Tamil National Struggle in Sri Lanka - Where did it go wrong? Part III

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Tamils need to be more pragmatic and less utopian by Victor Ivan The political devastation caused to this country by Black July of 1983 is much worse than the destruction caused by the Tsunami. It was a gruesome and an unfortunate event which provided a reasonable guise to the violent Eelam struggle. Black July was the reason for sympathy at an international level for the Eelam struggle despite its violent and utopian nature. It is this incident which spurred neighbouring India to interfere in the problem.
However it was neither sudden nor unexpected. For a violent incident that happened in the North, there was a backlash in the South of immense proportions. When compared with the mass scale massacres that happened later, the killing of 13 soldiers could have been a minor incident, but it was a major incident at that time. Although the responsibility for this violent and destructive reaction falls on to the Sinhala peoples’ account, it can not be treated as a thing that happened with the general approval of the Sinhala people. There are various interpretations as to whether it was a spontaneous backlash or an intricately planned action with the patronage of the government. Whatever it is, during those few unfortunate days, when demons reigned, there were a large number of Sinhala people who protected Tamil people in spite of the risk to their own lives. Even after Black July, Colombo city was not devoid of Tamil people. The number of Tamil people who are permanent residents of the Colombo city numbers more than those living under the administrative authority of Prabhakaran. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that even amidst hundreds of much worse incidents, there was no repetition of a Black July or even an attempt to rouse the people into doing something like it. Hence it is evident that the Sinhala people are in the process of learning through the unfortunate experiences they had to go through. All Party Conference - 1984 After Black July 1983, President J. R. Jayawardene initiated an all party discussion. This can be reckoned a serious attempt made to formulate a solution to the ethnic problem. Even though the SLFP did not participate at these discussions, the objective was to find a solution acceptable to the traditional Tamil leaders after extensive discussions with them. It was the first time that the Sinhala leaders (JR) agreed on the right to amalgamate two or three District Councils if approved by the people. There was an in-depth study of the land problem. An agreement was reached to distribute lands belonging to major irrigation schemes like the Mahaweli on the ethnic ratio at national level. Accordingly 74% of the land was for the Sinhala people and 26% was for other minorities. In the case of rural irrigation systems, it was agreed to distribute lands on the basis of the divisional ethnic ratio. There was also an agreement for a Second Chamber in parliament. Two drafts of acts prepared according to the agreement reached with Tamil political leaders were submitted to the last session of the All Party Conference held in December, 1984. Leaders of the TULF gave their consent and approval to these drafts on the 21st of December, after an extensive and in-depth study of the proposals contained therein. Accordingly, it was planned by J. R. Jayawardene to submit the two draft acts to the Cabinet of Ministers on the 26th December for their approval. However, quite surprisingly, the Tamil leaders going against their agreement informed the President that they do not accept the proposals in the two draft acts. It is said that the President was astonished and was angry by this turn of events. Why is it that the traditional Tamil leaders had to go against the agreement they entered into? By that time, the power of the armed groups who were actively engaged in fighting for a separate state through an armed struggle was much in evidence. Tamil leaders had to withdraw their agreement due to pressure from the armed groups that nothing should be accepted apart from a separate state. At the Thimpu discussions, the change that had occurred in the politics of the Tamil struggle was very much in evidence. At the end of October, 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated. Her son Rajiv Gandhi replaced her. Rajiv Gandhi tried to understand the crisis in Sri Lanka with a more open mind. Prior to the death of Indira Gandhi, three organisations which had received training in India (EPRLF, EROS and TELO) formed an umbrella organisation by the name of ENLF in April, 1984. The LTTE of Prabhakaran also joined this organisation in April, 1985. Prabhakaran, Padmanabha, Balakumar and Sri Sabharatnam signed a joint declaration in Madras and vowed not to accept anything less than an independent Eelam. By this time, bank heists in the north of Sri Lanka, ambush of armed services patrols and attacking the Sinhala people in the border villages, which were all committed by armed groups trained in India had escalated. The armed forces also resorted to a policy of taking revenge on these armed groups. Rampaging through the sacred city of Anuradhapura and the killing of 146 devotees is the most heartless massacre that was carried out by LTTE amidst mass scale murders committed by them during this period. Nothing but EelamThe intention of Rajiv Gandhi was to encourage a negotiated solution between the two rival parties as the tension was worsening. For this purpose, India followed a policy of exerting maximum pressure on the Sri Lanka government and the armed groups. But the general view of the ENLF was to win Eelam without consenting to compromises. But these Tamil armed groups did not have the ability to totally disregard the pressure brought upon by India. They knew that by antagonising India, they will lose the aid provided by India and also the right to use Indian soil. Hence they needed a policy to refrain from agreeing to a compromise while feigning that they do listen to India. They resorted to the so called ‘Thimpu principles’ accordingly. The first three principles are the more important among the Thimpu principles. They are:

1. To recognise the Tamils in Sri Lanka as a separate nation.

2. To recognise the Tamil homeland (Northern and Eastern provinces) and its territorial integrity. 3. To accept the right to self determination of the Tamil nation. Accordingly, any solution forwarded by the Sri Lanka Government should be consistent with the three principles mentioned above. To be consistent with those principles, the Sri Lankan government had no option other than a confederate system. Even though discussions were to be held with the Sri Lankan government to satisfy India, the aim of the Thimpu principles was to create a situation where no solution could be given through negotiations. After the failure of the Thimpu discussions, Rajiv Gandhi endeavoured to find a solution to the

ethnic problem in Sri Lanka by preparing a set of proposals for which he tried to get the approval of the Sri Lanka government and Tamil armed groups. This plan was known as the ‘Delhi Accord’. In this plan, the unit for devolution was to be the province instead of the district. The powers to be devolved to this unit were much more comprehensive than those which were conceded at earlier discussions. Even though India was able to get the consent of the Sri Lanka Government for this new scheme, Prabhakaran refused to sign it. Hence other organisations too refused to sign it. When the SAARC Summit was held in Bangalore in November, 1986, Rajiv Gandhi was able to bring down Prabhakaran to Bangalore with the help of M. G. Ramachandran. But, he could not persuade Prabhakaran to sign the accord. Prabhakaran’s plan of action Of all the armed groups that originated in the north, Prabhakaran’s LTTE was the only organisation which operated within a solid policy framework and with a consistent objective. Prabhakaran was the leader and the God of the LTTE. He did not want to liberate the Tamil people in Sri Lanka from the problems they are facing. What he wanted was a separate Tamil state over which not only Tamils in Sri Lanka, but Tamils all over the world, could rejoice. It is for this consistent aim that he trained his followers. He did not have the capacity to make a real assessment as to whether this is a realistic objective or a utopian objective which cannot be won by any means. He obtained the maximum aid from India. But, from the beginning, he knew quite well that India will assist only for a compromise and not for an Eelam. He wanted to stand steadfastly for the objective without bowing down to India. According to his road map, he eliminated the traditional Tamil leaders on the grounds that they were ‘traitors’. He co-operated with other militant groups until he achieved this objective. In the second round, he eliminated the leaders of the competing armed groups and their supporters who did not obey him. Through this, his organisation became the only organisation leading the Tamil struggle and Prabhakaran became the only leader of Tamil people. On and off, he consented to ceasefires and peace negotiations. The objective of such steps was not to abandon the struggle and reach a compromise. The intention was to forge ahead with the struggle with added vigour to achieve Eelam. With the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord of 1987, all other organisations handed over their weapons and accepted the Agreement. But the LTTE of Prabhakaran adopted a policy of fighting against the Agreement. Even though, Prabhakaran possessed expert knowledge of war which he developed through self study, he was not a political leader with a deep knowledge of politics. He was incapable of realising that Tamil Eelam is a goal which cannot be achieved by any means. Prabhakaran is a ruthless and formidable leader who fought for a goal which can never be realised. To achieve this goal, he not only made thousands of his own people sacrifice their lives, but also massacred tens of thousands of people. He was able to mesmerise not only the Tamil people of Sri Lanka, but the Tamil people all over the world. But his defeat and destruction is an inevitable event which had to happen sooner or later. Lessons to be learnt The Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka is not a movement which sought to seek solutions to the problems faced by the Tamil people. It was a movement that went beyond such purpose and represented a very elaborate and utopian objective. This was the main