

BOOK REVIEW

A. J. Wilson, 1994 "S. J. V. Chelvanayakam and the Crisis of Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism 1947-1977. A Political Biography", Hurst and Company, London, 1994. 149 pages. £ 22.50.

A biography of S.J.V. Chelvanayakam (1898-1977), or SJV as he was fondly called by his followers, has been long overdue, given the love and respect with which he was held by not only large segments of Sri Lanka's Tamil community, but also the Sinhalese community. Many of us like this writer, a Tamil from Sri Lanka admired him and personified our political and national aspirations in him while growing up in Sri Lanka, but we really knew, authoritatively, little of him. Indeed, what we Tamils knew of him was through the great debates between his Federal Party and his arch-rival G.G. Ponnambalam's Tamil Congress, and therefore our information was coloured by the rhetoric of the times and the predilections of our friends.

This book by Professor Jeyaratnam Wilson is therefore a necessary and authoritative addition to the literature, and is very much to be welcomed. A practised author trained in the rigors of scholarship, Wilson has taken pains to back most of his claims with careful and exhaustive references. A particular strength of the book is that Wilson-as SJV's son-in-law and himself a player in the field of politics during J.R. Jayewardene's tenure as president when he was deeply involved in drafting the bill on district councils-is in a position to speak with authority on SJV's inner thoughts and private moments. As such we hear much of Chelvanayakam's personal life and thought processes that would have been difficult for other authors to gain access to. The same vantage allows him also to comment with conviction on the personal traits of the many political players whom Chelvanayakam came across. The rivalry between G.G. Ponnambalam of the Tamil Congress and SJV is played out in full detail in the book. Similarly we hear of what SJV thought of the Senanayakes.

To his credit, Wilson does not fight shy of addressing effectively some of the charges made at the time by SJV's detractors-for example Ponnambalam's charge that SJV left the Tamil Congress only after being refused a position in the cabinet. In doing so, Wilson is also fair in spelling out in detail the charges and arguments made by those critical of Chelvanayakam, so that readers feel that the final judgement is theirs to make, rather than being left to feel that the author's opinions are being imposed on them.

There are also some valuable insights from Wilson's days at the university in Sri Lanka. For instance, he tells us that Bandaranaike was not convinced of his Sinhalese-only policy and was contemptuous of the Faculty of Oriental Studies whose members wanted full implementation of the language policy.

All this is not to say that the book is perfect. Wilson's strengths in being related to Chelvanayakam and being a player in politics, also prove to be a mild weakness in the book. Especially when he treats persons and institutions he dealt with, we see a loss of his otherwise characteristic rigour. For example, on p. 119 he says that the allegation by Sinhalese that the TULF was nonviolent in public speeches but in private encouraged its youth wing to resort to violence, was unfounded. And then he contradicts this-after calling Amirthalingam a "statesmanlike leader" (p.129), he adds the serious charge on p. 135 that party men whom SJV trusted, especially Amirthalingam, unbeknownst to SJV, were hand-in-glove with people who were involved in violent acts." Besides, it is a charge so serious against a dead man, Amirthalingam, in one short sentence, that one feels that it should have been made with better documentation to sit comfortably along with the rest of the book.

Indeed, the issue of Chelvanayakam's stance on violence is one that merits greater treatment, but for Tamils, it remains a topic that their psyche seemingly does not allow them to address squarely. For Tamils, that Chelvanayakam stood for nonviolence is a given, not to be questioned. But two disturbing issues remain to be investigated before we can definitively assert exactly where Chelvanayakam stood. First the question of Amirthalingam raised by Wilson. There is some evidence that Amirthalingam, as a young man, organised counter-violence against Sinhalese civilians in Jaffna during the riots of the late fifties. (A chemistry professor in the US, in his teens at the time, remembers cycling about Jaffna listening with admiration to Amirthalingam's exhortations to retaliate; and this writer remembers, as a six year old in the company of teen-aged neighbours, seeing the violence visited on City Bakery across Jaffna Hospital and picking up biscuits from the street). While such evidence appears to be anecdotal, it certainly suggests the need for more formal enquiry, which I wish Wilson had included within the sweep of his book. Did SJV really not know of Amirthalingam's activities, particularly if they spanned a period of 20 years under SJV? Did no one tell him? Or did he choose to skirt around the issue? Besides, shortly after the Sri campaign against the Sinhalese letter Sri on motor car number-plates, under rumours that the Sinhalese would March on Jaffna, the "Defence of Vavuniya" was organised by the Federal party, under the leadership of Professor C. Suntharalingam, and P.S. Somasundaram, the FP's municipal member for Chundikuli. It was an effort that involved some shot-guns, but otherwise largely crudely armed men in sarong (the well-to-do do not engage in such nasty business as fighting, naturally, just like the upper-class/ caste Tamil gallery cheering on now in comfort from Western capitals as lower-class/ caste children are sacrificed) being carried in convoys of lorries from Jaffna (I recall running at the time in the company of older boys down Chemmany Road, Nallur, along-side one such convoy, shouting "Victory to the Tamils!". "Thamilarukku Jai!"). Surely, SJV must have known of this? If he knew, did he approve? If he did not know, or if he knew and did not approve, was he in control? The second issue requiring enquiry before we definitively speak on Chelvanayakam's position on violence, has to do with his presence on stages at election rallies in the seventies where

others spoke advocating violence. By then he was hard of hearing but his mind was still sharp. Thus again, did no one tell him? If not, was he a leader being used by others?

