

Theoretical organ of the New Democratic Party

New Democracy

December 2006 23

21st October 1966 Uprising

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The Moon and the Chariot

by
Mahaakavi

"The village has gathered to draw the chariot,
let us go and hold the rope"
- one came forward.

A son, borne by mother earth in her womb
to live a full hundred years.
Might in his arms and shoulders
light in his eyes, and in his heart
desire for upliftment amid sorrow.

He came. He was young.
Yes, a man. The brother of the one
who only the day before
with agility of mind as wings on his shoulder
climbed the sky, to touch the moon
and return - a hard worker.

He came to draw the rope
with a wish in his heart:
"Today we shall all be of one mind".

"Halt" said one. "Stop" said another.
"A weed" said one. "Of low birth" said another.
"Say" said one. "Set alight" said another.

The fall of a stone, the slitting of a throat,
the flight of a lip and teeth that scattered,
the splattering of blood,
and an earth that turned red.
A fight there was, and people were killed.

A chariot for the village to draw
stood still like it struck root.
On it, the mother goddess,
the creator of all worlds, sat still,
dumbfounded by the zealotry of her children.

Out there, the kin of the man
who only the day before had touched the moon
is rolling in dirt.

(Translation of a poem written around 1969)

From the Editor's Desk

The closure of the A 9 highway by the government in August following the breakout of hostilities between its troops and the LTTE in the southeast of the Jaffna peninsula had the anticipated effect of severe shortage of essential goods in the peninsula and difficulties for the people in the Vanni struggling to recover from the effects of the tsunami of 1994. The closure of the A 9, whose opening was the only tangible achievement of the MoU signed in 2002, constitutes a serious breach of the CFA. While the reopening the highway is a necessary precondition for meaningful progress in the peace talks, the government's insistence on the transport of goods by sea as well as the opening of an alternate land route to the peninsula is driven by its chauvinistic political and military agenda. Nevertheless, it is important that both sides appreciate the immense suffering of the people resulting from the closure.

An impending shortage of goods in the peninsula was pointed out in October and serious shortages reported in early November, but the government claimed that there were no shortages and that the complaints were politically motivated. Hoarding of essential goods and the blooming of a black market meant that the poor were left to starve. With the LTTE unable to curb the hoarding and the black market, the armed forces sought to make political capital by opening fair price stalls where they sold their surplus goods, which led, however, to the question as to how the government kept the armed forces well stocked over and above its needs while the people faced serious shortages.

When the conditions became intolerable, the Bishop of Jaffna Rt. Rev. Dr. Thomas Savundaranayagam, on 19th November, appealed in desperation to the Co-Chairs for the Sri Lanka Peace Process to prevail upon the Government of Sri Lanka to open A9, and to implement the CFA. The appeal attracted the attention of the media in the south, but failed to persuade the government to act to supply essential goods. Despite statements that essential goods have been shipped or are being shipped to the north, nothing had happened, even after Jaffna reported a death by starvation.

The Sri Lankan government appears to use every form of threat against the Tamils of the North East to bully them into submission. Where the LTTE is in control, it bombs the people out of residential areas, thereby increasing the number of internally displaced people, and further aggravating the crisis by disrupting economic activity. In the eastern stronghold of LTTE in Vaharai, which is already facing a serious refugee problem with a large number of people displaced from the Muthur district in August, the armed forces on the one hand have intensified military action, including the bombing of refugee camps, while on the other blocked the movement of essential supplies. Human rights organisations have reported the miserable conditions there, but the chauvinists seem to think that the people in LTTE controlled areas deserve to be starved.

If holding the people to ransom by using starvation as a weapon of war was part of government strategy in the North East, the spate of heavy rains added disease to the government's armour. The rains were followed by the spread of *chikungunya* and even *dengue*, with their effect aggravated by the lack of nutrition. Cases of *chikungunya* in the North East are reportedly in the tens of thousands, but the government has failed to act.

The 'international community' has done nothing to ease the growing crisis and the recent expression of concern by the Co-Chairs about the deteriorating conditions in the North East has not gone anywhere near persuading the Sri Lankan government to deal promptly with the deteriorating human conditions in the North East.

The Indian government seems to be only interested in placating its Tamilnadu political allies under pressure from growing mass anger about the plight of the Tamil people, especially since the air attacks on civilians. The reported humanitarian aid to the people of the north will certainly not be a replay of the drama of 1987, when the Rajeev Gandhi government tried to send supplies by boat and when the boats were intercepted by the Sri Lankan Navy, resorted to air drops to snub the Jayawardane government.

The closure of A 9 cannot bring about the defeat of the LTTE but will certainly prolong the misery to the people of the Jaffna Peninsula, and make them less hopeful of a political solution. It is the duty of the progressive and peace loving forces to prevail upon the government to reopen A 9 and to persuade the government and the LTTE to re-enter negotiations in earnest.

Thoughts and Experiences Forty Years after
The 21st October 1966 Uprising,
a Turning Point in the History
of Sri Lankan Tamils

Comrade SK Senthivel
General Secretary, New Democratic Party

On 21st October 1966, a great revolutionary uprising took place in the north of Sri Lanka. That uprising led to a major turning point in the long history of the Sri Lankan Tamils. It occurred as a challenge to the two-thousand year old caste system and the cruel practice of untouchability associated with it, and was a clarion call for awakening and struggle to the downtrodden by caste among the Tamils, living a slavish life, oppressed, and denied their rights by the caste system and the practice of untouchability. The uprising also was a pointer to the opening of new fronts in the path of struggle against the national oppression of the Tamils as a whole.

It was the Revolutionary Communist Party¹ led by Comrade N Sanmugathan (Comrade Shan) that called for the struggle and initiated it. In the 1960's, there was a great debate in the international communist movement on the question of the choice between the revolutionary path and the parliamentary path, which led to splits in communist parties internationally. The old communist party opted for the parliamentary path. The Revolutionary Communist Party was founded under the leadership of Comrade Shan to take the revolutionary path. It had overwhelming support in the South,

the Hill Country and the North and the East. Internationally too, that was a time when revolutionary struggles took place in several countries.

At the time, the national contradiction in Sri Lanka had begun to grow. The forces of Tamil nationalist political domination used that growth to secure their parliamentary seats and carry forward their elite class politics. To be specific, the politics of the Saiva Vellala upper class elite was represented by the Tamil Congress and that of the Saiva-Christian Vellala upper class by the Federal Party, in the name of Tamil nationalism. While these elements spoke of the unity and rights of the Tamils, non-violent struggle and their rivalry for parliamentary seats, they showed no interest about the plight of the downtrodden people living among the Tamils and denied of their rights by the caste system and untouchability.

Meanwhile, the caste contradiction gradually came to the fore in the early sixties to supersede the national contradiction. The people of downtrodden castes comprising thirty percent of the total Tamil population suffered the cruelty of untouchability under the caste system. Their democratic rights were denied. They were not respected as a people entitled to equality and justice, and were referred to in the neuter as 'it'. Under the social conditions prevailing then, they lived a life of sorrow as the toiling class at the bottom layer of society and were kept economically, socially, educationally and culturally backward by caste oppression.

It is important at this point to elaborate a little on the caste system that has continued in history as a social structure. The caste system came to Sri Lanka from the Indian sub-continent, and struck root and flourished not only among the Tamils, but also among the Sinhalese. The caste system also exists among the Hill Country Tamils of Indian origin, who were brought to the island by the British colonialists. However, a rigid system of caste domination intertwined with untouchability has been secure among the Tamils, especially those in the north. A caste hierarchy like that in India has been preserved in Sri Lanka too. Its basis was Hindu religious ideology and the feudal regime that defended it. But, unlike in India, where the Brahmin was dominant at the peak, in the north of Sri Lanka the Saiva Vellala elite dominated. These forces were as a class the landowners and rulers. Among the Sinhalese, it was the Govigama, a feudal elite caste group with station matching that of the Vellala, who were the rulers. This basis was the meeting point for the unity of the Tamil and Sinhala elite forces.

Any honest historian studying the historical development of Tamil nationalism among the Sri Lankan Tamils cannot ignore the fact that the caste

system was one of its important structural components. Leaders from Arumuga Navalar through Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan to GG Ponnambalam, upheld Saiva Vellala elite domination that nurtured and defended the caste system. When the Federal Party under the leadership of SJV Chelvanayakam upheld Tamil nationalism, it acted in the form of Saiva-Christian Vellala elite domination that defended the caste system. It should be noted that, even with the advancement of the Tamil nationalist armed struggle, Saiva-Christian Vellala domination and its sustaining ideology have not been eliminated.

In the caste structure of the Sri Lankan Tamils, the Vellala elite occupy the peak position as the highest caste. Vellalas at the next levels and the Brahmins are also considered to be upper caste. In all they comprise 40% of the Tamil population. The middle castes comprise 30%. The remaining 30% are the downtrodden people who toil at the lowest level. It was upon them that caste oppression, the cruelty of untouchability and the exploitation of labour have been imposed. Such a caste structure, the caste contradiction and oppression, under the circumstances, demanded a struggle against it. Such a struggle was then seen as a historic necessity.

It was in full consideration of the above social reality and the sharpening of the class contradiction that the Revolutionary Communist Party resolved in the mid-60s to carry forward struggles. It was also decided to carry out the struggles in the north, which was the bastion of the caste system. The Central Committee of the Party handed over the entire responsibility for it to the Northern Regional party leadership.

21st October 1966 was determined as the day of launching the struggle. It was decided to conduct a procession opposing caste-based untouchability, starting from Chunnakam, an important agricultural township, and hold a mass rally at the Jaffna maidan. The Party applied for police permission for it. The police refused permission for the procession, but allowed the meeting. The political desires of the dominant upper caste forces were behind the refusal of permission for the procession.

Nevertheless, over a thousand members of the various fronts of the Revolutionary Communist Party mobilised to carry forward the decision of the Party to go in procession in defiance of the ban by the police. People, including youth, clad in red shirts and carrying red flags and banners with revolutionary feeling and passion were getting prepared. I was among the young comrades who were enthusiastically at the forefront of organising the procession. I was twenty-two then, and was attracted to Marxism when I was eighteen, while I was a student at school. The difficult condition of the

working class family to which I belonged; the rural environment pervaded by casteism and untouchability; the denial of social justice, based on inequality; and the pain and sorrow experienced as a result in my daily life raised many questions within me. It was in the process of finding answers that I arrived at accepting Marxism. Marxism is not merely for learning and appreciating. It exposed clearly the horror, exploitation, and inequality of the existing social system. It also pointed to methods of struggle to overcome and transform them. I got ready at the age of eighteen to take my first steps along the road to developing into a fully-fledged Marxist Leninist. I became a strong activist in the student organisation of the Party, founded in 1964 as the Revolutionary Communist Party under the leadership of Comrade N Sanmugathan, and later in its youth movement. I was granted membership of the Party in 1965 and, in the same year, the Party accepted my application to serve as full-time member. Comrade M Karthigesan was then the Northern Regional Secretary. Comrades KA Subramaniam, VA Kandasamy, Dr SV Seenivasagam, M Kumarasamy, Neervai Ponnaiyan, K Daniel, V Sinnathamby and M Sellathamby were among comrades in the leading group. Comrade KA Subramaniam was the Northern Regional Secretary of the youth movement, and Comrade RK Chudamani was treasurer.

Comrade KA Subramaniam showed a keen interest in guiding my activities. He was a leading comrade who worked with a sense of responsibility and initiative in the development of comrades who would stay on for long to carry out party work. The national conditions and the international environment of struggle at the time also contributed positively towards many young comrades besides me to function with idealist motivation and resolve to struggle.

It was in such a situation that the Party took the decision to carry forward the struggle of October 21st. The decision of the party to conduct the procession in defiance of the ban by the police gave revolutionary enthusiasm to all the fronts of the Party.

The blow struck on the procession opposing casteism in Chunnakam on that day, like the mythological blow on Lord Siva² carrying earth for a wage of *pittu* (steamed rice cake) falling on all beings, became a blow on all people among downtrodden Tamils who lived under the yoke of caste oppression. The 21st October 1966 Uprising was a firm pointer to the downtrodden people, especially the younger generation, that the only way of winning their rights was through struggle.

