

HANDY PERINBANAYAGAM

Second Memorial Lecture

on

"TAMILIAN NATIONALISM AND SOCIAL CONFLICTS"

—An Effort to Understand the Current Ethnic Crisis

Delivered by

Professor K. Sivathamby

University of Jaffna,

at

St. John's College Hall, Jaffna.

on

31.12.1985

Prefatory Note

S. Handy Perinbanayagam (1899-1977) was essentially a thinker and social commentator although he was in the forefront of all social and political activities in the North. He influenced the lives of generations of students as an educator of all-Ceylon fame.



He pioneered the movement for complete national independence with his leadership of the Jaffna Youth Congress which became extinct through political machinations.

It looks ironic that a fighter for freedom and for a United Ceylon had to fight for the cause of Tamils after independence.

It is appropriate therefore that the Youth Movement of Jaffna of his day should be related to that of today looked as it is in a deadly struggle for 'National liberation' in order to evaluate the present militancy in the right perspective.

The choice of the theme of the second memorial lecture as of well as the speaker, we felt, was proper; the success of the function, despite the many odds that threatened it has us proved right.

We are happy to present this lecture in print; we thank the public for their response and seek their continued support.

**Handy Perinbanayagam,
Commemoration Society.**

110, Ambalavanar Road,
Jaffna, Sri Lanka.
12th Dec. 1986.

Handy Perinbanayagam Memorial Lecture—1985

Tamilian Nationalism and Social Conflicts — An effort to understand the current ethnic crisis

"..... The two linguistic groups (Sinhalese and Tamil) have no other homeland. Ceylon is the only home they know and the future must be planned with full recognition of this fundamental truth.

Another fundamental truth is that such a sizeable minority as the Tamil-speaking people of Ceylon will never be reconciled to an inferior status in their homeland."

*Handy Perinbanayagam in his
"Memorandum to the Constituent Assembly".*

Chairman Sir,

Let me at the outset thank the Handy Perinbanayagam Commemoration Society for inviting me to deliver the Handy Perinbanayagam Memorial Lecture for this year. Mr. N. Sabaratnam, Principal Emeritus, and presently Editor-in-Chief, "Eelamadu", contacted me first regarding this lecture. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to him. I find in him a true intellectual in our midst, transcending many of our local inhibitions and prejudices.

Handy Perinbanayagam is an unforgettable intellectual and social activist, not merely in the history of the Tamils in this country, but also in the history of Sri Lanka itself. His claim to greatness rests on the fact that he was the motivating ideological force behind the Jaffna Youth Congress, the first Youth Movement of the Tamils which, with its sense of intellectualism and idealism, radicalised Sri Lankan politics in the thirties. The role of Handy Perinbanayagam in its formation and growth was very substantial; as Silan Kadirgamar said "The voice of Handy Perinbanayagam was recognised as the voice of the Youth Congress".

It had been my privilege to know his children as friends. Siddharthan, Saravanasavan and Selvy. 'Sid' and I were contemporaries at the University and it was with him I first met this legendary idealist of Jaffna. And when I narrated the incident later to my father, a Tamil Pandit, he commented நல்லாரைக் காண்பதுவும் நன்றே "The very sight of good men is in itself enough good for you". Such was the esteem Handy had among even the punditry, known for its conservatism. The life of Handy Perinbanayagam and the Youth Congress of which he was the voice have a relevance to the Sri Lankans of today.

Today, we are in the midst of another youth movement which is radicalising not only the Sri Lankan Tamilian society, but also the entire Sri Lankan society in an unprecedented manner. The history of that first youth movement has a great message today, in that the history of how that movement was misunderstood and mistaken, of how it floundered against Tamilian social reaction and political opportunism constitutes lessons for the present socio-political movement which also makes a claim as a "social revolutionary movement" seeking fundamental social change. Let it not be repeated that, "we learn from history that we do not learn from history".

I do not therefore think that I should in any way be apologetic about the topic I have chosen for this lecture. It flows from the logic of the memory of this great man and from the need to understand the whirlpool of events that is enveloping the citizens and the State of Sri Lanka.

II

Mr. Chairman, Friends,

It is my intention to share with you my thoughts on the character of the struggle and the nature of the conflict that is going on in our midst. It is my conviction that unless we are sure of the nature and the character of the struggle, our assessment of what is going on amidst us would be faulty. A flawed assessment can lead to wrong attitudes and incorrect attitudes can lead to damaging actions. We must not be thrown into a situation where we cannot see the wood for the trees.

The current political happenings may be described, in non-qualitative terms, as a struggle of the Tamils for an unambiguously defined, assured, secure political status within the Sri Lankan polity and those forces that are unleashed, in the course of, and due to, this struggle have reached unprecedented heights involving not only the life of every one of the Tamils of Sri Lanka but also the future power balance of South Asian region.

The problem therefore has got to be viewed at two levels—the Sri Lankan level—and the regional level—the latter would take us to the international level.

At the Sri Lankan level of cognition, the problem has three aspects:-

- (a) Those relating to Sinhala / Tamil relationship (arising out of this, those relating to Muslim / Tamil relationship);
- (b) Those that are taking place within the Tamilian society;
- and (c) Those that are taking place within the Sinhalese society.

