

# The Sri Lankan National Left, Imperialism and the Tamil National Question

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## Introduction

The unitary state administration and Westminster modelled parliamentary democracy were designed and implanted by the British colonial rulers in the island of Sri Lanka at different historical junctures as mechanisms to secure the perennial geo-strategic and political interests of imperialism in the Indian Ocean region. It is noteworthy that Sri Lanka and its off shore waters bound by the Indian Ocean are strategically essential as the global maritime trade passes through them. The Indian Ocean region facilitates the water gateways for half of the world's container ships, half of its bulk cargo and two thirds its oil shipment (Khalid 2005). The Indian Ocean has since antiquity been essential in global trade as the littoral states with coasts facing the Indian Ocean were the pillars upon which trade from Europe, Middle East and later from the Americas was connected to South Asia, South East Asia and China. Due to its strategic position in the heart of the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has throughout the pre-colonial, colonial and now in post-colonial era retained a centre stage in world trade and has rightfully been recognized as crucial to exercise hegemony in the region and by extension the world.

The early colonial conquest of the Kotte kingdom at the south western coast of Sri Lanka by the imperialist Portuguese began in early 16th century and in 1598, the lowland Sinhalese lost their sovereignty through the formal signing of the Malvana convention. The Portuguese quickly administered a comprador system in which predominately Sinhala locals were enlisted as soldiers known as the Lascarins to serve the Portuguese crown in further conquest of the island's sovereign peoples (Abeyesinghe 1986; Indrapala 2003). In 1619, after aggressive Portuguese military campaigns against the Tamil north, nobles of the Jaffna kingdom signed the Nallur convention and formally ceded the Tamil north's sovereignty to the Portuguese Crown. These conventions are significant historical materials which documents that the kingdom of Jaffna as well as Kotte were "*independent, legally constituted, diplomatically recognized, political entities*" at the time of colonial conquest, i.e. they were two sovereign states (Hensman 2010). The Lascarin tradition of native servants and compradors continued through the Dutch and British colonial period, enlisting their services to the imperialist-corporate exploitation and domination of the island. The colonial conquest of the island was concluded by the British Empire when they defeated the rebellious Vanni and its Tamil chieftain leader Pandaravanniyan in 1803 and annexed the Kandy kingdom in 1815 leading to the signing of the Kandyan convention the same year.

## **Geopolitics of Imperialism, Comprador elites and the unitary state**

Ceylon was then and still is a multi-national island, yet the collusion of capitalist, geo-strategic and political prerogatives of imperialisms and the subservient nature of the ruling comprador native elites denies and obfuscates the nationhood of Tamils vying instead to sustain the centralized unitary bourgeoisie state. Despite the formal independence of Ceylon in 1948, the colonial structures inherited into the post-colonial state sustain and expedite neo-colonial bondages of Island into the so called era of post-independence. As much as the mono-ethnic nation state serves as the instrument of rule for the various ruling bourgeoisie elites of the dominant nation and consequently a mechanism of national oppression it also remains a tool of neo-colonialism of competing international hegemons and corporate interests.

American Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840 -1914), considered the father of modern American naval strategy and geo-political thinking with his classical '*The Influence Of Sea Power Upon History*', elucidated the global significance of controlling the Indian Ocean:

*“Whoever attains maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean would be an prominent player on the international scene. Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This Ocean is the key to the seven seas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters”* (Quoted in Jash 2015)

Admiral Thayer words reflect the fact that the US and British imperialist establishments had in the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself, evidently theorized the geo-strategic imperative to control the Indian Ocean to attain world hegemony.

The significance of the Indian Ocean for European imperial-corporate interests led to different imperialists and power establishments vying to secure access to strategic, military, economic and infrastructural factors on the island throughout the colonial and post-colonial period. The Portuguese came in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; the Dutch in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the French made attempts during the latter 18<sup>th</sup> century, but the treaty of Amiens secured the British the prized island. Consequently in post-colonial times, the British and U.S imperialists have taken keen interest in the Sinhala bourgeoisie state of Sri Lanka and its comprador English educated Sinhala elites. The unitary administration implemented by the British in 1833 on advice from the Colebrooke – Cameron commission, incorporated by force the entire island and its social formations and political entities into a single politico-judicial set-up with centralized powers in Colombo, the capital which would become the seat of the Sinhala speaking English educated elites. External colonialism structured the politico-judicial structures of the island in such a manner that it would cultivate internal colonization and national oppression, by deliberately not recognizing the nature of the multi-national island, in particular denying Tamils the sovereignty which imperialism had usurped centuries earlier. The British imperialist have historically and contemporarily been denying the multinational environment of the island and subsequently refuted the nationality of Tamil speaking peoples. Colonialism bequeathed to their neo-imperial successors in Westminster and Washington the erudite insight that national and linguistic inequality, racial supremacist ideology and a

bourgeoisie state controlled by the dominant nation's comprador elite would see their foremost duty propagate (in the Sri Lankan context), Sinhala chauvinism existentially grounded on the national oppression of Tamils. Such imperialist lessons furthered that a comprador elite of the dominant nation or a coalition of elite classes from the dominant nation and their subordinates would create political cloth and obfuscations through rampant chauvinism in order to secure their own parasitic class interests which are tightly interwoven with that of neo-imperialism. .

