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**EXPERIENCES IN NON - VIOLENT ACTION IN
FIGHTING OPPRESSION IN CEYLON (1956 - 1976)**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 GEO-PHYSICAL

Ilankai, (Lanka or Ceylon) a tropical island in South Asia, is the southern extension of the Indian peninsula. It is separated from the sub-continent by a strip of shallow water called Palk strait, 50—80 km. in width. The island is situated between 5°55" and 9°50" north latitude and between 79°42" and 81°52" east longitude. The centre of the southern portion of the island comprises of mountainous area covering about 10,000 sq. km. out of a total island area of 65,605 sq km. The rest of the island consists of long stretches of plains. The island could be divided according to its geographical, physical and climatical conditions into two recognisable zones, the wet zone and the dry zone. The wet zone consists of the south west quarter of the island. The dry zone stretches across the plains in the north, north west and eastern regions of the island.

1.2 TWO NATIONS

The geo-physical zonation of the island is reflected, amongst other things, in the ethnic composition of the population. The hilly rain-fed, fertile wet zone is occupied for a long time exclusively by the Sinhalese nation; the arid infertile plains, stretching from the north towards the east forms the niche of the Tamil Nation

H. Cleghorn, Secretary to the first British Governor of Ceylon wrote (1st June 1979) "Two different nations from a very ancient period have divided between them the possession of the island; first, the Sinhalese inhabiting the interior of the country in its south and western parts and secondly the Malabars (i. e. Tamils) who possess the northern and eastern districts." of the 12.8 million (1971) persons, (rate of natural increase 3.5) two-thirds form the Sinhalese nation, comprising of as at present, Sinhala Buddhists, Sinhala Catholics, Sinhala Christians, hill country Sinhalese, low country Sinhalese and others. Excluding a small percentage of the Burghiers, Malays and others, the one third of the islands population consists mostly of the Tamil nation, comprising of Tamil Hindus, Tamil Muslims, Tamil Catholics, Tamil Christians and others.

2. 0 HISTORICAL

The history of the non-violent movement in the island is largely the history of the two-fold struggle of the Tamil nation under the leadership of Mr. Samuvel James Velupillai Chelvanayagam (1898-1977). Firstly, it is the struggle to free the Tamil nation from the yolk of oppression and aggression of the Sinhala nation and Government; secondly, it is the struggle to redeem the Tamil nation from social disabilities and other inner evils of society.

2. 1 TRADITION OF NON VIOLENCE

Mahathma Gandhi visited Ceylon in 1927, at the invitation of the Jaffna Youth Congress, an organisation of Tamil Youth. This was followed by admission of socially disabled students in large numbers in big schools in the northern part of the island. As in India, a rigid system of untouchability prevail amongst Tamils in the island. In 1931 Jaffna Youth Congress organised the boycott of the elections to the state council in protest against the Donoughmore constitution, for not conceding full independence to Ceylon. Tamil leaders played a vital role in seeking independence from the British rule. The Tamil nation did not protest interdependence with the Sinhala nation for achieving independence. Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, a Tamil, was the father and founder President of the Ceylon National Congress (1918) which spear-headed the independence movement.

2. 2 INDEPENDENCE AND OPPRESSION

Freedom day arrived on February 4th 1948. Political power was transferred from London to Colombo; parliament had proportionate representation; 29 Tamils, 8 Muslims, 6 Minority, 58 Sinhalese making a total of 101. Constitution guaranteed safeguards to Tamils and other minorities (both religious and linguistic) against a Sinhala majority rule.

Sinhala nation betrayed the Tamil nation by enacting the Indo-Pakistani Citizenship Act of December 1948, (just ten months after independence). This deadly act took away from nearly a third of the Tamil population, their inalienable right to citizenship, voting, residence travel, justice, protection, employment etc. They became "stateless", as aptly described by the then High Commissioner for India, Mr. C. C. Desai.

