

GANDHIAN CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE WHY IT FAILED IN SRI LANKA

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Gandhian methods of civil disobedience played an integral role in India's independence struggle. The end of British colonial rule, signified the success of Gandhi's civil disobedience campaign and symbolised the birth of a new and powerful force in the sub-continent. The close proximity of Ceylon to India ensured that these Gandhian precepts would influence people in Ceylon and between the period 1927 and 1958, there were two significant resorts to Gandhian methods of civil disobedience. The first phase was in the 1930s, when the Jaffna Youth Congress campaigned for total independence and led a boycott of the State Council elections. The second was in the 1950s, when the minority Tamil community sought to pressurize the majority Sinhalese, into granting them equal rights. However, in both these cases, non-violent civil disobedience failed: the primary purpose of this essay is to analyse why this happened.

Civil Disobedience and Gandhi

Civil disobedience is described in the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences as "any act of public defiance of a law or policy (enforced by a Government) carried out for limited public ends and by way of carefully chosen and limited means." Our understanding of civil disobedience was greatly influenced by the writings of Henry David Thoreau, Thoreau's state, and its claim to moral authority. He called for "not at once no government, but at once a better government". These ringing words were to later inspire one of the greatest mass civil disobedience campaigners: Mohandas K. Gandhi.

The heart of Gandhian methods of non-violence lies in his greatest accomplishment: *satyagraha*. He explained, "*satyagraha* largely appears to the public as Civil Disobedience or Civil Resistance. It is civil in the sense that it is not criminal. The law breaker openly and civilly breaks (unjust laws) and quietly suffers the penalty for their breach."¹ Gandhi believed that *satyagraha* was a moral weapon which was intended to induce the oppressor to change his attitude, and to lead to realization that his action was unjust.

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Gandhian Methods in India

The largest civil disobedience campaign was inaugurated on January 26, 1930, when the Indian National Congress unilaterally proclaimed India's independence from Britain and announced a program of peaceful struggle to induce the British to yield. The first law to be broken was the law that made it illegal to take salt from the ocean or from any source other than the British held salt monopoly.

On March 12th 1930, Gandhi embarked on a 26 day march, beginning from his residence near Ahmadabad. The solemn and yet festive procession kept growing as the world followed the unfolding drama closely. At 6.30 a.m. on April 6th, Gandhi reached his destination. Watched breathlessly by about 4,000 followers he reportedly "stooped down, scooped up a handful of sand and salt water and returned to his bungalow with a broad smile on his face"²

Gandhi had ignited the spark that set off the cataclysm for the all-Indian *satyagraha* campaign. Soon, Gandhi proposed more radical acts of civil disobedience., salt would be seized from the government's salt depots. On May 21, a group of 2000 *satyagrahis* marched valiantly towards a police cordon that had sealed off the Dharshana Salt Works. As the group moved closer, the police rushed forward with their steel-tipped bludgeons and set upon the non-resisting *satyagrahis* till they fell down. Column after column advanced in the same manner, awaiting the same gruesome fate with amazing courage. Not an arm was raised in defense. Webb Miller (an American Journalist) captured the heroism of the incident, "In eighteen years of my reporting in twenty countries, during which I have witnessed innumerable civil disturbances, riots, street fights and rebellions. I have never witnessed such harrowing scenes as in Dharshana. Later, in 1956 in Ceylon similar feats of heroism would again be ruthlessly beaten and who would also yet again, stand up for their rights, unflinching.

Gandhi's Impact on Ceylon

In the early part of 1928, Gandhi paid his inaugural visit to Ceylon. In a short space of three weeks, he delivered numerous speeches, travelled through various regions in the island and amassed large donations. Gandhi made a particularly strong impact in his address to



the Jaffna Youth Congress. He summoned them to "mercilessly and spontaneously reject untouchability... drunkenness and the sacrifice of animals in the name of God."³ These moral instructions were later to have strong political overtones, consequently evolving into the basis of civil disobedience in Ceylon.

Jaffna Youth Congress

The Jaffna Youth Congress was formed in 1924, and was for six or seven years, a successful vehicle for the aspirations and ideals of the Ceylon Tamil youth.

