

TAMILS IN SRI LANKA: A NATION IN LIMBO

Amnesia

In July 1991 the LTTE launched a massed attack on the army camp at Elephant Pass. Posters went up in Jaffna describing the camp as the last enemy position on the soil of Tamil Eelam. This was neither an isolated slip nor was it accidental. It represents the progressive mental transformation of the promoters of the leading Tamil chauvinist ideology. Rationalisation of the absurd necessarily involves a huge dose of amnesia. Among these elites it has come to be taken for granted that Tamil Eelam consists of the truncated portion of the Jaffna peninsula under Tiger control. They talk as if Eastern Tamils do not exist, the Hill Country tamils having been forgotten long ago. The Eastern Muslims may as well have been a barbaric horde in Bosnia or in the caucasus. Tamil professionals abroad may casually maintain that having put their foot into it, they must go on backing the LTTE. While struggling to send their children to astronomically expensive Western private schools, they close their minds to children at home, exploited, perverted, cornered into becoming walking grenades, and finally mangled to serve their egos and the destruction of their community. Massacres of Muslims are either rationalised or are blamed on the Sri Lankan forces, the press being accused of distortion. They do not even listen to the LTTE, or more significantly, to what it does not say. The long article about Muslims in the LTTE journal 'Kalathil' of 7th August 1992 does not mention a single massacre of Muslims, even if only to blame it on the Sri Lankan forces.

A good sample of this amnesia comes in two recent published interviews given by a Jaffna dignitary, well received in foreign circles and closely associated with the World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism. The first, published by the WCC's Ecumenical Press Service in July 1992 and strongly critical of the government, made no mention of what is being inflicted on the Muslims, notwithstanding a commitment to oppose racism and further inter-religious dialogue. The second, published in the 'Kalathil' of 10th July 1992, would have sounded incredible if it did not reflect the tone of the first. Asked about the extent of support for the Tigers among Tamils, he replied: "Those who do not support the Tigers have left the land (Nadu). Those who remain largely support the Tigers..." Asked whether the Tamils through weariness will not gradually withdraw from the national liberation struggle, he replied: "Even without electricity, food and medicine, people have demonstrated a clear will to live. The deprivations imposed on them have only strengthened their resolve...". Even allowing for distortion by 'the Kalathil', such answers do a clear disservice to the people of Jaffna, not forgetting the expelled Muslim population, who have suffered much, share deep anxieties about their children and thousands among whom are political prisoners of the Tigers, including for living the Christian faith. What these interviews reveal, both on the part of the dignitary and the editors of the official Tiger organ, is that the East, including its Tamils, in practice do not count.

A struggle based on the social values of an insensitive and decadent elite, has shrivelled morally, mentally and geographically, driving a whole people into a state of limbo. It is a social rather than an individual disease, where the widening gap between the claims of ego and reality, has transformed a sizeable section of the Tamil elite into virtual vampires.

As for the Tigers themselves, this is not to say that they are more concerned for the people of Jaffna than for the Tamils in the East. Balasingam, their spokesman, told the foreign press earlier this year that should the army come into Jaffna, they would vanish into the jungles. His mention of the large number of civilian casualties 'which the government would not like', made clear what he had in mind. Those with first hand knowledge of the debacles in Jaffna of October 1987 and in the East of June 1990 could have no illusions. A politics that has destroyed every real strength in the people could only use them as corpses for propaganda. Children and young men from the East alienated by the barbarity of Sri Lankan forces may give their lives for this cause. But what is at stake has nothing to do with people, but with the power of a mafia leadership - again Balasingam's description.

The sacrifice of hundreds of other people's children to the quasi-religious ideology of the Tigers is extolled as new heights of Tamil valour. That in reality child-sacrifice is the symbol of cause cannibalising what is left of a people is not understood. The use of children points to a people, weakened, divided and disillusioned by a politics of destruction, distancing themselves from the Tiger cause as best as they could.

Political consequence of moral decay

How did it become possible for a small group of power hungry men to hold an entire people hostage? Some of the causes were sketched in the first article. As early as 1972 Alfred Duraiappah and M.C.Subramaniam were declared traitors worthy of an abject death from a TULF (FP) platform. Both, for their services in a limited capacity, had a considerable following. The first was killed. As time went by, the killing came to be rationalised. The process of turning nationalists into vampires was underway.

Against this, it was possible for the TULF and then the Tigers to sit down to tea with UNP governments, discuss unsavoury deals, and pass themselves off as Tamil patriots. Such hypocrisy is an accepted part of Tamil life at the top. Well to do Tamils in Colombo could even today have good relations with the ruling establishment, garland Southern dignitaries whose records are seriously wanting, articulate Tiger interests, even boast of good contacts with them, and get along fine. What was then particularly treacherous about Alfred Duraiappah and M.C.Subramaniam? Their main crime was to be a challenge at home and an embarrassment to the TULF, whose political programme lacked cogency and conviction. Its successor, the LTTE, whose record of blood and misery was even less defensible, carried the 'traitor' ploy to even greater lengths in a bid to avert accountability. The mildest criticism or a hint of dissent, came to mean death or imprisonment. Apart from countless murders, the LTTE holds about 4000 political prisoners.

The LTTE finds itself in a position where it cannot face any form of open accountability. It cannot thus mobilise international support for a settlement which would involve the risk of open political activity and hence a need to come to terms with dissent as well as with Muslim and Sinhalese minorities in the North-East. Its politics of division has weakened the Tamils to a point where it cannot hope to deliver militarily. It must therefore keep the people in limbo, allowing attrition to run its course. Even if a few in Jaffna and others abroad could delude themselves, there are no illusions in the East.