The 21st October 1966 Uprising was not a one-day event. Its historical importance was that it became the biggest revolutionary assault on the caste system which in the course of the history of Sri Lankan Tamils had developed into a caste hierarchy. It cannot be denied that there have previously been from time to time attempts to combat the caste system and reject untouchability. In that sense, the organisational activities of the Jaffna Student and Youth Congress formed in the 1920's against untouchability comprised a remarkable social event. That was a progressive facet of the nationalism adhering to Gandhian principles. Subsequently, an organisation led by Joel Paul, an educated member of the downtrodden community, and well-meaning Christians have protested against the caste system and untouchability. Subsequently, the Lanka Samasamaja Party, the first left political party in the north, was active against caste-based untouchability under the leadership of S Tharmakulasingam. However, it was only after the founding of the Communist Party in Jaffna in 1945 that political and social work was carried out extensively among the downtrodden. Meantime, the Minority Tamils Council served as the body that put forward demands for the setting up of several social organisations and the granting of various rights, highlighting the more popular demands. The Communist Party was the supporting force behind it.

Associations such as the Minority Tamils Council, Thiruvalluvar Council, Arunthathiyar Association, Toddy Tappers' Union and the Washermen's Union put forward demands on behalf of the downtrodden people. But they were unable to put forward demands for a comprehensive set of rights or launch a firm struggle for the rights. They were only able to have some reforms implemented. In 1957, under the Bandaranaike government, a law was enacted for the elimination of social disabilities. Under that legislation, and as a result of severe pressure, certain cafés and restaurants were made to serve on an egalitarian basis. It was the Minority Tamils Council and the Communist Part which took the initiative in the matter. Things did not change beyond that. It was under intense pressure that the Nallur Kandaswamy Temple, the most renowned temple in the North, was opened to the downtrodden. Elsewhere, in cafés and restaurants in the smaller townships and villages in the north, there continued to be two kinds of Tamils—those elevated in caste and those downtrodden by caste. The doors of the remaining temples too remained firmly shut to the downtrodden.

It was in this context that, following the 21st October 1966 Uprising launched by the Revolutionary Communist Party, the campaign against untouchability was undertaken by the Party and its Youth League all across the north. The importance of people mobilising along the path of struggle was

emphasised. The campaign took place amid opposition, interference and obstruction by the dominant castes, the police and casteist fanatics.

At this stage, the struggle moved towards its next stage. That concerned the question of carrying out struggles in practice. Whenever a social liberation movement initiates a struggle, the starting point and the basis of the struggle should be in accordance with correct theory. It is essential that both theory and practice should be farsighted and suit objective reality. The theory and practice for the mass struggles against caste-based untouchability were devised by the party on that basis, and may be summed up as follows:

- * The people downtrodden by caste, comprising thirty percent of the Tamil population, belong, as a class, to the working class and, within the system of caste slavery, remain at the bottom layer of society. Thus, they are the people at the core of the struggle.
- * It was affirmed that the struggle against caste-based untouchability will be carried out on the basis of Marxism Leninism from the standpoint of class struggle, and it was decided that the struggles shall be free of a merely caste-based outlook and of parliamentary opportunism, and aimed at winning fundamental democratic and human rights.
- * Communists have embraced the Marxist world outlook and the politics of class struggle. Thus, the Revolutionary Communist Party firmly upheld the natural position that communists go beyond the issue of elevated and downtrodden by caste, to be at the forefront of struggle against all forms of oppression. The Marxist Leninists of the north were firm in their will to carry forward that position.
- * Importantly, the question of who the enemies were and who the friends were was clearly determined. Policies were drawn in a way that the casteist approach of 'elevated by caste vs. downtrodden by caste' did not come to the fore. Those desirous of caste domination and the casteist fanatics guided by them were included among enemies. At the same time, it was decided to win over progressive and democratic forces of goodwill from among the so-called upper castes as friendly and supportive forces.
- * It was decided that the form of struggle would take the form of a popular struggle, mobilising the people and combining both lawful and unlawful forms of struggle.

- * Importance was given to the formation of a united front to unite all forces that could be united to carry out broad-based struggles, while the Party provided leadership and direction to the struggles.
- * It was decided that the struggles will be launched in cafés, restaurants, major temples, and other public places where the cruelty of caste-based untouchability was practiced openly.
- * Losses and sacrifices are inevitable in mass struggles. It was, however, emphasised that unnecessary losses be avoided and that the struggles be based on the people and reliant on the people rather than on individualistic heroism. In particular, it was mandatory that no struggle was carried out that was anti-people or was likely to harm the people.

The above matters were not determined clearly and definitely in a day or two. The correct and the incorrect were identified through continuous debate and the discussion, and debate from time to time of practical knowledge and experience. The guidelines of Comrade Mao Zedong of going to the people, serving the people and learning from the people were of great help during this period. It was thus that a firm mass struggle could be carried out with calm under the conditions that prevailed.

Struggles inspired by the broad and widespread impact of the 21st October 1966 Uprising took place within a year of its launching. Café-entry and temple-entry struggles had started by mid 1967. A situation of direct confrontation arose as a result of the café-entry struggles in Changanai. Sinnar Karthigesu lost his life as a victim of shooting by casteist fanatics. The first conference following the launching of the Mass Movement for the Abolition of Untouchability was held in the Town Hall, Jaffna at a forum named after him, the first martyr of the 21st October 1966 Uprising. It was at this conference that STN Nagaratnam, a communist supporter and a socially concerned person firmly opposed to caste-based untouchability, was elected chairman of the Mass Movement for the Abolition of Untouchability. Comrades Dr SV Seenivasagam, KA Subramaniam and N (Mann) Mutthiah were elected Vice Chairmen. Mattuvil V Chinnaiya and Alvai K Ganesan were elected Joint Secretaries. K Daniel was elected Organiser. A General Committee of thirty-five and its Executive Committee were also elected.

The Mass Movement was neither narrowly caste-based nor with a parliamentary outlook nor aimed at securing concessions, titles and positions. It was founded as a broad-based mass movement that united that included all who opposed and rejected casteism and untouchability. Those who served in it

carried forward consciously and responsibly the social task before them. They contributed collectively through dedication, sacrifice, bravery, public interest, and hard work for the struggle. The lofty feelings and actions that I witnessed in an environment of revolutionary struggle and the thoughts that I shared with comrades like me are still fresh in my mind. Besides, I should add that it was the experiences of those struggles that were the cradles for our continued revolutionary political stand and public life.

Following the struggle in Changanai, struggles for equality took place in cafés where equality in Chavakachcheri, Kodikamam, Acchuvveli, Karaveddy, Nelliyadi, Urumpirai, Maruthanarmadam, Chunnakam, Kankesanthurai, Tellippalai, Chitthankeni, Vaddukkodai, and in parts of Jaffna town where equality was not in practice in cafés. Such demands for equality and emphasis of democratic and human rights were not easily accepted by the forces of caste domination. Struggles in areas such as Changanai, Kodikamam, Manduvil, Acchuvveli, Karaveddy, Kanpollai and Nelliyadi became direct clashes and went on for months and years. That in Changanai went on for three years.

Up to fifteen militants at the forefront of the struggle became martyrs to the struggle. Many were imprisoned and tortured in police stations. Many were seriously wounded. At the same time casteist fanatics too were attacked and annihilated. Many women were at the forefront of struggle.

The struggle to enter the Maviddapuram Kandaswamy Temple, one of the major temples in the north, went on for three years. During the period the temple remained closed. The Amman temple in Mattuvil too suffered the same fate. The Selvachannathi temple at Thondamanaru and the Azhvar temple in Vallipuram were opened to all as a result of the struggle. Some temples were opened amicably as a consequence of the impact of the ongoing struggle.

The struggles carried forward by the Mass Movement for the Abolition of Untouchability under the leadership and guidance of the Revolutionary Communist Party yielded a variety of experiences and understanding. The mass struggles that occurred over a period of five years (1967-1971) served as a major turning point in the history of caste-based untouchability among Tamils. Political, social and cultural awareness among the downtrodden by caste was heightened in the course of these struggles. Art and literature reinforced the struggles. Literature was enriched by short stories, novels and poetry. Plays such as *Sangaaram*, *Kandan Karunai*, *Kaduzhiam* and *Kudinilam* were centred on the struggles. In 1969, the Mass Movement for the Abolition of Untouchability held its second conference at the Martyr Ratnam Forum in

Jaffna. An art exhibition that accompanied it served to expose caste-based untouchability. This exhibition which portrayed the life of misery of the downtrodden by caste and the cruelty of untouchability and emphasised their rights was held for three days in Colombo; and had a major impact in the south of the country.

Many creative writers, artistes and educationists, from among persons with social concern and supporters of Marxism Leninism, joined in these mass struggles, and made their contributions willingly and without reservations. The casteist outlook and approach of today's advocates of 'Dalitism' had no role in that environment. This made the experience and practice of that situation distinctly different from that in India. Marxist Leninists, democrats and writers and artistes who came from among those elevated by caste were at the forefront of the struggle. They shed blood. They were tortured in prison. That made history. Besides, that became the strength of the mass struggle and contributed to its success. The struggles provided a clear historic lesson forty years ago that narrow casteism, narrow regionalism and narrow nationalism cannot win the true liberation or the rights of the broad masses.

Thus the 21st October 1966 Uprising and the mass struggles in its wake served as a major turning point in the history of caste-based untouchability among Tamils in Sri Lanka. The Tamil nationalist leadership did not support or sympathise with the struggles in any way. The extreme Tamil nationalist youth organisations that succeeded it did not come forward to appreciate the historical experience of those mass struggles or to learn from the theory, concepts, method of struggle or the tactics. It is, however, true that the Revolutionary mass struggle against caste-based untouchability served to create among the Tamil youth a new environment for carrying out the struggle against national oppression.

The 21st October 1966 Uprising and the mass struggles that followed won and established the equality and democratic rights of those downtrodden by caste in the course of the history of caste-based untouchability. It paved the way for the downtrodden by caste to free themselves to whatever possible extent from the slavish life of pain and sorrow. It was a harbinger of economic, educational and social advancement. The historical role of the 21st October 1966 Uprising in securing for a people, who were given second class treatment in the name of the caste system, a status of social equality deserves to be praised and remembered forever.

Nevertheless, the social reality is that, forty years after the uprising, casteism has still not been completely eliminated from among the Tamils.

While economic changes and the environment of Tamil national struggle tend to give the impression that casteism has been eliminated, actual life demonstrates that the reality is otherwise. As long as the basic ideology of Hindu religion-cum-caste structure which was rigidly constructed during the feudal era lasts, it will not be possible to eliminate casteism. It is through carrying forward revolutionary struggles for social change based on class struggle that casteism could be destroyed. The uprising of 21st October is a good illustration for it.

In the crisis ridden situation in which the Tamil national liberation struggle is being carried forward, an environment has emerged in which it is necessary to examine in depth, on various fronts, the theory, aims, methods of struggle and the future. Some super genius intellectuals suggest that all Tamils should abandon contradictions of class, caste, gender oppression, and regionalism to unite under Tamil nationalism as a divine mantra. Such views are none but short-sighted notions arising from the failure to take into account the social contradictions, the development of the inherent contradictions, and their reactions. A so-called unity without policy, principle or aim and put forward with a superficial and conservative outlook cannot achieve any form of liberation.

Thus, for the Tamil liberation struggle to advance along the correct path, it is necessary to have the internal contradictions identified correctly and adopt the correct approach for their resolution. Besides, it is necessary to pursue broad-based unity and tactics of people-based struggle. For that, it is important to learn from the direction, path and journey charted by the struggle of 21st October.

¹ Both the revisionist party and the Marxist Leminist Party used the name Communist Party of Ceylon at the time. The name Revolutionary Communist Party is used to avoid ambiguity and to distinguish the Marxist Leninist tradition from the revisionist

² The reference is to South Indian Saivaite mythology, where Lord Siva once assumed the form of a wage labourer to put right a wrong committed by the Paandiya king. The labourer was struck with a stick as punishment for neglect of duty and the blow was felt by all beings.

Only the Parliament can Legitimise the North-East Merger*

Comrade E Thambiah

National Organiser, New Democratic Party

The North and East have been de-merged by a ruling of the Supreme Court. It is opinions regarding that ruling which are the subject of debate today. Concerning the arguments in support of the claim that the North-East is the traditional homeland of the Tamil people, the Supreme Court has in its ruling noted that more arguments have been presented against that position. However, the judgement was made on the basis that the presidential declarations from 1987 to date concerning the North-East merger have been made in violation of the Thirteenth Amendment and the Provincial Councils Act.

Accepting or rejecting historical arguments about traditional homelands concerns the outlook of an individual. Administrative boundaries for the Provinces of Ceylon were demarcated by the British. Under them, Ceylon was portioned into five provinces, namely the Western, Northern, Eastern, Southern and Central Provinces in 1933 in accordance with the Colebrook-Cameron Reforms. The Kandyans opposed it then on the grounds that the demarcation of the boundaries adversely affected the importance of the Kandyans. Their protests were ignored. The seven *Koralas* of Kandy and what is today the North Central Province together comprised the Central Province.

