Tamil National Struggle in Sri Lanka –Where did it go wrong– Part II

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The ingrained short sightedness of Tamil leadersby Victor Ivan About ten years back, I had the opportunity to discuss the ethnic question with a young Tamil leader who was dreaming of an Eelam State devoid of the Tigers. One of the issues we discussed was the language problem. I told him that in the Constitution of J. R. Jayawardene, he has included solutions for the problems of the Tamil people. If the provisions granted by law have not been realised, there is no need for an armed struggle to achieve those rights. Sometimes, these can be won by submitting an appeal on Fundamental Rights to the Supreme Court. If the Supreme Court is unable to grant any redress, then the next course of action has to be considered. I appealed to him to act accordingly. He was really surprised at what I was telling him.
Even though they followed a non-violent struggle against the Sinhala Official language policy, the Tamil leaders did not have any definite plan of action for the future. They did not even have a precise notion regarding the demands they have to win over. Just as the Sinhala leaders of the South propagated anti Tamil ideas to consolidate their power among the Sinhala people, Tamil leaders of the North propagated anti-Sinhala ideas in trying to consolidate their power among the Tamils. Just as the Sinhala leaders did not have a vision for the future, Tamil leaders too did not have a vision. The self rule which was demanded by Tamil leaders from Bandaranayake was not equal to the same demand made to Dudley. They requested a provincial council system from Bandaranayake. What they requested from Dudley was a District Council system. Civil disobedience Campaign Idiotic acts by both Sinhala and Tamil leaders caused the Communal riots in 1958. After signing an agreement with Bandaranayake, Chalvanayagm spear-headed a campaign of smearing tar on the letter Sri on the number plates of CTB buses sent to the North. The Tamil Letter Sri was painted in its place. The campaign to apply tar on the Tamil names on the name boards of shops in the South, started thereafter, as a reaction to the above. The smearing of tar campaign in the North served to inflame emotions in the South. It is really sad to note how an intelligent and mature leader like Chelvanayagam failed to foresee what sort of effect this tar smearing campaign will have in the South. It was the tar smearing campaign on the Tamil name boards which started in response to what happened in North, that paved the way to the communal riots. The ingrained short sightedness of the Tamil leaders was evident in the Sathyagraha and civil disobedience campaigns they launched in the Northern and Eastern provinces in 1961. Through a protracted Sathyagraha campaign held by the leaders and activists of the Federal Party in front of the Government Agent’s office in Jaffna, they were able to disrupt activities of the government totally. Due to this disruption, the rice subsidy could not be distributed and the salaries and pensions could not be paid. This Sathyagraha campaign was able to create a great impression among the Jaffna people. In the beginning, there was pressure from the Police and later from the Navy. In spite of such pressure, those engaged in the Sathyagraha were able to continue their programme courageously. This programme of activities was put in to operation not only in Jaffna, but also in the towns of Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Mannar and Vavuniya. The people of those areas actively supported the Sathyagrahis. When one month elapsed with the continuing Sathyagraha, the activities of the State sector in the North and East had come to a stand still. The situation was such that a discussion had to be held between the Federal leaders and the Minister of Justice to end the Sathyagraha. When the Government refused to accept the conditions put forward by the Federal Party, the leaders of the Federal Party thereafter converted the Sathyagraha Campaign in to a civil disobedience campaign. The Federal Party began operating its own postal service and a scheme of issuing postal stamps and post cards. Using this as an excuse, the Government declared a state of emergency. Fifty one leaders of the Federal Party were taken into custody and were detained at the Army Camp at Panagoda for 170 days. Thereafter, these parties never engaged in any such non-violent struggles. Leaders of the Federal Party did not have a proper understanding of the Gandhian style of non violent struggle. Gandhi never followed a policy of continuous struggle without any break until the goal is achieved. In his non violent struggles, he had a strategic scheme of action and a time table. After a certain number of days, he stopped the struggle temporarily and gave an opportunity for those engaged in the struggle to have some respite. A struggle which was started at a lower level was stopped, only to start the next struggle at a higher level. There was an arrangement in place to continue the struggle further, even if all the leaders were to be taken into custody. But there was no such vision in the Sathyagraha campaign and in the civil disobedience campaign launched by the Federal Party. Not only was everything finished once the leaders were taken in to custody, they were also inclined to think that when the leaders were taken into custody and the party was banned, it showed that there is no room for non violent struggles. Later, when an armed struggle was launched, their argument to justify that was to say that they had to resort to such action unwillingly, and that they were forced to select this path due to the crushing of non violent struggles launched by them in a merciless manner. But, how many times was the Indian National Congress banned? How many times were the leaders including Gandhi taken in to custody? Bombs were thrown at Martin Luther King’s house. He was also taken in to custody once. But due to such incidents they never abandoned their non- violent struggles and resorted to arms. The attitude that there is no possibility of solving the problems of the Tamil people until a separate state is established, is just a stubborn decision to come out of a difficult situation when the crude experiments at a non violent struggle failed. It is not a decision taken after an in-depth analysis. The founding of Bangladesh with the mediation of India was an inspiration to Tamil leaders. They believed that a separate state for themselves could be achieved like wise with the support of India without any serious struggle. The story that they had a historical homeland was to justify their right for a separate state. But this story was not founded on historically true and acceptable facts. According to the analysis of the Tamil homeland based on historical facts by Professor K. M. de Silva, the major portion of the East never belonged to the Kingdom of Jaffna which was very short lived. On the other hand Batticaloa was never a part of the Kingdom of Jaffna. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) which was formed by the coalition of several Tamil parties, contested the 1977 General Election with the aim of obtaining a mandate for an Eelam State. But they received such mandate only from the North. The people in the East rejected it. While 69% of the votes in the North were for the TULF,