The Youth Congress consisting of highly enthusiastic and idealistic young Tamils evolved a radical political ideology. It called for the abolition of the dowry system, advocated religious rights for untouchables and an end to all inequalities based on caste. It further denounced communalism and advocated a program of social service. Their basic demand, however, was the immediate grant of *swaraj* (self-government). Gradually, the Youth Congress' programs and popularity grew and they began to take further steps to achieve their goals. The culmination of this heady rise to power came with what was called the "Jaffna Boycott" in 1931. The Jaffna Youth Congress, spurred on by the Indian boycott of elections by the Indian National Congress, resolved to manifest their dissatisfaction with British rule by a boycott of the new State Council elections. The decision to boycott the elections took shape after the annual meeting of the Jaffna Youth Congress in April 1931.

The meeting was presided over by the Indian politician, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya; indeed many Indian political leaders (including Gandhi) maintained a correspondence with the Youth Congress, advising them on political issues. The Jaffna Youth Congress soon out-manoeuvred senior politicians and by nomination day on 4 May 1931, the Youth Congress had persuaded their elders to boycott the elections. Finding the boycott tactic successful the Youth Congress turned to organising a boycott of imported daily necessities such as sugar, kerosene and cigarettes in Jaffna. However, they met with little success in this aspect of their campaign in sharp contrast to the purely political phases of their activities.

The boycott of State Council elections did not find favour in the rest of Ceylon. Except for the few constituencies in the North and East both the candidates and voters seemed eager to work the new representative institutions. Public opinion did not focus on the weakness of the new reforms, but on the new opportunities presented by the universal adult franchise which had been introduced for the first time. Besides, the political leadership in the South did not fully grasp the idealism and the political commitment to *swaraj* which had taken root amongst the Jaffna youth. The Jaffna youth in 1930 had the advantage of almost a century of missionary education, and contact with liberal intellectual ideas. Their imagination had been fired by

the independence movement in India, and the opportunities for personal contact with some of the most colourful and charismatic leaders of this struggle. The Jaffna student movement had no counterpart in the South, where the educational opportunities had lagged behind. Besides, political leaders in the South continued to believe that the boycott represented an opposition to communal representation. For all of these reasons, neither the Gandhian method of civil disobedience nor the boycott evoked sympathy in the South.⁴

We need to now examine the revival of civil disobedience during the language agitation in the post-independent years.

Language Controversy

Ceylon is a land of many diverse languages. The indigenous languages of the Sinhalese is Sinhala, of the Tamils it is Tamil and for the few, well-educated elite it is English. In 1945, the language question was first raised in the State Council, when J.R. Jayawardene brought in a proposal to make "Sinhala the only official language within a reasonable number of years."⁵ Little did he realise, what a crucial role the language issue would play in the future of Ceylon's ethnic conflict. Language has been a main source of contention in Ceylon since independence, because of its relevance to education, as a medium of instruction, and for its access to lucrative employment. Employment in the government's administrative departments and in the legal medical and engineering professions were all much coveted occupations since the 1930s. In the colonial era these jobs were held only by the affluent English speakers. The limited number of positions in these fields ensured acute and intense competition among the middle classes. Due to the limited range of professional employment in the Jaffna peninsula and the scarcity of arable land for agricultural pursuits, the Tamils have to a greater extent than the Sinhalese depended on employment outside. (secured through educational qualifications.) Therefore the government's language policy was bound to cause wide concern among them.⁶

Tamil animosity and frustration grew from the debates conducted in the 1950s on the language issue. These parliamentary debates showed a slide of opinion favor of the Sinhalese majority. The discussions initially proposed the idea of education in one's own tongue (*swabasha*), then progressed to concede both Sinhalese and Tamil as mother tongues and national languages. These concessions, however proved to be illusory. Opposition from nationalistic Sinhalese parties and from sections of the Buddhist clergy sealed the fate of parity status for the Tamil language: it was doomed from the start.