The North Western Province was formed in 1845. Subsequently in 1873, the North Central Province, then a part of the Central Province, was made a new sixth province. In 1866 a part of the Central Province was taken out of it to form the Uva Province. The Sabaragamuwa Province established in 1889, again comprised what was part of the Central Province.

* Translation of article in Tamil in the *Veerakesari* Weekly Edition of 22nd October 2006

Changes have been made since to the boundaries of the nine provinces, and have been accepted. However, it cannot be said that these arrangements enabled the provincial administrations to fulfil the aspirations of the people of the provinces.

When the Provincial Council system was introduced in 1987, the nine provinces were accepted as the basic administrative units. Provincial Councils were introduced by the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of 1978 and were included in the Constitution. Besides, a separate legislation was enacted for the Provincial Councils.

According to Section 154 A (3) of the Thirteenth Amendment, it is possible for two or three adjoining provinces to merge to function as a single Provincial Council through an Act of Parliament. In other words, for provinces to function jointly, Parliament has to enact new legislations. Among detailed provisions given under Sections 154 A to 154 T, there is no provision besides Section 154 A (3) on the merging of provinces.

With the Thirteenth Amendment standing as above, Section 37 (1) of the Provincial Councils Act (Act No. 42 of 1987) has special provisions for the merging of the Northern and Eastern Provinces. By Section 37 (1), the President could declare the merger of two or three adjoining provinces to function as a single Provincial Council. The merger will remain valid until the day a referendum is held to determine the wishes of the people of the provinces concerned regarding the declaration. The date for the referendum could, however, be deferred indefinitely by the President, using his discretionary powers.

Thus, although the President could merge the provinces by his declaration, it is necessary to conduct a referendum to determine the wishes of the people of the provinces regarding the merger. If a majority of the people of the provinces vote in favour of the merger, the provinces will continue to remain merged and function as a single Provincial Council. If a majority of the people vote against the merger, the provinces will function as separate Provincial Councils. Elections will be conducted for membership of the Provincial Councils.

Besides, as already stated earlier in the article, it is possible through passing an Act of Parliament to merge two or three adjoining provinces to function as a single Provincial Council.

Section 134 A (3) of the Thirteenth Amendment and Section 37 (1) (A) of the Provincial Councils Act contain the general provisions for the merging of

provinces. There are also specific provisions for the merging of the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

Section 37 (1) (B) states that the President cannot make the declaration merging the Northern and Eastern Provinces unless the arms, ammunition, explosives and other such military equipment in the possession of extremist terrorist groups and other organisations have been handed over to the Government and there is a cessation of hostilities. Section 37 (1) (B) (3) also states that if a referendum is held in the Eastern Province and a majority of the people in the Eastern Province vote in favour of the merger, there is no need to conduct a referendum in the Northern Province.

What is clear from the above is that for the President to declare the merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces there should have been the surrender of weapons and there should be peace. That is a precondition for the President to make the declaration. No such condition has been laid down for the merging of other provinces. Also, a referendum is necessary for only the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

When the Thirteenth Amendment and the Provincial Councils Act were debated in Parliament, the representatives of the Tamil parties of the North-East were not present in the house. As the MPs of the Tamil United Liberation Front had not sworn their oath rejecting secession, under the Sixth Amendment they had been deprived of their right to parliamentary membership. As a result, their views were not expressed there. However, the Muslim MPS of the North-East had spoken against the merging of the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

Although attention has been drawn outside Parliament to ambiguities in the Provincial Councils Act regarding the merging of the Northern and Eastern Provinces, the late Amirthalingam and his colleagues in the TULF appealed that it should not be developed into a major debate. Constitutional experts like AJ Wilson and Neelan Thiruchelvam too did not involve themselves in debates concerning the ambiguities. The Tamil leaders announced that India had assured them that, if the Northern and Eastern Provinces are merged somehow, the merged province will never be de-merged and that there will never be a referendum on the merger. Knowing very well that the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and the Provincial Councils Act will not fulfil the national aspirations of the Tamil people, they accepted and approved of them.

The unclear and confusing legal provisions and loopholes concerning the merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces have lent support to the declaration of the Supreme Court that the merger is not valid in law. In the

same way that those who struggle for their rights use favourable aspects of the law that could be used, those who oppose struggles for rights too make use of confusion and lack of clarity and loopholes in the law to their advantage.

It was in this way that the JVP filed a fundamental rights petition accusing that the declaration by the President merging the Northern and Eastern Provinces was unlawful and claiming that the people of the Eastern Province had been deprived of their fundamental right of setting up their own Provincial Council because of it.

The Supreme Court which inquired into the petition pointed out that either the Parliament should have passed legislation merging the Northern and Eastern Provinces or the President should have made a declaration in compliance with Section 37 (1) (b); and on that basis ruled that the Parliament had not passed legislation merging the Northern and Eastern Provinces, that only the Presidential declaration deserved attention, and that declaration was contrary to the law.

According to Section 37 (1) (b), the conditions that weapons should have been surrendered and that there should have been cessation of hostilities should have been fulfilled prior to the declaration merging the Northern and Eastern Provinces. It is contrary to that section of the law for the President to have declared the merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces without fulfilment of the requirements. Also the referendum in the Eastern Province regarding the merger had been deferred for seventeen years. It was on this basis that the Supreme Court ruled that the merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces was unlawful, and also that the people of the Eastern Province had been deprived of their right to set up their own Provincial Council.

In a similar way, the Supreme Court had ruled that the agreement reached between the Government and the LTTE to set up a joint mechanism (P-TOMS) to provide relief to the victims of the tsunami was unlawful.

Again, the Supreme Court has in some recent cases ruled as legal the steps taken by plantation companies through the Ministry of Plantations to expel workers from the plantations.

Legally and logically these rulings may seem right. Also, the verdict of the Supreme Court is ultimate and final. But the consequent political, economic, social and cultural problems can be serious.

The position of the Tamil people is that any talks not based on a merged North-East will be unfruitful. A political solution sans that basis will be neither meaningful nor acceptable.

Lakshman Kiriella, UNP MP has announced that the UNP will support parliamentary legislation for the merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces. But the government should introduce the legislation. When the Head of the Government, President Rajapaksha is not in favour of the merger, there is no chance for the legislation to be introduced in Parliament.

If the declaration of the merger is unlawful, conducting a referendum in the Eastern Province for a merger too will be unlawful. To defer the elections for the Eastern Provincial Council too will be unlawful.

Parliamentary legislation is the only way to merge the Northern and Eastern Provinces. That needs a two-thirds majority, which could be achieved if the Government, the UNP and the Tamil parties join hands.

Presently, even if President Rajapaksha is willing, it will not be possible for him to use his discretionary or executive powers to effect the merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces contrary to the Constitution and the Provincial Councils Act.

It should also be noted that there is nothing that India could do in this matter under the provisions of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord.

The Right to Water

VR Krishna Iyer

(Former Judge of the Supreme Court of India)

The right to life is a foremost human right sans which society ceases to exist. Air, water, and everything without which life cannot exist are universal assets. Humanity needs water for a hundred reasons and so civilised progress is inconceivable without potable water. Countries worldwide struggle for sources of water. Preserving every ounce of safe water and breathable air is humanity's highest priority. Under such circumstances, every drop of rain has to be harvested, every well has to be conserved and every pool or pond has to be preserved.

“Every generation should leave water, air and soil resources as pure and unpolluted as when it came to earth. Each generation should leave undiminished all the species of minerals found existing on earth”.

Aqua robbery by corporates is becoming common in the Third world but dereliction of state duty is denying humanity the basic source of water.

The core principle of public law is: The state is the trustee of all natural resources and is under a legal duty to protect them. These rare resources are meant for public use and cannot be converted into private ownership.

The ancient Roman Empire developed the ‘Doctrine of the Public Trust’ which primarily rests on the principle that certain resources like air, sea, waters and the forests have such a great importance to the people as a whole that it would be wholly unjustified to make them a subject of private ownership. The said resources being a gift of nature, they should be made freely available to everyone irrespective of the status in life. The doctrine enjoins upon the government to protect the resources for the enjoyment of the general public rather than to permit their use for private ownership or commercial purposes.

The American courts in recent cases have expanded the concept of the public trust doctrine in protecting all ecologically important lands, for example freshwater wetlands or riparian forests. Our legal system based on English common law includes the public trust doctrine as part of its jurisprudence. The state is the trustee of all natural resources which are by nature meant for public use and enjoyment. Public at large is the beneficiary of the seashore, running waters, airs, forests, and ecologically fragile lands. The state as a trustee is under a legal duty to protect the natural resources. These resources meant for public use cannot be converted to private ownership. Thus the public trust doctrine is a part of the law of the land. (1997; ISCCP-388/389)

Now we come to the menace of multinational corporations consuming all the water, converting all the perennial springs, depriving the poor and the hungry, the mother and the child of water without which life becomes extinct. If law of life is to be sustained, giant corporates cannot deny every human life, every drop of water. Be you ever so large a corporate power, the law of life is above you. Man, woman and child come first and no corporate might, no technological power, no economic cabal, nor military arsenal can supersede people's rights. If people's water wealth is plundered, polluted, profiteered and converted into market, leaving the helpless to die of thirst, the earth will become a desert. People everywhere must win.

If We the People of India, one billion strong, claim Bharat's water resources properly planned, there never shall be a global multinational Big Business in food and water. What we need today therefore is to arise and awake, share what belongs to all through social justice. Let us unite, agitate and demand our right to water. No terrorist bore well shall bully the poor, no cola shall commit breach of people's global trust, no single soul shall perish sans water.

Journalists must stand united behind humankind because the Fourth Estate has power over humanity's mind, voice over the world's democratic order. Each according to his thirst is the rule of water justice.

[From *The Hindu*, as reproduced in *Thirst for Profit*, compiled by *Puthiya Kalaccharam*, Chennai 600083]

Profiteering of Thirst

The story of Coca Cola in India

India Resource Centre

Most of the media promotional images of Coke that are beamed down to millions of Indian homes through television and newspaper advertisements, billboards etc. since the onset of market liberalisation and the mushrooming of channel television in India no longer target the wealthier middle class audience but are wooing the common masses. Can one see this as a reflection of the improving economic condition of India's struggling poor with the onset of economic liberalisation as its proponents seem to claim? Be it Amir Khan in his different avatars of the common man in the "thanda matlab coca cola" campaign or the "paanch matlab chota Coke" and even the earlier campaigns, the overwhelming message is that "Coke adds life".

The reality is far from this rosy picture.

Coca Cola in Kerala

The largest Coca Cola plant in India in Kerala is responsible for putting thousands of impoverished farmers and many poor Dalits or Adivasis out of work by draining the water that feeds their wells and poisoning the land with waste sludge. The plant in the southern state of Kerala, which uses one million litres of water a day, has been the target of protests by the farmers who are currently involved in an unequal struggle to stop the drinks giant from destroying their livelihoods. For them "thanda matlab coca cola" means something entirely different.



Three years ago, the little patch of land in the green picturesque rolling hills of Palakkad in the Indian state of Kerala yielded 20 sacks of rice and 1500 coconuts an year. It provided work for dozens of labourers. Then Coca Cola arrived and built a 40-acre bottling plant next door. In his last harvest, Sahul Hameed, the farmer who owns the modest smallholding, could coax only five sacks of rice from the land and a meagre 200 coconuts. His irrigation wells have run dry.

“The world will always get thirsty” says one Coke commercial. What they allude to is an entirely different kind of thirst: a manufactured thirst, a want for manufactured and bottled drinks. At Plachimada village, Palakkad District, Kerala, the Hindustan Coca Cola Beverages Pvt. Ltd (HCBL) is also creating real thirst, thirst borne out of scarcity of plain drinking water. Meanwhile, the huge factory extracts up to 1.5 million litres of water a day from the deep wells it has drilled into the aquifer to produce Coke, Fanta, Sprite and the drink the locals call, without irony, Thumbs-Up.

The cruellest cut of all is that the plant bottles a brand of mineral water while the local people – who could never afford it – have to walk up to six miles a day to fetch water for their use. Women from the six Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe colonies at Perumatti and Pattanchery panchayats now have to walk 3 km each way to fetch drinking water every morning, often making them unable to report in time for casual farm jobs.

The turbid brackish water which remains at the bottom of their wells is now too high in dissolved salts to be healthy to drink, cook or even wash in as locals claim that it made them ill. On account of water scarcity, farm jobs too have become scarce as Coca Cola’s huge water consumption has not only made people thirsty but hungry too.