Mr. S. J. V. Chelvanayagam, and few other Tamil members of parliament withdrew the conditional support given to the then government and inaugurated the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchy (Federal Party, 1948) At the inaugural Presidential address Mr. Chelvanayagam declared that he would use non-violent methods, as espoused by Mahathma Gandhi to fight Sinhala oppression. He proposed that as a minimum requirement for interdependence, that the Sinhala nation and the Tamil nation live under the umbrella of a Federal Constitution. He issued a warning that the failure to meet this requirement will result in the Tamil nation shifting from interdependence to independence.

Sinhala leadership with the active support of their people ignored the proposal and the warning. Traditional Tamil territory in the dry zone became the target of planned Sinhala colonisation and settlement. Government of the day planned every detail of the settlement of Sinhala people in the Tamil homeland. Disfranchisement was followed by physical displacement. By the enactment of the Official language act. (1956) which read, "The Sinhala language shall be the one official language of Ceylon", the Tamils were compelled to learn the Sinhala language. Unequal language requirement gave unequal access to public service. Language preference was essentially discriminatory. August 1958, and August 1977 saw the release of

anti social elements on the innocent Tamil persons. Ample evidence has been unfolded before the commission appointed to probe into the August 1977 disturbances that certain Sinhala service personnel had been directly involved in arson, looting, murder and assaulting of innocent Tamil People in the Tamil territory.

Since 1962, service personnel have been stationed in various parts of the Tamil territory. Their continued presence and their use in enforcement of discriminatory regulations, enactments etc. made them the semblance of an army of occupation. The unwarranted killing of nine Tamil lives on the eve of the Fourth International Conference (1974) of Tamil, led the foreign participants who attended the conference to describe the moods and deeds of the Sinhala government as "imperialistic".

The 1972 constitution of the Republic of Sri Lanka, was promulgated without the consent and participation of the Tamil nation. Tamil leadership rejected the constitution, and declared it as an aggressive act of the Sinhala nation. Similar fate awaited the 1978 constitution. Both constitutions relegated secular nature of the government, enshrined Buddhism as State religion, with Sinhala as the state language. Tamil nation was deprived of its legal right to rule itself.

2. 3 SOCIAL EVILS

Tamil society is loaded with the evils of caste untouchability, and alcoholism. A section of the community has been debarred from entering public places for worship, personal conveniences, eating and some times education, mainly in the Jaffna Peninsula in the north. Discriminatory practices do not surface out in other areas. However caste remained a factor for concern in the Tamil areas.

3. 0 NON VIOLENT ACTION

3. 1 REMOVAL OF SOCIAL DISABILITIES

Jaffna Youth Congress in 1931 had successfully attempted admission of untouchable school children into big schools in the north. Educationists like Mr. K. Nesiah were in the forefront of the movement. Tamil leadership studied the problem in its perspective Temple entry campaigns, opening of schools to the children of the disabled, opening of barber shops, laundries, eating house etc, through well planned non-violent methods were carried out during the early

fifties. Members of Parliament, Youth Leaders, Tamil public servants. Teachers and Volunteers joined the non-violent struggle. Propaganda meetings followed by community lunches were performed. Mr. C. Vanniasingham, member of Parliament for Koppal electorate, introduced a private member's motion in Parliament (1957). The Bill was accepted in both Houses of the Parliament and became law. This gave legal status to the principles preached by the Tamil leadership. What was introduced as a moral right in society also became a legal right.

In the early seventies, under the guise of providing education to the harijan children, Sinhala Buddhist extremists opened five Sinhala medium schools in the Jaffna peninsula. Tamil children were converted to Buddhism and were taught in Sinhala. The opening of the schools were illegal. However the Government encouraged the move. Neighbouring Tamil medium schools were instructed not to admit children attending these illegal schools.

Mr. Chelvanayagam informed the Government that he will violate the law and open schools to provide education for those children misguided by the Sinhala Buddhist extremists.

As declared, Mr. Chelvanayagam organised a school for the Tamil children and peacefully violated the law. He appointed the Trust Board and the teaching staff for the school at the village of Puthur. Children from the Sinhala school were transferred to the new school. Government did not take any action. The school was run for an year without interruption. Section 25 of Act 8 of 1961 prohibited persons from starting new schools. Section 27 of the same Act provided for six months imprisonment and or penalty of 500/-. The civil disobedience action helped Tamil children to strengthen their resolve to remain Tamils and fight Sinhalisation of Tamils.

