

21st century's movements for self-determination : the Sri Lankan case study

This voice is raised on behalf of a people who were discriminated against, fighting for their rights to self-determination.

When the whole world watched, children, women and elderly were cornered into a tiny area, smaller than Hyde Park corner and massacred.

Yes, we live in an era where children were massacred without knowing the reason for their murder. We have seen newborns crying in hunger on the laps of mothers who lay dead in a corner of Sri Lanka, a beautiful island, which was turned into a slaughterhouse. The cry of those killed still lingers in the air. The biggest human catastrophe of the century was accomplished in broad daylight without witnesses.

The genocide committed by the Sinhalese majoritarian nationalism for over sixty years was yet again repeated in a small region in Vanni. The perpetrators of the genocide proclaim that they have been right in doing such an ethnic cleansing. The ruling class of Sri Lanka boast to the world that they have wiped out terrorism.

Vanni where they cornered the 300, 000 innocents along with the LTTE freedom fighters, had been a land of prosperity. People have never expected foreigners to help them. Today, Vanni has turned into the breeding ground of international terrorism.

In the five square kilometer area where innocent Tamil community had been isolated, according to U.N, over 70,000 people were annihilated in a few nights during May 2009; mercilessly butchered because they dared to fight for their rights to self-determination.

In the North and East of Sri Lanka reside the ethnic Tamil population; in the Centre of the country are Plantation Tamils; Muslims are also spread across these geographic regions. These are the nationalities which have been oppressed in the country. The Sinhalese Buddhist State represented majoritarian hegemony. The armed struggle waged for over thirty years against persecution by a majoritarian state for securing the right to self-determination was wiped out by genocide.

The role of the imperial powers:

The perpetrators of genocide celebrate their victory of '*war on terrorism*', Standing on the coffins of those killed, they talk about peace. When the genocide occurred, the United States remained a mute witness; The United Nations too remained a spectator. Today, these imperial powers want to exploit the people who survived the catastrophe. Warplanes are replaced by business eagles who circle over Vanni. Multi -Nationals corporates from all over the world are occupying the peaceful and 'marketable' Sri Lanka. The perpetrators of genocide are even marketing their strategy of '*war on terrorism*'. Due to the thirty years of the liberation struggle, the world's elites have established a totally imperial friendly government as well as pro-imperial resistant forces, the so called '*freedom fighters*'.

The armed struggle waged for self-determination was handled by the imperialism for thirty years from the day it emerged as armed struggle. On the one side was India's expansionist regime; on the other side were the US and European imperial powers which expressed solidarity with the cause of the Sri Lankan Tamils. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam(LTTE) and other Tamil outfits trusted these countries. Indian intelligence and western powers provided help, support, weapons and training to handle them, to

the Tamil outfits in order to use them as pressure groups against Sri-Lankan government.

While the war was going on, the international neo-liberal order –known as neoliberal globalization- was imposed in South Asia. As in any stage of imperialism, the major instrumentations of these international power relations have been corruption, subversion and war. The devastating war of the century –the war on the people who fought for self-determination- in south Asia backed by the imperial power provided them a ‘marketable environment’. They managed to implement an imperial friendly government which is ever ready to sell even its own peoples’ lives to its masters.

These imperial powers used the ‘liberation movements’ as pressure groups against Sri Lankan government and the other enemies who stood for the national economic development, have now established a local imperial friendly government.

However, the Sri-Lankan ‘war generation’ has learnt a political lesson. Today, the much-needed emergence of at least a small section of population which understands what imperialism is has taken place. This section of population looks up to the struggle of other oppressed nationalities, instead of looking up to the super powers. The new generation of the oppressed ethnic groups recognize the struggle of those fighting for self-determination in Kurdistan, Kashmir, Nagaland, and Baluchistan which was not the case during the past 30 years of war. Thus, the powers which targeted the self-determination struggle have inadvertently helped the innocent people learn lasting and valuable political lessons.

We all know that the struggle for right to self-determination is closely associated with anti-imperialism and national consciousness which emerges from national capital accumulation. In the case of Sri Lankan Tamils’ Struggle for rights to self-determination, all the liberation movements were somehow associated with the major imperial powers which historically destroyed national struggles in various part of the world. The question that invariably arises now is - how that is possible? How those fundamentally contradictory forces collaborate with each other? So, naturally we need to question the nationalism on post-globalized era.

Let us briefly look at the historical framework on how the concept of self-determination was born.

Historically, the concept of self-determination and national consciousness were in existence during the feudal period. In the feudal mode of production, religion used to provide the philosophical framework in order to unify the society. In the feudal production the lords’ benefit from the product of the labor of serves thorough various mechanisms such as working on the land of the lords, giving over the fraction of the crop and so on. In capitalism, the capital class owns the means of the production and extracts surplus value from the workers. However, the workers have certain level of freedom compared to feudalism. The unifying factor of workers, capital owners and various layers of class configuration in the system is nationalism. Nations and nationalities were born only after the demise of feudalism. When nations and nationalities were born, people were united by the idea of nationhood. Nationalism formed the philosophical basis for such a structure.

The birth of capitalism and market economy coincided with the creation of nations and nationalities. The creation of a market around a population shaped a nation with self-determination rights.