The economy of Plachimada was entirely agrarian till the Coke factory came up in 1998. “The plant was set up in a 38-acre plot violating the Kerala Land Utilisation Act intended to prevent conversion of agricultural lands for non- agricultural purposes”, argues Vellor Swaminathan, convenor of Coca Cola Virudha Janakeeya Samara Samithy.

Every day 85 lorry loads leave the factory, each containing 550 cases of 24 bottles. To produce them the company siphons off enough water to meet the minimum requirements of about 20 000 people. They have not only lost their water but, with the dried-out farms closing, also their jobs. The worst affected are up to 10 000 landless labourers.

Coca Cola obviously denies the truth that lies behind their carefully crafted image of ‘life and living it up’. The statement from its headquarters in Atlanta reiterates that the allegations made against the plant in Kerala are not only untrue but also politically motivated. The real culprit for the Company is the reduction in rainfall in the area – from 1213 mm in 2000 to 1147 mm in 2001 and just 670 mm in 2002. It quotes India’s National Geophysical Institute in Hyderabad as saying: “There is no field evidence of overexploitation of the groundwater reserves in the plant area”.

All these despite the fact that state meteorological reports show rainfall rose between 2000 and 2001. Neither is how much is saved through rainwater, as indicated by the company, the issue here. How much load you add to the aquifer is.

While the company staff casually repeat the argument that the area is drought-prone, they fail to answer the questions raised by the people involved in the anti-Coke struggle: “If the area is drought-prone, then, how could such a water-intensive unit be set up without any norms and restrictions in such an area?”

The quality of the water is an issue too. Samples for analysis sent to the United States have concluded that high levels of dissolved salts were produced by the fast rate of depletion of the aquifer and that washing in it would cause “severe hardship”.

Then there is pollution. Chemical effluents produced by bottle contaminate the groundwater and poison the land with waste sludge. Early attempts to dry the foul-smelling sludge as “organic fertiliser” and market it failed when the farmers started to develop sores on their skin and noticed that their coconut palms were dying. Furthermore, the state’s Pollution Control Board recently found cadmium at toxic levels in the sludge samples from the plant. The plant tried to give it away but no one wanted it. Protesters have been gathering it up and dumping it in front of the plant. The pollution board asked Coke to stop emitting sludge from the factory, but the company continues to claim that their waste is a good “soil conditioner”.

Local council tax records, despite claims from local political establishments that it would create jobs in the area, show only 134 permanent staff at the plant of whom approximately thirty are from nearby areas. Some of the protesters there themselves had once worked there but quit. “I used to get a terrible headache working there”, Saraswathi Kaliappan, 38, who works as a bottle washer for two years, said. Conditions were so poor that she claimed she wouldn’t go back if the pay was doubled.

Early this year when the panchayat decided not to renew the industrial licence issued to Coca Cola on grounds of “protecting public interest” saying that they were persuaded by the idea that the company would bring money and jobs to the area. “But the reality is few local people have been employed and the water situation and pollution are a calamity”.

The decision could, however, not stand for long as a chain of pressure tactics was initiated to set the decision aside. Coca Cola workers set up a

counter protest outside the council headquarters and 1000 demonstrators marched on the town hall. Just like in the Enron case, the US government played a significant role. The US ambassador to India wrote to Brajesh Mishra, the Principal Secretary to the Indian Prime Minister, attempting to bring to their attention: “I would like to bring to your attention, and seek your help in resolving, a potentially serious investment problem of some significance to both our countries. The case involves Coca Cola, one of the largest single foreign investors in India”.

The issue is not just about corporate irresponsibility in the absence of binding international regulations but signs of the type of political arm-twisting by agents of trans-national global capital such as Coke on local governments such as India who often lack the necessary political will to resist or have already bought into the logic of corporate globalisation.

That is why few expect that the final verdict for the waterless people of Kerala to be anything other than “If they do not water, let them drink Coke”.

Reader's Views

C.P., the Netherlands

The article by Dr. Ravi Vaitheespara gives additional information and analysis on the left and the national question and furthermore also deals deeply into the subject in relation to the survey articles by Kumari in the eighties. I could still remember the speeches of P. Kandiah. I hope there will be more discussion from other leftists, because one always finds it difficult to understand why the left had failed in Sri Lanka.

Further, I find the article on the current political climate is also a very clear analysis.

V Geetha, Chennai

The Left in Sri Lanka and the Tamil Question: a Response

Ravi Vaitheespara's paper offers a refreshing perspective on the conflict in Sri Lanka. It revisits the Tamil national question and walks us through ideas argued by communists of various persuasions from the 1950s to the present. Vaitheespara wryly points out that, ironically enough, the left parties were, at one time, truly national: they did not imagine that the Tamils and Sinhalese constituted two nationalities whose interests could not ever be reconciled. Following Lenin, they supported the Tamils right to self-determination, and Colvin De Silva in fact was opposed to the 'Sinhala Only' policy outlined in 1956. Yet the left did not really work through its own ideas carefully, either theoretically or politically. Thus the Leninist line advanced by left thinkers and political leaders remained an abstract ideal – here Vaitheespara quotes Kumari Jayawardena's work to support his own reasoning – which was gradually abandoned as the left succumbed to a politics of pragmatism.

Vaitheespara, however, does not bemoan this gradual fall from revolutionary grace: rather he sets about to investigate the speeches and writings of individual communist thinkers and leaders, especially those who were Tamil to find out if their understanding allows us a radical critical handle on the Tamil national question. He points out that though passionately committed to the cause of a united proletariat, men like Pon Kandiah and Karalasingam were yet deeply aware of the essential justice of the Tamil national cause. However they appeared to have accented it differently.

In his charged speech in parliament, Pon Kandiah invoked the importance of language and memory for a people and considered the Tamils' fight for linguistic rights a noble one, fit to stand company with the struggle of the working class. In fact he even

attempted to delineate a class basis to the language issue: he noted that those who thus fought in the name of their beleaguered linguistic identity were not the rich or the middle classes, but those from the lower classes. Karalasingham saw the issue differently: in his essay in *Young Socialist* he detailed the systematic denial of rights to the Tamil people in all fields of civil and political life; he charged the Tamil parties with an opportunism that could not go beyond making and breaking parliamentary majorities and, more importantly, held that the Tamil communalism of the Freedom party and the Tamil Congress had yielded their Sinhala counterparts. He counselled a united struggle of Sinhala and Tamil working people, which he argued would help realize Tamil rights. He was also sceptical of Tamil militancy and understood it as continuing an older partisan tradition that would ultimately bode ill for all.

Vaitheespara then considers the views of Ponnambalam who advocated red nationalism – through his sharp critique of the left parties' position on the national question. He accused them of not being sensible to the actual nature of the Tamil problem and of offering arguments and solutions that were mechanical and indifferently conceptualized. Ponnambalam was politically more open to the nationalists than Karalasingham was and this, it appears, proved his downfall. For he lost his place in the left, was let down by the left parties and only served as political grist to right wingers determined to mock the left. Like Ponnambalam there were others who were incensed with left arguments on the national question: Vaitheespara considers the career of Shanmugathan as emblematic of those who were forced to acknowledge, albeit bitterly, that Tamil nationalism was a worthy cause, fuelled largely by genuine grievances on the one hand and an unabated and unabashed Sinhala chauvinism on the other. Referring to more contemporary views, Vaitheespara notes that the Tamil left has come to see the national contradiction as predominant and subsuming class concerns. For instance, a *New Democracy* publication notes that the call of nationalism is both imminent and urgent and that it is not surprising that it has attracted a number of men and women from the working classes.

Yet wonders Vaitheespara, why, in spite of this recognition of the historically just nature of the Tamil national cause, could left ideologues not delineate a credible argument or political strategy that would provide an alternative to the militancy they understood but which left them feeling uneasy. The reasons, he notes, had perhaps to do with two things: the left in Sri Lanka, including the Tamil left, assumed the nation and nation-state as almost sacrosanct entities within whose limits and terms alone could the question of self-determination be transacted. Secondly, left ideologues did not really seek to unpack the idea of the nation in their conceptions of the good national society. Shanmugathan, Vaitheespara points out, accepted the Sinhala-Buddhist version of Sri Lanka's pre-colonial history and thereby granted its salience, without

asking if this was, itself, not a constructivist view, and one enabled by Sinhala chauvinism.

This is not so different from the Indian communists' position on Kashmir or the troubles in the north-east and on the question of Tamil Eelam. They uphold in an almost sacerdotal manner the idea of a united India – or a unified Sri Lanka – in their theorising on this subject. In fact, in spite of their acceptance of the Leninist doctrine of self-determination, the left has always been uneasy with the question of self-determination of nationalities within the Indian Union. As early as the 1940s, left ideologues resolutely opposed the demand for a separate Dravida Nadu advanced by anti-caste radicals from Tamil Nadu, and failed to engage with the social and economic justice issues that lay at the core of this demand. With respect to the idea of the nation too, left ideologues are prone to accept hegemonic descriptions of civilisation and culture – as Dilip Menon has shown in his remarkable critique of EMS Namudiriphad's historiography. (Vaitheespara refers to this in his paper, as also to a more recent critique of the caste question in communism in the Tamil Nadu context).

Vaitheespara's attempt to unpack the details of the Tamil left's engagement with the national question could be pushed further and in diverse directions. Firstly, the uncovering of a 'Tamil' left position is itself interesting: for Kandiah, Tamilness appears an affective sensibility, bound up with literature and cultural memory. Karalasingam considers Tamilness through the prism of rights on the one hand and classic Leninism on the other; whereas for Ponnambalam the wrongs endured by Tamils transform them into almost revolutionary subjects. For Shanmugathan and others, who are clearly not guided by affective sentiments, or revisionist ideas, the Tamil cause appears primary and urgent in a classic Leninist sense, constituting as it does, an important feature of the socialist project itself. The different ways in which Tamilness re-constitutes the socialist project in each of these instances is interesting and could be investigated further. This would help to both delineate a map of nationalist rhetoric and practice and socialist theory-making and mark the points where they meet and where they seal their borders. As Terry Martin has noted in his monumental work on the nationalities question in the erstwhile Soviet Union, nationalism is both form and content: how one defines a people is as decisive as how one understands their national rights. In this sense, it would be useful to ask whether the prisms of language and class yielded for their proponents an adequate knowledge of the Tamil people.

Secondly, it might be useful to turn the critical lens to Sinhala Buddhist nationalism as well and how its cause was advanced within the left parties. Terry Martin notes that, for Lenin and initially for Stalin, nationalism was bound up with the modern notion of self-determination as well as with the larger socialist project. But in the post 1932 period national identities in the Soviet Union, notes Martin, came to be primordialised.

This easy sliding between the one sense of the nation and the other is perhaps more characteristic of socialist arguments on nationalism than we imagine – the Hungarian and Czech Springs bear witness to this in creative ways, and there are other examples, in Soviet history itself, which prove the destructive effects of this sliding. This distinction and the manner in which it is constantly fudged are matters that pertain to Tamil nationhood as well: when objective factors render self-determination a distant dream and in fact are made to aid an active oppression of those who uphold this idea, the question of cultural origins becomes all the more urgent – for it serves as an enabling rallying cry when all else appears to have failed. This perhaps explains why militant Tamil nationalism found its adherents in Sri Lanka: Tamil militants have recourse to a political rhetoric of self-determination and a cultural rhetoric of an ancient homeland. The one allows them to battle the chauvinist Sri Lankan state, whereas the other helps to recruit fighters to their cause.

Thirdly, the rhetoric of a united struggle needs to be critically interrogated as well, for it assumes the possibility of socialist comradeship across class, language, faith and geography. And it also assumes a continual memory of such a struggle. In this context it would be important to ask: What were the actual objective correlates to this comradeship? Were they contingent correlates, which had to do with specific struggles and leaders, circumstances and successes? Was there a more enduring basis for such a comradeship to sustain itself, either in terms of party propaganda or programmes of action?

This question could be pushed even further: was such an imagined and desired comradeship a feature of a cosmopolitan worldview as well? In the Indian left context, the historian Uma Chakravathy has noted (in a personal communication) that communist ideologues were far more attracted to building a secular ideal, bringing together Hindus and Muslims, than to building a communist bloc across castes and linguistic groups. The reasons, she suggests, might have to do with the peculiar cosmopolitanism of the left in India in the 1930s and 1940s, when Hindi and Urdu speaking writers and artists constituted the intellectual vanguard of the party and gave it an expansive secular character. It would be interesting to find out whether, in the Sri Lankan context, the idea of a unified struggle was one hatched in common schoolrooms, furthered by shared literary and cultural tastes and practices, rather than an empirical or political possibility?