It is not my intention here to go into the third one. I am interested chiefly in the second—those that are happening among and to the Tamils in Sri Lanka; but that cannot be dealt without reference to the first. So it shall be my aim, in this lecture, to deal with the first two with 'an emphasis' on the second. It should however, be admitted that it is not easy to delineate (b) exactly as these are even taking place daily in our midst the most recent ones overtaking the previous ones. I have therefore dealt with (b) more in a "conceptional" sense than in a strictly empirical sense. Though meagre, the significance of what is stated here is that it is being discussed for the first time.

III

Let us now ask ourselves, as witnesses to what is happening around us, what exactly is the struggle that is taking place in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka, viz. the northern and the eastern parts of it. The answer is that it is a socio-political struggle

the political part of it more pronounced than the social one. We shall soon see that the political aspect embodies within it the social aspect and the social one is inalienable from the political.

For purposes of clarity, let us attempt to describe the political struggle first.

The struggle is, as mentioned earlier, for an assured political status for the Sri Lankan Tamils within the Sri Lankan polity. As summarised at Thimpu I, the new political status demanded for the Tamils is on the basis of.

- (1) the recognition of Tamils as a distinct nationality;
- (2) the guarantee of the territorial integrity of the Tamil homeland;
- (3) the recognition of the right to self-determination;
- and (4) the right to full citizenship of the plantation Tamils.

Thus, the struggle of the Tamils is based on their rights of ethnicity and territoriality.

The mere mention of the demands is not enough. The scenario of the enactment of the struggle is equally important. The struggle right now is taking place in an atmosphere of war, military attacks, raids and reprisals. The Tamil struggle is spear-headed by a violent militancy which, though legally outlawed within the island by enactments and regulations, had to be met with outside the country at the negotiating table in the mountainous Bhutan, at Thimpu. This militancy has a cause and effect relationship with the total collapse of the Parliament, the traditional forum in Sri Lanka for airing and settling disputes, as a political forum to bring about a settlement. The third feature of the scenario is the Indian involvement in the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis. Indian involvement has a two-fold significance. India is the dominant power in South Asia; more important than that is the fact that the Tamils in India, constituting one full State-the State of Tamil Nadu - are evincing an unapologetic concern for their ethnic counterparts in Sri Lanka. The concern of Tamil Nadu provides a further dimension to Tamilian nationalism. It is

taken as an expression of Pan-Tamilian sentiment, causing grave anxieties among the Sinhalese about their security in the face of a "consolidated" Tamil State.

Such a combination of militancy, of breakdown of internal political structure, of demanding political intercession and of a fear of being overwhelmed, has never been experienced in Sri Lankan political life. Understandably the anxieties are high and the determination to put these out is also pronounced.

The social origins of this struggle and the social results of the manner it is waged have brought virtually every Tamil into it. Every minute of his life is affected by it. It can be said without fear of contradiction, there is not a single Sri Lankan Tamil family, nuclear and/or extended, which has not suffered in some substantial way on account of this problem.

IV

Having described the nature of the struggle and the scenario in which it is enacted, it now becomes important to characterise this struggle in terms of political terminology.

A close analysis of the four demands at Thimpu makes it clear that the demand is for the recognition of the Tamils as a *Nation* within Sri Lanka; thus the struggle is "*Nationalist*".

It is, I feel, an important task, to ascertain the true character of the contemporary stage of this political struggle and demarcate historically when it assumed that character and how.

To ascertain that, we should know exactly what the concept of "nationalism" implies. In terms of political science:—

"Nationalism implies the identification of the state or nation with the people, or at least the desirability of determining the extent of the state according to ethnographic principles. In the age of nationalism, but only in the age of naturalism, the principle was generally recognised that each nationality should form a State - its State - and that the State should include the whole nationality" (Encyclopaedia Britannica - Vol. 16-1967). "It is an ideology locating the political legitimacy of the state in self-government by co-nationals".

There has been an argument in certain dogmatic circles that nationalism as an ideology is regressive, in that it is hostile to some other group and that it tends to blunt down class consciousness and thereby enable the class that champions nationalism to continue its exploitation and repression.

This formulation of nationalism as a reactionary ideology was made imperative in the thirties of this century in the face of the fascist exploitation of the nationalist sentiment in Germany and Italy which, no doubt, continues in White South Africa even today. But in view of the historical developments since the Second World War, in the Third World countries it would be difficult to deny completely the historically progressive role of nationalism in the development of many of those countries. In fact, the terminology of "national liberation" is an important advancement in this sense. It refers to a positive and progressive nationalism.

"Since nationalism can take many political directions—democracy, fascism or communism—and can be associated with different classes, it has been argued that there can be no general theory of nationalism. There is no theory which can identify a social process (such as industrialisation) that will explain all the forms of nationalism or which is able to define the essential and universal features of nationalist movements. This negative conclusion is not widely shared. The consensus in social review is that, despite its empirical complexity, nationalism has the following features:-

- (i) It is based on the demand that Govt. should share the same cultural features (especially language) and ethnic identity as the governed;
- (ii) As a result, cultural nationalism, which seeks to preserve or recreate the national heritage through, for example, the revival of a language in Africa, prepares the basis for a political nationalism, which seeks self-determination and political supremacy;
- (iii) The development of modern systems of mass communication facilitates the dissemination of unifying nationalist ideologies

(iv) Nationalist ideologies have a strong appeal to the subordinate classes by providing them with some economic protection against non-nationals, but the content of the ideology is typically developed by marginal intellectuals, black intellectuals, for instance, excluded from white educational establishments, were drawn to nationalism;

(v) Nationalism is in the twentieth century, associated with de-colonisation and the economic development of the Third World countries, and struggle for regional equality within existing capitalist societies."

(Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 1984)

In deciding whether the ideology operating in a struggle is one of nationalism or not, we are, thus, required to inquire into two aspects:—

- (1) What is the target political-structure it demands? Is it some form of self-rule?
- (2) Though invariably the struggle has got to be led by a class (that is an inescapable historical factor), is the struggle bringing in *all* the people of the group, in terms of their membership to that ethnic group or to that "nation-ness"?

If "nation-ness" is felt and perceived, and self-rule is the political target, then the struggle, without doubt, is one of nationalism. If the self-rule is located in a given territory, then there could be no doubt at all relating to the nationalist character of the struggle. Territory is an important imperative for exercising political power.

Given this theoretical framework, it is not difficult to determine the character of the ethnic struggle now in Sri Lanka and the history of the intensification of the characteristics of that struggle.

V

It is a well known fact that 1983 is a major landmark in the history of modern Sinhala-Tamil relations. It climaxed a tendency that started in 1958. Since 1958 there had been ethnic

riots in Sri Lanka in which the Tamils living in predominantly Sinhala areas were hurt and/or driven out of the areas. It was at first in townships far away from the metropolis. Since 1977 the incidence of the occurrence and intensity of the incidents increased. And in 1983 it was shown that even in Colombo, the capital city, where the Tamils had been living for over 300 years and had contributed to its commercial expansion and to its demographic complexion, they were not safe. It was also shown in 1983 that a Tamil, whether he was prepared to learn in Sinhala medium, or to marry a Sinhala woman, was no more safe in Sinhala areas. During each of the major ethnic riots, Tamils had to be transported to the northern and eastern parts for safety and security. It was now clear the Tamils were safe only in the north and east - their traditional homeland.

With this influx of Sri Lankan Tamils from the various Sinhala regions into the North and the East, which have been the traditional homelands of the Sri Lankan Tamils, the need to preserve them as places safe and secure for the Tamils arose. There had already been the demand by the Federal Party way back in 1948 that these areas should be accepted as Tamil areas. At that time it did not have the unanimous approval of all the Tamils. Now after the July incidents of 1983, the preservation of North and East as exclusively Tamil areas began to be supported by all the Tamils. Even the Tamils of Indian descent found that they were safe in the Tamil regions, when displaced from the plantation regions as was during the time of the S. L. F. P. rule when there was one such influx into both North and East necessitated by attacks on them.

The argument of these in power, expressed in 1984, that the whole country belongs to everyone and that no place is a traditional homeland for any one ethnic group, began to create the fear that even in the North and East, the Tamils are not going to be safe and that was well proved by the acts of the Army and the Police. If this sentiment that all parts of the country belonging to everyone was expressed soon after July 1983, it would have demonstrated the goodwill of the government towards the Tamils. But to make that statement after a number of them have sought refuge in the North and East, was taken as an act of denying them the only places of safety. It is important for

us to look into the other side of the picture too. The Sinhala view had throughout been that if the traditional homeland concept is granted, it would constitute a threat to the Sinhalese, for there was also the possibility of a union of all Tamil forces. Besides there is also the question of Trincomalee, the strategic natural harbour. Also there is the question of the opening up of the cultivable lands in the East through the Accelerated Mahaveli Project.

The territorial imperatives of the current struggle are thus quite clear; and the territorial basis of the Tamil demand is also amply seen.

It was in July 1983 that the crisis was irreversibly precipitated. It was from this date that even moderate Tamil opinion felt the need to have a safe place for the Tamils if they were to continue as citizens of the country. It is necessary to demarcate the political beginning of this territorial consideration as a factor in solving the Tamil problem.

This task would take us to 1949, the year of the formation of the Federal Party. The Tamil name of the Party, in terms of political semantics is very significant - Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi (I. T. A. K.) - the Party for a Tamil State in Sri Lanka. But this semantics was articulated only at the level of the Tamils. To the non-Tamils it was 'Federal Party'. None the less, the territorial aspect of the Tamilian political demand had been emphasised.

The formation of the I. T. A. K., with its emphasis on the concept of Tamil-speaking peoples of Sri Lanka, was able to signal the demand for territorial unity of the Tamils. At the start, it did not articulate itself in such politically exclusive terms. In the 1956 - 1970 era its demands were mainly confined to the use of the Tamil language in State administrative matters. There was also discussion on the formation of district councils for the predominantly Tamil areas. But it was yet within the concept of 'local government'. The qualitative change in its character and appeal took place in 1972 and 1978, when in both the Republican Constitutions, Sinhala Buddhism was enshrined as the paramount force to the exclusion of the Tamils, with no legal guarantee for the continued existence of the minorities.

What were the propelling factors in the formation of this Tamilian nationalism in Sri Lanka?

The formation of the Federal Party (F.P.) was necessitated by the disfranchisement of the Tamils of Indian descent employed in the Tea and Rubber plantations. The F.P., since its formation, was expressing its concern over the increasing State-aided Sinhala settlements in Tamil regions. In spite of its articulation of Tamilian sentiments, the F.P. at its most active period was led by upper middle class and supported by low-middle class state sector employees. These classes saw in Sinhala Only a threat to their own class interests, for without English it would be impossible for them to wield that amount of influence over the Tamil masses.

