

Introduction by Prof. N. Shanmugaratnam to Ravi Vaitheespara's *Theorizing the National Crisis: Sanmugathasan, the Left and the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, published by the Social Scientists' Association, Colombo.

Introduction

Interrogating an Obscured Legacy

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'The volatility of the national question', writes Nimni, 'disconcerted two of the most formidable ideological protagonists of the twentieth century – liberal democracy and Marxism' (Nimni, 1991: 2). In post-colonial Sri Lanka, the national question posed a formidable political challenge to the liberal democratic and Marxist (Left) parties in a Westminster type parliamentary system implanted by the British colonialists. Communalism had already become a dominant factor in the politics of representation in colonial Ceylon. The ethnic contours of the national question were clearly marked indeed. The left movement, which arrived in the 1930s when communalism had already begun to raise its ugly head in the trade union movement, stood for the unity of the working class and other sections of the people across ethnic divides against colonialism.² The so called liberal democrats chose an ideology of ethno-majoritarianism to win elections and form governments. The Left movement, represented by the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party (CP), remained a staunch defender of the rights of the minorities and stood against the powerful resurgence of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism until the end of the 1950s. The 1960s saw major splits in the LSSP and CP due to domestic as well as international causes. In the early 1960s, both parties decided to adopt a conciliatory approach towards Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and join a united front with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). They justified the alliance with the SLFP on the ground that it had a progressive anti-imperialist character as opposed to its main challenger, the pro-imperialist United National Party (UNP). The breakaway groups rejected the reformism/revisionism of the LSSP and CP leaderships and began to function independently. They attacked their former leaders for capitulating to the communalist line of the SLFP, upheld the original position of the left on the national question and advocated revolution. Within the LSSP and CP, there still were inner party differences on the national question. The two old parties and the new revolutionary formations, which identified themselves as Trotskyite (Fourth International) and Marxist-Leninist or Maoist, faced further splits, which contributed to the marginalisation of the Left movement in Sri Lanka. Some of the radicals who had left the LSSP and CP returned to their old parties. However, the radical groups of Trotskyites and Maoists continued to pay attention to the national question and addressed it with reference to the larger political system and class relations from their own perspectives.

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² See Jayawardena (1972) for an authoritative study of the labour movement in colonial Ceylon.

Over the years, ethnicity has trumped class in Sri Lanka, which today is an exemplar of how an externally implanted liberal democratic system can lend itself to machinations by political parties that resorted to communalism and communalisation as a shortcut to power. The institutionalisation of ethno-majoritarianism has been carried out by ‘democratic’ means. Indeed this is a dark side of our democracy in which universal franchise without safeguards for the numerically smaller ethnic groups was turned into a tool to deny them a meaningful role in political decision making, which, in the long run, has subverted both democracy and the creation of an inclusive, united Lankan state. One is reminded of Michael Mann’s statement that the ‘dark side of democracy is the perversion through time of either liberal or socialist ideals of democracy’ (Mann, 2005: 4). This perversion has led to a protracted war which has made the national question even more intractable in Sri Lanka. The majoritarian nationalists have reframed the national question as a ‘terrorist problem’ and displaced it from the historical and political domain to which it belongs. They have couched their call for a military solution in a discourse of ‘sovereignty and territorial integrity’ of the majoritarian unitary state and linked it to the so called global war on terror at the same time. Now it is official that the main problem is ‘terrorism’ which has to be defeated before any ‘political solution’ can be found. The real meaning of this position is that the military solution is the political solution.

This situation has thrown up intellectual challenges for the political left as well as critical scholars. Indeed there is a growing body of scholarly writings on the Lankan conflict. More recent writings have focused on identity, the social and economic consequences of the war, conflict resolution, aspects of state building, and terrorism. Some of the earlier writings looked critically into the history and historiography of ethnic relations, ethnic and class conflict, the shifting positions of the parliamentary left parties on the national question and the emergence of Tamil militancy. The two papers by Ravi Vaitheespara brought together in this volume explore an area of left politics that has been neglected for long by researchers working on the national question and its militarisation. Vaitheespara sheds light on a political legacy of the left that has been obscured by communalist and populist forces masquerading as leftist and socialist in the country’s political arena. As a historian, he sets out to reclaim the thinking and works of some individual Tamil left leaders which are lost in the broad narratives about the left and the national question in Sri Lanka. The two research papers are a valuable addition to the existing body of knowledge on the recent history of the left movement in Sri Lanka with special reference to the ‘ethnic conflict’ or the ‘Tamil problem’ as the Lankan national question is often referred to.