The question then arises: can such cosmopolitanism really speak to the contingent moment, to history meaningfully, especially when it represents a marginal point of view in a deeply divided society, marked by class and ethnic fault lines? The corollary question would be, is it not because of this, that this cosmopolitanism represents an impossible historical condition, that nationalism is far more appealing, since it offers, as

Bukharin noted in a different context, an expressive means to articulate discontent? (Bukharin noted in 1923, “when we tax [the non-Russian peasantry] their discontent takes on a national form, is given a national interpretation, which is then exploited by our opponents.) This last observation could be pushed to both critically examine the politics of militancy – its myth of a homeland, its celebration of Tamilness, its cult of martyrdom and death – as well as the politics of peace and democracy. The former is deeply embedded within a rhetoric that is resolutely opposed to the sort of cosmopolitanism that cross-ethnic groups represent, because the latter denies the primordial core of nationalism, and further smacks of class power. (It is another matter that Tamil primordialism is equally a product of class and culture, but since this is easily subsumed in the fact of a common tongue and a shared historical destiny, Tamil nationalists do not see the need to acknowledge class or caste.)

These are some of the fascinating and urgent directions that Vaitheespara’s work suggests we pursue.

Sri Manoharan, Colombo

I refer to the paper by Ravi Vaitheespara titled “the Left in Sri Lanka and the Tamil Question: a Response”. It is most welcome that a subject of that title has been taken up for study in the current situation. I wish to add the following items of information to supplement the points made by the author:

The Communist Party at its Valvettithurai Conference in 1955 adopted a resolution prescribing regional autonomy as a way of settling the national question.

The Sinhala Only Act of June 1956 was adopted amidst vehement opposition by the left. The left comprising the LSSP and the CP had a combined parliamentary strength of nineteen, a formidable number in a house with 95 elected members, and demanded parity of status for Tamil. All nineteen voted against the Act along with the eleven Tamil MPs from the FP and TC put together.

The left organised a meeting at the Colombo Town Hall to oppose ‘Sinhala Only’, and a hand grenade tossed at Dr NM Perera, who was saved by an LSSP stalwart who intercepted the device and lost his hand as a result.

It should also be noted that personalities from among the Buddhist clergy such as Sri Rahula Thera and Sri Sumangala Thera joined the left in its struggle for parity of status for Tamil.

E Thambiah, Colombo

The paper "the Left in Sri Lanka and the Tamil Question" in ND 22 elaborates historically the stand of the left of Sri Lanka on the national question, and differentiates between the section of the left movement that may be called the 'official left' comprising the LSSP and the CP and the 'unofficial left' comprising the NSSP, the NDP and other left parties and groups.

The highlighting of these differences will help the readers to know the real and correct position of the genuine left on the national question. The opportunistic stand of the 'official left' has always been used as supportive evidence by the anti-left and anti-Marxist Tamil nationalists to attack the left movement as a whole.

We should also bear in mind the healthier position adopted by the 'official left' until the early 1960s, especially on issues such as the Citizenship Act and the Official Language Act (commonly known as Sinhala Only Act). They even canvassed for equality and autonomy for the North East.

The strong stand taken by N Sanmugathasan against Tamil nationalism was used by the Tamil nationalist parties and subsequently the Tamil militants against the entire left. It may not be wrong to say that the subsequent change of heart by Sanmugathasan to defend Tamil nationalism and denounce Sinhala chauvinism was based less on scientific analysis than on sympathy for the Tamil people suffering under Sinhala chauvinist state oppression.

The breakaway faction of the Communist Party now functioning as the New Democratic Party has always taken a correct and consistent position on the national question, based on scientific and historical dialectical outlook. Its position will need to be further developed in keeping with new developments in the national question.

The contribution of Ravi Vaitheespara could serve as a good start for reopening the question of the role of the left and examining in detail its contribution. The dialogues and exchanges of views that emerge will contribute to reshaping left movement, which is essential to arriving at a lasting political solution for the national question and for building socialism in Sri Lanka.

Imayavaramban, Kandy

Vaitheespara has raised searching questions regarding the changing position of the 'left' on the national question. Attempts to answer these questions would necessarily need to address the role of class outlook of not only the parliamentary left but also the Tamil nationalists.

Kumari Jayawardena has charged that the CP accepted Stalin's definition as well as the Indian CP's line, which accepted the right of the Muslim nation for self-determination, and that the positions taken by the 'left' were "all merely routine and obligatory", and that there was no serious debate. I wonder if the CPI's acceptance of the right of the 'Muslim nation' to self-determination was in line with Lenin's and Stalin's analysis of the national question. The concept of a Muslim nation (as opposed to a 'Hindu nation') evolved in the complex context of the Indian struggle for independence; the increasing inability of the Indian National Congress-led freedom movement to address the concerns of the Muslims ultimately led to the birth of Pakistan. The CPI simply endorsed what it saw as objective reality, and inevitable under the circumstances.

Jayawardane fails to say what was wrong in the CP's recognition of the Tamils as a nationality, which, for whatever reason it was done, put the CP at ease when it came to endorsing the district-based devolution under the Bandaranayake-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957. (Notions of Muslim and Hill Country Tamil nationalism did not even occur to the leaders of those communities until the national question began to turn into a national crisis). While Jayawardena claims that the LSSP accepted Lenin's line on the rights of nations for self-determination, the LSSP did not recognise the Tamils as a nationality even in the 1960s; and many LSSP leaders still talk of a Tamil minority rather than a nationality.

The backsliding of the left on the national question was mainly a consequence of its taking the parliamentary road to power. Parliamentary opportunism led not merely to the betrayal of the Tamil nationality but also of the working class. It should, however, be noted that the LSSP endorsed the *satyagraha* campaign of the FP in 1961, and that the CP which supported the cause was critical of the way the FP carried out the campaign.

Despite the left defending the rights of the Tamils well into the 1960s, the left has been consistently rejected at the polls by the Tamils, with the single exception of Pon Kandiah's success in 1956 in Point Pedro. Despite the chauvinism of the UNP, the Tamils living in the south mostly supported the UNP, with tactical endorsement by the Tamil Congress and later the FP. That was frustrating for the two main left parties, which by the mid-1960s were well entrenched in parliamentary politics; and seeing little electoral benefit in standing up for the Tamils they acted to arrest the erosion of their respective Sinhala vote banks, on which Sinhala chauvinism had started to have an impact. This was explicitly admitted to me in the late 1960s by members of the LSSP.

The LSSP dealt behind the back of its United Left Front partners (the MEP and the CP) in 1964 to betray the ill-fated 21 demands of the workers as well as cause the break up of the ULF, so that its leader NM Perera secured a cabinet post. This was shortly after the MEP leader Philip Gunawardane sought, unsuccessfully though, to use

the impending workers' struggle as a lever to get the entire left into government. Jayawardena seems to miss the strong link between the parliamentary path and betrayal of the oppressed by the left, be it national minorities or the very classes that the left claimed to represent.

Tamil consciousness transformed itself from one of linguistic identity to that of nationality or nationhood over a century. For most of the period, Tamil identity served the interests of the Jaffna Vellala elite. Even though the Muslims had from time to time asserted their separate identity, Tamil nationalists ignored it by referring to a 'Tamil speaking people'. Even today there is reluctance among Tamil nationalists to recognise the Muslims and Hill Country Tamils as distinct nationalities. Tamil nationalism has constantly refused to address issues of caste oppression, while the left, especially the CP (most importantly the Marxist Leninists) took up the cause of those oppressed by caste. That was a major cause for friction between the left and the Tamil nationalists.

The Tamil nationalists were not serious about a struggle for a federal state that the FP had called for at its founding in 1948 or for the separate Tamil Eelam demanded by its successor, the TULF in 1976. Right up to 1980, they were ready for deals with Sinhala chauvinist governments, well short of genuine autonomy. I think that it is useful to compare the positions taken by the parliamentary left and the genuine Marxist Leninists on the national question with that of the Tamil nationalists during this period.

I have some doubts about the role played by Karalasingam in the LSSP. In 1964, he broke away from the LSSP with those who disapproved of its opportunist line, but rejoined shortly after. It will be interesting to learn what the position of Karalasingam was regarding the conduct of the LSSP on questions relating to the Tamils, after his return to the fold.

It took V Ponnambalam until after 1977 to redefine himself as a red-Tamil. Interestingly, he contested SJV Chelvanayakam in KKS in 1976 to oppose the latter's demand for Tamil Eelam. He was a high ranking member of the revisionist CP at the national and regional levels when the party was a partner in power in the SLFP led-coalition until 1976. I am not aware of any denouncement during that time by Ponnambalam of the discriminatory constitution of 1972 or of the string of betrayals about which he complained following his endorsement of Amirthalingam (who took barely a year after his roaring electoral success in 1977 to be branded a traitor by the very youth who once adored him).

The demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam became a serious proposition among Tamils only after all hope of a just and lasting solution based on devolution of power was shattered in 1980. The genocide of 1983 was a major turning point. In the famous debate in 1977 between Sanmugathan and V Tharmalingam, an important

TULF leader, the former showed that the TULF demand for Tamil Eelam was just an electoral ploy.

The Marxist Leninists never took a static view of the national question. They recognised the emergence and expression of distinct national identities of the Muslims and Hill Country Tamils well ahead the Tamil nationalists. They also developed the concept of self-determination to extend it to nationalities and ethnic groups for whom secession was not a feasible option.

To refer to the parliamentary left as 'left' now is absurd since it has for too long been an appendage of the SLFP. Any remaining left identity of the chauvinistic JVP is now fully eroded. So it is the weak but principled Marxist Leninists among Tamils and the various factions among the Sinhalese who constitute the real Sri Lankan left and on whose shoulders rests the task of rebuilding the left, providing leadership the anti-imperialist struggle and carrying forward the campaign against national oppression through supporting the just struggle of all oppressed nationalities.

While it is useful to draw parallels between Sri Lankan and Indian left, one also has to be conscious of the risks of extrapolation. For example, the form and nature of caste oppression differs not only between the two countries but also between the different states of India, so that the role the Brahmin and Brahminism has to be seen in context. In fact, many fail to see how the Vellala elite domination of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka succeeded in denying the Tamil national struggle an anti-imperialist dimension, let alone orientation.

Thus, the need to correctly understand the role of the left in the national question is strong, and Vaitheespara's intervention is particularly valuable in clarifying the difference between the opportunist left and the Marxist Leninists. I think that for a fuller appreciation of the issues, future work should consider the context of the development of national politics among the nationalities as well as issues of caste, class and gender oppression; the role of parliamentary politics; the position of the various nationalists as well as the left parties vis-à-vis imperialism and regional hegemony, and globalisation.

NDP Diary

Statement to the Media

NDP Welcomes Talks

11th October 2006

Comrade SK Senthivel, General Secretary of the New Democratic Party issued, on behalf of the Politburo of the NDP, the following statement.

The agreement between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to conduct talks on the 28th and 29th of October is to be welcomed. At the same time, both sides should act with very much responsibility to create a climate conducive to the taking place of talks for the talks to take place as scheduled and for decisions that mean progress. Especially, the President and the Government should make their fullest effort to use the forthcoming talks to proceed along the path for a political solution without yielding to pressure from the chauvinists for military action. As a forerunner, attacks, killings, kidnapping and acts of revenge should be ceased by both sides. That would put an end to the fear for life, apprehension and anxiety among the people. The New Democratic Party emphasises the need for such a course of action.

People in the North-East have, as a result of the increased intensity of attacks and conflicts, experienced during the past ten months daily loss of life, displacement and burdens on their lives. The suffering has been severe during the last two months. The closure of A 9 has cut off the supply of essential goods and travel to the north. As a result of this undeclared economic blockade, people of the north are finding it difficult to buy essential goods even at sky-high prices. Patients are suffering because of shortage of essential medicine and medical services. Education is in disarray. People are stranded, unable to come to the south for essential needs and medical treatment.

Hence our Party puts forward the appeal that the President and the Government should open the A 9 highway to the north as an anticipatory act of goodwill to make the talks meaningful. It also points out that the suffering experienced by the people in the north could be alleviated through it. The party also emphasises the need to adopt an appropriate approach to deal with the misery faced by the people in the east.

Statement to the Media

NDP Warns of the Consequences of the Supreme Court Ruling on the Merging of the North-East

18th October 2006

Comrade SK Senthivel, General Secretary of the New Democratic Party issued, on behalf of the Politburo of the NDP, the following statement.