In 1978, one month period ending on October 2nd, Gandhi's birthday, was dedicated to continue the non-violent fight against social disabilities. Propaganda rallies, opening of more temples to the under privileged, community dining were performed.

3. 2 FIGHT AGAINST OPPRESSION

A well planned one day Sathyagraha campaign was organised on 5th June 1956, opposite the lower House of Parliament to

protest against the passage of the Sinhala only act in Parliament. Probably this was the first non-violent struggle in the island. Selected volunteers sat in the open green opposite the Parliament. Sinhala hooligans were set upon the peaceful Tamil satyagrahis. Stones were pelted on them; some were physically assaulted; Their clothes were removed; police were just looking on; Sinhala Prime Minister Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike seems to have said "let them (Sathyagrahis) have a taste of it (violence)". Volunteers remained peacefully with all the provocations, until the Sathyagraha was called off by Mr. Chelvanayagam to prevent bloodshed.

This was followed by well organised "Patha Yathirai" — walk through Tamil villages. Volunteers converged at Trincomalee, from all over the Tamil territory on foot, some of them having walked over 200 km.

In 1958 volunteers courted arrest by defying law, as a protest against the introduction of Sinhala letters in the number plates of motor vehicles. A peaceful non-violent campaign to deface the Sinhala letter in the government owned buses led to the arrest and punishment by courts. Many Sathyagrahis refused to pay penalties and served short terms of imprisonment for having peacefully violated the motor traffic act in civil disobedience.

In 1961, Mr. Chelvanayagam, inaugurated the Sathyagraha campaign to pressurise the government to a peaceful settlement of the Tamil — Sinhala problem. Volunteers led by Mr. Chelvanayagam and others picketted the entrances to the district administrative headquarters, thus disorganising functioning of government authority in the Tamil territory. Police unsuccessfully used force on the first day of the campaign. Volunteers did not move, maintaining strict discipline. The campaign, started on the 20th February went through till 17th April in all districts of the Tamil territory. Government machinery was immobilised. Essential services were disrupted. Food and fuel supplies became thin. However, the Tamil people did not protest against the Sathyagraha. In fact many thousands of them sat along with Sathyagrahis, and provided them with food and shelter. Government declared emergency, sent armed personnel to the north, arrested the Sathyagrahis and forcibly opened the government offices in the Tamil territory on April 18th 1961. Thus ended a Sathyagraha cam-

paign, which strengthened the moral forces everywhere. Also this campaign highlighted the evil designs of the government. Government used emergency powers to break the Sathyagraha. Tamil leaders were arrested and jailed. (Please see exhibit)

During this struggle (1961), Tamil leaders appointed a Post Master General, opened ten post offices in the Tamil territory, issued postage stamps and ran a parallel postal service efficiently. This was violation of law. Only a Post Master General appointed and authorised by the government could maintain the postal service. However government did not take any legal action on the Sathyagrahis.

(Please see exhibition of postage material used in the Sathyagraha (1961) at this seminar)

Nonviolent action subsequent to 1961, upto 1971 was mainly restricted to observance of February 4th (Ceylon's Independence day) each year, and June 5th (day on which Sinhala only act was enacted) with meditation, fasting and prayer, and occasionally by hoisting black flags in the homes of individual volunteers. However during 1965-1969, Tamil leadership in an effort to resolve issues with the Sinhala nation, participated in government.

Promulgation of the 1972 Constitution by the Sinhala nation, without the concurrence, consent, or acquiescence of the Tamil nation brought the two ethnic groups in direct confrontation. Mr. Chelvanayagam directed the Tamil nation to observe May 22nd 1972 as a day of mourning, meditation and prayer.

Mr. Chelvanayagam informed the government that he will publicly burn copies of the 1972 Constitution, and did so at the Navalar Ashram, Jaffna, few days after the promulgation.