In the first paper, titled ‘Towards a Tamil Left Perspective on the Ethnic Crisis in Sri Lanka’, the author teases out the positions articulated by eminent Tamil left politicians such as P. Kandiah, who belonged to the CP and was the first and so far the only leftist to win a parliamentary seat in the Tamil speaking north of the country, V. Karalasingham, a well known Trotskyist theoretician of the LSSP, who left the party in the sixties and returned to it after a while, V. Ponnambalam, a popular Tamil politician who was with the CP for many years before he left it to found the short-lived ‘Red Tamil Movement’, and N. Sanmugathasan (popularly known as Shan), the leading trade unionist and theoretician of the CP, who initiated an ideological debate within the party and led the Marxist-Leninist (Maoist) wing which became the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist, also known as the Peking wing) in 1964. All these well educated leaders, who were fully committed to the causes they believed in,

are no more but their views on the national question and ethno-politics in Sri Lanka continue to be relevant and worthy of serious analysis as shown by Vaitheespara, who also discusses the theoretical position and policy of a breakaway group from Sanmugathan's party. The second paper explores the contribution of Sanmugathan in considerable depth and detail and hence appropriately entitled 'The Wisdom of Hindsight: Sanmugathan, the Left and the National Crisis in Sri Lanka'. In this paper, the author has also used some of the unpublished writings of Shan, written during his last years.

The first paper, while locating the positions of the Tamil left leaders in the larger setting of ethno-national politics in Lanka, also extends the analysis to the broader regional, particularly the Indian, and international contexts. P. Kandiah passed away before the turbulent ideological debate and the resultant split in the CP. The articulate communist was an informed and erudite contributor to various debates in the Lankan parliament to which he was elected in 1956. He made an impassioned yet reasoned intervention in the debate on the Official Language Bill in parliament on 11 June 1956. Vaitheespara highlights sections of this speech to show Kandiah's commitment to a united Lankan identity without losing one's Tamil identity. He also stresses another point made by Kandiah regarding the lack of a popular anti-colonial movement that succeeded in uniting the people across ethnic and other divides against the common enemy. Kandiah argued that such a movement would have created an 'abiding sense of comradeship between the different racial and linguistic groups.' More important for the author's line of analysis, however, is the view expressed and defended by Kandiah that the 'Sinhala only' language policy had united the Tamil people, especially the underprivileged sections among them, to begin fighting for their language.

Kandiah's speech and the entire debate on the Official Language Bill showed how fractured the Sri Lankan polity had become along ethnic lines. There was a Sri Lankan state without a Sri Lankan nation, and the government's language policy represented a major step towards transforming the colonial state into a Sinhala Buddhist state. But Kandiah was not alone in challenging the majoritarian language policy in that debate. All CP and LSSP members in parliament condemned the bill and voted against it. N. M. Perera, the leader of the LSSP and the opposition, moved an amendment to the bill to make both Sinhala and Tamil state languages with parity of status throughout the island. Colvin R. de Silva, another leading member of the LSSP, was prophetic when he condemned the 'Sinhala only' language policy and asked the government if they wanted a single nation or two nations, one Ceylon or two countries. Earlier, in the first parliament after the general elections of 1947, the two left parties were the staunchest opponents of the Acts (1948, 1949) that disenfranchised the Tamil plantation workers.

