

A Note on the National Crisis

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In the present crisis, where the Southern and Northern polities are both interlocked into a situation primarily characterised by an armed conflict, the presuppositions of Sinhalese chauvinism are widely taken for granted. One consequence of widespread Sinhalese chauvinism is that the Tamils are not viewed as human beings with aspirations, fears and sensibilities of their own. The Tamil national problem then is treated and responded to as a military problem. Attempts to advance beyond this position have been rendered abortive. Meanwhile, its counter-phenomenon - Tamil chauvinism of the LTTE - has been able to compensate for its physical disadvantages by the ruthless exploitation of every human foible of the adversary as well as of the Tamil people. This situation has also given the LTTE a free hand to play on the fears of the Tamil people, by provoking the instinctive sense of insecurity in the state and among the Sinhalese people. It has also allowed the LTTE to keep the Tamil people in a state of mental inertia, preventing the emergence of any fresh reflection on their condition. Overwhelmed by disillusionment, defeatism and a self-imposed incapacity to re-evaluate the situation, the Sinhalese polity has also turned inwards, so much so that its war machinery is visibly functioning without any direction. Unless a re-evaluation is initiated and concrete attempts are made by the Sinhalese to create a sense of confidence among the Tamil people, the process of dividing the country will continue unabated.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION, OR CONTINUATION OF THE CONFLICT?

There also exists, among some people, the rather simplistic view that the present conflict could be resolved by promoting mutual confidence and understanding between the two protagonists - the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. Based on this 'lack-of-confidence' assumption, peace-makers tend to overlook and ignore totally the ordinary Tamil people, their tragedy and

plight, and their relationship with the two warring parties; the occasional peace-makers thus concentrate only on the protagonists.

True enough, the Tamil people do not place any confidence in the Sri Lankan state and the Southern polity. It is also true that the Sri Lankan state's ethnic oppression has given rise to an armed struggle in the North-East. However, in order to understand the development of the conflict, the particular direction it took and the process through which the LTTE achieved its dominance, we need to look beyond those propositions. The LTTE quite clearly re-inforces and then exploits the fears of the Tamil people and their lack of confidence in the Sri Lankan state, in order to tighten its strangle-hold on Tamil society. In doing so, the LTTE also clearly displays its own narrow and authoritarian political ideology.

The LTTE is no longer only a reactive force as some people appear to think. The Tamil armed struggle did show a reactive character in the early stages of the conflict and indeed many militant formations sprang up in that fashion. However, subsequent developments have indicated, particularly with regard to the LTTE, that its political behaviour has acquired its own specific characteristics. The killing of hundreds of youths from amongst its own ranks, the physical annihilation of rival groups and individuals and the reckless killing of Rajiv Gandhi — can these be explained simply as reactive actions arising from the LTTE's lack of confidence in the Sri Lankan government? On the contrary, the LTTE is immensely confident of its own strategies and methods, ruthless and cold-blooded as they are. It is also acutely aware of the forces that have a sneaking admiration for its deeds. The LTTE also knows of the hypocritical nature of power politics - both national and international. Hence, the LTTE's callous lack of concern about the misery and plight of Tamil civilians.

Any attempt to preserve the present status quo by making arrangements which would guarantee political power and control for the two main protagonists - the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE - will surely bear no lasting results. The dynamics that have already been created points to an entirely different agenda.

In a sense, the LTTE, and for that matter some other Tamil groups too, have more confidence in President Premadasa than in any other section representative of the southern polity. This was amply demonstrated during the recent impeachment crisis. The overt and covert help which the LTTE received from the present government during the period of so-called negotiations to annihilate its adversaries and the way in which the government kept its promise of confidentiality concerning the issues discussed during this period are indications of that trust. At the same time, the LTTE is a victim of a blood stained history, which is, paradoxically, its own creation. Placed in the midst of this bloody history, the LTTE needs an arrangement which will enable it to determine the next phase of politics in which it may be able to open up spaces, according to its need, in the Tamil community and in turn to gain legitimacy for its own brand of politics. Therefore, the LTTE cannot and does not allow any evaluation of the past, a task that is absolutely essential for a new beginning. There lies the crux of the problem. If we forget the democratic and human rights concerns of the Tamil people and are prepared to legitimise a mode of politics which basically relies on its own destructive capacity for sustenance and survival, then the endorsement of narrowly nationalistic and authoritarian perspectives on Tamil politics will be the historical legacy we leave behind us. This will be the symbol of our failure.

On the other hand, there are measures that can be more meaningful in creating

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confidence among ordinary people. If all communities can re-evaluate their histories and start recovering their respective democratic legacies, then, within that process, new arrangements can be made to remove the fears and feelings of insecurity of the minorities. In such an event, the question of who should represent whom will be utterly irrelevant.

As part of this process, a clear agenda for the resolution of the conflict should be put forward by the state and/or by major political parties. They should openly campaign for the conflict-resolution agenda among the Sinhalese people with a clear commitment to a phased programme in which that agenda would be implemented. Such measures will surely mark the beginning of confidence-building among the ordinary people.

It is true that chauvinistic sections of the Sinhala polity will attempt to obstruct this process. We must not forget that the Sinhalese people too have gone through enough tragedies and experiences that should make them re-evaluate their own history. Enough democratic potential does exist among the ordinary Sinhalese people, waiting only to be tapped; once tapped, this potential could be a source of strength for a reconciliation process. Upto now, negotiations on the ethnic issue have been manipulated for purposes of purely tactical manoeuvring; people have naturally become cynical about political solutions and, in that context, have been swayed by chauvinistic forces.

