

Pirapaharan

By: T. Sabaratnam

11. The Mandate Ratified

Thanthai's Final Declaration

For five reasons 1977 was an important year in the history of the Sri Lankan Tamil problem. In that year both major Sinhala parties, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP) accepted the existence of a Tamil problem. In that year, Thanthai Chelva gave his final declaration that a separate state is the only possible solution to the Tamil problem. In that year, the Tamil people decided overwhelmingly in favour of the establishment of a separate state for themselves. In that year, the Jayewardene government commenced intimidating the Tamils into subjugation through mob and military violence. And in 1977, Tamil militants started their armed resistance.

1977 was an election year. The SLFP's deceptive extension of its term of office by two years by making use of the new constitution had taken its control of parliament to July that year. With the surging popularity of the J. R. Jayewardene-led UNP, Sirimavo Bandaranaike badly needed the support of the Tamil and Muslims voters. To win their votes the prime minister summoned a meeting of the Tamil and Muslim members of parliament to identify the needs and grievances of the people of those communities. TULF parliamentarians were also invited for that meeting.

That invitation created a furor among Tamil youths. They argued that the Vaddukodai Resolution had given the Tamil members of parliament only one task: to constitute themselves into a Constituent Assembly and draft the constitution for Tamil Eelam. There is no need to attend Sirimavo's meeting, the youths argued. The Tamil Youth Forum (TYF) passed a resolution asking the TULF not to talk to any party except about the establishment of a separate state. The Colombo branch of the Tamil Youth Forum took up the matter with Thanthai Chelva. This is what the mature 79-year politician with considerable civil law practice told them:

Please bear this in mind: Never refuse if you are invited to talk. Attending a meeting does not mean you accept what they say. Attending a meeting gives you the opportunity to say what you want to say. I want to tell the SLFP government that we have decided to go our way because you have refused to accommodate our concerns. I will tell them that we will not compromise on our decision to establish a separate state for the Tamils.

That is what Thanthai Chelva did at the meeting held at the BMICH on 21 February 1977 over which Sirimavo Bandaranaike presided. After listening patiently to Felix R. Dias Bandaranaike's announcement that the government was not prepared to even talk of a separate state Thanthai Chelva told the government delegation that the TULF was not prepared to compromise its stand on the separate state, but was prepared to accept an interim arrangement to work out



solutions to the problems of the Tamil and Muslim people.

Felix R. Dias Bandaranaike

At that meeting and the second held on 16 March, in which Sirimavo Bandaranaike was more accommodative, six areas of Tamil and Muslim grievances were identified. They were:

- Use of the Tamil language
- University admissions
- Unemployment
- Problems faced by Tamil public servants.
- Decentralized administration, and
- Problems faced by Tamils of Indian origin in the plantation sector.

Sirimavo Bandaranaike expressed her readiness to enshrine the Reasonable Use of Tamil law and the regulations made under it in the constitution, modify the university admission scheme, look into the problem of unemployment among Tamils and Muslims and remove the hardships experienced by the Tamil public servants and the Tamils of Indian origin. She said decentralization was her government's policy.

Thanthai Chelva was pleased with the outcome of the conference, while others were not. He told the TULF parliamentary group that reviewed the outcome of the conference,

All this time the Sinhalese were telling the world that the Tamils had no grievances. They said Tamils are more privileged than the Sinhalese. They cannot say that any more. The government had accepted that the Tamils had grievances and had identified them. We now have a firm basis for our demand for a separate state.

The youths were not convinced. They accused the TULF leadership of not taking steps for the establishment of the independent state of Tamil Eelam. Thanthai Chelva advised patience to the groups of youths that met him and told them that the forthcoming election should be turned into a referendum to obtain the approval of the people for the establishment of the separate state. He told them they would proceed step by step.

Thanthai Chelva took the next step at the second convention of the TULF held in March 1977 at Hindu College, Trincomalee when he said:

An irrevocable decision with regard to the future of the Tamil Nation in this country had been taken at the first convention of the TULF, held in May 1976. My advice to the Sinhalese leaders is to allow us to go our way. Let us avoid bitterness and agree to part peacefully. This will pave the way for greater cooperation between the two nations on a footing of equality. The Tamils have no other alternative. Bitterness is growing in the midst of the younger generations. Without allowing it to grow and lead to inevitable confrontation leading to foreign intervention, a method of peacefully working out this entanglement is necessary. We are confident that the truth will ultimately triumph and we will win in the war of endurance.

Recognition of Tamil Problem

Thanthai Chelva died on 29 April 1977. Amirthalingam who succeeded him as the leader of the TULF lacked the father-figure image Thanthai Chelva

possessed. Thanthai Chelva would close his eyes, listen intensely to all the arguments and pronounce his opinion which is final and accepted without question. Amirthalingam was an agitator, a populist. He did not enjoy that amount of respect or command Thanthai Chelva had with the people. And Amirthalingam was more a politician than a statesman. His concern after assuming TULF leadership was the next election and his role after the election.