1956 however, marked the coming of a new phase of ethno-politics in Sri Lanka. The passage of the Official Language Act signalled the beginnings of a sustained process of communalisation and desecularisation of the state. It also marked the rise of Sinhala Buddhism to hegemonic status in the Sinhala polity. The other side of this hegemony was the ethno-majoritarian domination over the minorities.³ Lured by the

³ Following the Gramscian/neo-Gramscian distinction between hegemony and domination, I use the former to mean the construction of popular consent principally by ideological and cultural means. This

prospects of sharing power with the SLFP as its junior partners in a coalition government, the LSSP and CP chose to compromise their stand on the national question and on other key issues as well. Kandiah did not live long enough to see this historic submission of the two left parties to Sinhala Buddhist hegemony.

Karalasingham, Ponnambalam and Sanmugathan approached the national question and the deepening conflict in different ways although all three shared the view that the Tamils were an oppressed people. The differences had a lot to do with their particular ideological affiliations within the Marxist camp. There were also differences and similarities in how they communicated their views and practised their politics. Vaitheespara elucidates the positions and practices of the three in a way that enables the reader to make his or her own comparison of them. Of course, Sanmugathan receives the most detailed attention as the second paper is entirely about him. Karalasingham, a lawyer by profession and an eloquent writer and articulate speaker in English, was quite outspoken about the oppressive policies and pogroms against the Tamil speaking people even when the LSSP to which he belonged was a part of a coalition government led by the SLFP in the 1970s. However, he was even more trenchant in his critique of the Tamil nationalist parties and their leaderships. Like the other left leaders, he attacked the Federal Party and the Tamil Congress as communalist, pro-imperialist and reactionary and hence not capable of winning the support of the Lankan working class for the Tamil people's cause. In Karalasingham's view, Tamil political 'monolithism' encouraged Sinhalese political 'monolithism' and helped to bring together divided Sinhala nationalist forces. This was a reversal of the view held by Kandiah (in 1956) who argued that it was the Sinhala communalist language policy of the government that united the Tamil people to fight for their rights. Karalasingham, while prescribing to the Tamils what ought to be done to win their rights, was unable to influence his own party on the same issue, as noted by Vaitheespara. Having returned to the LSSP after leaving it with Edmund Samarakody and other radical Trotskyites who established the LSSP (R, i.e. Revolutionary), Karalasingham did not seem to wield any significant influence within the party.

Ponnambalam was a political activist since his student days in India, where he had his university education. He taught at Skanthavarodaya College in Jaffna, after returning

is not to say that hegemony is purely non-coercive but that it relies on intellectual and cultural resources to consolidate a popular political base across classes. In Sri Lanka, the hegemonisation of the majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist ideology began with Badaranaike's Mahajana Eksath Peramuna's (MEP) gaining power in 1956. Domination relies on coercive means and not on popular consent. There is hardly any need to labour the point that the institutionalised Sinhala Buddhism and its supremacist claims do not enjoy the consent of the Tamils. However, the hegemonic status of the Sinhala Buddhist ideology is not a given. Its reproduction runs into trouble when antagonistic class issues and anti-government feelings due to deprivations turn serious among the Sinhalese people, which has happened many a time and is happening even at present as working class families suffer from falling real wages and unemployment, farmers face economic hardships and youths and other sections feel socially excluded. While the state would not hesitate to use coercive means to deal with protests arising out of deprivation and exclusion, the majoritarian ideology and the war to defend the 'sovereignty of the state and the nation' (read 'the Sinhala nation' as there is no Lankan nation) are used to suppress divisions and mobilise popular support for the regime to counter any possible political threat to the ruling alliance. It must also be noted that this hegemony has been criticised and opposed by some sections within the Sinhalese society. The most principled and consistent critics and opponents include the radical left political formations (which though small are actually multiethnic) and several left and liberal intellectuals and enlightened anti-war activists in civil society.