On 2nd Oct. 1973, a letter was posted to the Prime Minister with defaced postage stamps (see exhibition at seminar). Name of the sender with address was clearly inscribed to facilitate identity of person for arrest if necessary. Using a defaced postage stamp is a punishable offence by law and the nonviolent worker courted arrest through his action. Government did not take any action. During this period, Sathyagrahis informed the government that they will travel in state run buses without paying the fare and courted arrest. Government did not take any action.

Every year on May 22nd Tamil nation observed nonviolent methods of meditation and fasting, praying that almighty may invoke reason and understanding in the mind of the Sinhala nation.

Mr. Chelvanayagam called for a hartal when Finance Minister Dr. N. M. Perera visited Jaffna. Hartal was successful. Tamil women organised a day long fast and prayer at Veeramakali Amman Temple for the release of 42 Tamil youths detained indefinitely under emergency without any charges. This fast was performed on the day Prime Minister Mrs. Bandaranaike visited Jaffna.

Failure of the repeated attempts by nonviolent methods and peaceful negotiations to redeem the Tamil nation from the oppression of the Sinhala nation, made Mr. Chelvanayagam and his followers to shift the policy to the earlier (1948) announced alternative of the establishment of an Independent sovereign secular socialist democratic Republic of Tamil Eelam.

A resolution to this effect was made at the first national convention of the Tamil United Liberation Front on 14th May 1976. Notices embodying the resolution were distributed to the public on 22nd May 1976 by Mr. Chelvanayagam and others after informing the government about the disobedient act. It is punishable offence under the emergency regulations to distribute seditious literature. A maximum of 20 years in the jail may be the reward for such an act. Mr. Chelvanayagam and other selected volunteers distributed the notices courting arrest. Four leaders, were arrested and indicted before three judges at the trial-at-bar (1976). After initial controversy over the constitution of the court, Government did not proceed with the case, and the arrested leaders were set free.

4. 0. EPILOGUE

Many pathways were open to the Tamil nation and its leadership in meeting disfranchisement, displacement, discrimination, oppression, etc. brought upon it on succession since 1948. Mr. S. J. V. Chelvanayagam in his inaugural Presidential address (1948) of the Ilankai Tamil Arasu kadchi in 1948 announced his choice of the nonviolent pathway as the only method of meeting oppression. He steadfastly held to it, for thirty years and influenced his people to use it in all fields of life. Two years after Mr. Chelvanayagam's death, his political and social successors profess to adhere to nonviolence. It is not the end, but the means by which the end is achieved that matters. The Tamil nation will continue to fight oppression by nonviolent methods. With this key the liberation of the Tamil nation in the island of Ceylon is at its door step.



TAMIL NATION IN SRI LANKA

Kanapathipillai SATCHITHANANTHAN

NON-VIOLENT DIRECT ACTION GROUP

VEL CINEMA ROAD, CHAVAKACHCHERI, SRI LANKA.

Sri Lanka, an island of two nations, is an area where there is adequate room for pacifists, non-violent workers, anti-militarists, war resisters, anti-colonialists, reconciliatory groups, peace motivators, and similar groups in the international arena to extend their work and influence.

1.1

Hugh Cleghorn, the British Colonial Secretary for Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) wrote in 1799 that, "Two different nations, from a very ancient period have divided between them the possession of the island; first the Sinhalese inhabiting the interior of the country in its southern and western parts from the river Wallouve to that of the Chilaw, and secondly the Malabars (Tamils) who possess the northern and eastern districts.

1.2

The Tamil nation is distinctly different from the Sinhalese nation in language, religion, culture, geo-physical situation, economy, etc. The two nations occupy well defined land areas which form their traditional homelands. The Tamil nation has its own seat of government since pre-historic times. This situation was changed only in 1833 by the British, who by then had succeeded the Portuguese and the Dutch in the possession of the government of the Tamil kingdom. The British unified the administrative machinery of the island with one government based in Colombo.