The Supreme Court ruling that legitimises the separation of the Northern and Eastern Provinces which remained merged for eighteen years has only aggravated the national question which continues as war, without a solution. The above ruling has paved the way to reject and shatter the political, economic and socio-cultural aspirations and just demands of the Tamil people. Besides, it has also opened the way for new conflicts among the Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala people of the North-East. It has also strengthened extreme chauvinists such as the JVP and the Hela Urumaya who insist on continuing the chauvinistic war of oppression. Hence the President should abandon the idea of a referendum in the East and take steps to pass an act of Parliament that will enable the continuation of the merger of the North-East. In this matter, the President should consider favourably the idea put forward by the UNP, the main opposition party, to enact legislation for a merger. The New Democratic Party wishes to point out that, otherwise, a situation will arise with a growing risk of the current efforts for a peaceful solution becoming meaningless and increasing destruction by war.

It has become a new trend today to use certain aspects of the law to frustrate just demands and struggles for such demands through rulings by the courts of law. Already strikes which constitute a right of the trade unions have suffered such a fate. In a similar fashion, the PTOMS legislation put forward by the former President and passed in parliament has been rendered ineffective by a ruling of the Supreme Court. That too was the chauvinistic handiwork of the JVP which then wrecked the efforts for peace. Even today, when serious efforts are being made for talks on the coming 28th and 29th, the JVP has secured a court order nullifying the merging of the Northern and Eastern Provinces.

The New Democratic Party has continuously stressed that only autonomy to the North-East, comprising the traditional homeland of the Tamils and the Muslims, through the sharing of power on the basis of the right to self-determination could be the right political solution. Hence the Party emphasises that the Tamils and the Muslims should speak in one voice and come forward to join in struggle to defeat the intrigue of the chauvinists.

Statement to the Media

Reopen the A 9 Highway and Resume Talks

4th November 2006

Comrade SK Senthivel, General Secretary of the New Democratic Party issued the following statement, on behalf of the Politburo of the NDP.

The refusal of the Government to open the A 9 Highway has led to the failure of the Geneva talks and pushed the north towards starvation and human misery. Meantime, the Government is conducting aerial bombing and missile attacks on the North east. Such military actions indicate a move towards total war. If the Government while talking of a political solution and peace take the road for a military solution, it will plunge the North east as well as the whole country into destruction. Hence the only way to transform the current critical situation is for the Government to reopen the A 9 Highway and to find ways of resuming negotiations.

It will soon be n year since President Rajapaksha was sworn in. Nothing on the lines of an honourable political solution in the ‘Mahinda Chinthanaya’ has been undertaken. The two talks in Geneva failed because they were not conducted in a constructive manner. Meanwhile, charges and counter-charges proliferated. People had to face loss of life and displacement. Besides, tit-for-tat killings and kidnappings based on revenge took place daily. Democracy, human rights, and law and order seem to have woefully lost their meaning.

Hence the people are anxious to know whether the President and the Government want to implement a programme with a chauvinistic militarist orientation or make the necessary efforts for a political solution through negotiations. Meantime, the New Democratic Party wishes to warn of the danger that the so-called ‘international community’ taking advantage of the heightened crisis in the North East to interfere and infiltrate with ease to serve their own interests.

Statement to Television

Death Sentence for Saddam Hussein is Unacceptable

7th November 2006

Comrade SK Senthivel, General Secretary of the New Democratic Party made the following statement to a television channel, on the death sentence for Saddam Hussein.

The verdict of a death sentence for Saddam Hussein, Ex-President of Iraq delivered by a tribunal of a US puppet government set up in Iraq is unacceptable. It is merely a verdict guided by the US imperialists. The New Democratic Party joins the people of Iraq and the people of the world in opposing and denouncing the verdict. If this bad precedent is not stopped, US imperialism will make it the accepted practice to pass a death sentence and get rid of every ruler and political leader opposed to it in any country.

Saddam Hussein emerged as an Iraqi nationalist and headed a military regime. He mercilessly killed Iraqi communists, and murdered those who opposed him to run a nationalist military government in Iraq. He used the US and certain other western countries for his survival. He was also an opponent of the US and Israel, who resisted US domination in the Arab World. The invasion of Iraq and the death sentence for Saddam Hussein are merely actions taken by the US to dispose of its opponent and to secure its control over oil in the Arab World. Saddam was at the forefront of opposing Israel, the US favourite and hit-man in the Middle East which acts a threat to the Arab World and carries out mass murder of the Palestinians. Thus, through this death sentence, the US has miscalculated that it is able to assert its control over the Arab World. The reality is that the US is getting its feet enmeshed into a death trap. What one can see is that not only the people of Iraq and the world, but also the American people are becoming increasingly opposed to the policy of imperialist aggression.

Statement to the Media

NDP Denounces Violation of Human Rights

15th November 2006

The Politburo of the New Democratic Party, after a careful consideration of the situation prevailing in the country, issued the following statement.

Amid the political and economic crises in the country, there is a threat of chauvinistic military forces gaining the upper hand. To stop this trend, all democratic forces that are interested in the wellbeing of the country and its people should unite and carry forward mass movements and struggles. Otherwise, chauvinist military oppression will lead to a fascist dictatorship. The brutal murder of Nadarajah Raviraj MP in broad daylight is an advance warning of that. The young parliamentary politician took part in agitations both inside and outside parliament to defend democracy and human rights, and to publicise the pathetic situation of the Tamil people. His murder has

demonstrated that parliamentary democracy under the executive presidential system is a farce.

In recent months, paying no heed to statements of condemnation, displeasure and opposition, the government continued unabated its air strikes, artillery fire and shelling against Tamils in the North East. One such brutal attack was on the people who took refuge in the Kathiraveli School in Vaharai in the East. Based on the decision of military advisors, the A9 Highway has remained closed for the past three months. There is a human tragedy in the north owing to the blockade. Meanwhile, in the North East, abductions and killings have increased by the day and reached a peak. The situation in the North east will not take long to spread to the Hill Country and the South. Such chauvinist military activities could soon evolve into an open fascist dictatorship. It should be understood with forewarning that the whole country and its people could face a major disaster.

The ruling SLFP and the opposition UNP have come to an understanding to work together. The CWC and the Hill Country People's Front have joined the government and hold ministerial posts. While pretending that they have differences with the government, the JVP and the JHU have discussions with the government, urging it to adopt severely a chauvinist agenda. Under these circumstances, those who oppose war and desire peace, democracy and respect for human rights are unable to have a positive response from the government.

There is now the need and urgency for the Tamils, Muslims and Hill Country Tamils who are denied of justice and fair play and the workers, peasants and toiling masses of the south to unite under an alternative political programme. It should be realised that little could be expected from the government, the opposition, or the imperialist international community.

Thus it is necessary to mobilise the people and subject the ruling sections to strong protest and pressure. The immediate political programme should be to compel the government to take the necessary alternative steps to secure peace and a political solution to the national question, and answers to the day to day crises faced by the people. The New Democratic Party calls upon all democratic forces that love the country and the people to act in unity to achieve it.

Statement to the Media by the Proletarian New Democratic Union

Award Wage Increase Immediately

8th November 2006

The Proletarian New Democratic Union has warned that the Collective Agreement between the Employers and the Unions should be renewed to award a daily wage of 350 rupees without further procrastination. Otherwise the current state of unrest among workers will only deteriorate.

E Thambiah, Attorney-at-Law, President of the Proletarian New Democratic Union, which serves as a union for plantation workers, and workers and employees in the private sector, added in his statement that, without building a strong trade union movement, it will not be possible to secure a new wage scheme with a fair increase in wages. Replacing with others the trade union leaders who are the current signatories to the agreement cannot lead to the building up of a strong trade union movement. Instead, a strong revolutionary trade union movement should be built based on the working class. It is through that it will be possible to secure a fair wage increase now as well as achieve a new wage scheme that will allow fair wage increase in the future.

Trade unions that are wasting time without renewing the collective agreement or securing higher wages are of no use. Nor will other trade unions which, while criticising the former, seek to drag the workers along the same route be of any good to the workers. Meantime, today, when the trade union movement is weak, certain trade union and NGO leaders acting in a way to totally wreck the trade union movement are only helping the plantation companies. It is necessary to build up in their place a powerful revolutionary trade union movement based on working class ideology. It is through that a wage scheme accommodating fair wage increase could be won by the plantation workers.

Plantation workers are participating in struggles demanding a wage increase, in defiance of the trade union leadership. This has led to unrest among workers. If prolonged, the unrest will intensify. Bearing this in mind, the plantation companies should award increased wages.

Sri Lankan Events

Geneva Round 2: Road to Nowhere

No serious political observer could have expected anything worthwhile to emerge from the second round of talks in Geneva, especially after the government went back on its pledge at the earlier round of talks to implement the ceasefire agreement (CFA) and control the activities of Tamil militia groups, and went a step further to launch air attacks against alleged LTTE targets without justification and kill civilians through indiscriminate bombing. To make matters worse for the Tamil people, especially in the Vanni and in the Jaffna peninsula the government closed the A9 road to Jaffna on 11th August, using the armed conflict in the peninsula as pretext.

Peace talks and proposals for a political solution have hitherto proved to be devices of procrastination and deception; and the last round of talks in Geneva has lived up to that reputation. With the government, in violation of the CFA, holding the people of Jaffna to ransom by the closure of the road, any progress in Geneva hinged on satisfactorily resolving the question of reopening A9. The refusal of the government to reopen the road is clear indication that government thinking is driven by elements within and outside the armed forces who seek a military defeat of the LTTE. Meantime, the refusal of the LTTE to assure safe passage for government supply vessels to take supplies to the north through what it claims to be its territorial waters has created a further impasse.

It is essential today for the government and the LTTE to put behind them the failure of the Geneva talks and reach an early agreement on the opening of the A9 in the interest of the ordinary people of the north, whose hopes for return to normal life has been shattered by the events of the past few months

(1 11 2006)

The Supreme Court Strikes Again

The Supreme Court upheld the fundamental rights petition filed by the JVP accusing that the declaration by President JR Jayawardane in 1977 merging the Northern and Eastern Provinces was unlawful and claiming that the people of the Eastern Province had been deprived of their fundamental right of setting up their own Provincial Council because of it.

While the Supreme Court ruling is technically valid, the reality is that the judgment has adverse implications for the peaceful resolution of the national question. It should also be noted that judiciary ceased to be independent ever since JR Jayawardane, as Executive President, started to meddle in its affairs, and in recent years it has been used by the right wing and the chauvinists to deny justice to the workers and to the oppressed Tamil nationality.

(15 11 06)

A Marriage of Convenience

The Memorandum of Understanding signed between the UNP and the SLFP has been hailed as a milestone in the history of the country by the Sri Lankan media. The purpose of the cooperation between the parties is said to be in order to enable the government of President Rajapaksha to find a solution to the national question. However, there does not seem to be much in common between the two leaders on issues that are wrecking the prospect of peace. While the UNP leader Ranil Wickramasinghe is emphasising the need to abide by the CFA and the MoU between the Government and the LTTE and reopen the A9, President Mahinda Rajapaksha is most reluctant to open the A9 and turns a blind to the excesses of the armed forces. He made his intentions clear by increasing the defence budget by nearly a half at a time while declaring his desire for a peaceful solution to the national question. Nor has the government stopped inducing members of the UNP from crossing over by offering ministerial posts.

Although talks of a 'national government' comprising the two major parties and their closest allies has been there even before Rajapaksha became President, the reason for the present alliance seems opportunistic, and to do with the politics of survival: for Rajapaksha to proceed with the undeclared genocidal war without criticism from the main opposition party and for Wickramasinghe to stabilise and strengthen his position within the UNP before the party is further weakened by crossovers.

(15 11 06)

Slaying of an Outspoken Parliamentarian

The killing on 10th November in broad daylight of the TNA MP Nadarajah Raviraj, a very much liked and arguably the most outspoken Tamil MP, in the city of Colombo in a state of a maximum security alert does not bode well for the political stability of the country. The killing drew strong protests from most political parties, and the TNA leadership charged that the government with responsibility and accusations had been made about involvement of a cabinet member, although the government has denied any involvement.

Given the spate of kidnappings and killings mainly of Tamils taking place in Colombo and the failure of the police to intervene effectively, President Rajapaksha's statement that he would seek the help of the Scotland Yard to find the culprits did not cut much ice with the Tamil MPs, drew a sharp retort by one of his critics that 'why he should to bother to bring in Scotland Yard when the killers are in his own backyard'.

(20 11 2006)

International Events

Nepal: A Historic Achievement

It is a year since the twelve-point understanding and reached between the Seven Party Alliance and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and five months since the eight-point agreement concluded in June 2006, that a historic deal was made between the SPA and CPN(M). The US is even now unhappy about a role for the CPN(M) in government and could be expected to do its utmost to wreck the new deal. Even India was using its influence with its client parties, and especially the Nepali Congress leader and Prime Minister GP Koirala, to secure a role for the King, with some power in the future government and to weaken the CPN(M) politically and militarily.