The F.P. in its early stages failed to support some of the legislative enactments taken as very progressive social acts at that time, viz. the Paddy Lands Act and the Take-over of all Assisted Schools.

It is true that in sociological terms, Tamils tended to be exclusive, in that they had developed a we/they attitude towards the other communities (in fact, they had it among themselves too - the Jaffna Tamils, the Batticaloa Tamils, the Vanni Tamils and so on). But it was the character of Sinhala nationalism that prohibited the Tamils from taking part in any uninhibited form in "national" collaborative acts.

Kumari Jayawardena delineates the characteristics of the emerging Sinhala nationalist trend thus:

"In the early 1950s, Sri Lanka went through a new upsurge of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, based not only on the language question but also on religious fervour. The two issues, language and religion, were combined in the Sinhala mass consciousness not only by various mythic and symbolic factors, but also because Sinhala was the linguistic medium by which Buddhism was 'reproduced' among the Sinhalese".

(Kumari Jayawardena 1985: 61/2)

She identifies the class basis of the Sinhala Only in the following manner:-

"To the urban and rural petty bourgeois, however, language was an issue that aroused strong emotions and had profound significance. This class included the rural and urban small proprietors and traders and those who were key opinion-makers among the Sinhalese intelligentsia—monks, writers, novelists, poets, journalists, as well as other articulate sections, school teachers, students and minor employees in the Govt. and private sectors".

(ibid p. 64)

The chief characteristic of this language cry was that it was primarily directed against the Tamils. Not only were those Tamils in high and medium positions in the state and private Sectors made targets but there was also a revival of the myths that painted the Tamils as the archetypal enemies of the Sinhalese.

The left movement was at first against this anti-Tamil cry. While it condemned the "*communalism*" of the F.P., it forewarned that an uncompromising *Sinhala Only* position could lead to a separatist cry emerging from the Tamils.

Though the left parties did not have a clear-cut idea on nationality-formations and national oneness, they had cultivated at least among their cadres, which consisted of both Sinhalese and Tamils, a sense of oneness as "Communists" and "Samasamajists", as "comrades".

There was an interesting response to this emerging Sinhala / Tamil split in national consciousness coming first from the Tamil writers of the Communist Party, later broadening out into an effective literary movement.

The Progressive Writers' Association, with the writers associated with the Marxist political parties in control of it, first advocated the need for a Sri Lankan identity in Tamil writing as opposed to the Madras-based popular Tamil writing as expressed through the popular Indian Tamil weeklies. It brought together all the serious-minded Sri Lankan Tamil writers in fostering Sri Lankan Tamil writing. This group adopted "realism" as its guiding literary principle. This led to the development of a corpus of highly commended Sri Lankan Tamil fiction and a

readership that was beginning to notice the difference between the mass-scale, commercialized output in the popular Tamil weeklies of Tamilnadu and the seriousness of the Sri Lankan Tamil writing. It is of interest to note that this movement was opposed by the Federal Party and its official organ "Suthanthiran", which in its turn attacked them for being Marxists. The entire idea of a nationalist Sri Lankan Tamil literature was ridiculed by the Suthanthiran group of writers.

With the basic political connections this group had with Sinhala progressives, it was able to go in for a meaningful dialogue with leading Sinhala writers and artists both at individual and organisational levels.

The high watermark of the literary dialogue was in the early sixties and the dialogue in the field of drama and theatre arts was in the early seventies (this was facilitated by the Cultural Council of Sri Lanka).

But the picture began to change with the shift of the Marxist parties' position on the language issue. From about the mid-sixties, the left parties began to adopt a policy of viewing Sinhala nationalism as *progressive* and Tamil national self-consciousness as *retrograde*. Prompted by electoral considerations, this grew into a major campaign against the Federal Party and soon began to assume racist proportions especially in terms of its slogans. "Thus the left, whose main contribution to the political life of the country had been to promote democratic and socialist ideology that was essentially non-racist and based on class unity and class action, was to lead the working class not only into Coalition Governments, but more dangerously into racist politics. The long years of struggle in building up class-consciousness among a multi-ethnic working class was abandoned, and instead, the poisoning influence of racism was injected into the system resulting in sections of the working class participating in the subsequent pogroms that occurred in the country, both in 1977 and 1983" (ibid pp 82-3)

It was a pity that the leftist parties which took Sinhala chauvinism for genuine nationalism failed to appreciate the political responses of the Tamils to the anti-Tamil activities of the consecutive governments as constituting rudiments of Tamilian nationalism.

And this failing of the left movement, allowed Tamil nationalism (since 1956) to develop itself in a more inward manner. With a left movement conscious of the true character of Tamilian sentiments, Sri Lankan Tamilian nationality consciousness could have been fostered and developed within a truly 'national' framework.

The failure of the left parties to understand the nature and character of Sri Lankan Tamilian nationalism and to respond in a constructive manner, had led to three major consequences, which have determined the character of the extra-parliamentary struggle of the Tamils since 1972, i. e. since the time the first Republican Constitution was promulgated.

First and foremost, it prevented at least certain levels of the Sinhala-educated population from understanding the legitimate grievances of the Tamils. Given the gap that has been created by the wrong handling of the mother-tongue media in education, this attitude taken by the left parties created a further chasm.