In 1938 the British secretary of State for Colonies in a memorandum reviewing Ceylon's constitutional reforms presented to the Imperial Cabinet responded to the question of appointment of 'minority' representatives in the executive committees attached to the Council of Ministers as raised by the Tamil conservative bourgeois leader, G.G Ponnambalam. The latter advocated a system of 50 percent representation for Tamils and 'other minorities' and 50 percent for the Sinhala majority in parliament as a safeguard from Sinhala hegemony in the colonial state. The British refuted it for their own geo-political and administrative convenience and in contrast preferred a centralized pan-Sinhala executive ministry as exemplified in the following:

*"The presence of Minority Members on each Executive Committee not only failed to prevent the election of a pan-Sinhalese Ministry but... actually provoked it; its election was the Majority Community's answer to the insistence by certain Minorities on a retention of the Executive Committee System..... If the Executive Committee system should be retained against the prayer of the Majority Community I therefore foresee a succession of Pan-Sinhalese Ministries. Only a communal distribution of seats, on a fifty-fifty basis or some approximation to it, could prevent it; and as I have already stated I am opposed to such a distribution. Moreover if Minority Ministers were elected as the result of a communal distribution of seats the Board of Ministers could never be a consentaneous body; for they would be divided on fundamentals of the Constitution. Of the Pan-Sinhalese Ministry it can at, least be said that, so far as the present Constitution admits, it provides an element of congruence. ....it has been suggested to me that the Governor should exercise this right in such a manner as to secure a percentage of portfolios for the Minorities. With this suggestion I **profoundly disagree**; nor do I consider that it should be definitely laid down in the Order in Council that the Ministry must be representative of all communities. Such a provision would give rise to varieties of interpretation and thus lead to heartburning and disgruntlement."* ( C.P.254 (38) )

The shrewd logic presented by the Colonial officer was that the 'insistence' by Tamil politicians in demanding to secure minimal safeguard mechanism for the Tamil nationality and the interspersed minorities, elicited Sinhala chauvinism which in turn led to Sinhala political dominance. Such an outlook is reminiscent of the contemporary stand of the so called international community coveting around the geopolitics of the U.S-U.K-Japan axis, which malign Tamils for demanding equality and justice for the national oppression they suffer at the hands of the subservient Sinhala bourgeoisie nation-state.

Another document, an excerpt from a memorandum by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, titled 'Report on Ceylon' and dated 17th March, 1948

illustrates further British favouring of the Sinhala English educated bourgeoisie and their leader D.S. Senanayake who incidentally became the first 'independent prime minister of Ceylon':

*“Ceylon is settling down as a genuine Dominion. Present Ministers are extremely friendly and want to maintain and deepen the British connexion. They want, for instance, to preserve English as the official language in Parliament and courts. They do not want Ceylon to be a Republic : in looking for a name to describe themselves they are inclined to favour ” Kingdom of Ceylon....Sehanayake is in the genuine tradition of Dominion Prime Ministers : deeply committed to the British connexion. The present Administration is firmly in the saddle and has, I think, been strengthened by the transfer of power. To quite an extent we can help the present Administration if we preserve the right approach to them. It is hardly too much to say that if we treat them strictly as a Dominion, they will behave very like a loyal colony: whereas if we treat them as a Colony we may end in driving them out of the Commonwealth. For some time the tone in which we conduct our various negotiations will be extremely important. I think that all such negotiations should, therefore, be conducted by our High Commissioner or through the Commonwealth Relations Office..... The friendship of Ceylon for Britain, which was always strong, became stronger after 4th February. “ (C.P (48).91 ).*

The above excerpts elucidate the sort of congenial relationship the British imperialists and the Sinhala English educated elite enjoyed, a relationship which incidentally facilitated a historic bloodless de-colonization process, in which the British literally handed over independence to their allied friends among the Sinhala English educated elite.

### **The menace of Anti-imperialism and multi-national equality**

In contrast to other context of decolonization, there was in Sri Lanka neither a sustained and extensive nor militant anti-colonial nationalist movement. Anti-imperialist mobilization and philosophy were first disseminated throughout the island through the agencies of the Tamil Jaffna Youth Congress (JYC) established in the mid 1920's and by the Left parties founded in the 1930's and 40's. (Shanmugaratnam 2007: Vaithespaara 2007 ; Kadirgamar 1980). The JYC and the Tamil intelligentsia associated with it were pioneers in propagating the idea of a united, secular and an egalitarian Ceylon, in which all the nationalities and minorities were to be equals and to join forces to demand full independence from Britain. The JYC also held as their foremost task to fight caste, race, class and religious discrimination and the revival of native languages.

Sections of the progressive Tamil intelligentsia in the north were due to geographic, cultural and linguistic factors inclined to be oriented onto the events occurring in colonial India. A number of those whom would become Tamil anti-imperialist and left leaders had studied in Madras or elsewhere in India, and had been influenced by the anti-colonial movement unfolding there (Kadirgamar 1980).

In the British official's field report and memorandum quoted above, he reflects that opposition to the British on the eve of Independence was exhibited by the Left parties and by the Tamil North "...one village in the north flew black flags : a few slogans were stencilled on walls : " Real, not fake, independence."