The East : Walking on hot coals

The May 1992 issue of the London based Sri Lanka Monitor, whose editor was in the country at that time, reported two singular incidents in the East. In separate incidents a train and a bus were stopped by the Tigers and the Tamils were ordered to separate themselves from the Muslims. The reasons were clear. In the first the Tamils refused and the Tigers went away. In the second, a Tamil who refused was gunned down when the Tigers opened fire. These and other testimonies make it clear that the Tamils want their alleged leaders to stop killing Muslims. It reveals an irony that while many well placed people around the world, including leading churchmen, treat the Tigers as the sole representatives of the Tamil people, an important segment of the Tamils have given clear indications of their disapproval. Leaders must be seen to arguably, if not demonstrably, represent the interests of the people concerned, holding out some prospect of a human existence. What results from international concern of this kind is clearly a disservice to the Tamils.

The opening of the Eastern University was a boon to Eastern Tamils as well as Muslims, long handicapped in education. Recent developments have threatened the basis as well as the development of the university. Some dons recently asked the Tigers for an assurance of security for Muslims students attending the Vantharumoolai campus. They were told that they (the LTTE) had no objection, but that some incident may take place and things may get out of hand. Incidents there are, such as bombs viciously planted in Muslim areas. Boxed into small villages, deprived of means of livelihood and employment and subject to unforeseen and vicious attacks, the Muslims have become a hunted people. It is hardly surprising that Muslim areas have become seedbeds of resentment and militancy. These developments made both ordinary Muslims and Tamils anxious. Whenever the two communities tried to talk, they often found that they had no control over events. If Muslims could not restrain their lawless elements, the position of the Tamils was even more pitiable. They had no influence over their so-called leaders. In the meantime life in the East becomes increasingly unbearable.

Thus the 'leaders' of the people could survive only by making people powerless and denying them any control over their lives, thanks to the incompetence and brutality of the state. These developments are not accidents or mistakes as some Tamils maintain. Some tried to rationalise earlier attacks on Muslims as mistakes made by second rate, undisciplined Eastern cadre. No doubt, the LTTE is happy with such explanations, as with other 'mistakes' attributed to 'low caste cadre' in Jaffna. The LTTE is not such an organisation. Whenever competent and respected leaders of Eastern origin posed a challenge to the Jaffna leadership, no mistakes were made. Their authority was swiftly neutralised. This was the case with Kadavul who in 1986 opposed the order to massacre members of the TELO. So with Francis in 1987 who opposed the order to attack Sinhalese in Batticaloa who were part of the community. They had both maintained that there were hard facts about the multi-ethnic East governing the long term interests of Tamils which could not be ridden over roughshod.

While many Eastern Tamils have a soft corner for the LTTE because of the actions of the state, there is growing universal disapproval of its actions. There is little doubt in the minds of Eastern Tamils that they are being used as a human shield to protect the egos and unsustainable ambitions of demented leaders in Jaffna. To this end

many Eastern Tamils face the prospect of being permanent refugees in the land of their birth, thus playing into the hands of Sinhalese chauvinists. The latter, have long connived at displacing Tamils to facilitate colonisation.

How will it end?

There is always the outside chance that the LTTE or the government would have a change of heart and will act with greater wisdom, or that something utterly unpredicted would happen. If not the Tamils face the dismal prospect of long being leaderless and not having their interests voiced rationally or cogently. Much that is lost, particularly lives, will be irrecoverable. There is perhaps a small ray of hope. The legacy of the past that led to a fascist culture and tragedy is being questioned by an increasing number of young articulate Tamils. That politics is not something to be discussed over beer, but is a serious matter involving life and death issues is also being understood. Many young in reaction to the long-drawn tragedy of their community have rejected the traditional notion that professional studies are the highest form of educational attainment. Several with good science backgrounds are turning to a study of the humanities and a serious approach to politics. Moreover, rejecting the notion that life abroad is the done thing for those good enough, they are determined to live in Ceylon. These are good signs. While a sound leadership may be a long time coming, much can be accomplished through broadening the work on human rights. It will distance the Tamil struggle from its atrocious and repellent associations. A broad-based move cannot be derailed as was the aim of the assassins of my friend and colleague, Dr.Rajani Thiranagama. Meanwhile it is to be hoped that the Tamils will soon see an end to the political legacy well captured in John Dryden's satirical description of the Earl of Shaftesbury:

In friendship false, implacable in Hate:

Resolved to Ruine or to Rule the State.

To Compass this, the Triple Bond he broke;

The Pillars of Public safety shook:

And fitted Israel for a Foreign Yoke.

Then seiz'd with Fear, yet still affecting Fame,

Usurp'd Patriot's All-attoning Name.

To be clear, in the course of realising a just order, the Sri Lankan state's historic predilection for brutality and insensitivity, that was ultimately responsible for this tragedy must be challenged and exposed. In doing this, in effect for all the people of this country, a liberation struggle must uphold higher values and must be responsible by all concerned. A struggle that is so bankrupt and relies only on its capacity to destroy, degrades everything around, allows no point of reference, and legitimises in the end an incomparably more repressive state. The people are in turn sold into misery and servility. Such a force that masquerades as a liberation movement and uses that mantle

to fool the world, is dangerous. It must exposed at the same time as challenging the state.