In the post-independence era two parties had emerged, which would dominate the political spectrum of Ceylon: the United National Party (U.N.P.) and the Sri Lanka



Freedom Party (S.L.F.P.). Both political parties were in intense competition with each other, and the 1950s saw the culmination of their individual bid for power. The already rampant language controversy saw both parties making desperate attempts to canvass the votes of the Sinhalese majority and at the same time not discriminate against the Tamils. Indeed, in April 1953 S.W.R.D Bandaranaike (the Leader of the S.L.F.P) told a Sinhalese gathering, "Sinhalese is the language of the majority of the country. The unemployment and economic problems can be solved to a great extent by making Sinhalese the only language."⁷ Although, he gave the crowd what they wanted, he did not explicitly say that only Sinhala should be recognised. Tamil was merely not mentioned.

One of the main reasons why the Sinhalese language movement was driven with such a strong sense of urgency during the years, 1955-56 was the misconception over the term, "parity status" for the Sinhalese and Tamil languages. Many sections of Sinhalese opinion believed that this meant that all Government administration without exception would have to be maintained in both languages throughout the length and breadth of the island. There was further, an almost universal view among Sinhalese that such a policy would lead to every Sinhalese child having to learn Tamil. Bandaranaike and his peers skillfully exploited this misunderstanding in order to ride the populist Sinhalese wave. The fantasy that unless "Sinhala only" was adopted, Sinhala and indeed the Sinhalese "race, religion and culture would vanish" became an essential ingredient of Bandaranaike's speeches.⁸ The crowds would become intoxicated by his skillful presentation of this message, and this would eventually in 1956 propel him into power.

The election of 1956 was a turning point in the debate over the language controversy. Initially, Bandaranaike and his party were not optimistic about their chances. The U.N.P. appeared to hold most of the cards. It had massive financial resources, due to large contributions from wealthy individuals and firms and besides, most newspapers gave it much fuller and more sympathetic coverage. Bandaranaike had however, grossly underestimated the fervor, his promises of "Sinhala only" would incite in the minds of the people. By 10 April, 1956 Bandaranaike and his comrades emerged victorious, but the fulfillment of his promises for "Sinhala Only", would be followed by the dark, threatening shadow of communal bigotry.⁹

Satyagraha Campaign - 1956

The Tamil reaction to Bandaranaike's "Sinhala Only" bill was one of disillusionment and disbelief. The strongest resentment was felt among the English educated, elite Tamils who also spearheaded the Tamil political parties. This elite had earlier, in the colonial era secured high level employment based solely

on their knowledge and fluency in English. "Sinhala Only" would, therefore, severely endanger their chances of employment.

The Federal party was founded in December 1949. It was initially very much a voice in the wilderness living in the shadow of the Tamil Congress, the main Tamil party of that period. The elections of 1956, however, saw it emerge as by far the most influential of the Tamil parties. Led by the patriarchal S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, the Federal party strongly advocated the adoption of a federal constitution in Ceylon, parity status for Tamil with the Sinhala Language, and emphasised the separate identity of the Tamils in Ceylon.¹⁰ Although the Federal Party first contested the elections in 1952, initially they won only marginal support in the Tamil districts. However during the period after 1952 the Party's political strength grew rapidly mainly as a result of its strong stance on the language issue. Unlike other Tamil political parties, Chelvanayakam's party adopted a radical program and it launched a campaign of non-cooperation and civil disobedience in order to pressurise the government; the most renowned of these being in June, 1956. This act of civil protest set in motion a train of reverberating effects throughout Ceylon.

While Bandaranaike had ridden to office on a massive wave of Sinhalese nationalistic emotion, the sobering realities of political power compelled him to impose restraints on the implementation of the promises that had brought him into power. Bandaranaike's early days in power witnessed tremendous political activity. Pressure from within his party (in the S.L.F.P), had coerced him to draw up the "Sinhala Only" bill devoid of any minor concessions towards the Tamils. Bandaranaike announced that provisions for the "reasonable use of Tamil" would come later, when emotions had cooled, but he had stumbled badly and the Tamils began to have little confidence in any of promises.

Bandaranaike's acquiesce to the chauvinistic bill triggered strong Tamil reaction. Federal Party leaders had whipped up feeling against the bill for weeks and on 5 June, the day that it would be introduced in Parliament, a complete "hartal" (suspension of normal business) was held in the Tamil-majority areas. The day before Chelvanayakam had written to Bandaranaike, "members of Parliament belonging to our party will lead a batch of about 200 *satyagrahis* to sit on the steps of the western entrance to the House of Representatives and there they will remain fasting the whole day...I write to you asking you for your cooperation...to ensure that the *satyagrahis* are not disturbed."¹¹ Bandaranaike tactfully replied to such a move... and there is every reason to believe that a breach of peace would take place." On 5 June the Tamil *satyagrahis* converged on Galle Face Green, mere meters away from the Parliament from which they had been refused entry.