In contrast he noted among the Sinhala bourgeoisie dominated state council and the masses they commanded:

*"...there was real rejoicing at independence peacefully won in co-operation with Britain . (This revealed itself in the official flying of the Union Jack side by side with the Lion Flag; the unofficial flying of quite a number of Union Jacks; the emphasis on royalty in the celebrations; the good will of the crowds towards the Duke ; passages in the Prime Minister's speeches.)"* (C.P (48).91).

The British imperialist, coping with the weakening of the empire during the WWII and its aftermath, identified two forces in South Asia and elsewhere which threatened its regional and global sphere of influence; anti-imperialist nationalist movements of the Indian variant, more that of Subash Chandra Bose than that of elitists Nehru and the then proliferating left movements.

In Sri Lanka, anti-imperialism represented by the Indian anti-colonial movement inspired JYC and later the Suriyamal movement in the south and the national Left represented by the LSSP and CP constituted thus the greatest threats for British imperialism (Kadirgamar 1980: Vaithespaara 2007a.). It is noteworthy the JYC, with influential leader like Handy Perinbanayagam formed the ideological and inspirational basis for the anti-imperialist youth leagues and societies formed in the Sinhala south, out of which emerged the Sinhala Suriyamal movement and the Left movement in the island (Kadirgamar 1980). He was also known for the articulation of the merits of self-rule and anti-colonialism and for his efforts to mobilize people among the Sinhala south and the plantations. These progressive sections of the Tamil speaking bourgeoisie also stood for the rights of all Tamil speaking peoples, the oppressed lower castes, the Muslims and Hill country Tamils.

The parallel interlocking of Tamil radicalism and the national left was also attested by the significant participation of Tamil clerks, teachers, activists and workers from the North East and from the Hill country in the Trade union movement and the LSSP. Incidentally the largest proletariat in the island, the Hill country Tamils employed in the exploitative plantations also provided the most militant sections of the trade union movement in the island. There was heightened Leftist and unionist activism among the plantation workers as sporadic strikes and protests erupted from November 1939, which lasted throughout the 1940's under the leadership of the Ceylon Indian Congress and to a lesser degree by the LSSP aligned All-Ceylon Estate Workers Union (ACEWU). V.Balasingham of the LSSP was essential in mobilizing the plantation workers through the ACEWU (Ervin 2008). During this period several Tamil workers and unionists from the plantations were killed by the colonial police and plantation authorities due to systematic state repression, thus marking the first martyrs of the left (Goonewardena 1960).The first son of the plantations to be martyred for

the left was Govindan, a Tamil plantation worker who was shot and killed by the colonial police during the All-Ceylon Estate Workers Union led Mool Oya Estate strike on January 19<sup>th</sup> 1940.

During the general strike of May – June 1947 organized by the trade unions and the Left parties, the colonial police resorted to lathi charge and firing live ammunition to break the hartal. The police violence and colonial aggression injured 18 and killed yet another Tamil left activist, the clerical worker V.Kandasamy (Goonewardena 1960). Tamil militant radicalism was interlocked in its early phases with union and left activism and incidentally Tamils from the plantations and the North-East were chief among the first martyrs to be sacrificed for the Left and the anti-imperialist struggle.

In relativist terms, although the British faced greater threats in the form of an anti-colonial movements in Malaya and India, the JYC, the radical trade unions and the incipient Left, were identified as menacing threats which could sprout an extensive anti-imperialist struggle to achieve complete independence and sovereignty. The overlapping of Tamil radicalism, in the form of Trade unionism, anti-imperialist and egalitarian thoughts an practice and the mobilization of the national left parliamentary parties among the Sinhala masses and intelligentsia during the late colonial period created the possibility of organizing unity and equality between both the nationalities against the external coloniser. The British imperialists thus devised perennial schemes to contain or eradicate these elements of threats and potential unity between the Tamil and Sinhala nationalities and the Tamil speaking interspersed minorities.

In contrast the pro-imperialist Sinhala national bourgeoisie party of the UNP and later its breakaway Tamil conservative bourgeois party the Tamil congress opted to negotiate and appease the Colonial masters with dominion status rather than confronting them with independence. However it was progressive Tamil leaders and intelligentsia from the JYC and the incipient national left who became popular among the Tamil masses and consequently the North became, in relativist terms, a notable base for anti-imperialism and leftism in the island. Such developments would have raised the alarm among the echelons of colonial power regarding progressive Tamil leaders, their sway among Tamils and their promotion of pan-island anti-imperialist nationalism promoting unity and equality between Sinhalese and Tamils. The potential unison between the indigenous and progressive forces of the two nationalities and the Tamil speaking minorities was also unwarranted in the eyes of imperialism, as it could develop into a powerful anti-imperialist coalition. Arguably imperialist hegemony grasped the danger of indigenous rebellions and anti-colonial uprising in the region through the experience of the popular revolts against the British during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the form of the predominantly Tamil Polygyars wars in South India, the Tamil Vanniya revolt and the Kandyan Sinhalese Uva rebellion in the island. In a similar spirit it is plausible that through the prism of imperialism Tamils were deemed largely as sovereign and potentially troublesome people. In contrast the Sinhala English educated bourgeoisie from the low-country of the old Kotte kingdom appealed to them as subservient.