The fact that J. R. Jayewardene would sweep the election was known. Amirthalingam wished to make a deal with Jayewardene. He sent public and private feelers to Jayewardene. The public feeler was through a speech by Point Pedro Member of Parliament K. Thurairatnam. In an interview to the Tamil daily *Virakesari* Thurairatnam suggested the working out of an agreement between the UNP and the TULF about finding solutions to the Tamil grievances. Amirthalingam repeated that suggestion in a speech he delivered at Kayts. The private feeler was through Thondaman.

Jayewardene wanted the meeting to be secret and Thondaman invited UNP and TULF leaders for a *thosai* dinner at his flat opposite Royal College.



Royal College, Colombo

Jayewardene, M.D. Banda and Esmond Wickremesinghe represented the UNP and Amirthalingam, Sivasithamparam and Kathirvetpillai represented the TULF. Thondaman said that it would be easier to defeat the SLFP if opposition parties were united. Both sides agreed.

“Democracy is in peril,” Jayewardene said and added, “We must get together to safeguard democracy.”

Kathirvetpillai approved that and said: “Democracy is in peril. We are prepared to support you in your effort to save democracy.”

Jayewardene was pleased. “We are talking on the same wavelength,” he added. He then enquired from the TULF leaders what problems they would like him to solve if he formed the government. They then discussed the problems faced by the Tamil people. They identified the following problems:

- The use of the Tamil language,
- Ending Sinhalese colonization in Tamil areas,
- Employment,
- University admission, and
- The issue of citizenship for Tamils of Indian origin.

The approach adopted by Thanthai Chelva and Amirthalingam were

completely different. When he negotiated with S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike in 1957 and when he talked to Bandaranaike's wife, Sirimavo, in 1977, Thanthai Chelva first stated the solution acceptable to the Tamil people and without giving up that objective discussed ways and means of mitigating the hardship suffered by the people. With Bandaranaike, it was a federal unit and with his wife, it was the separate state. Amirthalingam did not mention the separate state decision of the Tamils. He talked about finding solutions to the problems only.

During the entire discussion at Thondaman's flat, the phrase 'separate state' was mentioned only once and that was by Jayewardene. When they were about to part after a strong Indian coffee Jayewardene told Amirthalingam: "I have no objection if you campaign for a separate state. All I need is that you win at least 15 seats, I need them to form the government."

Appapillai Amirthalingam

Despite the failure to mention the separate state demand, Amirthalingam had succeeded in getting the UNP to recognize that Tamils had problems.



The UNP and the SLFP recognized in their 1977 election manifestos the existence of a Tamil problem and the need for a political solution. That was a major shift in the position of the Sinhalese who, till then, had told the world that the Tamils were a privileged community and the Tamils were clamouring to perpetuate that position.

The UNP in its election manifesto had a special section under the heading, "Problems of Tamil-Speaking People". It read, "The United National Party accepts the position that there are numerous problems confronting the Tamil-speaking people. The lack of solution to their problems had made the Tamil-speaking people to support even a movement for the creation of a separate state. In the interest of the national integration and unity, so necessary for the economic development of the whole country, the party feels such problems should be solved without loss of time. The party when it comes to power will take all possible steps to remedy their grievances in such fields as;

- Education,
- Colonization,
- Use of Tamil language,
- Employment in the public and semi-public corporations.

We will summon an all-party conference as stated earlier and implement its decision."

The SLFP, in its manifesto, under the heading, "National unity and national problems," said: "We shall establish a National Consultative Committee consisting of every ethnic group in the country to advise the government on ethnic, linguistic, economic, social, cultural and other questions of a national nature or on matters relating to minority groups wherever such questions or matters require resolution by the government."

The United Left Front, led by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party, which contested as a separate group, in its election manifesto under the heading of National Minorities, declared: "While retaining the unitary character of the state, the principal of regional

autonomy will be applied within the general national framework of the district councils, while protecting and implementing to the full language rights already provided for, our government will facilitate the use of Tamil as the language of administration in the Tamil-speaking areas. The Republican Constitution will be amended to include the rights already administratively granted to the Tamil language. Tamil will be declared a national language in terms of the **constitution**, without prejudice to the status of Sinhala as the official language of the country. Discrimination in education, or employment, on the basis of race, religion, or caste, will be prohibited. Incitement of racial or religious hatred will be declared a penal offence."

The Plebiscite

Thus, all major Sinhala parties went to the 1977 polls on the basis that problems existed for the Tamils and these problems needed to be resolved politically. The national parties contested the North and East on this basis. TULF, on the other hand, turned the election into a plebiscite and asked the Tamil people to determine whether they wanted to continue to live with the Sinhalese or have a separate state.

The TULF released its election manifesto in 1 June at a public meeting in Jaffna that followed a massive rally. In an emotional speech Amirthalingam told the gathering that their votes would determine the future of the Tamil race in Sri Lanka, whether they wanted to live as independent people or not.

