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Right of Self Determination of Ilankai Tamils

by Dr. Vickramabahu Karunarathne

Right of self determination of Tamil speaking people is a foremost issue in modern Lankan society. Though it is related to the Tamil vs. Sinhala conflicts narrated in various chronicles, the present form arises out of inability to construct a democratic, plural, civil society. Though Sri Lanka (the Sinhala equivalent of *Ilankai*) is considered a nation by the United Nations Organization, Sri Lankan nationality is yet to be recognized by the masses here. People in Lanka consider themselves as Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher, Vedddha, etc. and rarely as Sri Lankans. In that sense it is a Society of Nationalities. As a Marxist, I consider nations are really built on capitalist market economy. I refer to a community as a nationality if that community of people are in conscious struggle to be a nation but not yet matured fully as a nation.

The word nation is loosely used to represent any group of people with a common language. But such a definition is not useful in understanding problems of nation in modern society. The identities Sinhala and Tamil were used in Lanka for a long period of time stretching as far back as 3rd century BC. But the entity represented by the term Tamil or Sinhala is very different at different times. For example, Sinhala was used in Anuradhapura period to represent

a *Vansa*, a clan of people associated with a particular agriculture based on a special irrigation system. These people were considered to be of Aryan descent. Aryans were the nomadic people who invaded India around 2000 BC and over-ran Dravidian clan societies clustered around the Indus valley and elsewhere. It is widely believed that around 500 BC some Aryan people came to Lanka and overpowered the Dravidian society that existed there. Thus there were *Vansa* clashes in that early period of history. These *Vansa* clashes continued until the end of Rajarata Civilization and the emergence of semi-feudal society in the wet zone. In this society divisions were based more on trade caste groups.

When we look at the Kandyan kingdom before takeover by the British, we see that the word Sinhala is used to represent the ruling elite. The *Radala-Mudali* elite referred to themselves as the Sinhala. In this scenario not only the other caste groups in the Kandyan areas were left out of the Sinhala identity, but also the entire community in low country who spoke Sinhala Language as their mother tongue. At this stage caste was more important than any other clan identity. The word *jātiya*, the Sinhala word used in general today to represent a nation, was used widely at that stage to represent *caste*. Even today if

one asks a Kandyan villager about his *jātiya* he may assume that as a reference to his caste. In any case at that time and until recently people in Lanka were more loyal to their caste group than any other form of community. Sinhala royalty always thought it is better to marry some one from Tamil royalty than to a lower caste person from Sinhala kingdom. This thinking was not confined to the royalty but common to almost all caste groups. Even today such thinking exists in spite of Sinhala vs. Tamil national clashes.

I explained all these in order to show that Tamil or Sinhala nation as we know today did not exist in the past. Nation building is a relatively new phenomenon. It means that a community with the same language and tradition will unite to work democratically. This is the positive side of an emerging nation, its ability to break down caste and other parochial barriers to unite a community with equality and fraternity. In the recent past we saw the emergence of several nationalities in Lanka. Sinhala nationality emerged with the temperance movement under Anagarika Dharmapala. Parallel to this there were movements launched by Ārumuga Nāvalar and Siddhi Lebbe. The Vedda community also asserted its identity under Thissahāmi and others.

Thus when the British went away in 1948, Lanka remained a prison house of several nationalities. Power was concentrated in the hands of the English speaking elite that behaved like a separate nationality. A tiny community of less than 1 million fake *Anglo-Saxons*, who relished to imitate Anglo-American upper classes, appropriated and held all economic, political and social powers in their hands. It was in their interest to build a state power on the basis of Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism. This policy was started by D S Senanayake and continued with vigour by

the Bandaranayakes. They de-franchised Tamil plantation workers and made the majority of the working class state-less. Consistent campaign of discrimination was aimed at Tamil speaking people. While English remained the language of the rulers, Sinhala was made the sole official language to be used as a device for discrimination. Sinhala Colonization schemes were established in Tamil areas to create communal disharmony and fool the Sinhala poor masses. So called media-wise standardization was used to discriminate against Tamil students.