The British imperialist and the Sinhala bourgeoisie of their choice seemed to be conscious of a Sinhala Buddhist chauvinist formula to deal with the growing popularity of the Left among Sinhalese and Tamils, as well the fledging Tamil national mobilization represented by the progressive sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie led by S.J.V. Chelvanayagm.

### **The chauvinism of Compradors and Lascarins**

The development of chauvinist Sinhala nationalism presided over by the Sinhala bourgeoisie identified the above mentioned threats to imperialism and camouflaged them as threats to the nation. British colonial authorities also identified that the Sinhala bourgeoisie both rural and urban

*“...tend to be terrified by the Left opposition which they do not understand; they regard it as a monstrous and wicked violation of the natural order and, if it grew, would be tempted to suppress it. Their spontaneous reaction is to combat Marxism with Buddhism and they are spending a good deal on this propaganda . Buddhism (and the Catholicism in the coastal area north of Colombo) are indeed very powerful barriers to the advance of the parties of the Left.” (C.P (48).91)*

The above indicates the subservient nature of the Sinhala bourgeoisie and the fact that the British colonial rulers deemed them and their Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism as fundamentally sharing the integral interests of imperialism. Meanwhile the activities of the JYL and Tamil communists transformed sections of the North into Left supporting constituencies and villages. Needless to say that the Left parties and trade unions also became popular among certain sectors of the Sinhala polity, yet in relativist terms a more visible position of support was initially harnessed among Tamils of the North.

The eradication or suppression of Tamil national characteristics, political mobilization and political rights as advocated by Sinhala chauvinist nationalism has effectively obfuscated the imperialist designs for the island. During colonial rule the comprador Sinhala elite were enlisted in providing the anti-Tamil ‘opium for the masses’ through a supremacist Sinhala Buddhist ideology and state oriented patriotism. The Mahavamsa mentality transpiring from the Pali scripted Mahavamsa canon was first unearthed by the British colonialists before being translated into English and then made available in Sinhala. It became the basis for a Sinhala nationalist consciousness which was spread among the Sinhala masses through electoral politics and state apparatuses. Such a relationship between imperialism, the English educated Sinhala elite, the nation-state and the Sinhala national consciousness was made contingent upon anti-Tamil racism and seemed to have been structured into Sinhala statecraft and political culture in the 1930s during the pan-Sinhala state council. It has since been the main driving force in transforming the island into a mono-ethnic nation-state bonded to imperialism and institutionalizing a protracted structural genocide on the Tamil nation.

In this light it is poignant to understand the keen interests taken by the British and other European imperialists in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century, in uncovering the isolated ‘Aryan Sinhala

Civilization' in the midst of a Dravidian ocean. German Indologist Max Muller, known to dedicate his life to identify the cradle of the Aryan civilization, said in the 1860s that he had identified idioms spoken in Iceland and Ceylon as 'cognate dialects of the Aryan family of languages' (Gunawardena 1979). In an essay from 1866, James De Alwis, the assistant secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society's Ceylon Branch, proclaims " *Though the complexion of the Sinhalese present different shades, the 'copper colour is that which prevails over the rest, and this it would seem is the colour of the Aryan race, so much honoured by Manu....when he cleared it an offence to pass over the shadow of the copper-coloured man'* (De Alwis 1866)

The Aryan myth of the Sinhala speakers was thus created by the British and likewise the Sinhala English educated elite was cultivated and groomed in the manners of Sinhala supremacy and chauvinism as envisaged by imperialist orientalism. The corollary was an imperialist friendly, anti-Christian missionary, anti-Tamil national Sinhala bourgeoisie, who together with British orientalists and sections of the Buddhist clergy articulated an antagonistic Sinhala nationalism prophesizing the mono-ethnic Sinhala Buddhist Nation-state and the assimilation of Tamils (Tambiah 1986 ; Kapferer 1988). These developments obliterated the principles of equality between the nationalities and communities and the potential for inter-national unity between the Tamil and Sinhala speaking people. Hence the fundamentals to build the necessary material and ideational conditions to coordinate revolutionary forces of both nationalities and all communities against imperialism in all its forms was forsaken.

Imperialist interests and Sinhala bourgeoisie interests coincide in the perpetuation of the unitary Sri Lankan state. Initially the Tamil section of the English educated Tamil conservative bourgeoisie, represented by Arunchalam Ponnampalam and later G.G. Ponnampalam collided with the Sinhala elites in securing a unitary state. Such a pro-imperialist and elitist attitude led the communalist Tamil bourgeoisie leaders to support the Sinhala national bourgeoisie in the inhuman disenfranchisement act of 1948, in which close to 1 million Tamil workers of Indian descent in the plantation sector were made state-less and without basic human rights overnight. They constituted the only real proletariat force on the island, yet Sinhala chauvinist and Tamil conservative bourgeoisie alike, vehemently opposed the emancipation of their rights. It follows that the national left parties, who due to their increasing appropriation of parliamentary means, along with the appeasement of majoritarian constituencies mobilized by the Sinhala bourgeoisie on chauvinist grounds, neglected any attempts to mobilize the Tamil proletariat in the midst of the Sinhala south (Shanumgaratnam 2007 ;Shanmugathan 1989). The Tamil conservative bourgeoisie, who entered into coalitions, including in government with the comprador Sinhala bourgeoisie of the UNP, also consistently neglected the Eastern sections of the traditional homeland amidst state sponsored colonization schemes for the sake of government portfolios and bourgeoisie business interests (Navaratnam 1996).