The CPN(M), by refusing to yield to external pressure on issues of disarmament and the role of the monarchy and through its commitment to a democratic republic, succeeded in arriving at an accord with the SPA on 16th November whereby the CPN(M) would join the interim government on 1st December.

The Peace Agreement essentially concerns the adaptation of programmes and policies for political, social and economic transformation and management of the existing conflict through positive means; the management of arms on the side of both the Nepalese Army and the PLA implementation of the ceasefire; ending the war; upholding human and fundamental rights; mechanisms for settling disputes; and issues related to the implementation of the agreement in its right spirit. What is important to the people of Nepal is what is said in Section 3 of the agreement regarding political, social, economic transformation and conflict management give below in approximate translation in English.

3 Political, social, economic transformation and conflict management

Both parties have agreed to formulate following programmes and policies for political, social and economic transformation and management of the existing conflict through positive means:

- 3.1. Based on the decision taken by the meeting of the top leaders of the seven parties and the Maoists (schedule 6) on November 8, guarantee progressive political, economic and social transformation.
- 3.2. Form the interim legislative – parliament, as per the interim constitution, the interim government shall hold election to constituent assembly elections by mid-June 2007 in free and fair manner and make the Nepalese people feel their inherent sovereign right.
- 3.3. No rights of state administration shall remain with the King. Bring the properties of late King Birendra, late Queen Aishwarya and their family members under the control of the Nepal government and use it for the welfare purposes through a trust. All properties acquired by King Gyanendra by the virtue of him being the King (like palaces of various places, forests and conservation areas, heritage having historical and archaeological importance) shall be nationalised. Determine the fate of the institution of monarchy by the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly through simple majority vote.
- 3.4. Promulgate the political system that fully comprehends with the concepts of universally adopted principles of fundamental human rights, multiparty competitive democratic system, sovereign rights inherent in the people and supremacy of the citizens, constitutional balance and control, rule of law, social justice and equality, independent judiciary, periodic elections, monitoring by the civil society, complete press freedom, right to information of the citizens, transparency and accountability of the activities of the political parties, people's participation, fair, able and uncorrupted administrative mechanism.
- 3.5. End the existing centralised and unitary state system and restructure it into an inclusive, democratic progressive system to address various problems including that of women, Dalits, indigenous community, Madhesis, oppressed, ignored and minority communities, backward regions by ending prevailing class, ethnic, linguistic, gender, cultural, religious and regional discrimination.
- 3.6. End all forms of feudalism and prepare and implement a minimum common programme of socio-economic transformation on mutual understanding.
- 3.7. End feudal land ownership and formulate the policies for scientific land reforms.
- 3.8. Adopt policies for protection and promotion of national industries and resources.
- 3.9. Adopt policies for establishment of civil rights in education, health, shelter, employment and food security.
- 3.10. Adopt policies to provide land and socio-economic security to backward groups like landless, bonded labourers, tillers, Haruwa-charuwa and other such groups, which are socio-economically backward.

- 3.11. Adopt policies to take strict actions against the people who have worked in government positions and have amassed huge amount of properties through corruption.
- 3.12. Prepare a common development concept that will help in socio-economic transformation of the country and will also assist in ensuring the country's economic prosperity in a short period of time.
- 3.13. Follow policies ascertaining the professional rights of workers and increase investment on sectors like promoting industries, trade and export and increase employment and income generating opportunities.

There is no doubt that what has been achieved for democracy in Nepal would not have been possible without armed struggle; and genuine democracy is an essential prerequisite for the eventual transformation of Nepal into a people's democracy and a socialist republic. Multi-party democracy by itself will not hinder the process, provided that the working masses are empowered to ensure democracy at grassroots level and to defend their victories over the feudal exploiting classes during the decade long armed struggle. The challenge facing the progressive forces in Nepal is the implementation of the programme for democracy and social justice

Caution is particularly necessary, however, against foreign meddling, especially by US imperialism and Indian expansionism which has dominated the economic and political affairs of Nepal for long. More caution is needed against the 'sugar-coated bullets' of foreign aid and foreign investment for 'economic development' aimed at exploiting the natural and human resources of Nepal.

Korea: The American Threat

The nuclear tests carried out by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has serious implications for nuclear disarmament from the point of view of existing unequal nuclear order ruled by the US and based on outright double standards. With Israel in possession of a powerful nuclear arsenal and remaining out of the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) with the blessings of the US and India and Pakistan which have conducted their own nuclear tests and out of the NPT, to accuse North Korea of being a threat to peace and nuclear non-proliferation is a sick joke, especially when the charge comes from the unrivalled nuclear power.

With the US refusing to give assurances about the non-use of nuclear weapons against North Korea, and having its military bases and troops

stationed across the border in South Korea, North Korea has every right to take appropriate steps in defence. North Korea opted out of the NPT in 2003 and is not legally bound to non-proliferation. The tests will, however, be used by the US as a pretext to intensify its aggressive campaign against North Korea, in the name of punishing violations of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) regulations, and more importantly Iran, which is the more immediate target.

The US, the self-appointed global policeman, seeks to obtain Security Council sanctions to bully North Korea and Iran by punitive offensives, and attempts at any such offensive or to escalate conflict in East Asia and in the Middle East should be fully opposed. It is thus the duty of progressive forces across the world, to expose the hypocrisy of nuclear states, with a record of repeated nuclear tests, in coming out against North Korea for alleged violation of IAEA regulations, and more importantly to denounce the US for reserving the right to use nuclear attack North Korea while denying North Korea the right to a nuclear deterrent.

Israel: Nuclear Terrorism

Robert Fisk, a respected reporter for the British daily, *The Independent* and author of *Pity the Nation* and *The Conquest of the Middle East* (forthcoming) in his article of 30th October in the internet magazine *Counterpunch*, accused Israel of using a secret new uranium-based weapon in southern Lebanon in the 34-day assault last July and August that killed 1,300 Lebanese, mostly civilians.

Fisk points out that Israel used American "bunker-buster" bombs on Hizbollah's Beirut headquarters; drenched southern Lebanon with cluster bombs in the last 72 hours of the war, leaving tens of thousands of bomblets which continued to kill Lebanese civilians; and, despite initial categorical denial, used phosphorous bombs, said to be restricted under the third protocol of the Geneva Conventions, which neither Israel nor the US have signed.

Fisk cites an initial report by Dr Chris Busby, the British Scientific Secretary of the European Committee on Radiation Risk on samples from at least two bomb craters in Khiam and At-Tiri, which indicate that uranium-based munitions were used against targets in Lebanon. According to the report the contamination is either from some novel small experimental nuclear fission device or other experimental weapon based on the high temperature of a uranium oxidation flash, or from a bunker-busting conventional uranium

penetrator weapon employing enriched rather than depleted uranium. (Enriched uranium is a fuel for nuclear reactors which is more radioactive than natural uranium or depleted uranium, an extremely hard metal used in anti-tank missiles and less radioactive than natural uranium).

Fisk quotes Chris Bellamy, Professor of Military Science and Doctrine at Cranfield University, UK who has reviewed the Busby report: "At worst it's some sort of experimental weapon with an enriched uranium component the purpose of which we don't yet know. At best--if you can say that--it shows a remarkably cavalier attitude to the use of nuclear waste products."

He also draws attention to Israel's poor reputation for telling the truth about its use of weapons in Lebanon, and its denial in 1982 of using phosphorous munitions on civilian areas, until journalists discovered dying and dead civilians whose wounds caught fire when exposed to air.

Lebanon: Murder Conspiracies?

Lebanese Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel has been killed in Beirut on 22nd November and the blame has been laid on Syria again by forces loyal to the US. In this context, it is useful to draw attention to the story from the website *waynemadsenreport.com*, which was the first to report Israeli and American involvement in the assassination of Lebanon's ex-Prime Minister Rafik Hariri as well as those of Elie Hobeika, George Hawi, and other Lebanese politicians. The website reported on 24th October 2006 that a senior French DGSE (*Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure*) intelligence officer has informed it that that Lebanon's ex-Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was killed in a car bombing arranged by Israel's Mossad. The revelation is significant as the French government joined Washington and Israel in blaming Syria for the attack, and the UN Secretary General still pursuing that charge.

According to the DGSE officer, Israel and its American backers wanted to blame Syria for the assassination of the popular Lebanese leader to prompt the Lebanese mass revolt that saw the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. The Syrian withdrawal left Lebanon defenceless against the "Clean Break" attack launched by Israel, with US support, against Hezbollah and Lebanon's infrastructure in July and August 2006.

Is the latest murder too another step in destabilising Lebanon and isolating Syria in the process of achieving Israeli goals in Lebanon?

US Elections: A Snub to the Neo-Conservatives

The results for the elections held in November for the seats that fell vacant in the US Senate and the House of Representatives has given the Democrats a majority in both chambers. The results have severely weakened the hands of President Bush and his neo-conservative advisors who drove the US towards its disastrous policies in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The results of the elections are a welcome change to the extent that the people of the US have clearly expressed their disapproval of the war in Iraq. Hence the Democrats have called for a phased withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. But that does not mean that US imperialism will mend its ways. In fact the Democrats did not oppose the invasion of Iraq or Afghanistan before nor is their Middle East policy different in substance from that of the Republicans.

Nicaragua: the Return of Daniel Ortega

Daniel Ortega was elected President of Nicaragua in early November. Fidel Castro was prompt to congratulate Ortega, whose victory follows a wave of left wing electoral successes in South America in the past few years and the near success of the left-wing Lopez Obrador in Mexico, denied to him by electoral irregularities. Ortega's is the first left-wing success in Central America after the Sandinista government led by him was pushed out of power by a two-pronged campaign of US-backed terror and vicious campaign that undermined Ortega's stature as a national leader.

Ortega is no more the radical and democratic leader who played a key role in overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship and in rebuilding Nicaragua from the ruins left behind by the dictator. He was frustrated by the US-backed civil war waged by the 'Contras' and the severe economic embargo placed on Nicaragua by the US. Nevertheless, Ortega's election makes way for the modest hope that a new Nicaraguan administration might do a better job of addressing the country's endemic poverty than have the past sixteen years of neoliberal rule for whose continuation the US went out of its way to canvass within Nicaragua as well as to threaten the country with economic ruin in the event of victory for the Sandinistas. More importantly it represents the will of the oppressed masses of the impoverished country to stand up to threats by US imperialism.

Mexico: the South on the Boil

Successive Mexican governments have followed a policy of submitting to US imperialist demands. The tying up of the Mexican economy with that of the US under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has made some people rich in the north of the country while causing misery to the vast majority of the workers and peasants, and especially the agricultural south.

1994 saw the first successful act of rebellion when the Zapatistas launched in the province of Chiapas a brief but violent uprising, and remain in control of a substantial part of the province. The success of the Zapatista rebels was an inspiration to the left and the suffering masses. While the presidential elections of 2000 brought an end to the corrupt one-party monopoly in Mexico, the new government of President Fox was again pro-US and right-wing.

The Democratic Revolution Party candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador was confident of electoral success in the elections held in 2006 but cheated of victory by electoral malpractices. Mass protests against the election of Felipe Calderon demanding a full recount. But the Electoral Court ruled based on partial recounts that there was no need for a recount. Supporters of Obrador have persisted in their demand and protests are to continue inside and outside Congress to impede the inauguration of president-elect Felipe Calderon. Meantime, Obrador has sworn himself in as Mexico's "legitimate" president on 20th November, launching a parallel government that could prevent Calderon from effective governing the country an already dented the economy.

Meanwhile, the poor southern state of Oaxaca, bordering Chiapas, has since May 2006 been gripped by violent political crisis caused by the heavy-handed action of the state governor Ulises Ruiz against striking teachers.

Opponents of the repressive regime in Oaxaca have resisted repressive measures by the Mexican armed forces under the leadership of APPO (Popular Assembly of the Peoples' of Oaxaca) founded on 17th June 2006 and embracing a large number of social organizations that include the striking teachers and indigenous people. Initially the struggle was in demand of the removal from office of Ruiz. But state repression has extended the scope of the struggle so that resistance is now to the oppressive Mexican state and the misguided economic policies of globalization and addresses more basic issues.

The militarized police's violent occupation of Oaxaca in fact provoked protests throughout Mexico: The Zapatista-inspired 'Other Campaign', together with other movements, blocked highways throughout Mexico on November 1st, while all roads through Zapatista territory in Chiapas were blocked throughout the day. APPO has in effect taken over the running of city

of Oaxaca and some 30 municipalities throughout the state, and has proposed that Popular Assemblies be created throughout Mexico and that grassroots organizations join to create a new way of exercising representative democracy.

