Sri Lankan affairs has led to increased resentment among the Sri Lankan elite. The announcement of the appointment of Rao as Indian Ambassador to China has helped to take the heat off the debate.

In any event, the entry of Pakistan as a player in the affairs of Sri Lanka will only make more complex the problems faced by the country, since India would resent the growth of Pakistani influence and seek to curtail it.

International Events

Cuba: Long Live Fidel

The US government spokespersons showed how small minded they were when they for a second time in recent times expressed their glee at the incapacitation of Cuban President Fidel Castro. Castro and the Cuban leadership and the people of Cuba know that Fidel is not forever; but the policies, which for over forty-seven years enabled Cuba to stand up to the mightiest power in the world and frustrate its every effort to topple Fidel and the Cuban government led by the Communist Party, are there to stay.

Fidel will live on for many years, even after his eventual death some day, and the spirit of Fidel will lead the defiance of US imperialism in Cuba, in Latin America, and the world over until its impending collapse.

India: Terror in Maharashtra

On 11th July 2006 a series of seven bomb blasts in suburban trains in Mumbai that took place over 11 minutes killed 207 people and injured more than 700. The Chief Minister of the State of Maharashtra claimed that the blasts were anticipated by the State Police but there was no knowledge of the time and place. How credible these claims are is one thing, but what matters is that the Indian state has once again failed to protect innocent people from acts of terror and communal violence.

Sections of the mainstream media, notably the Chennai-based 'Hindu' group of newspapers, were quick to accuse Pakistan. Association of Pakistani intelligence agents with acts of terror by suspected Muslim terrorists has only helped the reactionary forces of Hindutva to portray the Muslims as an 'unpatriotic' community loyal to Pakistan. Such accusations also deflect attention from identifying how genuine grievances of the Muslims in certain parts of India could lead to militancy and in sometimes terrorism.

On 8th September 2006, a bomb attack at Muslim burial ground in the town of Malegaon with a predominantly Muslim population killed several

people including three children and injured many more. The Muslims were of the view that not only did the largely Hindu police forces fail to protect them, but are also hostile to them. Remarkably, the Muslim community has been calm in its response to the attack and there was no counterattack on the Hindu minority in the town.

The Muslims of India are under-represented in the state sector and remain a backward social group, marginally better off than the Dalits. Rather than address their genuine grievances, the ruling classes seek to whip up anti-Muslim sentiment among Hindus at national and local level by campaigning in the media as well as by other means to claim that Muslim militants have links with international Muslim militant/terrorist organizations, including the Taliban and Al Qaida. To add claims of links with Pakistani Intelligence to this charge sheet will only worsen communal tension.

Israel: From Palestine via Lebanon into Shame

A statement issued in early July 2006 by Tariq Ali, John Berger, Noam Chomsky, Eduardo Galeano, Naomi Klein, Harold Pinter, Arundhati Roy, Jose Saramago, Giuliana Sgrena and Howard Zinn, commenting on the conflict between Israel and Palestine following Palestinians taking an Israeli soldier prisoner, pointed out that Israeli forces had abducted on 24th June two civilians, a doctor and his brother, from Gaza, (an incident scarcely reported anywhere, except in the Turkish press) and that it was on 25th June that the Palestinians took the Israeli soldier prisoner, and proposed a negotiated exchange against prisoners taken by the Israelis. (There are over 9 000 Palestinians in Israeli jails, including a thousand against whom there are no charges). The statement drew attention to the double standards repeatedly employed by the West, which considered the "kidnapping" by the Palestinians an outrage but saw the illegal military occupation of the West Bank and the systematic appropriation of its natural resources—most particularly that of water—by the Israeli 'Defence' Forces a regrettable but realistic fact of life.

Israel which has been carrying out attacks in Gaza over the past several months escalated its attacks and re-occupied Gaza, which it reluctantly left not long ago. Its killing of well over a hundred civilians, injuring thousands, inflicting extensive damage to property, and disrupting essential services has failed to cow the Hamas, which has, in fact, gained support among the Palestinians.