Secondly, when a disgruntled youth movement, dissatisfied with the Tamil political parties for the manner they had handled ethnic issues, began to emerge, there was no framework of a national reference available to it for action and for discussion. It had to work out a programme within itself; even the preliminary relationship it had with the major Tamil political group started snapping when that parliamentarist Tamil parties found it unable to deliver the goods.

With the left parties taking an unhelpful attitude in the mid-sixties and in early seventies (when the Leftists had a chance to formulate a new Constitution), the anti-Sinhala position of the pioneer militants was almost irreversible.

And with the police and military harassment and brutalities increasing since 1978 these groups were forced to take shelter in Tamilnadu, India, only 22 miles away across the Palk Straits. With that the die was cast and the possibilities of a Sinhala-Tamil dialogue became remoter still.

The period since 1949 marks the beginning of Tamil nationalism, with 1956, 1959, 1966, 1977 and 1983 constituting important landmarks. These years are known for the ethnic clashes that

took place. The nature of political bargaining that was carried on till 1982 by the leading Tamil political party did not help to accentuate always the nationalist character of the demands. With 1983, of course, the territorial aspect inescapably became the sheet-anchor of the Tamil political demands.

VI

This raises the question of characterising the pre-1949 Tamilian political activities in terms of the concept of nationalism.

Looking backwards, one comes across the All Ceylon Tamil Congress led by G. G. Ponnambalam, the Youth Congress in which Handy Perinbanayagam was a chief figure and prior to that the breakaway of Sir P. Arunachalam from the Ceylon National Congress and the formation of the Tamilar Mahajana Sabhai (1921). All these constitute important landmarks in the evolution of Tamilian nationalism. Except for the Youth Congress which was instrumental in getting the Tamils in Jaffna to boycott the first Elections under the Donoughmore recommendations, not because of any communal exclusivity but because it was felt that the recommendations fell short of full independence for the entire country, the other two were directed towards better representation of Tamils in the legislature.

The formation of the Tamil Mahajana Sabhai (1921), when viewed retrospectively, is very significant, for it marks the beginning of the Sinhala refusal to accommodate Tamils in what could be called traditional Sinhala areas. The formation of the Tamil Mahajana Sabhai was occasioned by the refusal of the Sinhalese leaders of the Ceylon National Congress to recommend that one Tamil representative be elected from Colombo. Though this in terms of *realpolitik* was Karava response to the Goigama-Vellala combination that enabled the victory of Ponnambalam Ramanathan over Marcus Fernando for the constituency of the Educated Ceylonese Member, the victim this time was Sir P. Arunachalam, a true nationalist, who had been viewing entire Sri Lanka as one unit and had been a pioneer in the labour movement, the movement for social services and the movement for higher education, in Sri Lanka.

The All Ceylon Tamil Congress, formed in 1944, to put forward the claims of the Tamils to the Soulbury Commissioners, brought together the leading non-leftist Tamil politicians of the day under one umbrella and demanded equal status for the minorities in relation to the majority community. With the Soulbury Commissioners, it canvassed for balanced representations (fifty-fifty). It is accepted by no less a person than Amirthalingam, a constant critic and adversary G. G. Ponnambalam's politics, that the All Ceylon Tamil Congress proclaimed that "the Tamils were not prepared to live as slaves and on 20th November, 1947, sent a telegram to D. S. Senanayake and to the British Secretary for Colonial Affairs demanding right of self-determination" (A. Amirthalingam; 1974).

These do mark the increased pace of the march of the Sri Lankan Tamils towards nationality consciousness. One year later, when G. G. Ponnambalam and Tamil Congress after joining the U. N. P. Govt., voted for the Indian & Pakistan Citizenship Act (December 1948), a section of the Tamil Congress led by S. J. V. Chelvanayakam left the Congress and formed the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi, thus marking the formal political institutionalization of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka,

Of all the movements that arose in Jaffna, none could have been more nationalistic, in the true sense of the word, than the Youth Congress. Imbued with Gandhian idealism, it worked with the Sinhalese and won the plaudits of the Sinhala for its nationalist fervour in calling for a boycott rejecting the politically inadequate recommendations of the Donoughmore Constitution.

This analysis raises quite rightly the assessment of the role of Arumuga Navalar (1822 - 1879) in the development of Sri Lankan Tamil consciousness. Since the time of the Sri Lanka Progressive Writers' Association - a writers' association of the Sri Lankan Tamils run by Marxist Tamil writers encompassing within itself all the progressive Tamil writers - started around 1954 - 56 and campaigning for the development of truly indigenous Tamil literature, reflecting the problems and struggles of Sri Lankan Tamil (and not imitative of the "mass liberation" popularised through the South Indian Tamil Weeklies), there arose a need for this movement to establish a pedigree for Sri Lankan

Tamil literature, one which would be quite independent of the South Indian impact, but drawing on its best traditions. This led to the identification of Arumuga Navalar as the one who started a very active campaign through literature for revitalising Sri Lankan traditions. He was likened to Anagarika Dharmapala, who fought against English traditions that eroded Sinhala Buddhist culture. The campaign of the Writers' Association went on further in creating an impression that Arumuga Navalar was the fountain head of Sri Lankan Tamilian nationalism. (The present writer was himself one of the advocates of it at that time). (Sivathamby - 1978).