The manifesto recounted the incidents of violence Sinhala mobs and Sinhala armed forces had let loose on Tamil people since 1956 and commented that those attacks were meant to drive home the message "that they were slaves who were not entitled to any rights or protection."

"Tamils and Muslims have been quite often the objects of violence of the Sinhalese hooligans, instigated by government-supported Sinhalese communal organizations, the police and the armed forces, in whose hands they suffered untold misery by way of looting and arson in homes, shops and places of business, by grievous injuries, loss of life and property and violation against women," the manifesto said.

The manifesto said, "Military terror was let loose in Tamil provinces against the Tamils, who were engaged in a non-violent campaign of civil disobedience in 1961, to demand their language rights. On 2 February 1976, seven Muslims praying inside a mosque at Puttalam were ruthlessly massacred by the Sinhala police, inside the holy spot. The government was not willing to hold public inquiry into the horrible murders. These were incidents only which reiterate the fact that the lives and property of Tamils and Muslims who are living as slaves in this country do not enjoy any protection from the Sinhalese governments."

The manifesto then posed the question - "What is the alternative to a nation that lies helpless as it is being assaulted, looted and killed by hooligans instigated by the ruling race and by the security forces of the State? Where else is an alternative to the Tamil nation that gropes in the dark for its identity and finds itself driven to the brink of devastation?"

It answers:

There is only one alternative and that is to proclaim with the stamp of finality and fortitude, that, 'we alone shall rule over our land that our forefathers ruled. Sinhalese imperialism shall quit

our homeland'. The Tamil United Liberation Front regards the general election of 1977 as a means of proclaiming to the Sinhalese government this resolve of the Tamil nation. And every vote that you cast for the Front would go to show that, the Tamil nation is determined to liberate itself from the Sinhalese domination.

The manifesto also answers the question: What will the TULF do after the election? It says:

The Tamil-speaking representatives who get elected through these votes, while being members of the National State Assembly of Ceylon, will also form themselves into the National Assembly of Tamil Eelam, which will draft the constitution for the state of Tamil Eelam by bringing that constitution into operation either by peaceful means or by direct action struggle.

Some youths did notice the 'catch' the drafters of the manifesto had introduced to enable the elected parliamentarians to attend and function in parliament. They knew that permitting the elected Tamil-speaking representatives to be members of parliament was contrary to the spirit and intention of the Vaddukodai Resolution which said "the struggle for winning the sovereignty and freedom of the Tamil Nation" should be launched without undue delay. They did not make it a big issue because the immediate need was to get the people to approve the Vaddukodai Resolution.

Youths, particularly those belonging to the militant groups, worked very hard to make the TULF candidates win the election. They told the voters that a vote for the TULF was a vote for Tamil Eelam, where they could live with honour, dignity and equality. Amirthalingam who ran the election campaign made full use of the militant groups.

At a massive public meeting held on the closing day of the election campaign, 19 July, Amirthalingam declared,

Ours is no longer a national problem. Ours is a dispute between two nationalities, The election of day after tomorrow (July 21) is no ordinary election. It is a plebiscite. It is a plebiscite to determine whether the Tamil people want to continue to live with the Sinhalese or they want to separate.

The Tamil people of the north and east voted almost *en masse* for separation. TULF won 17 seats, all the 14 seats in the northern province and three more in the eastern province. With the Pottuvil election, which was held later, the TULF strength in parliament rose to 18. It was a massive victory for the TULF and for Amirthalingam, who moved to Kankesanthurai, Thanthai Chelva's electorate. It was a resounding victory for him. He polled 31,155 votes, 5228 more than the 25,927 votes polled by Thanthai Chelva in the 6 February 1975 by-election.

Amirthalingam was jubilant. In his victory speech after Jaffna Election Officer W. J. L. Wijepala announced the result, Amirthalingam said the landslide victory of the TULF candidates showed the determination of the Tamil-speaking people to live as a free and sovereign people. He pledged amidst thundering applause that the TULF members were prepared to make every sacrifice to win the Tamils their lost rights.

He also said by voting overwhelmingly for the TULF the Tamil people had given the party the mandate it had asked for to struggle for a separate state. "From now there is no looking back," he vowed, "We will march forward to achieve our goal of Eelam."

In the national scene, the UNP triumphed. It won 138 seats to the SLFP's eight in the 165-member parliament. Left parties were completely routed. The Ceylon Workers Congress won one seat. The UNP polled 3,179,221 votes, 50.9 per cent of the total votes cast, the SLFP polled 1,855,331 votes, 29.7 per cent, the TULF 421,488 votes, 6.4 per cent and the CWC polled 62,707 votes, 1 per cent of the total votes.

Jayewardene formed the government and Amirthalingam, forgetting the mandate he had obtained, decided to continue living with the Sinhalese. He became the Leader of the Opposition promising to uphold the Republican Constitution and make democracy work better.

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Chapter 12. Moderates Ignore their Mandate

Will be posted on: September 29

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