

Pravāda

Vol. 4 No. 9

Rs. 25.00

ISSN 1391-104X

Contents

NOTES AND COMMENTS	04
STATE AND NATION	06
<i>Adrian Wijemanne</i>	
TIGER WOMEN AND THE QUESTION OF WOMEN'S EMANCIPATION	08
<i>Radhika Coomaraswamy</i>	
DECENTRALIZATION TO THE GRASS-ROOTS:	11
<i>Tressie Leitan</i>	
A NOVELIST SILENCED	15
SINHALAS AND EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL ORIGINS	16
<i>Sasanka Perera</i>	
READING "POLITICS OF LITERARY CRITICISM"	19
<i>Douglas Walatara</i>	
KURUMPACCIDDY VILLAGE, JAFFNA-1973	21
<i>Jane Russell</i>	
DOCUMENTS	23

From

Amnesty International
University Teachers for Human Rights, Jaffna
Civil Rights Movement
Organisations Against Political Violence

Pravāda in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

TO BREAK A STALEMATE

Between the expiry of one solar year and the beginning of the next, there is a strange period of a few hours when nothing happens, when one is really expected to do nothing. There is just such an air about now.

After the debacle at Mullaitivu, where there is still only speculation about the total losses in men and equipment suffered by the security forces, after the operation that was meant to restore the army's pride - operation Satjaya to capture Kilinochchi the war is back to isolated encounters and ambushes. There is of course no certainty that this will last; a bomb or an attack by the LTTE or a sudden foray by the army may shatter the stalemate and change things. As we write, there is news of a new offensive by the army; they have mounted an operation to capture areas to the east and the west of Paranthan. They are likely to have as their objective the capture of Kilinochchi, which has been the LTTE's virtual capital since the fall of Jaffna. The areas under the control of the army may thus expand. But, even then, the stalemate is real in the sense that the total defeat of one or the other is not to be expected in the near future.

There is a similar stalemate in the peace process. The political settlement, announced in conceptual terms by the government last August and presented to the Parliamentary Select Committee in a diluted form in January, is still stuck there.

The Chairman of the Committee, Constitutional Affairs Minister Pieris, speaks optimistically; he says there has been considerable progress and that he hopes to conclude the discussions by April 1997 and have the

constitutional amendments on the floor of Parliament soon thereafter. He also hopes that these proposals will have the full support of the Tamil and Muslim parties, if not of the UNP. The picture one gets from other participants in the Committee is not that optimistic.

The really important issues - for example, the form of the state and the unit of devolution - have not yet been seriously addressed within the Committee, though these have been the main themes in the devolution debate in the country outside Parliament. What has engaged the attention of the Committee upto now are so-called non-controversial issues. But there has been no finality even in these discussions; every time an issue becomes in some way controversial, when for whatever reason no immediate agreement is possible, it is laid aside, to be returned to later. Discussion then moves on to another issue. If some participants are to be trusted, not one single issue has been pursued to the point of agreement. And this is after seven months of sittings.

This lack of progress has created a sense of despair among the Tamil political parties in Parliament. So has the seeming unwillingness or inability of the government to consider the amendments that have been put forward by the TULF and by the other five Tamil parties in Parliament in order to improve the political package. All these parties are quite definite that the package as it stands now cannot have their full support.

They are also rather peeved that the government has virtually put on them the task of persuading the UNP to agree to the package.

Pravāda

Vol. 4 No. 9, 1996

Editors

**Charles Abeysekera
Jayadeva Uyangoda**

Pravada is published monthly by:

**Pravada Publications
425/15, Thimbirigasyaya Road
Colombo 5
Sri Lanka.
Telephone. 501339
Fax. 595563**

Annual subscriptions:

Sri Lanka	Rs. 300
By Air mail:	
South Asia/Middle East	U.S. \$ 28
S. E. Asia/Far East	U.S. \$ 28
Europe/Africa	U.S. \$ 30
Americas/Pacific countries	U.S. \$ 40

Why should they be brokers between the PA and the UNP, they ask and for a package they are not really happy with. Nevertheless, so great is their need, in terms of their own survival, for a political settlement that they have actually attempted to carry out this task, though with scant success.

This then is the situation. Some, including sections of the government, wait for a victorious conclusion to the war after which a political settlement can be negotiated and/or imposed on the Tamil people. Others wait for the political settlement. Both sections tend to underrate the role of the LTTE. However, both these visions continue to recede into the distant future. They may take years to achieve. In the meantime, there is no thought given to what can be done now, in the immediate present, to ease the grievances of the Tamils and help to create conditions in which the achievement of better solutions may be possible.

We believe that it is time for new beginnings, for new thinking on the strategy of dealing with the North-East question.

The present military strategy is aimed at capturing the territory held by the LTTE and bringing more and more Tamil people under the control of the government. This strategy can succeed only on the condition the army's control of the captured territory leads to the point of near normalisation. Then only can the civil administration be put in place, the normal services that people expect from a state be organized and people convinced that the government is genuine in its commitment to devolution.