Looking back at it now with better historical insight, it could be seen that the enthusiasm of the Writers' Association was misplaced. Arumuga Navalar's campaign was only for the exclusivism of the high-caste Tamils. He was a champion of the caste system. He was more an anti-Christian than an anti-imperialist. He wanted better relations with the British rulers. He appealed to the administration for help in running schools. He did not mind Christian converts coming back as long as they were prepared to accept Hinduism and its social code. The Saivism that he fought for was a re-affirmation of the caste hierarchy. He was against the new-found social nobility of the 'lower' caste groups. (Sivathamby 1979 (a), 1979 (b)). It would therefore be incorrect to characterise it as the beginning of the nationalist upsurge. It was, however, an attempt at group consolidation of the socially powerful Tamils of the North by coming to an understanding with the British rulers. It was an attempt on the part of the traditionally privileged in the Jaffna Tamil Society to define its relationship with the British. It merged social conservatism with moral acquiescence to imperialism.

The Navalair movement paved the way for the high-caste Hindu Tamils to enjoy the benefits of British rule, while at the same time maintaining their authority on those below them in the traditional social ladder.

It is, however, important to note that Navalar's work and his writings contributed to the creation of a Sri Lankan Tamil consciousness marking itself quite clearly out of what may be called the Indian Tamil consciousness of the time. His concept

of the Vellala supremacy even over the Brahmins, leading him theologically to the concept of the Sat-sudras, and his concept of Saiva Siddhanta, the Tamil contribution to Hindu philosophy, as the doctrine that is fully expressive of the Saivite—Tamil tradition (Sivathamby K. - 1984) later emerged as the cultural markers of the Jaffna Saiva—Tamil life. It is no wonder that in the late fifties, when there was a growing Tamil consciousness chiefly among the public sector employees and professionals, arising due to the linguistic chauvinism of the Sinhalese (which threatened the pre-eminence of the Tamils in those fields) Navalar's name began to loom large. Navalar who was able to combine the benefits of English education without any loss to traditional social power, became their 'hero'.

If by nationalism, is meant a democratic inclusion of all the people who could be brought within that fold, then it would be wrong to identify Arumuga Navalar as a nationalist.

Coming back to the question of the date and the rise of Tamil nationalism, it could be confirmed from the economic history of the Tamils, that nationalism as a political ideology was not likely to rise before 1956 and to get intensified before 1978 and 1983.

The primary reason is that there was no Tamil bourgeoisie in the Tamil areas. Tamil bourgeoisie was only in Colombo and even in Colombo it was more in professions and to a less extent in banking and plantations than in trade. There were no major investments in Jaffna or Batticaloa. Even when they were in Jaffna, they did not want to upset the pre-capitalist economic relations that were in existence at the peasant level. The Tamil bourgeoisie placed in Colombo, while making contact with Jaffna as "the land of its forefathers" did not want to upset the traditional social balance that was prevailing there. It did not wish to disturb the caste-class continuum. Those who belonged to the high stratum did not want to upset it and those who had beaten the traditional system and had achieved upward social mobility did not want to get back to Jaffna.

It was only when this position was threatened in Colombo, they turned towards Jaffna which they now describe as their traditional homeland. Prior to this when they had established themselves firmly the upper middle class Tamils were evolving a

distinct Colombo—Tamilculture. Getting back to Jaffna and Batticaloa was in a way getting back to the forgotten grass roots. And this could be seen in the semantic nuance of the term "traditional homeland of the Tamils". This implies that there were "untraditional" homelands too. That perhaps was Colombo, Kandy and such other towns.

Petty bourgeois development was intensified only after the opening up of the Swabasha-medium. The hopes of the Tamil peasantry to get into petty bourgeois class were thwarted by the government through a system of district quotas for jobs and standardisation for entry into the University.

Sinhala chauvinism enabled Tamil nationalism to overcome the regional restraints it had. This could be seen in the manner the Jaffna—Batticaloa rivalry and mistrust and the Vanni—Jaffna distrust were overcome; because of the discriminations imposed on all the Tamils on the basis of their ethnicity.

Agricultural developments in Jaffna since the early seventies had been promoting the growth of a market-oriented cultivation, which had a stake in an all-island market for its produce. The post—1977 agricultural changes in Sri Lanka went against the Tamil farmer. Balakrishnan writing in 1984 said:—

"In the absence of adequate price supports ensuring favourable producer-prices, in the context of sharp rise in import costs, important cash crops favoured most in the past may not hold out much longer. This uncertainty and the resultant dissatisfaction in the farming community had certainly contributed to the anti-Government feeling that is now so dominant in the Jaffna Peninsula."

With the pogrom of 1983 and the destruction of their professional life or capital, the Tamil bourgeois has now no need for national unity. As unsettled conditions do not provide the environment for investment, the Tamil bourgeoisie began to move out of the country and became expatriates. They would return only when local conditions are sufficiently secure.

VII

Having thus delineated the character of the current struggle as one of Tamilian nationalism, it now remains to see how the nature of this struggle had been determined, first in terms of those who had to take up this fight and secondly as to how the struggle was waged.

It should be emphasised that the upsurge of Tamil nationalism in early eighties had to face the reality of the collapse of the parliamentary system and more importantly it had to counter the increasing militarisation of the State security forces in Tamil areas. It is important to remember that the practice of using the Army in the Northern Province started as far back as 1958 and that the Satyagraha of 1961, a demonstration that started as a protest against the imposition of Sinhala as the language of the courts but soon developed into a mass civil disobedience campaign, was put down by the use of the Army. A notable feature since the sixties was the increase in Police excesses in Tamil areas and the lukewarm attitude of the government in dealing with the Service miscreants. The rise of the youth militancy could be traced partly to these excesses, for it was not possible to obtain legal remedy against these attacks. Even the moral authority of the politicians was eroded, for they too were humiliated or attacked by the Police.