The Hisbullah in Lebanon took two Israeli soldiers prisoner on 12th August to demand the release of Arab detainees. Israel with the blessings of the US and the UK started a non-stop bombing campaign in southern Lebanon and southern Beirut in the hope of inflicting heavy damage on the Hisbullah. It only succeeded in killing over 1200 Lebanese civilians, injuring many more, and causing severe damage to property and infrastructure. The Hisbullah defied the Israeli attack and air, land and sea blockades to emerge with minimal losses and enhanced reputation among the people of war-battered Lebanon, demonstrating that Israel was in fact a 'paper tiger'.

Today the Israeli government is in crisis. There is a strong demand for the resignation of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence. Although the pressure is not from the anti-war or left groups, the message has been driven home that Israeli aggression has failed to deliver. There are also signs of trouble in Arab countries with pro-US governments. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood capitalised on the success of Hamas, while the authoritarian government of Hosni Mubarak stared helplessly at mass celebrations of the Hamas and its leader Hassan Nassrullah.

The present move of the US-Israeli axis-of-evil is to bring pressure upon the Hamas through the pliant President Abbas who seeks to make it a precondition for Hamas to recognise Israel, if it were to join the PLO to form a government of Palestinian unity. This ploy is bound to fail, but will buy the necessary time for the Israeli warmongers to recover before the venture on their next major misdeed.

As for Lebanon, the US and Israeli conspiracies and aggression there are a part of a bigger scheme to subdue Iran. The prospect of a US-Israel attack on Syria leading to war on Iran has temporarily receded, as a result of the misadventure in Lebanon, but has not been eliminated.

India: The Law Sides with Coke and Pepsi

The Supreme Court of India has overturned the ruling of the High Court of Kerala banning the sale of Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola based on claims that the drinks contained pesticides. The ruling, which will have adverse implications for the other Indian states where a ban has been imposed, will please the two multi-national beverage giants as well as other foreign investors.

What is at stake with Coke and Pepsi is not only the presence of pesticides. The manufacturers have been drawing heavily on rural water resources, depriving rural masses of safe drinking water. The Supreme Court ruling could be transformed into a good thing for the people of India if the campaign against Coke and Pepsi will be transformed into a mass educational and boycott campaign against the companies in consideration of the adverse impact of their operation on the environment, health, water resources and local beverage industry.

Iran: Winning Non-Aligned Backing

One of the important resolutions of the meeting of non-aligned nations in Havana in September is the endorsement the right of Iran to develop its nuclear energy.

The Declaration on the Nuclear Question of the Islamic Republic of Iran ratified what was agreed upon by the foreign ministers in Malaysia in May 2006; reaffirmed the fundamental and inalienable right of all states to undertake research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes; and rejected the monopoly of nuclear technology and the hypocrisy and double standards of those already possessing, upgrading and extending nuclear weapons, but prohibiting others from using nuclear energy for peaceful ends. The Declaration defends the use of nuclear energy with peaceful aims, without discrimination and in accordance with respective legal obligations, and recognises the International Atomic Energy Organization as the sole authority competent to verify the fulfilment of the obligations under safeguard agreements and emphasises the need to protect the IAEO from pressures, blackmail and threats that the US government and some of its allies have been exerting on the IAEO.

The principled role played by Nicaragua and Cuba within the NAM and elsewhere in defending Iran against bullying by the US and its EU allies on the nuclear issue has a valuable message to the people of Iran and other Third World countries. Nations facing imperialist aggression have their staunchest allies in socialists.

Afghanistan: Taliban Bounces Back

The Asia Times, in an article marking the fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001, based on a report on the reconstruction of Afghanistan

by a group closely monitoring the Afghan situation, pointed out that the "Taliban front line now cuts halfway through the country, encompassing all of the southern provinces."

The report attributed the gathering momentum against the forces of occupation in southern Afghanistan to the failed anti-narcotics and military policy leading to a humanitarian crisis of starvation and poverty there, and that the Taliban is using the situation to regain the confidence of the people by address the needs of the people. The report also pointed out that military expenditure outpaces development and reconstruction, and that the US and the 'international community' should reassess the entire approach in Afghanistan since Taliban has grown from a very small group of isolated terrorists in 2001 into a large part of the population. Although it was the emphasis of the military aspects over issues of development that led to the tragic situation in the south, the US is persevering undeterred along its erroneous path.

