
A LABOUR OF RECOVERY

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Ravi Vaitheespara, *Theorizing the National Crisis: Shanmugathan, the Left and the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, Studies on the Sri Lankan Left -1, Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 2007, 78 + xvii.

One of the first headlines of 2008 announced that the six-year-old ceasefire between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil insurgents (in fact long de-ceased in the continuing fire of Tamil militancy and government repression) brokered by the Norwegians had ended. Even before that Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict had been one of the most intractable of our times, defying many attempts at resolution –by neighbours, international actors and donor powers; through negotiations and the use of peacekeeping forces. More than half a century after the problems first emerged, and a quarter century after the civil war began, the conflict seemed endless and, ironically, normalized. The neo-liberal economic model dating back to the 1970s had kept the economy humming along at decent pace even as its rewards accrued disproportionately to those privileged by class, ethnicity and geography. It had also, by many accounts, catalysed the civil war and kept it simmering. As the violence resumed in early 2008, many feared that economic growth might finally be one of its casualties, though whether that opened up possibilities for an early end to the conflict was still anybody's guess.

The very intractability of the conflict may, perhaps, have exhausted analysis. One of the principal aims of this slim volume—two articles and a substantial introduction by Professor Shanmugaratnam of the Norwegian University of Life Sciences—is to try to revive it in an intriguing fashion. Though the mainstream of the Sri Lankan left infamously capitulated to parliamentarism, and to the Sinhala majoritarianism which necessarily went with it, reneging on, and failing, the national question, Vaitheespara focuses on the far more interesting, and analytically powerful, positions taken on it by prominent left intellectuals—principally Shanmugathan, but also Kandiah, Karalasingham and Ponnambalam—who dissented from that capitulation. The complex intertwining of the social and national questions in Sri Lanka, and especially the intractability of the conflict which this intertwining produced, gives this volume, which

might otherwise seem merely to explore some particularly esoteric aspects an arcane world—that of the Sri Lankan left—the potential to play a key role in discussions about Sri Lankan politics and about nations and nationalisms more generally. For, contrary to myths about the congenital inability of an all-too-cosmopolitan left to understand the national question, myths rather irresponsibly perpetrated by those who should have known better,¹ the left has produced some of the most penetrating analyses of nationalism, even if these may have fallen short of its own theoretical ambitions and foul of its own political limitations.² Vaitheespara's sensitive explorations of dissident left positions in this volume confirm this in the Sri Lankan case. They also highlight the importance of the Sri Lankan case—in which class and nation, and the revolutionary and national struggles, proved to hard to separate—to the understanding of nationalism at a time when the operation of neoliberalism has exacerbated inequalities along class, but also along every other social faultline—national, ethnic, gender—making the understanding of their complex intertwining that much more urgent.

Vaitheespara's volume fills another gap. The literature on the Sri Lankan left, including major works such as Kumari Jayawardena's, aimed at explaining and criticizing the capitulation of the mainstream left on the national question. However, its focus on broader national developments meant that it neglected discussion of the relatively marginal figures which Vaitheespara focuses on. Marginal though they may have been, Vaitheespara's labour of recovery clearly demonstrates that their understanding of the national question in Sri Lanka was some of the most insightful that could be found. Its insights emerged from at least attempting to navigate the uncharted waters where nation and class flowed into one another making perilous whirls and eddies whose vortices of violence continue to spiral more than five decades on.

Finally, this book will strike a refreshingly different note against the background of contemporary scholarship. Though early accounts of the conflict in Sri Lanka attempted to identify its historical roots in the nature of the Sri Lankan state and specifically its Sinhala content and dynamics, as time went on the focus shifted to Tamil violence and

'terrorism'. The new scholarship suggested that it was this 'Tamil' violence and not discrimination and repression by the Sri Lankan state that bred Tamil identity (40-41). It also seemed to 'focus on the local and the "fragment" and [was] more ethnographic in orientation.' It expended its theoretical sophistication on no longer attributing 'the causes of the conflict to basic material and ideological struggles over access to jobs, resources and land, but toward a more rarefied ... failure of the imagination—albeit of Sri Lanka's ruling classes and policy makers' (1-2). Shying away from any semblance of argument or accusation (a necessary political act), preferring description and exoneration, it nevertheless attributed legitimate agency, the capacity to change things for the better, exclusively to the ruling classes, if only they would muster the imagination to do so. Needless to say, the agency of the Tamils themselves was delegitimized by equation with terrorism and violence alone, shorn of any justice or legitimacy. In these discourses, 'communist and populist forces, masquerade[d] as leftist and socialist' (iii) to obscure the real legacy of the left in Sri Lanka, as Professor Shanmugaratnam notes in his introduction.