The Mexican state has responded in violent ways and having failed to defeat the mobilised masses resorted to unlawfully detaining and disappearing the protesters. Struggles are on for the release of all political detainees and return of disappeared people. One thing is certain: the Oaxacan people will not stop with the resignation of Ruiz. but will continue to build grassroots empowerment. International solidarity is needed now to support them in their struggle to build a true representative democracy.

The Philippines: Hiding the Comb to Stop the Wedding

The website *philippinerevolution.org* of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the New People's Army (NPA) which posted news and photographs of war victories against the oppressive state disappeared, probably defaced or hacked, at the end of July 2006. But losing one of the most visited sites on the Internet did not prevent the CPP and the National Democratic Front, in providing the media with latest news in the battle front. Despite the loss of the website, the CPP persevered in the propaganda war against the oppressive state, and was soon back on Internet with a new address: *philippinerevolution.net*

The CPP continues to report victories in armed struggle against the government armed forces and warns of bigger attacks to come; and in a statement a few months ago said that "through relentless mass work and warfare, the people's democratic government, the local Party branches, the mass organizations and the NPA, together with the people's militia and self-defence units in the guerrilla fronts, have been able to preserve their strength and grow on a nationwide scale" and that "the hundreds of NPA platoon now available for tactical offensives on a nationwide scale can bleed the enemy profusely. ... the NPA under the leadership of the CPP is determined to multiply the platoons as the attack units of the commands at the guerrilla front, provincial and regional units. These platoons can easily combine to launch bigger offensives"

Book Review

The Politics of Regi Siriwardena

Regi Siriwardena: Selected Writings Vol. 2, Politics & Society. (AJ Canagaratna ed.) International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo 8, 2006, pp.618 +xiv (Price not marked)

The carefully edited collection of essays on political and social issues by Regi Siriwardena, is a fair representation of Regi's world outlook. This review is confined to his political commentary on international and national issues.

After his articles in the 1950s on the Soviet Union, Regi's interest in the Soviet Union fades away in the 1960s and 70s to return with vigour following the ascent of Mikhail Gorbachev. His writings on international affairs are confined mostly to the Soviet Union with the exception of a review of a book on Cuba by Huberman and Sweezy in 1961 and two articles on Poland following a visit in the mid-1980s. His views on the Soviet Union are based on his apathy for Stalin and 'Stalinism'. They seem to rely heavily on western liberal interpretations and Issac Deutscher, and Regi's liberalism goes to the extent of condemning EH Carr's historical judgments as partial and unsound for their failure to denounce the Bolsheviks.

Stalin made serious errors when he was at the helm of the state and the party during very difficult times for the Soviet Union, with the imperialists seeking to isolate and undermine the soviet state before and after the war against German fascism, in which the Soviet Union made the biggest sacrifices. His errors have been acknowledged by Marxist Leninists, but seen in their context. Regi's views are, however, conditioned by his one-time Trotskyite outlook, the views of western liberals, and of course Issac Deutscher, whose only fault seems that he remained a Marxist.

The blurb on the back cover claims that 'Regi has no sacred cows and even Lenin is not exempt from his scrutiny', hardly realising that Gorbachev was to Regi the last messiah, almost. Whatever Regi's interpretations were of history, his understanding of trends in the Soviet Union and Poland seems pathetically flawed. He clutches at straws to explain why Gorbachev failed disastrously and has no explanation as to why Poland, which after a visit in the mid-1980s

he assured would remain socialist, failed to do so. He could hardly foresee that Yeltsin would betray Russian interests to US imperialism.

Regi's lack of interest in the affairs of the rest of the world, especially the socialist countries of Asia surprises me. Nor does imperialism seem to be one of his concerns. However, he is gleeful that nationalism prevailed over socialism in the post-Brezhnev Soviet Union, with hardly a mention of US meddling in encouragement of Islamic forces in the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union, following the Soviet misadventure in Afghanistan. When it comes to Sri Lanka, Regi is reluctant to recognise Tamils as a nationality or concede their right to self-determination. Here, Regi is no different from the very left of which he is critical on the 'Tamil question'.

In his long response to the vilification of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 by Sinhala chauvinists, he acknowledges that India acted out of self interest in getting involved in resolving the conflict, but ignores aspects of the Indian expansionist agenda written into the Accord. He is also wrong in his claim that until 1983 India treated the matter as a domestic Sri Lankan problem. But India did use the escalating national problem to 'teach the JR Jayawardane regime a lesson' several years earlier, following the pro-US slant in Sri Lankan foreign policy.

Regi readily accuses the LTTE of cruelly dashing the glimmer of hope for peace in 1994, as on earlier occasions, ignoring the fact that the peace that was on offer was on each occasion was only for the peaceful implementation of the chauvinistic agenda rather than resolving the central issues of the national question. I am tempted to ask how the great survival value of nationalism was not a bad thing to Regi when it led to the break-up of the Soviet Union, but not worth a thought in the Sri Lankan context, where a formal demand for secession was made well before the nationalist upsurge in the Soviet union..

His approach to the LSSP also has its ambiguities. He is harsh in his criticism of Colvin R de Silva and V Karalasingam, both of whom had been staunch Trotskyites, but more forgiving and admiring of NM Perera, who played a key role in steering the LSSP along the opportunistic parliamentary path, for the latter's 'social democratic philosophy'.

Regi is presented by some as an 'independent' Marxist, a label that has served the opponents of Marxist politics well in using him to attack the bogus as well as the genuine left. His uncritical endorsement of the economic reforms in the USSR and China and hailing of Bukharin's economic policies, show to

me a different Regi, in fairness to whom I should say that he had distanced for long himself from not only any left party identity, but also Marxist identity.

What concerns me is not Regi's philosophy or ideology, but his obvious bias and double standards in political issues. Why every failure of the left whether it was in the Soviet Union or in Sri Lanka brings out a gleeful response full of mockery from him is not hard to guess, except perhaps for the few to whom Regi is a 'sacred cow'.

-SJS-

A Dissident's Diagnosis of a Sick Society

Michel Warschawski: Toward an Open Tomb. Monthly Review Press, New York NY10001, USA, 2004, pp. 124 , US\$ 14.95 (paperback).

The book, subtitled 'The Crisis of Israeli Society' by Michel Warschawski, a leading Israeli dissident and Director of the Alternative Information provides valuable insight into politics and society in Israel, and their deterioration especially since the breakdown of the Oslo peace process in 2000.

Continued military occupation of Palestine, the ongoing Israeli expansionist war in Palestine, and the brutal oppression of Arabs in Palestine as well as in Israel are discussed in historical sequence and context. The book shows how the war has not only brutalised the soldiers but also de-sensitised the Israeli society which is fast becoming, if not already, dehumanised, racist, undemocratic and corrupt. The book is clearly demonstrates how law, social justice, human and fundamental rights are sacrificed at the altar of militant Zionism agenda of ethnic cleansing and total war against the Arab-Islamic world.

While not underestimating the looming catastrophe and not holding back any punches against those responsible for the sad plight of Israel, the author is not at all a prophet of doom. He sees hope for salvation in the small but determined minority that stands up for the rights of the Palestinians, including soldiers who refuse to serve.

The following passages from the book seemed to ring a bell.

“From 1996 on, the army became a genuine power in its own right in relation to the government.... higher officers have been making political statements, threatening the government when they consider it insufficiently determined to carry out the pacification campaign to its conclusion, and addressing the public directly in order to “explain” the gravity of the situation to them....

“But the changed character of the State of Israel’s political leadership goes beyond the weight of the army high command. The major rule of fundamentalist religious parties on the one hand and the Russian parties on the other must also be emphasised. These two political parties represent and give voice to currents in Israeli society to which references to democracy, the rule of law, and separation of powers and civil liberties mean absolutely nothing....

“The law of the state does not count for the religious parties; for them only God’s law is legitimate. For the Russian parties, democracy and individual freedom are superfluous luxuries and the first cause of what they consider Israel’s moral and political weakness. Both currents share a boundless anti-Arab racism....

....

“The violence and rejection of the requirements of democracy by Israel’s elected officials serve as a model for its citizens.... (The graffiti on the walls and the bumper stickers) attack not only the Arabs but also anything perceived as the enemy within, from the ‘Oslo criminals’ that should be brought before a court-martial to the “hostile media” The refusal to allow people to stay alive which Israelis express more and more openly when it comes to Arabs ... is being extended now to Israelis who refuse to howl with the rest of the pack or who would just like to live normal lives in a democratic, secular society.”

(from pp.92-94)

-Sri-

The Cock Fight

SoPa

It was when
the Greek and Roman empires ran the roost
thousands of slaves
bid to carry out
the command of emperors and noblemen

A lion rushes into the arena
hungry
as a slave opens the cage door
for the amusement
of the noblemen and their ladies

What next?

The noblemen and their ladies relish the sight of the lion
tearing apart a man and devour him as he writhes in pain
That was two thousand years ago

Recently

the Olympic games returned home

What a grand carnival

As every black man and black woman scored victory
brushing aside the white race that enslaved them to forge ahead
my chest heaves with pride

But there was a little ache in my heart

For whom does every black man and black woman struggle?

For the America that oppresses and insults their race in the name of colour

The world has advanced very much in the past twenty centuries

No one relishes the sight of a lion tearing apart a man.

But what the world has placed at its apex is the American lion

that fattens up man like a bull, like a bantam

to extract victory for itself.

(2004)

THE ONE THAT GAVE THE LEAD

SoPa

Then, police stations were few,
the *vithana* had police powers.
The *vithana* ruled the roost, and
the villagers call the *vithana* the headman

The Kombayan Manal cemetery, the most famous in the peninsula –
massive banyan, *bo* and *vilaththi* trees, and
the pond surrounded by earthen wall
give a feeling of entering a grove, and not a cemetery.

It was a time when we flew kites and played kitti
in the fields that surround the cemetery.
The transport of corpses and
the feast of drums at the junction to entertain:
daangu dakkudu dangudu dakkudu
daangu dakkudu dangudu dakkudu
Jolly good, jolly good, the lordship has passed away
Jolly good, jolly good, we're sure of tomorrow's food

The folk playing the funeral drums lived around Kombayan Manal
Sinnaan was the senior of the drummers

The family of the dead do not attend to funeral matters.
A distant relative or a neighbour takes responsibility.

To conduct a funeral is an art.
The one who conducts too will be 'high'
and wield his might with ease on the low castes.
That day Ponnuthurai was dictating term as usual.
It was time to settle accounts.
Mooppan demanded payment for four teams of drummers.
Ponnuthurai insisted it was three that came.
Words got heated,
"Rascal you know me not! If I strike you .."
"If your lordship strikes a few would know.
Should I strike the whole would know!"

(from *Ninaivuch Chuvadukal*, 2005)

Announcement

New Democracy publishes articles of social, cultural and political importance to the people of Sri Lanka and their struggle for emancipation from imperialist domination and freedom from oppression of all kinds by the reactionary ruling classes.

Articles on local and international matters, with a Marxist outlook or with a progressive content are invited for publication. Articles should preferably be in English. Articles in Sinhala or Tamil will be considered for publication in translation.

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Colombo 11, Sri Lanka

New Democracy could also be accessed by internet at
www.ndpsl.org

Of things precious

by

S Sivasegaram

The shawl over my dad's shoulder and
the blouse covering my mum's breast
while they stroll along this street
are of cotton cloth, but
prettier than gold embroidered silk.

The long name that my mum and dad gave me
is old fashioned, but
sweeter than poetry to my ears.

The old chair on which I sat in my school
was of cheap timber, but
more majestic than a throne.

The cup from which I sip tea in the restaurant
is local porcelain, but
worth more than a gem-studded golden bowl.

The temple that I go to
is not world renowned, but greater in glory
than the famed temples of Madurai and Kaanchipuram.

The brackish water I draw from the village well
is more sacred than the waters of the Ganges and Kaaveri.

You ask me how –

Listen:

Each one was a reward of struggle
by me, mum, dad, grandma and granddad.

(Translation of a poem written around 1988)

Three short poems by Lal Singh Dil

Words

Words have been
uttered
long before us
and for
long after us
Chop off every tongue
if you can
But the words
have been uttered

Dance

When the labourer woman
Roasts her heart on the *tawa*
The moon laughs from behind the tree
The father amuses the younger one
Making music with bowl and plate
The older one tinkles the bells
Tied to his waist
And he dances
These songs do not die
Nor either the dance in the heart

Caste

You love me, do you?
Even though you belong
to another caste
But do you know
Our elders do not
even cremate their dead
at the same place?

Courtesy: *the little magazine*, November-December 2000.

Published by E Thambiah of 47, 3rd Floor, CCSM Complex, Colombo 11
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Website: www.ndpsl.org

Printed at the Gowri Printers, Colombo 13