There is no evidence so far of the success of this strategy. To begin with, the capacity of the army to implement such a strategy is in doubt. The army has been unable to recruit the forces it needs; attempts to tempt back into service the 20,000 deserters have only been partially successful. Then, there is the question of the very viability of that strategy. It is now evident, from the many attacks and skirmishes that take place, that LTTE cadres have infiltrated the Jaffna Peninsula. In these circumstances, restoration of civil administration and reconstruction have been difficult to achieve. As the President herself recently declared, her ability to force civilian officials to go back to Jaffna is limited precisely because the security situation on the ground is not yet good enough. People in Jaffna virtually are living under military occupation. This same situation precludes reconstruction work on any large scale.

We are not, by any means, advocates of a military approach to the ethnic question. Neither are we specialists in military strategy. However, even using our political common sense, we fail to see how the present military strategy of the government could create conditions for a political settlement. We do not believe that the present strategy fulfills this aim. The President has said that her aim is to free the Tamil people from the grip of the LTTE so that they will be free to exercise their political will. But from the other side, this same position can be viewed as one where the Tamil people will be reduced to an abject state, totally without power, where freedom will merely mean the acceptance of whatever is offered.

The political process will also have to be thought out anew. A political package has

been presented; it is, however, yet to be negotiated and settled. It has then to be implemented under reasonable security conditions, which might be unattainable at least in some parts of the North-east.

It is possible to conclude from the current situation - a descent from the peace euphoria of two years ago to the present stalemate - that the space available for any radical political reform has shrunk to the point of disappearance. This may be true of other sectors as well, for example, the economic. Sri Lankan society seems resigned to going on as it is. This may be partly the result of apathy and inactivity in the political parties and partly due to a genuine and general disenchantment with the political rounds of high promises and little delivery.

This brings us to the point of discussing what is possible under the current circumstances, particularly as far as the ethnic problem and the war are concerned.

There can be an argument that the closure of space for political reform is not temporary, that it is permanent and that there can never be a political settlement under which the two communities can live together peacefully within the bounds of a single state. We publish in this issue a persuasively written article by Adrian Wijemanna which makes this argument.

We believe that we can not yet come to this dismal conclusion. We believe that it is yet possible to work out a political structure - basically federal in nature - which will permit the federal unity of ethnically and culturally diverse groups. It is within these parameters that we look at what is immediately possible.

The Tamil people can be persuaded of the government's good intentions only by its present behaviour, by political conduct that demonstrates its total commitment to devolution as a means of recognizing minority rights. And this is precisely what is not happening now. With sights either on a military victory or a political settlement to be achieved in the future, no one appears to be concerned with the now, with what can be done immediately.

There is constitutional sanction for a programme of devolution now in the shape of provincial councils. Everyone knows and recognizes that this scheme is not being implemented; there are elected provincial councils in the seven southern provinces but they do not enjoy their full constitutional powers. As a first step, the government can devolve power as fully as possible under the current laws to these elected councils. It can consider the setting up of some kind of interim political council for the North-East and devolve power to it on the same basis. Recognizing the necessity to devolve further powers to the North-east, the government may even declare that it will unilaterally refrain from exercising the powers in the concurrent list. This will mean a considerable enhancement of the powers devolved to the North-East. And it can lead to the realisation that one feature of a political settlement to the ethnic problem may be an asymmetrical system of devolution, where the Tamil people enjoy a greater degree of regional autonomy than the seven southern provinces.

It can even consider the holding of elections in the North-East at an appropriate time, may be with international supervision. It will also be necessary to declare unequivocally that these steps, as far as the North-East is concerned, are but steps towards creating a necessary base for discussing and implementing further devolution in association with the elected representatives of the Tamil people at both provincial and national levels.

There are also other measures that can be taken immediately to mitigate or remove some of the other grievances Tamils live with, such as in the area of language use. It should be also possible to devise measures where the requirements of security considerations do not imply in practice some discrimination against and harassment of Tamils per se.

Some action as is proposed above can win back the confidence of the Tamil people and convince them of the government's dedication to the concept of regional autonomy. It can also deepen democratic practice throughout the country.

P

In view of the dismal history of ethnocultural nationalism, and its recent resurgence in some of its most virulent manifestations in the Balkans and elsewhere, the image of a world in which most individuals identify with their ethnicity, claiming and implementing that ethnicity's "right to self-determination" is both a theoretical and a practical nightmare. Whatever the theoretical difficulties of individuating a people with recourse to citizenship, those difficulties have not prevented political and ideological leaders from forging or sustaining politically significant, ethno-culturally defined "peoples." This process has often been a defensive response to ethnically based discrimination, oppression or worse. How others identify one's ethnicity and treat one because of that label can itself result in self-identification primarily with that ethnicity rather than with a citizen body.... One's ethnicity can be thrust upon one. Politically significant, ethnically or religiously defined peoples can be created by such other peoples, too many of whose members are bent on domination.

James A. Graff
in *Group Rights* (ed. Judith Baker)
University of Toronto Press 1994