in the East this party received only 32.9% of votes. If it was a realistic political movement, then they should have abandoned the idea of a separate state after the election results. Or else, they should have limited their demand to the North only, doing away with the demand for the East. After the General Election in 1977, the TULF obtained the leadership of the opposition in the new parliament. The TULF had obtained only a little over 1/5th of the total votes received by the SLFP. But the number of seats won by the TULF was twice the number of seats won by SLFP. This is due to the existence of an electoral system in the country which was drafted with emphasis on the minority ethnic population. Does it not indicate that while a stern policy was followed by the majority community with regard to the minorities in some issues, a lenient policy was followed with regard to certain other issues? The 1978 Constitution It is not true to say that Sinhala leaders did not pay attention to the problems of the Tamil people until the Tamil national struggle transformed itself into an armed struggle. Even though it can be said that the 1978 constitution was formulated to give supreme power to J. R. Jayewardene, it should be emphasised that the framers of the Constitution had taken great pains to remove any injustices caused to the Tamil people. It shows that the Sinhala leaders had realised the gravity of the injustices done to the Tamil people in the compilation of laws since 1956 and by 1977, they were engaged in an honest effort to correct them. If the Tamil leaders were wise enough, they should have realised the efforts made in the 1978 Constitution to remove any injustices done to the Tamil people. They could have taken appropriate action with the support of the Sinhala leaders to put into practice the changes that are approved in the new Constitution and to abandon the demand for a separate state. During the first days of the Government of J. R. Jayawardene, in fact in August 1977 itself, steps were taken to nullify the standardisation scheme for entry to Universities. It was this scheme which caused much heartache to educated Tamil youth. The following are among the provisions included in the 1978 constitution compiled by J. R. Jayewardene to correct the injustices that were done to the Tamil people. While the Sinhala Language continues to be the Official language (Section 18) both Sinhala and Tamil languages were accepted as National languages (Section 19). This is a deviation from the ‘Sinhala Only’ policy which was part of government policy since 1956. The right to be educated in any of the national languages was ensured (Section 21 – 1). In the event a certain course in the university is conducted only in one language, the right is ensured for a person who entered the University from the other language stream to continue education in the University in his own national language (Section 21 -2). The right is also ensured for the people of North and East to communicate with officials in the national language used for administrative purposes. (Section 21 -3). Constitutional validity was given to the regulations approved under the Tamil languages (Special Provisions) Act No. 28 of 1958 by including them in the Constitution. The right to use a language of one’s choice was ensured in Section 14 (1) (f). By section 27 (b), it was accepted as a state policy that no citizens should face any difficulty due to language. By Section 25, it was declared a government responsibility to provide adequate facilities for the use of a language as stipulated in the constitution. The provisions stipulated in the Constitution regarding fundamental rights were even more important to minorities. Seeking relief from the judiciary in the event of a breach of a right was assured by this provision. In addition, as a solution to the problems of citizenship faced by upcountry Tamil estate workers, all the eight fundamental rights described in Section 14(1) were granted by Section 14(2) to all the permanent and lawful residents who have lived in the Island for a period of ten years. Along with this provision, Section 26 of the Constitution eliminated the difference between a citizen by descent and a citizen by registration. Through this, the notion that those who are of Indian Origin and later received citizenship under the provisions of the Indo–Sri Lanka Agreements of 1964 and 1969, are second class citizens, was eliminated. While the political system introduced by J. R. Jayewardene through the new constitution is regarded as retrograde and reactive, it can be stated that the concessions granted to the minorities, are progressive and revolutionary. If any injustices had been caused to minorities until then, J. R. Jayewardene corrected them in his constitution. If the Tamil leaders were persons with a real affection for their people and were far sighted, they should have accepted these changes warmly and should have proceeded further to put them into practice with mutual understanding. Instead, they reacted as if nothing had been granted and continued to represent the Eelam dream. In fact, if the Tamil leaders had accepted the fact that whatever injustices caused to them so far have been remedied, there would not have been a Black July in1983. The violent flames raging in the North would have been extinguished totally. If it had been so, Prabhakaran would not have marched this far and also, most of the Tamil leaders would not have perished by his actions. Not stopping at creating the environment to make the lives of their people miserable, they themselves perished at the hands of a deadly apparition invited through their own incantations. While Sinhala leaders are mostly responsible for the injustices done up to 1977, the traditional Tamil leadership is mostly responsible for the mistakes made thereafter. (To be continued tomorrow)Courtesy: Island.lk