home with a master's degree. He was one of the most popular speakers and campaigners of the CP in Jaffna. While Karalasingham and Shan were based in Colombo, Ponnambalam lived, worked as a teacher and did his party politics in Jaffna. Like Shan, Ponnambalam was fluent in all three languages – Tamil, Sinhala and English. I remember how Ponnambalam presented Shan at a political discussion for party supporters in Jaffna in 1960 or 1961. 'The brain behind' and 'our brilliant theoretician' were the terms he used about Shan. That was before the two parted ways as a result of the split in the party. Ponnambalam remained in the CP (Moscow) and unsuccessfully contested the famous Tamil leader S. J. V. Chelvanayagam for the Kankasanturai seat in the general elections of 1956 and 1970 and in the historic bi-election of 1975. It was widely known in Jaffna that a reluctant Ponnambalam was persuaded by his party to stand against Chelvanayagam in the 1975 bi-election at which the Tamil leader, having resigned his seat in parliament to protest the newly introduced Republican Constitution of 1972, was seeking a mandate for Tamil nationhood to be exercised in a state called Tamil Eelam. It was obvious to Ponnambalam and everyone else who knew the political mood in the north that Chelvanayagam would be returned with a huge majority. Ponnambalam received about 12 percent of the polled votes at this election. By this time, people close to Ponnambalam were aware that he was quite unhappy with his party's leadership and regretted challenging Chelvanayagam without being able to offer a meaningful alternative with conviction. The nearly 10, 000 votes he received were largely due to his long established links as a communist with the grassroots and his personal popularity. Like the LSSP, the CP (Moscow) was a member of the coalition government of 1970-77 led by the SLFP. Ironically, the Republican Constitution, which caused Chelvanayagam's resignation, was presented to parliament by the same Colvin R. de Silva (now Minister of Plantation Industry and Constitutional Affairs) who warned in 1956 that the Official Language Act would lead to the creation of two nations.⁴ Disillusioned with the party's incapacity to do anything about the government's policies and practices affecting the Tamils, Ponnambalam decided to quit the party to which he was so loyal for many years and formed the 'Red Tamil Movement', at a time when Tamil youth in Jaffna were getting disillusioned with the traditional Tamil leadership and turning militant. Ponnambalam, as shown by Vaitheespara, offered a Leninist critique of the parliamentary left parties' opportunist policies on the national question.

Unlike Karalasingham and Shan, who castigated and rejected the Tamil Congress and Federal Party as pro-imperialist and reactionary, Ponnambalam sought an alliance with the Tamil nationalist parties, which he had opposed as long as he was in the CP. He justified his new stand by invoking Lenin's arguments against Great Russian chauvinism and in defence of the nationalism of the oppressed. Comparing Sinhala majoritarianism to Great Russian chauvinism, he faulted the Lankan left parties for failing to follow Lenin's teaching. However, Ponnambalam's uncritical embrace of the leadership of the parliamentary Tamil nationalist parties was not reciprocated. Vaitheespara compliments Ponnambalam for his 'innovative critique' of the

⁴There has been some debate on the role of Colvin R de Silva in the making of the 1972 constitution which promulgated the unitary state, the abolition of Soulbury constitution's Section 29 which provided some safeguards to the minorities, the reinforcement of Sinhala as the official language and the privileging of Buddhism to a special status. For a view on the debate and the first hand observations of an insider, see Nihal Jayawickrama (2007), An Insight Into Colvin's 1972 Constitution. <http://www.independentsl.com/cgi-bin/newsscript1.cgi?record=1985> (visited 26.07.2007)

parliamentary left parties. Unfortunately, he has not examined the reasons for Ponnambalam's failure to make any notable impact on the emerging youth militancy in the north. This aspect is worthy of further investigation.

Vaitheespara engages in a deeper exploration of some aspects of Sanmugathasan's political career. 'The contributions of Sanmugathasan to the revolutionary movement in Sri Lanka', if I may recall a line from my 1990 review of Shan's Memoirs, 'may be a subject of controversy among political historians, Marxist intellectuals and left organisations, but there cannot be any dispute about his leading role in creating the Maoist movement in Sri Lanka' (Shanmugaratnam, 1990: 89). A comprehensive history of Maoism in Sri Lanka is yet to be written. That could be quite a daunting task, as it has to investigate several tendencies that developed within Shan's party and broke away from it with their own 'revolutionary' messages and agendas.⁵ In the two papers in this volume, Vaitheespara examines Shan's position on the national question and the ongoing armed struggle while also discussing his critique of the 'Bandaranaike revolution', the parliamentary left and the JVP.