cause for the failure of the Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka. Due to this reason, problems that could have been solved in a simple manner were kept aside without due attention until a separate state was won. The biggest injustice perpetrated on the Tamil people by Sinhala leaders is the denial of their right to deal in the Tamil language due to the provisions of the Sinhala official language act. This limited their right to join the state service. In the next round, the injustice caused to educated Tamil youth is the limitation of their right to enter universities due to the implementation of a scheme of standardisation. The struggle launched to safeguard their rights against these injustices got extended to become a separatist struggle making the problem unnecessarily complex. All these mistakes were corrected by the Constitution of 1978. But without accepting those concessions, and cooperating to put them in to practice, they pursued an armed struggle to win a separate state. There too, if they had clamoured for autonomy only for the North, the path of the Tamil struggle could have taken a different form. But due to the claiming of rights to the east in addition to the north, the demand for autonomy was considered unjustifiable and not acceptable to the Sinhala people. Hence the Tamil struggle was seen by Sinhala people as a ruthless attempt to grab nearly 30% of the land of the country, and more than half of the resources of the sea, on behalf of a 12% minority of the population. Tamil political leaders are against the term ‘territorial integrity of Sri Lanka’. But, in the Thimpu principles, they insist on the ‘territorial integrity’ of the Tamil homeland (northern and eastern provinces). To establish this principle, they followed a policy of massacring Muslim and Sinhala people in those regions and forced them to leave their homes. About 60,000 Muslims who were living in Jaffna were ordered to leave those areas within 24 hours. In the case of oppressed peoples’ struggles, there should be a continuous dialogue with liberals among the oppressors to seek their assistance. It will not be productive or justifiable to treat them all as oppressors and to attack them all in general. But, the language of the gun was the only language considered fit for speaking to Sinhala people by the LTTE, in the Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka. Because of this factor, there was no conspicuous sympathy among the Sinhala people towards the Tamil struggle. It cannot be said that the Tamil struggle was crushed mercilessly and ruthlessly simply because they were Tamils. The security forces faced two armed struggles of Sinhala youth in addition to the Tamil armed struggle. It cannot be said that the armed forces followed a more merciless or ruthless policy to subdue and defeat the Tamil armed struggle than which they followed to defeat the two Sinhala armed struggles. In crushing the first insurgency in 1971, nearly 5000 persons lost their lives. In the crushing of the second insurgency of Sinhala youth that occurred in 1987 – 1989, the number of lives lost is not less than fifty thousand. Regardless of the question of having or not having justifiable reasons, no government will tolerate an armed insurgency. In defeating an armed insurgency, the occurrence of death or injury to both the parties cannot be avoided. The Sri Lanka government or the security forces have not killed anybody engaged in the Tamil struggle before it turned out to be violent. Finally, through the defeat of the Tamil struggle, Tamil people should realise that a ruthless war waged for a utopian aim which cannot be won, has caused misery for this country in general. More than that, it has caused destruction and gloom in the lives of Tamil people in Sri Lanka. In addition, they also should understand that even if Prabhakaran was able to gain victory in this gruesome struggle, his autocratic rule would not have brightened up their lives and would rather have darkened their way of life. Now, what the Tamil people can do is to integrate into Sri

Lankan Society without separatist attitudes as a community with equal rights. They should work together with other communities to transform the Sri Lankan state in to a well governed state in order to achieve their rights instead of dreaming of a separate state. (Concluded)Courtesy: Island.lk