There are many conflicting versions on what actually occurred at the Galle Face Green that morning. A. Amirthalingam, a Tamil member of Parliament who took part in the *satyagraha* campaign, made a comprehensive documentation of the event. He recalls, "During the night the Government ordered more fences to be erected around the Parliament building and armed policemen were strategically placed. A large number of unruly elements were mobilized and brought to Galle Face Green...volunteers who went around distributing leaflets were beaten up by the mob. Notwithstanding this assault...,they proceeded towards the Parliament. Before they could move very far a mob waving the lion flag attacked them, beat them with their fists and sticks and kicked them. Volunteer Chelliah's ear was bitten...as a result of this attack, several leaders and volunteers had to be taken to hospital. While this assault was going on the police stood silently."¹² Indeed, these *satyagrahis* bore this brutal assault and stood firm, following Gandhian precepts in a manner reminiscent of the Dharsana salt march, decades earlier.

The sounds of rampaging mobs were soon heard throughout the city. Small, mainly Sinhalese bands roved around Colombo stoning restaurants, looting a few boutiques and destroying cars. The following morning looting mobs reappeared in the Colombo Pettah (the market area) and police opened fire on three occasions, wounding seven. Two days later, violence and arson broke out in the Eastern Province ports of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. In the latter city violence, following a demonstration by 10,000 Tamils, provoked police firing which caused at least two deaths. Incidents took place in several outstations but the worst violence occurred in Gal Oya, an area of the Eastern Province with a heavy concentration of Tamils, which had recently been colonised by Sinhalese settlers. Sinhalese toughs — inspired by the fantastic rumours of demagogues — seized government cars, bulldozers and high explosives and for a few days terrorised the Tamil community. Scores of Tamils were massacred and hundreds more were driven into hiding. Eventually the army was sent in to quell disturbances; but that did not conceal the reality: Gal Oya was by far the worst episode of communal violence in modern Ceylon's history upto that time.

Meanwhile in Colombo, Bandaranaike had ignored the demands of Tamil political parties and enacted the Sinhala Only act on 15 June, 1956. The Federal party soon issued a statement warning that the Tamil people would never accept such legislation. To demonstrate their discontent, a rally was called forth to participate in the fourth Trincomalee session of the Federal party. The meeting at Trincomalee was like several streams of a river merging into a large ocean of people. Tamils from all corners of the island converged to march onto Trincomalee, and it was reported that nearly 30, 000 people attended the convention. These acts of civil protest deeply

antagonised Bandaranaike, who promptly attempted to disband the Federal Party. The convention resolved that unless the government took steps to confer parity of status on the Tamil language before August 20 1957, the party would engage in a non-violent campaign of direct action to accomplish its political objective.

Initially the government took no steps but as more concerted preparatory efforts were made to launch a non-violent campaign for linguistic equality, in June 1957, Bandaranaike initiated negotiations with the Federal Party. These negotiations culminated in the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam (B-C pact). The pact assured the Tamils that they would be granted a large measure of regional self-government and that Tamil would be recognised as a language of administration in the North-east. However, the Federal party had accepted a good deal less than a federal system of government. Why? The reason is most probably that Chelvanayakam and his peers accepted the partial concessions, realising the extent of the communal hostility growing throughout the island. The Federalists believed that they could later pressurize the government into further concessions after the tension had eased, and therefore called off the *satyagraha* campaign.