2.1

British left the island in Feb. 1948, handing over the government machinery to a Sinhalese majority parliament. The first piece of oppressive legislation by the Sinhalese-dominated parliament

disenfranchised nearly one million Tamils working in the tea and rubber plantations. These Tamils lost their citizenship and hence their freedom to:

- (1) have their elected representatives
- (2) travel
- (3) access to state welfare amenities

This barbaric act drastically reduced the parliamentary effectiveness of the Tamil citizens, who formed nearly 30% of the island's total population. (Est. Pop. 1979: Sinhalese 10 million; Tamils 4.2 million).

2.2

Another piece of legislation was the 'Sinhala Only Act', which meant that all Tamils have to learn Sinhalese for official transactions. This put the Sinhalese in a very advantageous position relating to education, employment, economic and cultural advancement. Language preference is essentially a cultural oppression.

2.3

The Colombo - based government encouraged Sinhalese people to settle in traditional Tamil lands. Also it formulated colonizing schemes to settle Sinhalese people in Tamil areas. This was a calculated move to 'Sinhalese' the island and drive the Tamils out of their aboriginal homelands.

2.4

The birth of the Republic in 1972, without the consent or co-operation of Tamils, made Buddhism the religion of the state abandoning the secular nature of the government and infuriating the followers of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian faiths.

2.5

The Colombo based government introduced a system of standardization for entry to university which was discriminatory to Tamils, requiring in effect different minima in different subjects

from the two ethnic groups to the advantage of the Tamil students. Education, the very means of fighting oppression, should itself become an instrument of oppression.

2.6

The Colombo based Government and its agencies sat as silent spectators, and in some instances active participants, during the island wide communal disturbances in 1958 and 1977, and occasionally in isolation in between and after. These disturbances, which resulted in large-scale loss of Tamil lives and property, were, according to observers, pre-planned incursions to annihilate the Tamil people in the island. Hindu temples were broken up by Buddhist extreme elements and sometimes Buddhist temples erected in Hindu sacred areas.

2.7

The traditional Tamil homeland has not been under civilian authority continuously since 1958. Successive governments had infringed the civilian authority through emergency regulations. The Tamil areas were in effect under military rule for the last twenty years except for short intervals. The 'army of occupation', by its frequent wanton killings of innocent Tamil people, induced Tamil youth to react violently. The emergency regulations of July 1979 were meant only for the Tamil District of Jaffna, and six innocent youth have lost their lives in the hands of the forces within the first fortnight of the emergency.

2.8

Since 1972 many Tamil youth have been imprisoned for varying periods without inquiry and the repeated request by Amnesty International for inquiry had fallen on deaf ears. This gross violation of human rights had irritated many a freedom lover of the world.

2.9

Traditional Tamil homelands are the arid plains of the island and Tamils are thus required to work hard to earn their living. Farming and fishing are the major occupations. However, the Colombo based government imports agricultural and fisheries

products, hitting the Tamil producer below the belt. The workers in the plantation sector form the most poorly paid workforce in the whole island and many of them are deprived of citizenship rights. (see 2.1)

3.1

Tamils have repeatedly adopted non-violent methods to meet Sinhali oppression. When the disenfranchisements came, there were sit-ins, fastings and Sathiyagraha by those affected. When the 'Sinhala Only' bill was enacted, Tamils performed Satyagraha in front of the parliament. The 150 mile 'patha yathra' (foot walk) by thousands of volunteers, was held in 1953. A parallel postal service was run, the District Secretariats were blockaded by sit-ins, and the administration of Tamil areas brought to a standstill in 1962. Fasts, black flag demonstrations, boycott were the frequent features of the struggle.

3.2

1972 saw a set of frustrated Tamil young men and women who could not enter universities or secure employment or travel outside, and who were oppressed otherwise. A few members of this generation reacted to atrocities of the 'army of occupation', violently resulting in the murder of Tamil politicians supporting the Colombo based government and of policemen involved in terrorizing innocent people. Also the state-owned branches of banks in some Tamil villages were relieved of their gold and cash.