The conservative Tamil bourgeoisie were effectively sidelined among Tamils in the course of the late 1940s and early 1950s as a result of their neglect of the Tamil masses, both in the East or in the Hill Country. The progressive tendencies among Tamils became dominantly



represented by Tamil leftists, anti-imperialists and the progressive national bourgeoisie who dominated the early Federal Party, and from the 1970s onwards by the fledging Tamil militant national liberation struggle.

### **The Incipient National Left**

In concurrence with cardinal Marxist-Leninist principles both the LSSP and the Communist Party of Ceylon, formed respectively in 1936 and 1943, had in their founding party programmes proclaimed that the Tamils and Sinhalese constituted two distinct nations and had the full right to self-determination. Tamil Marxists intellectuals and activists were among the founding members of the LSSP and the later CP. There were also prominent and popular Tamil left leaders who proved instrumental in building trade union movements and a popular support base for the left in the island.

The left's then principled stand towards Tamil speaking peoples was reflected in that the main support bases for the CP and LSSP in terms of popular support came initially from Tamil speaking districts. The North became a hub for leftism, and between the 1940's and the 1960's Tamil anti-imperialists and C.P and LSSP aligned Tamils Marxists were significant in being behind co-operative initiatives and the organization of the workers of the peninsula into unions. Concerning the question of caste in Jaffna, leaders from within the oppressed Tamil castes such as V.M. Kandiah and S.A. Sinnapu began mobilizing for their rights and against untouchability in the 1910's and 1920's. In the course of the 1920's Joel Paul, a militant anti-caste leader established the Depressed Tamil Service League (DTSL) in coordination with the JYC, (Jayapalan 1983). The DTSL was regarded as the first militant organization of the oppressed castes and during the 1940's through the facilitation of the JYC the anti-caste movement of Jaffna, interlocked with the Left parties. Out of this interaction emerged a broader front to advance the struggle against caste, namely the All Ceylon Minority Tamil Mahasabha (ACMTM) whose leaders became significant in building and popularizing the C.P under the leadership of P.Kandiah in the peninsula (Jayapalan 1983). During the mid- and late 1960's the Left parties supported the revolutionary and militant anti-caste struggles unravelling in Jaffna. Most notably was the armed struggle spearheaded by N.Shanmugathan and his Communist Party (Peking Wing) from 1966 up until his arrest in 1971, in the aftermath of the JVP insurgency (ibid).

Prominent Tamil left leaders emerged within the incipient left formations with many contesting elections and mobilizing the grass-roots on behalf of their parties. Within the C.P there were P. Kandiah who was the first leftists to win a parliamentary seat from the Tamil North and V. Ponnambalam, A. Vaidialingam, N. Shanmugathan and M. Karthigesan (Vaitheespara 2007b; Kadirgamar 2000). Prominent figures within the LSSP who also contested elections were leading Trotskyist theoretician V. Karalasingam, trade union organizer Vaithianathan Balasingham who operated in India during the second world war, P. Nagalingam, R.R. Dharmaratnam and A. Visuvanathan (Vaitheespara 2007b ; Ervin 2008; Kadirgamar 2000). Tamil left-wing nationalist V. Navaratnam was also associated with the

LSSP in the early years (Navaratnam 1996). It is also important to mention here C. Tharmakulasingam, a pioneering Tamil Marxist who organized the Omnibus Union in Jaffna. Among the founders of LSSP were also notable Tamil Marxists V.Sittampalam and his brother V. Sachithannandam, who aided in the organization of the workers of Jaffna's cigar economy into the Cigar Workers Union. S.C.C Anthony Pillai was also an early and leading member of the LSSP. B.M.K Ramaswamy from Puttalam, was also a founding member of the LSSP and became a remarkable organizer and translator, who were officially designated by the LSSP the task of building the fourth international in India. He was a founding member of Bolshevik-Lennist Party of India (BLPI) and became instrumental in mobilizing the trade union movement in South India and building the party branches in Tamil Nadu in Madurai, Tuticorin and Theni districts (Ervin 2008). He was also participant in the anti-colonial disobedience struggle known as Quit India campaign in 1942-43. Tamil members of the LSSP were predominant among those who were sent to India to build the BLPI on one hand and on the other to escape British persecution in the island during the Second World War. A proctor and LSSP supporter from Jaffna by the name of Kanagarathnam was a key figure in smuggling top LSSP leaders such as Robert Gunawardena and N,M Perera and dozens of party members to India in July 1942 (Gunawardena 1971). He organized the historic escape route by the use of fishing boats and through mobilizing the networks among the Tamil fisherfolk of Valvettihurai (Ervin 2008). It was Tamil leftists and fishermen who smuggled the Tamil and Sinhala leaders and cadres of the LSSP out of the reach of the colonial government. As the colonial government persecution of left party members and unionist in the island increased, Kanagarathnam escaped through Valvettithurai to Tamil Nadu where he too worked to organize the BLPI.

The Tamil north, in particular the coastal village of Valvettithurai, were historic in ensuring the survival of the LSSP and the Left movement during colonial repression, and incidentally localities affiliated with left activism also took a centre stage in the Eelam Tamil national liberation struggle which commenced three decades later.