Shan was different in certain respects from the other three left leaders studied by the author. They had their own professions while being active in politics but for Shan politics was nothing less than a full-time profession.⁶ Shan joined the CP in July 1943 as soon as he sat the final examination at the university where he read history. He was barely 24 years old and the CP had just been formed by a group expelled from the LSSP in 1940 after a bitter dispute over the Third International's (Comintern's) policy against fascism and on the Second World War.⁷ After joining the party, Shan played a major role in building the Ceylon Trade Union Federation (CTUF) of which he was

⁵ There was a series of defections from Shan's party. Let me mention some of the major splits. The JVP led by Rohana Wijeweera came out of the Maoist party, abandoned not only Mao's 'people's war line' but also the party's Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory, and adopted a populist ideology to mobilise the disgruntled Sinhalese youth to stage an unsuccessful insurrection in 1971. Gamini Yapa left the party with a faction and founded the 'Peradiga Sulang' (East Wind) movement which stuck to the basic Maoist line and went on to prepare for a long drawn out people's war by establishing 'revolutionary base areas'. Another faction led by Karawita and Watson Fernando broke away and called itself a communist party too. Later a group from this faction formed the New Democratic Party (NDP) led by Senthivel. The NDP upholds Shan's post-1983 position on the national question and the Tamil struggle. Vaitheespara discusses the NDP's policy in the first paper. There were also some other smaller breakaway groups from Shan's party.

⁶ Kandiah, a co-founder of the CP, was a librarian at the University of Ceylon before he became a member of parliament, Karalasingham practised as a lawyer while being an active member of the LSSP and Ponnambalam was a teacher while playing a major role for the CP in Jaffna.

⁷ A big majority of the members of the LSSP's Executive Committee rejected the Third International's policy which was supported by a minority led by S. A. Wickremasinghe. The majority supported Trotsky's position against the war while the minority supported the Comintern's position, which actually reflected the policy of the Soviet Union and its Communist Party led by Stalin. The Sri Lankan 'Stalinists' founded the Communist Party of Ceylon. Even before joining the newly formed CP, Shan had worked closely with Wickramasinghe, Keneuman, Vaidialingam, and others who later founded the party. Shan says in his memoirs that he became a communist in 1939 in his second year at the university. The 'Stalinist-Trotskyist' controversy loomed large for a long time between the CP and LSSP. Shan was a staunch defender of Stalin and Karalasingham was equally staunch in defending Trotsky. Shan discusses the first split in the LSSP and the Stalinist-Trotskyist controversy in his memoirs. Also see L. S. Goonewardene's statement (published in March 1940) on the Third International and the expulsion of the Stalinists from the LSSP, in Muthiah and Wanasinghe (1996)

the Secretary General when the party split. He was also actively involved in organising and conducting political classes for party members and supporters in different parts of the country. It was, therefore, no surprise that he had the backing of the majority of the CTUF and a substantial part of the party's membership when he chose to challenge the pro-Moscow leadership. By then he had worked hard full-time for almost twenty years in building the labour movement and the political arm of the party. So unlike Karalasingham and Ponnambalam, Shan was able to lead an ideological struggle and mobilise support at all levels from the central committee to the rank and file within his party.