The B-C pact however met with a tragic fate. Although Bandaranaike had promised to enact legislation within six months, a skillfully orchestrated campaign frustrated these efforts. Both the UNP and militant members of the Buddhist clergy spearheaded this campaign. Communal passions were further aroused by a campaign to erase Sinhala lettering on motor vehicles and a counter campaign to deface Tamil lettering on nameboards. The UNP and its hardline allies launched a march to Kandy to mobilise Sinhala opinion against the pact, but the march was halted by supporters of the government in Veyangoda. Buddhist monks staged a noisy sit-in at the Rosmead Place house where Bandaranaike resided. In a dramatic *volte face* Bandaranaike submitted to these pressures. Without any reference to Chelvanayakam, he abrogated the B-C pact. In May 1958, an islandwide conflagration was provoked. Brutal violence and communal riots between Tamils and Sinhalese spread to all corners of the island, murder and mayhem had arrived in Ceylon. This plunged the nation into a political crisis and a polarisation on ethnic and linguistic lines, from which it has yet to recover.

Conclusion

We can therefore conclude that between the period of 1927 and 1958, there were two important events where there was a resort to Gandhian methods of civil disobedience, in the otherwise violent political history of Ceylon. The first phase occurred during the nationalist struggle, when the leaders of the Indian national movement inspired the Jaffna youth in their quest for

swaraj and the boycott of elections. However, due to the absence of an equivalent idealistic student movement in the south of Ceylon, this struggle did not spread. Besides very few people in the South fully understood the reasons for the boycott and tended to believe that it was essentially linked to the controversy over communal representation. It was also the first election under universal adult franchise and the new constitution and both candidates and their supporters were eager to grasp the political opportunities that were presented by this momentous change.

During the independence struggle of Ceylon, unlike in India, there was no political tradition of non-violent struggle for independence, which linked the different regions of the country. The movement for constitutional reform was confined primarily, to a group of elite lawyers and businessmen. They were more familiar with methods of constructive cooperation with the colonial rulers than the fervor of mass agitation. They also believed in the effectiveness of a step by step approach, with emphasis on the progressive transfer of political power to the indigenous leaders. This group had commercial and professional links with the British establishment, and did not favor too hasty a break with the colonial past. Civil disobedience was therefore not part of the political culture of the independence movement in Ceylon.

With regard to the language agitation (56-57) the *satyagraha* campaign appeared to succeed and resulted in an agreement which could have served as a basis for ethnic reconciliation. The Tamils believed that they had made significant gains but their early hopes were frustrated when the pact was unilaterally abrogated. Unlike in the colonial period, when both communities faced a common colonial master, in the post colonial period non-violent campaigns for racial justice were perceived to be threatening in a period of heightened ethnic consciousness. The very articulation of ethnic grievances was interpreted as an aggressive assertion of group identity and a challenge to the political majority. The aggressive nature of such attitudes could have mitigated if inter-communal alliances could have worked together towards the same political objectives. However, this was not possible in Ceylon during the movement for the boycott of elections in 1931, nor in the language controversy in 1956-58. Both movements were confined to the Tamil intelligentsia and their supporters, and led to a further polarisation of the two communities.

In the late fifties Sinhala nationalism viewed English as the alien language of the colonial ruler which had been imposed on the indigenous people. The movement for the removal of English was part of the cultural resurgence of a majority which perceived itself to have been deprived of high level employment under colonialism. It was only after the euphoria of Independence had fully subsided, that political leaders in the south of Ceylon were able to

recognise the injustice of this policy towards the minorities. However in the fifties the civil disobedience campaign was not viewed as a struggle for justice, but as a manifestation of racial antagonism. In the subsequent racial intolerance, violence and confusion, the moral objectives of the struggle were obscured.

Another aspect which contributed to the failure of the civil disobedience movement is related to its organisation. Chelvanayakam, the leader of the campaign, combined the austerity, idealism and sincerity of Gandhi. He however lacked Gandhi's capacity for political organisation and also the strong ideological and moral base, so overwhelming in Gandhi's movement. Although the volunteers who joined the *satyagraha* campaign on Galle Face Green were restrained and disciplined in the midst of mob violence, the episode's impact on the conscience of the nation was limited. No meaningful efforts were made to mobilise the support or sympathy of the majority community, nor was there a concurrent campaign in other areas of the island. This indifference meant that the campaign did not receive the coverage in the international and local press, to bring about a change in public opinion. Chelvanayakam and his followers were therefore not projected nationally as apostles of non-violence and courage. On the contrary, he was perceived by many in the South as a sectarian politician. The failure of civil disobedience was due to forces both external and internal to the movement. The rejection of these methods would lead Ceylon onto a road of destruction and chaos.

Notes

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