An article in the People's Daily (China) of 17th September commented that the NATO was overreaching itself globally by taking over from the US the command of southern Afghanistan in August. It drew attention to the NATO Secretary General Jaap De Hoop Scheffer and Afghan President Hamid Karzai signing a long-term partnership agreement on 6th September to boost bilateral ties, and cited an official NATO website that, owing to frequent assaults from the Taliban, the number of NATO soldiers stationed in Afghanistan would increase from the present 8000 to 18 500 by the end of the year.

The Taliban, has no doubt emerged as a powerful resistance to the US puppet regime and foreign occupation in Afghanistan. To become a viable political alternative, however, it will need to seriously review its past and rectify the sectarian and oppressive aspects of its ideology.

Nepal: All the King's Men at it Again

Dr Baburam Bhattarai of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), addressing the 40th annual general meeting of the Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industries on 3rd August, strongly criticised Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala for wrecking an agreement between the Maoists and the government concerning political issues and arms management. He pointed out that Koirala had refused to sign the agreement

after receiving a call from an invisible place (meaning US envoy Moriarty). He also said that the CPI(N) believed that it needed Koirala's role for a democratic republic, but warned that if Koirala favours monarchy, it may become necessary to launch another movement, this time in urban centres.

Clearly, Koirala is dancing to the tunes of foreign forces who are only interested in disarming the Maoists, restoring power to the monarchy behind a façade of democratic government, and controlling Nepal with the support of the armed forces of Nepal.

Other incidents such as the landing of a cargo plane laden with arms and explosives from Ukraine at an Indian airport, allegedly part of a conspiracy of imperialist forces against the Maoists, and an unexplained meeting between Koirala and King Gyanendra on 31st August point to sinister moves behind the scenes about which the people of Nepal should be alert.

A press statement, issued by the CPN(M) Central Committee following its meeting which ended on Thursday 31st August, said the government was making an "allegiance with domestic and international reactionary forces" going against the spirit of the twelve-point and eight-point understanding with the Maoists. CPN(M) spokesperson Krishna Bahadur Mahara ruled out the possibility of arms management before the government and the Maoists agreed on an "overall political package". Making public the decision of the Central Committee that they would not be ready even to confine the Maoists' People's Liberation Army to cantonment areas unless the main political issues were addressed, he said both the sides had to make simultaneous progress on the interim statute, interim legislature, interim government and arms management.

Book Review

Thirst for Profit: Excerpts of Essays, Reports and Interviews on Privatisation and Commodification of Water. (Compiled by Puthiya Kalacharam), Contact R Srinivasan, 4 Fifth Street, Jegannathapuram, Chennai 600031, pp. 50. Contribution Indian Rs. 25.00

The collection of excerpts published is in support of the campaign by PALA, NDLF, PLF and RSYF against the privatisation and commodification of water. It has 21 articles, most of them from individuals with long known concern for the welfare of the people and their environment. Among the contributors are Maurice Barlow, Vandana Shiva, Jacques Pauw, Connie Watson, Rajesh Ramachandran, Arun Kumar Singh, Naudhini Kaur, P Sainath, Ann Ninan, Chandra Bhushan, VR Krishna Iyer, Mann Engqvist, and Nithyanand Jayaraman and organisations such as the Polaris Institute, Centre for Science and Environment, India Resource Centre and Zenith International.

The publication is most timely since mass campaigns against privatisation of water is gathering momentum in India and campaigns for banning the sale of Pepsi and Coca Cola have caught on in states where they have not been already banned, while the Supreme Court ruling of 22nd September overturning the ban in Kerala has led to angry mass protests.

The articles deal with various aspects of water privatisation including the economics of privatisation, cost implications for the consumer, health and environmental issues, implications for water resources and public access to water, and moral and ethical aspects of water privatisation.

The articles are of universal relevance and in a lucid style so that they are easy to understand. New Democracy will publish a selection of articles in its forthcoming issues in view of the importance of the subject, and strongly recommends this publication as essential reading for those concerned with the spate of privatisations in Sri Lanka, the impending environmental disaster facing the country, and the real threat of serious water shortages.