### **Equality between the nationalities**

The incipient left realized the necessity of the accommodation and recognition of Tamil nationhood, and right to self-determination as the foundation upon which the Sinhala and Tamil speaking nations could co-exists with parity of status and on an equal basis. This principle formed the conditions to mobilize a multi-national anti-imperialist movement to secure the island from colonial exploitation and to eliminate oppression and exploitation within the island.

The Communist Party's incisive proposal for all-island unity was grounded on Leninist insights regarding the national question, in which the equality of nations formed the material and ideational basis for supra-national unity in the struggle against imperialism and towards socialism and inter-national solidarity. The Communist Party of Ceylon, in which A.Vaidialingam was a founding father and significant theoretician, addressed the national question in the island in concise terms in their resolution presented to the All Ceylon Congress, whose Sinhala bourgeoisie leadership favoured dominion status rather than full

independence from Britain and a unitary-Sinhala dominated nation-state. In the second resolution of the Communist Party, issued in Colombo on the 15<sup>th</sup> October 1944, they declared:

“ ...in order to achieve unity between the different communities and a common demand for the recognition of independence and a free constitution, it is necessary to recognise that the development of Ceylon is taking and will take a multi-national form and that a united and free Ceylon can be realised only on the basis of guaranteeing full and equal opportunities for the development of all nationalities and minorities in Ceylon. As there are distinct, historically evolved nationalities – for instance, the Sinhalese and Tamil – with their own contiguous territory as their homeland, their own language, economic life, culture and psychological make-up, as well as interspersed minorities living in the territories of these nationalities, this meeting declares that the constitution of a free and united Ceylon should be based on the following democratic principles: “ ( Source: Roberts 1977 )

The CP adapted their resolution from a more radical version declared by the Executive committee of the Ceylon Trade Union Federation (C.T.U.F) on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1944. The C.T.U.F resolution included a preamble and a Leninist principle which was left out in the CP resolution

“This committee declares that Ceylon’s future development will not be along the lines of a one nation unitary state, with all except the Sinhalese people being regarded as minorities living within this state. As in fact there are two distinct nations’ historically evolved nationalities in Ceylon- the Sinhalese and the Tamils – each with their own contiguous territory as their homeland, their own language, economic life, culture and psychological make-up, as well as interspersed minorities living in the territories of these nationalities, this committee declares that the constituting of a free Ceylon must be based on the following principles:

- (a) Recognition of the equality and the sovereignty of the people of Ceylon -
- (b) Recognition that the nationalities (Sinhalese and Tamil) have **the right to free self-determination** including the right, if **they desire**, to form their own **separate independent state.**” (*ibid.*)

The left forces were in opposition to the majority of the Sinhala bourgeoisie, and the conservative Tamil bourgeoisie, demanding full independence of Ceylon, instead of being subjected to the external influences of the British imperialism through a dominion status. For such an truly anti-imperialist and sovereign movement and reality to manifest, these men in the incipient left grasped the imperative of the M.L principles of equality of the nationalities. In the Sri Lankan context it demanded the recognition of Tamil and Sinhala nationalities, the facilitation of the Right to self-determination and the implementation of statutory safeguards to the interspersed minorities. Such equality between the nationalities and communities of the island would be the very foundation to build a sovereign and independent country. The national bourgeoisie represented by the All Ceylon Congress, demanded the CP to elaborate

their views on the principle of equality between the nations and the formation of a multi-national country. The document produced by the Communist Party towards such an effect was known as the Keuneman- Vaidialingam memorandum of 1944. Remarkably, the memorandum presents a historiographical definition of nationhood, which the parliamentary left of the later decades persistently silenced in order to deny Tamil speaking people nationhood and its inalienable rights.

A.Vaidialingam is regarded as one of the theoretician behind such an historical and ideological work, and had with greatest integrity argued forth and righteously defined the nationhood, self-determination and sovereignty of the Tamils and Sinhalese alike. The insights of the C.T.U.F and the C.P resolutions of 1944 in recognition of the multi-national nature of the island and the articulation of the principles of equality of the nationalities, as the basis to form a multi-national union were consistently forsaken by national parliamentary left as their leadership adapted a conciliatory approach towards the state centric-Sinhala nationalism. Such a historic revisionism legitimized by a parliamentary logic to capitalize on electoral votes ensured that Sinhala chauvinism infiltrated into the left.

### **The Compromise of the National Left**

The gradual consolidation of chauvinist Sinhala nationalism within the Sinhala masses through the parliamentary and electoral activities of Sinhala bourgeoisie nationalist parties whether the rightist UNP or centre-left SLFP led to a context in which the obsession with parliamentary politics on part of the Left leadership compromised the cardinal M.L. principles enshrining equality between the nations. The conciliatory approach towards Sinhala chauvinism progressively isolated Tamil leaders within these formations as well as the Left parties' stand among Tamils. N. Shanmugaratnam following the analysis of N. Shanmugathan termed it as the "...historic submission of the two Left parties to Sinhala Buddhist hegemony" (Shanmugaratnam 2007: VI). The Left leadership in order to secure piecemeal portions of state power entered into partnership with the reactionary Sinhala chauvinist polity, including racist elements of the Sinhala Buddhist bourgeoisie and clergy.