Vaitheespara reviews Shan's critique of the parliamentary left parties and their leaders. Shan dwells at some length on this in the Memoirs. I had listened to and read articles by Shan on the same theme in the 1960s. According to Vaitheespara, Shan's critique of the left movement, though simple and straightforward, is perhaps his most original and noteworthy contribution. Shan offered a powerful critique of the reformist/revisionist politics of the parliamentary left parties from his revolutionary ideological point of view but I am not sure if it is his most 'original and noteworthy' contribution. In my view, Shan failed to explore this issue more thoroughly from a theoretical as well as a policy perspective. Shan was quite convincing in rejecting the parliamentary road to socialism as a mirage. However, the parliamentary system was a reality and the question of how a revolutionary party should practise its politics to build a popular mass movement in such an environment loomed large. The strategy chosen by the LSSP and CP to use the parliamentary arena stood as a negative example. After joining the government, some of the parliamentary left leaders claimed that they were taking the class struggle into the state. It did not take long for the politically advanced workers to see through this pretentious claim. They saw how the LSSP and CP were continually losing their trade union bases to the SLFP and UNP. The two parties were also rapidly reduced to minor electoral partners of the SLFP due to their ever-dwindling vote base. They were unable to prevent the systematic communalisation and desecularisation of the state let alone advance the class struggle within it. Shan's original warnings on the political consequences of their capitulation came true. He reiterated that the LSSP and CP had been complicit in perpetuating neo-colonialism in Sri Lanka as the SLFP, with which they collaborated, was not so different from the UNP in its subservience to imperialism. He had all along held the view that the independence of 1948 did not mean decolonisation but a transition from direct colonial rule to indirect neo-colonial rule. He contended that the so called middle path advocated by Bandaranaike, though it appeared progressive in some respects, was certainly not the way to free the country from neo-colonialism. However, the more difficult question that Shan and other left revolutionaries were reluctant to fully address was their own failure to win over and retain the political base of the parliamentary left and build a radical alternative. Shan did not believe in any shortcut to the revolution, as the JVP and some other groups that broke away from his party did. He believed in a 'people's war approach', which meant that the revolution was a long-term process involving mass participation. However, applying this theory to the Sri Lankan conditions remained a challenge for him and the party. Shan did not go much further than stating the general theoretical premises of a Sri Lankan revolution derived from the experiences of the Chinese revolution. Many young activists and supporters of the party wondered how helpful these premises were to develop a revolutionary strategy in a country like Sri Lanka whose conditions were quite different from those of pre-revolutionary China. I think this was one of the

major issues that contributed to internal conflicts in the party and the subsequent splits that led to the birth of the JVP, Peradiga Sulang (East Wind) and other formations. In the mid-1970s, a former senior member of the CP (Maoist), who had worked very closely with Shan, told me that the party had not been able to move beyond repeating the ‘universal principles of Marxism-Leninism’ in different words. The party had not done its homework on ‘theorising and strategising the Lankan revolution’, as he put it.

Vaitheespara provides an excellent synthesis of Shan’s critique of the JVP. The JVP, which staged the first armed insurrection that aimed at nothing less than the overthrow of the state in Sri Lanka, emerged from the CP (Maoist). Its leader Rohana Wijeweera was a popular leader of the youth wing of the party. Initially, before the insurrection, Shan was rather subjective in assessing the strength of the JVP. He dismissed it as a minor populist adventurous group. Later he engaged in a serious analysis of the JVP phenomenon and the United Front government’s handling of the uprising. For Shan, the JVP’s armed adventure was a proof of his theoretical position that there was no shortcut to the revolution. While re-asserting the Maoist people’s war line, Shan exposed the JVP’s petty bourgeois shortcomings and communalism. Vaitheespara has put to good use his access to Shan’s unpublished writings about the JVP. We learn from him that in 1993, just before his death, Shan had written that the JVP had become ‘an anti-working class, anti-Tamil, counter revolutionary and potentially fascist force’. Of course the JVP would disagree with this, but its warmongering and ethno-majoritarian alliances make it resemble a lot to the JVP that Shan has described.

Vaitheespara offers a coherent mapping and analysis of Shan’s views on the national question and some of the important political events and trends that compelled Shan to review his long-held position on the question of self-determination and nationhood of the Tamils. In addressing this subject, Vaitheespara is also illuminating a conundrum in Shan’s political life. Shan, the revolutionary who dared to challenge the age old institution of untouchability in Jaffna Tamil society by spearheading a militant mass movement against it, and who led the Red Flag Union that mobilised large sections of the disenfranchised and over-exploited Tamil plantation workers to demand their rights during 1966-1970, chose to be aloof from the burgeoning Tamil militancy in the north in the 1970s and early 1980s. When Tamil parties and youth organisations raised the demand for self-determination and nationhood, Shan argued that the Tamils were not a nation, since they (as a community) did not meet Stalin’s Marxist-Leninist definition of a nation. I remember a discussion I had with a young Tamil militant in the 1970s. In a long exchange of views with the Tamil youth from Jaffna, I defended Shan’s position. He brought the long discussion to an end with the following statement: ‘Shanmugathasan may think we are not a nation but I am telling you we Tamils think and feel we are a nation.’ That was more than five years before Benedict Anderson’s ‘Imagined Communities’ appeared in print! It must, however, be noted that Shan had always emphasised the material basis of communalism and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. He used to say that the fight for language rights was basically a fight for economic opportunities in a non-industrialised country with high unemployment. This was his way of illustrating his argument. Of course, there are powerful material causes behind communalism. However, in attempting to show that communalism was an ideology that distorted the material reality of underdevelopment, he tended to be economic and failed to provide a dialectical