-SJS-

Lament of a Mother

by

Sanmargaa

Your body in the street dirt
Blood flooding the back
I bent down to check if it was you
Yes my darling it was you
The crowd that gathered asks me
“*Aachchi* why are you sobbing?”
The khaki-clad one threateningly demands
“Do you know the lad?”
The revolver in his hand
Glitters in the sun
“I don’t” I nod
To deny the first pearl that I bore
My heart shudders

When *Karna* fell at the *Kurukshetra*
“My son!” screamed *Kunti*
And rushed to embrace him
Ill-fated I am
To be born in these times, my darling,
So ill-fated that I cannot
Declare that you are my son.
Had I been strong in body
I would have carried you overnight
And cremated you at *Chemmani*.
This hand that the day before
Served you soaked rice
Would have done
Its final duty as well

Unable to bear the cruelty of *Raavana*
You went on self-exile for six months
Could not you have stayed on
On some pretext
Just like those of our leaders
Within a week of your return
The wicked sinners shot you dead
Why had you to return?

Had I taken you home
 Claiming you to be my son
Would your brothers have been spared
 By these wicked souls?
They would hunt them down, burn the hut,
 And take away your brothers
And even the cow by truck to *Palali*
 Who would care, my darling son-
I am too poor.

The well to do send abroad their children
 To become doctors
Why did you my darling son
 Bear it all on your shoulder?
How could you forget us
 Who depended on you?
I brought up all of you
 On my wages alone
When you grew into a shade tree
 To give me shelter
All my dreams went to dust
 In the street dirt
Now I need to rely on my hands
 To my last day

Yes my darling, I will just say goodbye
 And weep the rest at home
My bitterness will some day
 Incinerate the wicked sinners!
The boy who died for the land
 Lies in the street dirt
While those who held forth on the stages
 Demanding a separate state
Enjoy their feasts
 And live in safety
My heart breaks
 To leave him there
So ill-fated I am that I could not
 Declare that you are my son.

(Written circa 1985)

How can I reassure them their world is safe when I am frightened?

I am a silent witness for children who witness violence, children who get shot walking home from school, who have bullets ringing past their ears, for being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Knowing that walking to school isn't safe after hearing of classmates getting shot and walking up from nightmares, afraid to leave their homes.

I grieve the deaths of innocent children, yet my grief is pale compared to their mother's losses.

I am a silent witness for children whose nights are plagued by nightmares, whose days are plagued by hunger, death, violence, bloodshed and fear.

Bougainvillea vines that once adorned a front door are trampled, their pink petals darkening as they soak up the blood of their owner.

Life is being destroyed all around me.

I am a silent witness for children who have nowhere to go and no one to protect them against the forces that destroy their lives, their families, their health, their peace, their well-being, their futures, their hopes and their dreams.

A Pregnant women being harassed by soldier who forbids her from crossing a checkpoint to give birth in a hospital passes out from exhaustion and fear.

I stand by helplessly as she falls to the ground begging for mercy.

A university student cannot cross a checkpoint into a neighbouring town's hospital to visit his father who suffered a stroke.

I am a silent witness for children who have witnessed violence against their parents, children who watch their parent's homes and shops bulldozed and razed to the ground, children who know their parents cannot feed them, protect them or promise them anything.

An elderly farmer watches his ancient olive groves cut down to the ground, turning the green landscape brown. His grandchildren are standing barefoot among the remains of their house, homeless, and destitute.

No words are able to begin to honour what his family has lost.

Mothers of young children whose husbands are detained, killed, or unemployed buying tomatoes and rice in the street cannot feed their children or fill their empty cupboards that they will discover are now flattened upon their return from the market.

I wonder, how will they go on? What will become of them now?

Broken plaster scattered all the toys, books, and clothes, burying them underneath grey rubble.

Where are the innocent joys of childhood in these children's lives?

No child should suffer as the children of Palestine suffer.

Where is the safety and the peace, the tranquillity and the joy?

A world that is capable of standing by in silence while the lives of innocent children on a mass scale are cut down by a violent occupation that does not bring forth peace or security is a world that has lost its conscience and its humanity. It is time to open our eyes and see the fate of the children of Palestine and it is time to open our ears and hear the silent screams of agony and suffering of Palestine's children.

How can I remain silent after all I have witnessed?

Beirut

Sami Mahdi

So this is Beirut
Lost in the Crowd
Staring at battered faces
So this is Beirut
A woman with many lovers
When she was shot
The killer left undisturbed.

(1979)

Resurrection

Sa'di Yusuf

In an unlit hospital
A little boy died of thirst
They buried him quickly
And left confused
Now he opens his wilting eyes
Opens his wide eyes
And digs
Digs deep into the earth

(1982)