With the increasing erosion of Parliament as a forum to settle disputes, the traditional politician was losing ground. Those who rose against these oppressive measures had to be victims but were not yet part of the system. This meant the recruitment had to come largely from a new yet untapped sector of society. It came from the deprived Tamil students and that too at the pre-university level.

The mechanism of standardisation of marks obtained at the University Entrance Examination prevented a large number of eligible Tamil students from entering the University. This affected all the Tamil students irrespective of caste and class and brought them together into new forms of organisations which repudiated the actions of the political organisations.

It must be borne in mind that a pre-university student body was brought into the limelight by senior educationists to demonstrate against the government the grievances of the students. Those who came to demonstrate against their grievances stayed on to fight against them, in their own way. Their wrath was first directed against all those "blackmarketeers" of political patronage (Sivathamby 1984). The Army presence and the militarisation of polity were already there. It was inescapable therefore that these new recruits to the Tamil struggle had to organise themselves militarily and militaristically.

Tamil nationalism became their ideology with militarism as its method. And the adoption of militancy as a method meant they had to be underground movements. Faced with such constraints in their political activities, proliferation of groups was inevitable.

It is important to go into the main political demands of the militant groups.

All these militant groups speak primarily of the oppression by the "Sinhala State Forces" and declare that it is their mission to liberate the Tamils from this State oppression. The demand for a separate State in their opinion is to ensure the liberation of the Tamils who are territorially threatened and militarily oppressed.

This is perhaps the right place to indicate by comparison the significant characteristics of the Tamilian nationalism that had arisen in Sri Lanka. This is, in a way urgent, because at certain levels of Sinhala consciousness, this nationalism is taken as part of pan-Tamilian nationalism. It is feared by the Sinhalese that this nationalism of the Tamils would be a serious threat to the Sinhalese.

While it is true that the Tamils in India have evinced a keen interest in the Sri Lankan Tamil issue and had even indicated a participatory commitment to it, it must be made clear that Sri Lankan Tamilian nationalism does not refer to "those ancient glories of the Tamils", which South Indian Tamilian nationalism has always emphasized. There is no reference to a great pre-Sanskrit past. Nor is there any reference to the highly

politicized literary myths and legend, relating to the Cankam literature. The accent here, unlike in India, is on a Tamil togetherness and unity for ending a system that threatens the continued existence of the Tamil ethnos in Sri Lanka. That is how the movement has liberationist overtones, which is quite absent in India. In fact, within the Indian context, the Tamil problem is not at all an ethnic issue (for the compositeness of the Indian personality has never been in doubt); it is described either as a *nationality issue* or just as a *language issue*.

It is, however, true that, of late, there have been a few "ideological" writings which have tended to depict the Tamils as possessing a great and glorious past in Sri Lanka and as inheritors of such great legacies as the Saiva Siddhanta philosophy. Radhika Kumaraswamy has in in her paper (*Demystifying Tamil Nationalism* Colombo 1985) referred to such developments and has indicated that such "fall-backs" on history would mar the progressive character of Tamil nationalism. It has to be emphasised that this is a recent introduction into the polemics of the struggle by a section of the expatriate elements. None of the leading militant youth movements has taken any such stand. On the contrary, the introduction of these new elements in a way distorts their aims, in that these would ideologically go against the declared democratic aims of those in the forefront of the struggle. Saiva Siddhanta would legitimise ideologically social hierarchy and thus social inequalities.

It is true that the youth movements have not looked upon a glorious historical past for their sustenance. But it is equally true that they have also not yet advocated secularism openly. It should be mentioned that the "Dravidian" ideology rests on 'secularism and rationalism'. This slogan is the outcome of the anti-Brahmin character of Dravidian nationalism.

What, in prospective terms, is going to be the course of this nationalism?

It is no doubt too early for us to say anything definitely. However, it should be mentioned that all of them express their ideals and struggles in marxist terms. Their mode of "arrival" to Marxism has an interesting history. At the start, references were made only to State oppression with an emphasis on the

need to overcome it. Given the changing stands taken by the Sri Lankan Marxist parties, these militant groups did not want at the start to make any reference to the socialist mode of overcoming these problems. But the subsequent history of the disenchantment of the Tamil populace with the non-marxist and the anti-marxist groups in the manner the political struggle of the Tamils was handled and of the widening of the social groups that were being affected by the excesses of the Security Forces, there arose a need for the militant groups to define comprehensively the character of their struggle and the socio-economic and political ideals to be achieved. The marxist concept of "national liberation" has been used to indicate both the character and the political ideals.

Defining 'national liberation' in a post-independent polity is not as easy as defining it within the framework of an anti-imperialist struggle. In this case, it is a problem within a Third World government which does not respect the rights of the indigenous minorities. This had largely arisen from that sense of "restorationism", which had been used as a motivating political force prior to independence; in the Sri Lankan case, it is the result of the restorationist demand for Sinhala Buddhism and its class use made of it by that emerging bourgeoisie to legitimise itself culturally in the eyes of its ethnic group. The militant groups have arisen because this was unable to be solved within the constitutional framework that the Sri Lankan government has been setting up. Thus it is only rational that only the political goal has been explicitly stated, and that is liberating the Tamils from state oppression. The social goals of this Tamil national liberation, have not yet been stated fully.