Imperialist strategic interests and geopolitical considerations of the British Empire, rather than the democratic aspirations of the various principle people, constituted the unitary state formation in 1833, incorporating the entire island into a single political entity and centralizing power in Colombo. The post-colonial state which emerged out of this colonial relic was through a process of Westminster monitored decolonization gradually handed over to the English educated Sinhala elite who were considered a class of reliable comprador elites in the Indian Ocean region.

As the mono-ethnic character of the Sinhala bourgeoisie state and polity consolidated, Sinhala chauvinism effectively infiltrated the parliamentary oriented national Left and compromised its principled stand on the Tamil national question and on the rights of interspersed minorities. CP (Peking) leader, theoretician of the Maoist movement in Sri Lanka, N. Shanmugathan, wrote "*The desire to emulate the 1956 election victory of the*

*MEP robbed the leadership of the LSSP and CP of whatever revolutionary pretences they might have had and converted them into faithful worshippers at the shrine of bourgeois parliamentary democracy*“ (Shanmugathan 1989 : 93 – 94)

Tamil participation in the emerging Left in Sri Lanka was significant, and Tamil leaders mobilized the Tamil speaking districts of the north to provide electoral and popular support for the Left. But during 1950s, as noted by Shanmugathan, some Sinhala leaders within the Left, most notably Philip Gunewardena, captivated by the populist appeal of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism among the Sinhala electorates broke away from the LSSP, established a party which formed one of the constituencies of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) or the United Peoples Front under the leadership of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and the SLFP. The MEP, campaigned on a Sinhala chauvinist nationalist basis, advocating the Sinhala only policy and the expulsion of the Tamil speaking plantation workers to India. Subsequently in the 1956 general election they won a landslide electoral victory among the Sinhala constituencies and formed the government. The LSSP and CP leadership, captivated by the popular appeal of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism, as capitalized on by Philip Gunewardena tilted increasingly towards capturing parliamentary power, and struck a deal with the MEP not to contest it in elections. Incidentally P. Gunewardena, regarded as the father of socialism in Sri Lanka, served as a minister in the MEP government during the period the Official Language Act of 1956 was passed. The act effectively destroyed any hope for parity between the Sinhala and Tamil languages, by making Sinhala only the official language of the state. Tamil government workers were given the order to master and pass tests on the efficiency in Sinhala language within a short period of time in order to retain their jobs. In parliament during this period, P. Kandiah of the CP spearheaded the Left's arguments against the chauvinist proposal, alongside Sinhala comrades such as Edmund Samarakoddy. Kandiah's prophetic observation that the proposals for the Bill had awoken an abstract consciousness among the Tamil masses and invoked a national spirit reflected in the popular and democratic character of the Tamil national political struggle:

*“ ... the entire people are united, all political parties, all castes, religions urged on by the belief that the cause they fight is as urgent as it is just.... You will never crush the spirit of a people fighting for its existence. You will never make a tribe forgets its history. I Cannot think of a fight more righteous, or ennobling than the one the Tamil people today are beginning for their language. I point out also that there is something new to be seen in the Tamil areas... It is not so much Tamils who have studied English, but the majority who have never studied it or any other foreign language who are leading the struggle. The resistance today comes less from the rich, middle sections of the Tamil people who you may hope, may eventually acquiesce from the lower sections.”* ( Kandiah 2002)

The increasingly conciliatory approach adopted by the national Left leadership evident during the late 1950s resulted in the LSSP and CP entering into a partnership with the Sinhala Buddhist chauvinist MEP led by former LSSP leader Philip Gunewardene. This cleared the path for the parliamentary Left's opportunistic and perennial collaboration with the Sinhala bourgeoisie party, the SLFP. This relationship would terminate the independence of the Left as they joined the SLFP as coalition partners in 1960 – 1965 and during the 1970-77 United

Front government (Shanmugamratnam 2007, Vaitheespara 2007 ; Navaratnam 1996). The Left partners of the MEP and the United Front government garlanded socialist rhetoric in order to guise the religious, reactionary and bourgeoisie policies of the government, which increasingly rallied the Sinhala masses on the platform of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism and anti-Tamil racism. The MEP government proclaimed itself as the protector of the Sinhala race, the Buddhist religion, and the nation-state. A few Sinhala communists, most notably Edmond Samarakoddy, retained their principle solidarity to the Tamil national question and broke away from the LSSP and CP.

The SLFP led Left government's policies beside the official language act included two more discriminatory laws legitimizing the national oppression of Tamils. The *Language of the Court Act of 1960* ordered Sinhala language to be made the medium for all proceedings and records in courts throughout the island. *The Finance Act of 1963* proclaimed that all deeds of sales of land where the purchaser has a Tamil or Muslim name would be withheld without registration pending proof of citizenship in accordance with the oppressive Official Citizenship Act (Navaratnam 1996).