Populations divided by many languages eventually found a language to unite themselves as national identities were formed. In France, only fifty per cent of the people spoke French when the nation was formed. The formation of France as a separate nation made the entire population adapt to a single language. In Italy, the modern Italian was spoken by just 12 per cent of the population when the national boundaries were created. It took just one generation to unite the population by a single language.

Capitalism and markets strengthened nations in a short span of time. Capitalism could not spread uniformly in some part of the world such as Balkan nations, leading to creation of different markets in that region. Different nationalities were formed around different markets. Without compromising their self-determination rights, they formed nation-states comprising many identities.

Nationalism and the sense of unity led to nationalist struggles against foreign capital.

Does this national capital still exist in any part of the world? If we begin to analyze Europe where the nations emerged, we will only find the anti-national powers. The historically formed national governments today use their markets for multinational capitalist interests. London Olympics 2012 was a good example for such a trend.

The British Government presented nationalistic slogans at an unprecedented level during the games. The inauguration ceremony proclaimed the pride of English national identity. However, Coco Cola and Mc Donald which challenge the British economy had a free run at the games. No British drinking water was allowed in the Olympic stadium. All the drinking water sold at the stadia were manufactured by Coco Cola. Other national brands were banned in the stadium. The majority of the sponsors and advertisers did not have anything to do with British national economy.

Nationalities, self-determination rights and nationalisms are passé in Europe now. Ethnic nationalities formed with the birth of capitalism are gone now.

If we look at the process of how the nations were naturally formed, we will get the answer on current social formation of European Society.

It took just a century for the people of Arabian origin settled in Toulouse and Marseille in France to lose their identities. They are now assimilated with the French society as French. Once the 'forming nation' process was completed at the beginning of 19th century, the assimilation process was also stopped. Therefore Moroccans, Algiers and Tunisians keep their individual identities even after five generations. In Italy and the other part of the world also, people retain and uphold their original cultural identities. These nations have failed to create a sense of national identity as they are no longer nation states.

So, the nationalism became an anti-social concept in Europe. In the European context, nationalism is seen as a fascist tendency. Now the underlying philosophy of the nationalism in Europe has its roots in Nazi thoughts. British National party, English Defense league in the UK and Front National in France are the brief example of the national parties.

What about the IIIrd world counties or our so called 'developing countries'?

While in Europe, nationalism is viewed as a fascist attitude, fascist imperial friendly governments in Third World –so called 'developing' countries, nations marginalize minority ethnic nationalities and destroy movements which fight for self-determination

rights. The mode of production in those countries has always been for the benefit of colonial and imperial power.

In Third world countries like Sri Lanka, the formation of national identities similar to Europe did not occur. The culture and the dynamics of capitalism and its production could not mature in these countries.

Even before national identities were formed, these countries were colonized. The feudal economic structures were replaced by imported economic structures of colonial governments. The replication of alien economic models in feudal conditions led to a half-baked market economy. The new markets led to creation of national identities around them. National identities could not mature completely as the process of market creation did not have a free run.

In Nagaland, people speaking various languages call themselves as a nation. The Tamil-speaking Muslims in Sri Lanka, though they are scattered geographically, call themselves a nation. The ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka don't have a market to unite them; yet they call themselves a nation.

These are people who are in the process of forming themselves as nations. However, the social model of the imported capitalism coincided with the establishment of a new class pattern more complex than simple distinction between capital owners and production workers. Comprador class -the local agents of imperial corporate economy- which occupies the upper layer of the society and it is considered as anti-social as well as the other semi-feudal elements, middle class, land owners and poor farmers forms the III world ethnic groups.

As the national identity formation process was not complete in these societies, the religions still play a key role as they played during the peak of feudalism. Religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity continue to unite people. Hindu domination throughout India, Sinhala Buddhist domination in Sri-Lanka, Islamic national consciousness in several nations and so on explain the existence of the remains of feudalism and incomplete national formations.

Within the power configuration of the third world countries, the upper layer of each ethnic group is held by pro-imperial forces which is also the obstacle for the formation of national capitalism. The outcome of this social order has never formed a single homogeneous national-capitalist class. The class foundation of such social arrangement helps the imperial power to hold a local pro-imperialist class.

However, the ethnic populations, especially the ones oppressed by majoritarian nationalists, resist forces which want to stall their natural process of growth and development. The struggles are anti-government and anti-imperialist in nature.

The upper middle class or the upper fraction of the middle class takes over the leadership of these struggles. This upper middle class is mostly formed with the owners of small-medium business and managerial workers. Although they have fundamental contradiction with the pro-imperial classes, in the absence of national capitalist they are comfortable to associate with the imperial class.

When a self-determination struggle becomes powerful, the upper middle class leadership associates with the imperial-friendly classes. Therefore, national struggle

turns into an anti-social movement at some stage. This has made liberation movements acquire a fascist nature. This leads to the death of liberation movements as they become pressure groups in the hands of Imperialist forces.

However, the national liberation struggles such as 'free Ealam' will continue until the formation of national identities and national economies is completed in these 'developing' nations. How do we save these national struggles from decimation and structure these struggles as people-centric? This is the uppermost question we have to address in right earnest.