In the 1950s, the Marxist movement led by the Lanka Sama Samāja Party fought against this fraud and stood for equality, democracy and socialism. Tamils and other national minority groups showed much faith and expected fair-play from them. Later, however, LSSP/CP leaders made a fundamental mistake and joined the capitalist government of Mrs. Sirima Bandaranayake. Once in power they also became pawns in the hands of Sinhala chauvinism. In fact Dr. Colvin R De Silva, who once said "One language - Two nations" became the man who formulated the Buddhist theocratic constitution. This total betrayal led to much disillusionment among Tamil youth. Failure of old left movement against Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism opened the stage for violence against Tamil people. Racial riots broke out several times, the worst of which was in 1983. All this led to the liberation struggle of the Tamil people.

Today Lankan Tamil nationality is a complex entity. Firstly, so called *native* Tamils of north and east have developed as *Eelam* Tamils with recognizable homeland. Their national consciousness has developed to a high degree among them. Existing armed struggle for Tamil liberation is based on them. Though Sinhala army of Chandrika regime is in occupation of certain

strategic areas of the Tamil homeland, it has failed to get the upper hand. Secondly, the plantation Tamils of up-country, descendents of South Indian Tamil workers brought to Lanka by the British-raj, have not identified entirely with the Eelam liberation struggle. Certainly the youth is highly influenced by the struggle in the north and east. But their demands are different, being very largely socio-economic. Land and citizenship rights, greater autonomy for Tamil areas, and greater Tamil participation in local administration are some of their demands. Thirdly, there is a substantial Tamil community living in Colombo and its suburbs. They are a combination of *native* and *Indian* Tamils. Except for the recent refugees, others are more interested in getting equality and justice than supporting the liberation struggle. However, in spite of these divisions all Tamils are living under fear and repression. On the other hand, the war has its effect on all Tamils irrespective of their actual connection to the liberation struggle.

Nava Sama Samāja Party (NSSP), from its inception defended the Right of Self Determination of the Tamil speaking people. Before becoming a party, as a group within the Lanka Sama Samāja Party, in 1974 we came out with our analysis of the Tamil National Question. We explained that Tamil nationality is emerging fighting for its self determination. Only unity possible is the voluntary union of the two nationalities. For this, recognition of the right of self determination of Tamil people is a precondition. Acceptance of equality, autonomy and the Right of Self Determination is the only basis for a democratic unity.

Since 1974 we have been fighting for this position in all our political campaigns. In spite of many difficulties, we have managed to take this message among the Sinhala people. We have influenced the thinking of almost all po-

litical parties of Lanka. Concepts equality, autonomy, and right of self determination are now very widely discussed. Understanding of the masses has increased tremendously. And now there is widespread resentment against the war efforts of the government. In the coming period it may be possible to establish a left-wing government that could resolve this problem on the basis of equality, autonomy and the right of self-determination.

About the author: Dr. Vickramabahu Bandara Karunaratne was born in Sri Lanka. He studied at the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya and was awarded the Commonwealth Scholarship to do doctorate work at the University of Cambridge in Electro-Magnetic theory. Currently, he is a senior lecturer at the faculty of engineering at Peradeniya and is the General Secretary and leader of the NSSP.

Dr. Karunaratne joined the LSSP as a student and opposed the coalition of LSSP with the SLFP. He founded the NSSP in 1977. He was taken into custody several times during the coalition government 1970–1977. Since 1977, he has been imprisoned several times for leading struggles against the government. He was the seventh accused in the case against the leaders of the 1980 general strike *satyagraha*. He was in hiding during 1983–1984 when NSSP was proscribed. He was fatally wounded in 1988 when attacked by the DJV murder squad. Currently, he is a member of the Western Provincial Council.

Nava Sama Samāja Party,
143/3, Kew Road, Colombo 2, Sri Lanka.
Tel: +94-1-430 621; **Fax:** +94-1-334 822
e-mail: nssp@iname.com