3.3

Tamil political leadership, under the late S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, M. P., reacted to oppression by raising their voices in Parliament, negotiating with the Sinhala leadership, and keeping the Tamil people aware of their oppression.

The All Ceylon Tamil Congress was overtaken in 1956 by the Federal Party which demanded a federal form of government. Later in 1972 all Tamil parties merged under what today is called the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). In the 1977 elections 18 of the 19 Tamil candidates fielded by the TULF were returned to the

Parliament, on the specific mandate from the Tamil electorate to restore the Tamil government in the island and exercise Tamil sovereignty.

3.4

In social, cultural, educational, and economic spheres Tamils met oppression by the age old traditional moral courage.

4.1

Duty is cast upon the Tamil people to fight oppression and they are doing their best. Also duty is cast upon the lovers of freedom, equality, liberty, and human dignity all over the world (including the Sinhalese brethren) to assist and support the Tamil nation in fighting oppression.

4.2

War Resisters International could assist the oppressed Tamil brethren in Sri Lanka by:

1. Resolving to support the struggle of the oppressed Tamil people;
2. Resolving to request the Colombo based Sri Lanka government to withdraw all armed forces from the Tamil areas, and to withdraw the 'state of emergency' in Tamil areas and bring back civilian rule, and to release all political prisoners and conscientious objectors who are in jail.

- to confer citizenship rights where they had been deprived;
- to remove all forms of standardization in admitting students to university ;
- to remove all forms of restraint on Tamil youth seeking employment;
- to remove economic sanctions which have resulted in hitting the Tamil producer;
- to stop settling Sinhala people in Tamil areas and to evacuate those already in traditional Tamil areas, viz. the north and east (Provincial boundaries of 1948)

- To restore the Tamil language to its pre - 1956 status;
 - to negotiate with the Tamil leaders in arriving at a workable political system or systems that will reduce tension, remove oppression, facilitate equal opportunity for fuller development of individual personality of every inhabitant of the island.
3. Resolving to request reconciliatory groups in the world to rush to Sri Lanka to avoid deterioration in the situation and promote peace and understanding between the Sinhala and Tamil people.
 4. Resolve to promote training activities in non-violence for removing oppression.
 5. Resolve to plan demonstrations in various parts of the world to attract attention of the world community to the atrocities committed against the Tamil people in Sri Lanka.
 6. Resolve to demand the governments supplying arms to Sri Lanka government to stop it immediately, on the alternative that demonstrations will be organized to raise public opinion towards this end.

K. Sachithanathan
Senderborg, Denmark
August 1979

WAR RESISTERS INTERNATIONAL

**35 RUE VAN ELEWUCK
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**16th Triennial Conference
Sonderborg, Denmark
12-18 August 1979**

RESOLUTION

on the liberation struggle of the Tamil People in the island of Sri Lanka.

The struggle of the Tamil people of Sri Lanka is a struggle for liberation from oppression.

The sixteenth Triennial conference of the War Resisters International supports the non-violent struggle of the people and expresses solidarity with them.

The conference urges the Government of Sri Lanka to lift the state of emergency introduced in July 1979 immediately. The state of emergency has caused an erosion of fundamental rights, loss of life due to use of violence by the armed forces; damage of property and means of production including that of food.

The conference urges the Government of Sri Lanka to restore citizenship rights of those Tamil people who have been deprived of these rights and to remove discriminatory measures in education, particularly in the University, and to remove discriminatory measures in employment in the state sector.

The conference urges the Government of Sri Lanka to restore the Tamil language to its rightful place in the affairs of the government.

The conference urges the government of Sri Lanka to create a situation in which negotiations could be made possible between themselves and the popularly elected leaders of the Tamil people, with the object of arriving at a workable political system that will reduce tension, remove oppression, facilitate equal opportunities for the fuller development of the individual personality of each inhabitant of the island.

The conference also demands that those governments that are supplying arms to Sri Lanka Government should stop doing so.

The conference also demands that the non-violent forces of the liberation movement of the Tamil people will continue to struggle for their rights non-violently; and to this effect the non-violent forces throughout the world to support their struggle.



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