VIII

The emergence of Tamilian youth militancy has increased, beyond recognition, the pace of the political developments of this country. The State administrative set-up has been streamlined to meet the exigencies created by the activities of these militants. Besides the collapse of the open political structure of representative democracy within the Tamil areas, there has also been a virtual collapse of civil administration in these areas. This is only natural because the civil administration has been geared

to the political structure of the government. When the political authority of the government collapses in any particular region, it is but natural that the civil administration also suffers.

The militants have become a part of the political dynamics of the country, though not yet accepted legally. The declaration of cease-fire in June 1985 and the establishment of a committee for monitoring the cessation of hostilities were implicit acceptance of the fact that the militants are a live force and that they are currently leading the political struggle of the Tamils. The struggle is being conducted in the form of guerilla warfare.

The more they operate within the Tamil society, the more it is evident that this movement is also committed to a process of social norms relating to property and achievement which are radically different from what is in existence now. While on the one hand, the political indispensability of youth militancy has become an undisputed fact, there is yet an absence of a full understanding relating to matters connected with their recruitment and their methods of operation. In short, youth militancy has introduced a new form of political behaviour into the society. This new political behaviour pattern has been necessitated in a society which has had no history of great mass struggle. The social hierarchy that is an aspect of the caste system does not permit such full-scale mass struggles. Hence, the social discomfiture of some of the events that are taking place.

At this stage of the socio-political changes, it could be safe to say that, in spite of what Bryan Pfaffenberger has said ("Fourth World Colonialism, Indigenous Minorities and Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka" — Bulletin of Concerned Scholars — Nos. 182 — 1984 USA), there are no social dominances within the youth movements.

That the youth movements have 'radicalised' the Sri Lankan Tamil politics and society is a fact, whether they could 'revolutionize' it is something which only future could tell.

References

- (i) Encyclopaedia Britannica
- (ii) Dictionary of Sociology (ed) Nicholas Abercombe, Stephen Hill & Bryan Turner
Penguin 1984.
- (iii) Amirthalingam A. Article Silver Jubilee Volume of Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi - Jaffna.
- (iv) Balakrishnan N. A Note on the Jaffna Peasantry
Paper presented at the Seminar on Open Economy and its Impact SSA. Colombo 1983.
- (v) Coomaraswamy, Radhika Demystifying Tamil Nationalism
(when used for this lecture it was unpublished, a review version of it was later published in Lanka Guardian1986)
- (vi) Jayawardene, Kumari Ethnic and Class Conflict in Sri Lanka. Colombo 1985.
- (vii) Sivathamby K. 1978 Eslathil Tamil Ilakkiyam
1979 (a) Hindu Reaction to Christian proselytization and westernization in 19th Century Sri Lanka a study of the socio-religious activities of Arumuga Navalar (1822 - 1879)
Social Science Review, Vol. I, No. 1, Colombo.
1979 (b) Camooka Iyal Nokkil Navalar Navalar Centenary Commemoration Volume. Jaffna.
1984 (a) The Sri Lankan Tamil Question 1977 - 1983
Seminar on "The Open Economy and its Effects" SSA. Colombo.
(b) Towards an understanding of culture and ideology among Tamils of Jaffna - Commemoration Souvenir - Public Library - Jaffna.

Professor Karthigesu Sivathamby (now 54) graduated from the University of Ceylon (1956), where he received also a Master's Degree (1963) and obtained his Ph.D. at the University of Birmingham (1970) working under the renowned Marxist scholar George Thomson.



Professor Sivathamby, one of the leading literary critics in Tamil and a leading scholar in the field of Tamil Drama and of Literary History, is known for his inter-disciplinary research. He has widened the horizons of Tamil studies by bringing to bear his knowledge of Anthropology, Sociology, Communication Studies and Social History on problems in Tamil Studies ranging from the economy of the Cankam Society to the socio-economic background and communicational strategies of the Dravidian Movement.

He earned his Professorship as a merit award for the research work he had done - the first Sri Lankan Professor of Tamil to obtain that distinction. He has authored 18 books - three in English and 15 in Tamil; some of the latter are textbooks in Universities. His writings have been translated into Sinhala and Russian. His "Drama in Ancient Tamil Society" (1981) won a Government of Tamilnadu (India) Award (1982) and his "Literary History in Tamil" (1986) is a publication of the Tamil University, Thanjavur. His research articles have appeared in prestigious international journals.

He has been a Senior Visiting Fellow at the University of Cambridge in the Centre of South Asian Studies (1983, 84), Special Research Fellow at Thanjavur (1983), a visitor to the School of History, Jawaharlal Nehru University (1983) and a guest of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (1986).

Professor Sivathamby's involvement in the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis has been at two levels. As an academic, he has been delineating the strands of Sri Lankan Tamilian uprising, providing the sociological background and the ideological orientations. As an activist, he was in the Citizens' Committee Movement in the crucial years of 1984-85 and is now the Chairman of TRRO (The Refugees Rehabilitation Organisation Ltd.).

Professor Sivathamby, eldest son of Pandit Saiva Pulavar Thampar Ponnusamy Karthigesu and Vallammai of Karaveddi, is married and has three daughters.

R.s 10/-