account of the interplay of ideational and material factors in the workings of identity politics in Sri Lanka.

Vaitheespara draws attention to Shan and his party's failure to seize the opportunity to play a role in the Tamil liberation struggle. He conjectures that the struggle might have taken a different course had this happened. He may be right, may be not. Rather than speculate further on this, I wish to reflect on the change in Shan's position on the Tamil struggle for nationhood. Shan's change of mind happened during and after the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983. What he saw and personally experienced in those seven days in Colombo and the rapidly changing political situation in the North-East made him rethink his long-held view on the Tamil struggle. It is relevant to recall that Shan had talked about the futility of trying to win the rights of the Tamil people by parliamentary means even before 1983. As a minority, Tamils would lose in the 'number game', he would say. Indeed the post-1983 July politico-military situation in the North-East showed the irrelevance of parliament and the inevitability of the armed struggle. The conflict had reached a point where the broad masses of the Tamil people had lost faith in the Sri Lankan parliamentary system and the state and were beginning to extend their support to the armed struggle. The Sixth Amendment to the constitution rushed through parliament by the government with the support of the SLFP and MEP in August 1983, shortly after the 'holocaust', to satisfy Sinhala majoritarian sentiments, reinforced the irrelevance of parliament and the electoral process in the minds of the Tamil people.

The situation in the North-East was quite different from what existed in the South in 1971 when the JVP revolted. What was happening in the North-East was in some ways close to the objective and subjective conditions for revolutionary action and 'people's war' that Shan had been talking about in rather abstract terms in his political classes for many years, and it was happening while Shan and his party remained far removed from the scene politically. After 1983, Shan recognised the revolutionary potential in the emerging struggle for self-determination but was unable to do much more than offering constructive criticisms of the weaknesses of the militant movements. In his view, the weaknesses are due to the failure of the movements to apply Marxism-Leninism and the Maoist strategy of people's war. However, again he does not go beyond a general theoretical prescription. He provides a reasoned and convincing assessment of India's role in the Lankan Tamil people's struggle, as summed up by Vaitheespara. While defending the Tamil people's right to nationhood, he is for a solution based on federalism or regional autonomy without partitioning the country. While being critically supportive of the armed struggle and sympathetic to the LTTE, he believes that ultimately the solution lies in uniting the Sinhala and Tamil revolutionary forces. He is impressed with the LTTE's ability to fight the Sri Lankan state and the Indian army but criticises the Tamil Tigers for tactical blunders both in policy and practice. His criticisms do not seem to have had any observable impact on the LTTE and the Tamil struggle so far, and his broad perspective on future revolutionary unity across the ethnic divide may look idealistic in today's Sri Lanka but let us not forget that there are others who share that vision. These contributions came from Shan in the last years of his life when he was not in a position to engage in active politics due to his own political isolation and poor health. It is remarkable that he was able to remain firm in his conviction to the last. Shan's total contribution to the working class movement and the struggle for revolutionary change has yet to be assessed.

Vaitheespara has done a commendable job of interrogating an obscured legacy of the left and offering an analysis that is so relevant to current discussions and debates on the Lankan national crisis. Some of the recent tracts on identity politics in Sri Lanka display a disconnect with history and a preoccupation with ideational elements without addressing the deeper and complex aspects of the conflict. Vaitheespara's historical approach is refreshing and rewarding as it sheds light on the complex politics of the national crisis.

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