The government of Srimavo Bandaranaike was also the first in the post-independent period to authorize the military to repress civilian protests as it ordered the armed forces to quell the 1961 civil disobedience struggle led by the FP in the North-East demanding federalism. The subsequent actions lead to mass incarceration of Tamil leaders and the temporary occupation of the Tamil homeland. Soon, throughout the 1960s the Srimavo government employed the state's armed forces to crush strikes and workers' opposition in the south. During the second term in power the parliamentary Left of United Front government presided over the New Delhi aided counter-insurgency against the JVP insurrection of 1971 in the Sinhala south, and the institutionalization of further discriminatory laws against Tamils which culminated in the 1972 republican constitution. This constitution formally established the post-colonial Ceylonese state into the Sinhala Buddhist nation-state of Sri Lanka with a clause preserving the state religion as Buddhism.

The rhetoric of Marxism was employed by the LSSP and CP, in order to promote the Sinhala chauvinist policies of the bourgeoisie Sri Lankan state and to curtail Tamil national political mobilization and rights. N. Shanmugathasan in his critique of the parliamentary Left for its conciliation with chauvinism of the bourgeoisie condemned the leadership's opportunism which "...led them to a situation where they have come to decide issues not on whether they are right or wrong but whether they meet the approval of the Sinhala masses... That is, why except the attempt made by the Marxist-Leninists to organize the Red Flag Union, in the 1960's, the other parties have neglected plantation labour. It is not an organizational defect. It is a matter of politics. It is for the same reason that the LSSP and the CPSL have refrained from making a bold and revolutionary call in the matter of the Tamil problem. It is not without significance that so far they have refused to call for the withdrawal of the army from the North and East."(Shanmugathasan 1989: 8)

Similarly V. Ponnambalam of the CP (Moscow wing) broke away forming the short lived Sen Tamilar Iyakkam (Red Tamil Movement) and began to coordinate with parliamentary

Tamil nationalist parties. Ponnambalam in both parliament and in his 1978 Tamil booklet titled *Sentamizhar Agividuvom* (Let Us become Red Tamils) famously raised Lenin's arguments on the self-determination of the Polish nation and articulated a critique of the parliamentary Left leadership (Vaithespaara 2007b : 52). He accused them of capitulating to Sinhala chauvinism in betrayal of Lenin's insights on the national question and regarding the dangers of Great Russian chauvinism camouflaged as Bolshevism.

Such a historic mistake or more rightfully termed a betrayal of the Tamils for the sake of opportunistic parliamentary politics, dealt the death blow to the national left in the island. The adverse effect of such dependency on Sinhala Buddhist communalism or in Shamugaratnam's words "the historic submission of the Left parties" resulted in the effective sterilization of the parliamentary left politics in Sri Lanka:

*"After joining the government, some of the parliamentary left leaders claimed that they were taking the class struggle into the state. It did not take long for the politically advanced workers to see through this pretentious claim. They saw how the LSSP and CP were continually losing their trade union bases to the SLFP and UNP. The two parties were also rapidly reduced to minor electoral partners of the SLFP, due to their ever-dwindling vote base. They were unable to prevent the systematic communalisation of the state let alone advancing the class struggle within it."*  
(Shanmugaratnam 2007 : VI, X-XI)

## **Conclusion**

Sri Lanka's location at the heart of the Indian ocean, has made this little tear drop of an island the undying fantasy of imperialisms and aspiring world hegemon and has both historically and contemporarily been at the centre stage in the geo-political gambit between rivalling international and regional hegemon. These external prerogatives and interests have taken such a hold of the island, in consolidating the Sinhala elite and the nation-state, that they successfully hamper the masses of the Sinhala nation from approaching the Tamil national question in a rational and just manner. The fundamental yet obscured truth is that it is only through securing the equality between nationalities and their respective rights to self-determination that the task to fight imperialism and safeguard the island can be undertaken advanced. Without equality between the nations, and the accommodation of the indivisible and inalienable right to self-determination of the Tamils, the fate of the island is sealed by the hands of subservient comprador Sinhala elites and a mono-ethnic bourgeoisie nation-state dependent on the services of imperialism for its existence. In the aftermath of imperialist funded and supervised counter-insurgency against the Tamil national liberation struggle and the genocidal massacres in Mullu'vaykal, the recognition of the nature of crimes and the punishment of the fascist comprador Sinhala bourgeoisie, the Lascarin Sri Lankan military, and its imperialist co-genocidaires are central to Tamil political mobilization. Similarly the recognition of Tamil nationhood, sovereignty and historical homeland forms central pillars in the basic democratic demands of the Tamil speaking peoples. An evaluation of these

demands reflect that they are in itself revolutionary as they are confrontationist towards imperialism and demand the democratic dismantling of the Sinhala bourgeoisie nation state.

In order for Tamils, Sinhalese and the interspersed minorities to steer their respective future collective developments and that of the island as a whole, it is imperative to dismantle the mono-ethnic bourgeoisie state by endorsing the Tamil struggle for national, territorial and linguistic equality. The struggle against imperialism is also one against Sinhala chauvinism and it depends integrally on eradicating national and multifaceted oppression of the Tamil speaking peoples, emancipating their homelands and securing the Sinhala masses a genuine state in their respective homelands reflecting their interests.

Fighting imperialism and foreign domination on the island and in the region was both then and remains still imperative in securing political justice and emancipating the island from the shackles of imperialism, capitalism, national oppression and genocide. Yet it is this historical task which has been consistently forsaken in the island in the name of majoritarian Sinhala chauvinism, parliamentary politics and statecraft.



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