Since a genuine opening for peace, as outlined above, is not emanating from the Sinhalese polity, there exists a continuous sense of uncertainty in the minds of the Tamil people. This in turn disables them from re-examining their own history and from negating the unhealthy past. Meanwhile, unable to face the naked truth about events in the recent past, ruling groups of the state have exposed to public view only certain aspects of what really happened in the Sinhala-Tamil conflict. Disclosures have been used to attack some individual politicians, fallen from grace, as if their anti-

Tamil actions had merely been aberrant and isolated incidents.

To achieve peace in the long-run, it is essential that both the state and the LTTE are compelled to be accountable as much to their own people as to the international community. Similarly, any negotiations should contain built-in mechanisms to guarantee at least minimum norms of democratic political behaviour to make certain that new space is created for the people on both sides of the ethnic divide. Negotiations, initiated merely for tactical purposes, will again lead to still more catastrophic consequences.

The following are some suggestions for consideration, in the hope that they will provide the necessary basis for the building of confidence among the Tamil people. They may help to open up some space within the Tamil community, whether a ceasefire is actually achieved or not.

Some suggestions for immediate action would be:

1. The setting up of judicial machinery to guarantee justice for individuals with complaints against the conduct of members of armed forces. This is very important because the persistence of massacres and disappearances in army-controlled areas is the chief cause of alienation of the Tamil people from the state. The massacres and disappearances in the eastern province are so widespread that the people feel thoroughly abandoned. The response of the state is such that the people feel angry and powerless.
2. Making a public review of the process of colonisation in the border areas of the Northern and Eastern province, and taking measures to ensure that no community is placed at a disadvantageous position vis-a-vis another. This measure will help remove the fear of national minorities that there is a hidden agenda being implemented with state patronage.

3. Using international agencies such as the ICRC to set up well-advertised procedures for civilian relief so that whenever the army enters a new area, civilians can be confident that their lives and property would be protected. Our experience has been that even when the army entered places without resistance (e.g Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Kayts), there has been considerable loss of civilian life. In Mannar, most homes were looted. In many instances, civilians are reluctant to go to refugee camps because they fear that their homes would be looted. Even well conceived procedures to safeguard civilians will not work unless the practice of looting by army personnel is curbed. In addition, the setting up of refugee camps by itself is meaningless unless the security of their inmates is guaranteed. In many instances, particularly in the East, hundreds of persons who were picked up from refugee camps have not been accounted for. It is a sad fact that ordinary people who entered refugee camps with confidence that they will not be harmed were rounded up and taken away by the army. How did the government respond to inquiries? It simply denied everything. How can the people trust the government? There is a urgent need for the state to accept responsibility for excesses committed by its armed forces and to have positive programmes to compensate and assist the victimised families to rebegin their lives.

Another question that the people are asking is "Why have we, the ordinary people, been arrested and tortured and killed for merely seeing the Tigers or because we were forced to feed them while a government Minister calls the LTTE the representatives of the people?"

The most important aspect of restoring peace is that of clarifying the political



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objectives of peace. Ultimately, any peace settlement must make the Tamils feel that they are truly fellow citizens of this country, enjoying, in concrete terms, both equal rights and equal opportunities. For this, the Tamils, especially the young among them,

have to be patiently won over. This must go much deeper than providing name boards in public places in Tamil. It must also go beyond the removal of restrictions placed on travel and the transportation of goods. It must look at the disabilities faced by minorities in the whole process of justice and administration. It must also look at the

humiliations and insults officially meted out to Tamils, and seriously attempt to heal the deep wounds inflicted on the Tamil people. Unless these are publicly explained to the Sinhalese in order to make them feel the need for a radical change, the prospects for lasting peace in this country are dim. ■

Tigers as Jailers and Executioners

Are there more Tamil political prisoners in the LTTE's fortified bunker jails than in the prisons of the Sri Lankan state? Yes, according to some observers.

The actual number of prisoners in LTTE custody is not known. However, well-informed Tamil sources claim the number to be anywhere between four and five thousand. The prisoners, according to these sources, are regularly tortured, and many have died under interrogation.

It appears that there are five categories of political prisoners in LTTE jails:

- (i) members and sympathisers of rival Tamil groups,
- (ii) those who had links with the Indian Peace Keeping Forces,
- (iii) ex-members of the LTTE,
- (iv) critics of the LTTE and
- (v) captured Sri Lankan soldiers and policemen.

Human rights activists express particular concern about the fate of these prisoners in case the Sri Lankan army launches a major offensive into LTTE strongholds in Jaffna. The prisoners are likely to be summarily executed by the Tigers, they fear.

Execution of opponents is not a new thing in the LTTE's manual of warfare. What is new, however, is the practice of public executions. In the month of October alone, nearly 35 'deterrent' public executions are reported to have been carried out by LTTE cadres. Horrendous details of such punishment of 'traitors' have now been revealed. In the typical execution ritual, the victim is brought blindfolded in a jeep to a public place and given 2 or 3 minutes to confess. While the confession progresses, and the public listens, a young executioner standing behind the victim holds a gun at his head and pulls the trigger. ■

INIMICAL FORCES

Einstein is loved because he is gentle, respected because he is wise. Relativity being not for most of us, we elevate its author to a position somewhere between Edison, who gave us a tangible gleam, and God, who gave us the difficult dark and the hope of penetrating it. Not long ago Einstein was here and made a speech, not about relativity but about nationalism. "Behind it," he said, "are the forces inimical to life." Since he made that speech we have been reading more about those forces: Bruno Walter forbidden by the Leipzig police to conduct a symphony; shops of the Jews posted with labels showing a yellow spot on a black field. Thus, in a single day's developments in Germany we go back a thousand years into the dark, while a great thinker, speaking not as Jew but as philosopher, warns us: these are the forces inimical to life.

E.B. White
The New Yorker
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