In these circumstances, Ravi Vaitheespara has begun an important work of recovery. In this short book of two articles he painstakingly steers us through the attempts by important figures of the Sri Lankan left, in particular N. Shanmugathasan, to theorize and take meaningful positions on the Tamil problem. These perspectives, though each had its limitations, both intellectual and political, can at least reignite a debate about the historical and materialist understandings which have been lost sight of and recreate overall political perspectives on the situation. In these perspectives, Shanmugathasan's analysis of 'the distinctly pro-imperialist and comprador character of Sri Lanka's ruling elite and political culture' (3) will clearly be central as will be his critique of the left movement. Both occupy Vaitheespara's account centrally. In the circumstances of Sri Lanka, the two could not be separated. The main left parties erred precisely in trying to do so when they capitulated to parliamentarism in a system which systematically marginalized Tamils. Though the left parties might have claimed to still be pursuing the politics of class, in Sri Lankan conditions abandoning the Tamil question was tantamount to compromising the politics of class. The list of blunders which Shanmugathasan pinned on the left included 'the failure to organize and the abandonment of the most exploited plantation Tamil workers for fear of reprisal from the majority community; breaking strikes in alliance with the United Front governments; the deafening silence over the mass butchery of the JVP youth; open communalism against the Tamils

under the UF government; the narrowly communal and discriminatory 1973 republican constitution; and the so-called standardization of university entrance' (14).

Vaitheespara's discussion of the complex and perplexing relationship between Shanmugathasan and the militant JVP, which later evolved into a sinister and virulently anti-Tamil and Sinhala chauvinistic organization, uncovers another layer in the complex relationship between left and nationalist politics in Sri Lanka. Shanmugathasan's closeness to the early JVP enabled him to see clearly the similarity of its evolution from the left to the fascist right, to that of Mussolini in Italy long before these tendencies became manifest. He was able to detect this early on because he had already observed the prominence of 'racialism' in the JVP in its earliest days. As he put it, after it was banned,

... the JVP provided the ideological leadership to the anti-Tamil chauvinist movement which was at the same time anti-UNP. This enabled it to draw near the SLFP and even attract to itself the support and sympathy of the rank and file of the SLFP as well as sections of the more chauvinist Buddhist clergy. It was a combination of these forces that joined together to form the Defence of the Motherland Organization ... (18)

In Shanmugathasan's case these insights did not translate into any easy endorsement of the Tamil cause. In sharp contrast to the easy 'nativism' of so many contemporary avowedly postmodern and postcolonial-intellectuals, he took his time in declaring his political support for the Tamil cause. Shanmugathasan emerges from Vaitheespara's account as almost touchingly paradigmatic of the cosmopolitanism of the left culture of his time, though perhaps he was also moved by the need 'to present himself first and foremost as a national leader able to transcend narrow ethnic affiliations' and 'project himself as someone without any sense of Tamil ethnic particularism or loyalty' (21).

Tragically, he failed to take any action with regard to the brutal repression which began in the late 1970s, causing much bewilderment in his own party's leadership. It was not until 1983 that he finally endorsed the Tamil struggle, and once he did so he supported its more militant wing, the LTTE. What comes through clearly in Vaitheespara's discussion, which will be read amid the ruins of the latest attempt to resolve the conflict, is how clearly and presciently Shanmugathasan saw that no solution to the national question was possible within the neo-colonial conditions of Sri Lanka.

Though short, this work often manages to re-create vividly the difficulties of taking a position on an emerging phenomenon, one which these leaders were still struggling to understand. Particularly moving are his accounts of leaders, anxious not to give up on principle, initially distancing themselves from the conflict because they happened to be Tamil only to return to a mature sympathy for the struggle which they defended unreservedly, putting their own attachments and sentiments in the reckoning.

However, this is only a beginning. One hopes that now that it has been made (and one can think of no more fitting inaugural volume in the series on the Sri Lankan Left), there will be further work which moves on from the work of reconstruction and sympathetic exposition to critique in the context of an overall theoretical framework which is capable of both comprehending the flaws of the array of left positions and laying the foundation of new historical understandings. For the Sri Lankan national question, given its complexity and intractability, has the potential for shedding more serious

light on theories of nationalism than practically any other. Perhaps this slim book will spark a new conversation of the relationship between the left and nationalism, between class and nation and the tensions latent in these relationships as well as the potential for creative interaction.

End notes

1 I discuss this issue in relation to the most prominent writer on nationalism in our time in 'The Inadvertence of Benedict Anderson: A Review Essay on *Imagined Communities* on the Occasion of a New Edition', *Global Media and Communications*, Vol. 4, no. 1, Spring 2008.

2 I trace the intellectual lineage of understandings of nationalisms in which the left figures prominently in my 'Introduction: The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Nationalisms in Historical Perspective', *Developmental and Cultural Nationalisms* Special Issue of *Third World Quarterly* guest editor, Radhika Desai, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2008.

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