In the same vein, Wilson stumbles in first saying that Chelvanayakam had reservations about the political trustworthiness of both Senanayakes, father and son (p.92), and then describing Dudley Senanayake as having a reputation for honour and integrity (p.104). In this as in the matter of Amirthalingam, Wilson appears to fall into the common trap many writers fall into in misunderstanding the concept of neutrality in observations. When the cold reality of facts points to a conclusion, they feel compelled by this dubious commitment to neutrality, to add a statement supporting the opposite, however implausible it might be and then they take comfort in having serviced this ideal of "neutrality" (It is, interestingly, the same weakness that Sri Lankan army spokesmen exploit every time they massacre civilians—they simply make a statement saying they killed so many militants who attacked them, knowing that Western correspondents would, through their commitment to "neutrality", simply repeat it, even if they did not believe it).

Similarly, Jayewardene and his UNP that Wilson dealt with are treated with kidgloves—especially when Wilson says (p. 138) that the Sinhalese state engaged in "cordon and search and destroy" operations... particularly under Srimavo [Bandaranaike]. Anyone who lived in the Tamil areas at the time knows that Srimavo did use harsh emergency regulations and did imprison youths without trial, and once even cordoned off Urumpirai at 4.00 AM searching for the youth leader Sivakumaran house by house (it was said that he avoided arrest that morning by wearing a sari). But never were these operations accompanied by mass destruction. Search and destroy operations among the Tamils were first under Jayewardene, starting with his sending his nephew Brigadier "Bull" Weeratunge who turned the Jaffna Kachcheri into a torture chamber. Wilson, in his good-will for J.R. Jayewardene, speculates at the end of the book that J.R. would have come to a settlement with SJV if he had been alive during JR's regime. It would have been of intriguing interest had he also used his insight to speculate on how today's militants who adulate SJV as "Thanthai (Father) Selva" would have responded to him if he were alive today, insisting on nonviolence.

Perhaps because of his personal relationship to SJV, Wilson like-wise skirts around SJV's separation from his father without explaining it, thereby leaving curious minds to speculate on whether his parents were separated or lived separately for the financial well-being of the family as many from Jaffna did at the time. For Mrs. Chelvanayakam, his mother-in-law, Wilson makes a claim to aristocracy and says her father was chief—leaving the reader wondering who a chief is and who the aristocracy are, in the context of a Tamil village of Sudras.

I wish that Wilson had also looked into the intriguing question of SJV's skills as a politician. Although even his worst detractors concede his unbending commitment to principle, a seri-

ous question is whether being unbending is a useful quality in the art of politics. It has been said that the Federal Party took the position that G.G. Ponnambalam should never have joined the early UNP governments. Having taken that stand, they would not (and perhaps could not) reverse themselves. Thus, when they entered a compact with Dudley Senanayake in 1965, they turned down ministerial positions and accepted only one portfolio for Tiruchelvam, an appointed MP with comparatively little grass-roots contact with ordinary Tamils, that merely involved the drafting of legislation. (The point was repeatedly and proudly made that SJV never accepted a perk). Thus Chelvanayakam never attended cabinet meetings to push forward his agenda, and never held a ministerial position in which capacity he would have met some 15 to 30 MPs a day from across the political spectrum, coming with requests. In the world of politics, it is such contacts and giving of favours that allow a politician to push through his own agenda by calling in all those favours given. As such, although Chelvanayakam backed the 1965-70 government, he never backed it fully and therefore failed at getting what he wanted. SJV's supporters and defenders take the view that after the BC pact experience he did not (and could not) trust the Sinhalese and that even the 1965 pact with Dudley failed because it is in the nature of the Sinhalese not to offer Tamils anything. But then, is it practicable to enter an alliance without trust? Is it even responsible? It is also said that what Chelvanayakam did in starting Sri campaign was a very "unpolitic" thing for a politician because it made it all the more difficult for Bandaranaike to deliver, and that Chelvanayakam never understood how politics works. These questions raise Tamil shackles: "Traitor!", it would be said in the now standard Tamil fashion given currency by the Federal Party in dismissing anyone who did not agree with them. The pity of it is that Wilson, with his family connections to SJV, is in a better position to examine these issues without being accused of treason.

Besides these, there are some minor shortcomings in the book: some figure captions are wrong (M.G. Ramachandran is called R.M. Ramachandran and the Federal Party is called the principal component of the 1965-70 government); Chelvanayakam could not have been at school for 13.5 years at Union College and St. John's College before going to St. Thomas's for further schooling; a retired bishop is called a former bishop as though he had been defrocked; the Tamil language is said to be part of the Hinduistic cultural atmosphere; fine distinctions between the America-Ceylon Mission and the Church of South India, and the Church of England and the Church of Ceylon, are not maintained; and the militant leader Sivakumaran is stated to have attempted to assassinate a superintendent of police and committed suicide upon being caught, whereas that was an unproven charge by the police and in fact he was caught by locals—who did not recognise him and thought him to be an ordinary robber following a failed bank robbery—and handed over to the police in pursuit of him, at which time he swallowed some poison and died.

In sum, Wilson's is an excellent book for what it contains, notwithstanding the several fascinating avenues of enquiry it missed. Everyone interested in understanding Sri Lankan politics should read it.

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